NAIROBI CITY MARKET

The Versatile Afterlife of a Colonial-Era Building in a Postcolonial World

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Place, Setting and Postcolonial Conceptions of the Built Environment

Nairobi City Market is a populous, lively complex. Its hum and bustle are evident today to anyone who walks along Mũindi Mbingu and Koinange Streets, which abut its main entrances (figures 5.1 and 5.2). The sounds of “Fish ḡapa,” “Porkchop chunks for you, my lady?,” “Exchange dollars?,” “Mama beautiful, some jewellery for you,” and many more trader callouts are synonymous with the market, as various merchants tout their diverse wares. It is the only location in Nairobi’s Central Business District (CBD) where you can get ready-made funeral flower arrangements, and it is also one of the few places where authentic Nyama choma is available at any time of the weekday.

The complex’s main space—the market hall—with its vaulted ceilings and Art Deco features gives the market a bold presence (figure 5.2). What truly stands out, however, is that it is a relatively untouched colonial-era building. Yet despite its age and colonial legacy, it is replete with life and activity, qualities shared by few surviving colonial buildings around it and across Nairobi.

Most colonial architecture in African cities has a static, isolated presence in the ever-changing urban contexts. There are existential vulnerabilities imposed on buildings and cities that were built and planned in settler colonies. Under colonialism, urban centers were planned with somewhat policed social and racial borders that preserved the identity of the foreign settler population. As for buildings, “colonial architecture was an insignia of colonial authority and symbols of colonial desire, exploitation, oppression, dominance and discipline.” Today, many postcolonial cities like Nairobi are places of immense and rapid urban transformation. As such, their colonial buildings and urban plans raise difficult questions about the past and what should be preserved.
Figure 5.1. Maps and plans. (a, b): Location maps of Africa, Kenya, Nairobi, and Nairobi’s Central Business District. (c): Site plan of the Nairobi City Market. (d): Ground floor layout of City Market. All traced maps and drawn plans by author, 2020.
Figure 5.2. City Market from different vantage points. (a): view from Muindi Mbingu Street; (b): view from Koinange Street; (c): view from Market Road; (d): Aerial view from Tubman Road; (e, f): internal views of the market hall. Photographs by author, 2020.
Along with this conflict between urban change and heritage is a lingering, persistent question: What properties should a building embody to characterize the African genius loci of postcolonial Nairobi? A closer look at the legacy of colonial architecture in Kenya’s capital indicates that few buildings from that period have stