Urban conservation in Kenya: a re-think of sustainable strategies

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Abstract

This paper attempts to critically review current practices in urban conservation in Kenya. At the moment urban conservation is concentrated along the coastal region and in particular in the historical towns of Lamu and Mombasa. It is being argued that the present approach is flawed and that there is a need of a "re-think" in terms of using alternative strategies if urban conservation is to achieve the intended outcome. There seem to have been some difficulties in reconciling the needs of the affected people and the objectives of the conservation process; an important pre-requisite towards successful and sustainable urban conservation. Public participation is being proposed as one of the possible strategies towards that sustainable urban conservation.

1 Introduction

The practice of conserving the urban built environment, long evident in developed countries, is still not prevalent in Kenya, as is the case in most developing countries. It only became significant in the early 1970s when the government commissioned its first studies to look into the problems and eventual protection of fast disappearing historical settlements along its coastal region. The findings and recommendations of these studies defined the basis for the eventual conservation of the historic settlements of Lamu and Mombasa. They have since been accorded legal protection under the Antiquities and Monuments Act Cap 215 of the Laws of Kenya and separate management plans prepared to regulate their respective developments. This process has led
to the listing of many other historical sites and monuments in the country, especially along the coastal strip.

Many worthy programmes started in many developing countries seem to fail because in most cases they were not tailored to meet the aspirations of the affected or beneficiaries. Urban conservation is not an exception to this trend. In the process of such initiatives the target groups never end up appreciating the benefits the programme might bring but only see the inconveniences, whether in the short, or even worse, long term. Its effects being long-term in nature and thus not providing any immediate panacea, conservation has yet to be understood by the majority of Kenyans. Like most societies, Kenyans equate conservation with “keeping the old”, as a recipe to backwardness as opposed to modernisation which is seen as a forward movement and a good thing.

2 Mombasa and Lamu Conservation Projects

2.1 Background

Mombasa and Lamu were among more than thirty independent city-states, which flourished along the East African coast at the height of the Swahili civilisation, from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries (Siravo and Pulver 1986:15). For thousands of years, the area stretching from south of Somalia to north of Mozambique has been part of a great circle of trade that has taken place in the Indian Ocean (Kamamba 1991:8). From as far as Sumatra, India and the Arabian Peninsular traders brought porcelain from China, glass beads from India, and clothes from Egypt and Somalia (Siravo and Pulver 1986:16). Six months later, they returned east with the summer monsoons carrying cargo of ivory, iron, gold, timber and slaves. Iron ore was mined in Tanzania while Mombasa and Lamu were famous for ivory and Lamu for mangroves respectively.

In the course of this continuous maritime contact, many people especially from the Arab Peninsular, the Indian sub-continent and to some extent Europe, migrated to the East Africa Coast, mingled and intermarried with the local ethnic groups. These contacts also resulted in the introduction of new religions of which Islam was predominant and also the birth to a common culture and language: Swahili, from the Arab word Sahil for coast. Settlements stretching from South of Somalia to the North of Mozambique and dating from the nineteenth century were one of the direct result and most visible aspect of this unique culture.

Today most of these have either disappeared and exist in the form of ruins or have transformed into modern towns. For instance Gede was since abandoned and is now in ruins while Mzizima has transformed into a modern town-Dar-es-Salaam, the capital City of Tanzania. In the case of Kenya Mombasa and Lamu are still maintaining that character that can be identified with the Swahili Culture.
2.2 Lamu Old Town

With settlements which can be traced back to the 12th Century (Abungu 1998:3), Lamu is claimed to be one of the oldest of the Swahili towns along the East African Coast. Narrow meandering streets, courtyard houses constructed of thick coral rubble walls in lime mortar and finished in coral rag, characterise the historic built environment of this ancient settlement. Due to its remoteness and loss of business to rival ports in the south, Lamu managed to retain much of its distinct pre-20th Century character. However, in the early seventies, this equilibrium came under sever test; its remoteness and quietness attracted tourist who were looking for quiet havens, away from the congested beaches and populated game parks and reserves. Within a short period of time the tiny Island received an increased number of visitors. Among the immediate consequences of this influx of visitors were random and unplanned developments to cater for the increased population. Cafes, hotels, restaurants and a variety of infrastructure which go with tourism mushroomed creating a lot of strain on the architectural qualities of Lamu’s built fabric.

It was in recognition to this threat that the Government through the National Museum of Kenya (NMK) instituted measures to curb that disturbing trend. Through the collaboration of international organisations like UNESCO and bilateral arrangements with governments of countries like the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway, Lamu is now a listed area with a conservation plan to guide its development. A Conservation Office is in place, implementing the planning guidelines and other recommendations in the Conservation Plan.

2.3 Mombasa Old Town

The old town of Mombasa has a unique and interesting character that has developed for over three centuries, which is best expressed in its built environment. Most of the buildings in this distinct area of 31 hectares date back to the turn of the century or even before. They are characterised by beautifully carved doors and intricately decorated wooden balconies.

In the early 1980s, however, just like in Lamu evidence of marked deterioration of this building stock began to emerge. The worsening condition of these buildings coupled with the crumbling infrastructure led to the Government to institute measures to reverse the trend.

With the support of UNDP and UNESCO, the Mombasa Old Town Conservation project took off in 1985. Several studies including physical and demographic surveys were carried out in the historical core of the old town. All buildings within the historic area were photographed and listed under plot numbers entered in inventories with information on ownership, construction condition and historical significance with photographic and bibliography references where available. Findings of the surveys (and other investigations)
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and subsequent recommendations regarding the protection of this historical settlement were compiled into the Conservation Plan of Mombasa. Today a section of the old town area is listed as a monument under the Antiquities and Monuments Act of 1983 (Cap 215). Under the direction of an architect, a conservation office was set up with similar responsibilities to that in Lamu.

3 Urban Conservation in Kenya: Current practices, issues and challenges

Despite the progress made so far, the conservation movement still faces a number of challenges which are undermining the efforts of safeguarding the nation’s historic built environment. Conservation remains a rather controversial topic, not only in its objectives but also in its implementation; its relevance (as put by Yassin (1994) has yet to be fully grasped or agreed upon by the society.

Both the conservation projects of Mombasa and Lamu Old Towns were set to encounter serious implementation problems from the outset because they failed to address the misunderstanding mentioned above-aspirations of the people and the objectives of the conservation.

Enforcement of the conservation guidelines has thus become the main stumbling block with the programmes meeting considerable opposition, albeit passive, from influential residents and other interested parties. In defiance to the laid down regulations, they have continued to demolish buildings indiscriminately as they are only interested in making a “quick profit” through demolishing and enlarging their properties for more revenue. Unapproved repairs and alterations to listed buildings have been going on unabated despite protests from the conservation authorities. The residents saw conservation as a direct threat to their economic survival and power base.

To explain the failure of conservation in those terms alone is however to misunderstand the entire context. It is being argued here that the poor performance of urban conservation in Kenya is rooted in the overall approach ranging from practical issues like legislation, administration and funding, to ethical issues such as culture, arguments of conservation vis-a-vis development to the political atmosphere under which the process finds itself operates within.

3.1 Weak legal framework

As already mentioned, conservation work in Kenya is guided by the Antiquities and Monuments Act, Cap 215 of 1983. However, definitions of what should and should not be conserved are not very clearly defined in the Act. The Act, which is based on colonial heritage Antiquities laws, is a particularly static medium with which to protect dynamic cultural assets like the built environment as heritage is defined and thus protected by date. Any site or monument found or built before 1895 is automatically protected under the Act.
yet there is no cultural nor historical significance in that date. This is one among many of the shortcomings of the present legislative framework in place.

The legal weaknesses, however, do not stop at the ambiguity of the Antiquities and Monuments Act, there is the issue of property rights; the right of an individual to his or her property as guaranteed in the constitution. As opposed to most archaeological sites where whoever owns the land within which the site is, can be easily be compensated, historic buildings are being lived in and together with the land they are private property belonging to individuals. Legally these owners have a right to them and to whatever development including demolition or building anew. Since the listing of a site does not necessarily mean ownership, this often brings the conservation authorities in direct conflict with the people. This is a major contradiction, which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. This is more so, as most of the historic towns, Mombasa old town in particular, are in prime areas of the town and consequently under intense development pressures.

3.2 Weak administration

A combination of administrative responsibilities often put conservation in almost impossible conflicts. In Kenya, National Museums of Kenya (NMK), under which conservation falls has many other responsibilities under its portfolio. These range from running museums, interests in archaeology, paleontology, primate research among many other research fields. With such a wide interest, concentration in conservation can easily be overshadowed. This is the case with NMK as the other research areas are more developed tending to attract much more interest and funding as a result. Creation of an autonomous body charged solely with national conservation issues might be more appropriate.

3.3 Funding

It is general knowledge that successful projects are normally those that are incorporated into the annual government’s budget on a regular basis to become sustainable programmes. However, in Kenya like in most developing countries, there is an apparent lack of political will to financially support conservation work. While a development vote is reflected in the national budget, in reality funds do not exist, conservation has to rely on donor funding and grants from bilateral agreements. Is this donor-reliance-syndrome sustainable? What if there are political disagreements, as is the case from time to time, and the donors withdraw their support or bilateral agreements are suspended?

To avoid this there is an urgent need of developing ventures as proposed by Abungu (1998) that can address such eventualities. Such efforts cannot be left to NMK alone; it is a collective responsibility of not only the government but the private and voluntary sectors and the public in general.
3.4 Conservation and culture

It can easily be argued that among the central problems of conservation in most developing countries are culture related rather than technical. It has always been difficult to divorce conservation from the cultural context in which it takes place. Yet contrary to western traditions in which the idea of culture is not questioned and is deeply rooted, the attitude in this country is quite different. While the west believes that the built heritage is important to the present and the future society, in Kenya as is in most developing countries, conservation has an entirely different attachment or connotations. In Kenya, traditionally conservation has always meant conservation of values, ethos and a way of life rather than the built fabric, sculpture or furniture. In this case the emphasis is in the continuity of abstract ideas rather than that of material objects. Craftsmen continue to make everyday objects, beautiful yet not for display; building techniques continued to be used in everyday building, but not for conservation purposes; knowledge continued by teaching the next generation but not necessarily documented in books. Conservation signifies an altogether different approach; conservation by active use and continuity of ideas and knowledge (ITT and INTACH 1990:18.5).

In the west on the other hand, the emphasis is on aestheticism, historicism, continuity and material wealth. All these are aspects central to the ethical concern that conservation is but an expression of very different values attached to buildings and architecture by different societies. The other cultural context undermining conservation in Kenya is that of different economic and social values and the intensive destruction of those traditional values by modernisation.

From the two Kenyan cultural contexts, there is an evident divergence of perception of conservation which needs to be appreciated before embracing the western approaches blindly. If conservation is to succeed in Kenya, therefore, it must be conceived and addressed within its own culture context, sensitive to the values from which it derives. Perhaps vernacular techniques and traditional forms may probably generate a more appropriate ethical dynamic for conservation policies.

3.5 Conservation and development

Conservation can easily be expressed as a highly introspective activity concerned with the built fabric and esoteric detailed technical matters which are a highly expensive, elitist luxury that very few people concerned with daily struggle for survival in a developing country like Kenya can ill afford. Poverty is the central issue and not culture in the way perceived by the conservation initiatives. When listed against immediate and basic priorities like food, shelter, education and health, conservation comes a distant last.
The Kenyan society, like any other in the world, wishes to become what they see as modern. They associate development with modernisation and conservation with conservatism. They perceive conservation as a negative force, one which keeps them at a lower level. After all one cannot expect to live in conditions they regard as primitive and indeed express a desire to remain in. If conservation is to be seen as an extrovert activity, therefore, it has to take a new identity and purpose, which could be identified with the development process.

The priority should be in transforming the historic built environment to meet future challenges rather than merely conserving them as artifacts of a glorious past, as is the case now, in the expectation that they would add to the quality of the contemporary lives of the society. In other words rather than a static and sterile pursuit of the privileged elite, conservation must be part of the dynamics of development. Yet for any meaningful development to take place, the culture of which the cultural heritage is part must be the basic foundation. This is the controversy and contradiction between conservation and development.

3.6 Political environment

From experience, the conservation process does not operate within a political vacuum; projects and proposals which normally proceed beyond the report stage, are those that are in tune with the political context and not necessarily that are perceived to be important from the conservation point of view. The major political issue in conservation in Kenya revolves around land issues. Kenyan’s affinity to land can be explained from both historical as well as political perspectives. Many Kenyans lost land during the colonials times, to the Arabs at the coast and later to the Europeans when they settled in the hinterland. Even today, most Kenyans are squatters in their own land and those who have been fortunate enough to own land know its benefits as it is one of the few assets whose value does not depreciate.

Secondly, land traditionally signifies power and prestige. Many, if not all, politicians or politically connected individuals manage to be allocated state land which they often sold off for their campaign funds and other favours to their constituents for votes (Abungu 1998). At the coast land is particularly precious that there are always willing buyers and as such national monuments and sites, most of them being in prime areas, are the most vulnerable to these land speculators. Since the gazettlement of a site does not necessarily mean or ensure ownership this often brings conservation into direct conflict with individual as well as political interests. In the process, NMK has lost a number of sites and monuments in both state and individual land.

Unless these contradictions are addressed, therefore, and until the general public and the politicians in particular realise that it is their
responsibility and they have a role in protecting their heritage, there will always be a problem in protecting cultural heritage in Kenya.

3.7 Popular resistance

The apparent contradictory ethical values between the west and the developing countries (3.4), the rivalry between conservation and development (3.5) and the political environment within which conservation finds itself operating (3.6) leaves the task of conserving the cultural heritage in Kenya and the historic built environment in particular a very daunting exercise. The sum total of those three issues is public apathy with most people viewing conservation as being for the minority elite and as having little to do with solving their immediate concern of improving their buildings, which to them are valuable economic assets.

Could this attitude which has had a strong negative impact on the conservation efforts in Kenya be attributed to the way the conservation gospel is being spread? Had the issue not been posed as being conservation versus development would people's attitude towards the initiatives have been any different?

4 A re-think of sustainable urban conservation strategy

The seven issues raised above are some among many challenges facing conservation efforts in Kenya. They need to be addressed in order to attract people’s confidence into the initiatives if they are not to take the conservation process as a luxury they cannot afford to participate, in but rather an obligation towards their cultural heritage. Despite the present political realities, an almost total lack of clarity of objectives and so on, if conservation is to have any value in Kenya, one thing is inevitable. It should be in the contribution it may make in the generation of more appropriate development, which tackles poverty while at the same time respects the cultural context in which it operates.

Moving from the substantive arguments above to practical constraints preventing conservation policies and programmes in Kenya, there are yet other factors to consider. Throughout Kenya's history in urban conservation, the trend has been that projects are designed centrally either by the planning elite or external agents and then implemented 'with' the people. This meant that, within a period of time, various studies of an area are carried out and subsequent management plans with guidelines and regulations are prepared. Thereafter such recommendations are handed over for implementation to the relevant government ministries or agencies and the local authority under which the area falls. This orthodox planning approach may be proficient in making plans (beautiful city plans, land use plans, strategic plans, development plans etc.) and devising development and regulatory controls. However, as far as delivering action on the ground, which is the most important in the
conservation of historic settlements like Mombasa old town, they have proved to be less proficient (Hamdi and Goethert 1997).

These impose a need for repeated assessment of the conservation process itself, in order to ensure that conservation respects and responds to community needs and values. Successful plans will definitely be those that take these concerns into consideration and consider historically built environments as a common good and to mobilise resources and people to improve it for all concerned. The outcome of a reverse approach is what has been the discussion of this paper so far. Unless the aspirations of this community which include the building owners and other interested groups is met, not even well thought plans, good intentions or legislative restrictions could guarantee the protection of a historical settlement. In any case the survival of so many buildings to the present day owes much to the attitudes of its custodians—the citizens of past eras. Any continued survival of these structures cannot be successful without their involvement and participation (Sudi 1994:68).

In these circumstances, the introduction of public participation as an additional tool in the conservation process cannot be overemphasised. As already shown throughout the discussion in this paper, centralised planning and attempts to develop such areas following pre-set 'ideal' schemes or approaches have generally failed because of lack of support of the people who live and work in these areas. This is so as at an urban scale, conservation does not take place in isolation- it involves not only cultural values, but also the inherent economic factors and events shape the context in which that conservation is undertaken (Jokihleto 1985:112). How that participation should be introduced is another matter all together.

5 Conclusion

Given the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions under which it operates, the conservation of the urban environment, seems to be currently hanging in the balance. The neglect and destruction of the urban fabric continue unabated. With a few successful projects, the overall picture is by and large far from impressive.

With such a gloomy outlook, conservationists in Kenya face an unenviable and daunting task. They are against nothing less that the powerful forces of greed and political corruption. Unfortunately, there seem to be no choice but to work within the prevailing realities, hoping in the end there will be in the end as minimal losses as possible.

Accepting such a reality, perhaps the most successful approaches will be those that allow for the dynamics of the changing society but at the same time not to fully succumb to it-recognising their aspiration and tailor the conservation objectives accordingly. Public participation seems to be one of those strategies which takes account of those two concerns is a top
candidate. The current approaches are flawed, as they have not managed to do so. How public participation can be used as a tool of implementing urban conservation is a subject a lengthy study which I am in involved in at the moment.

6 References


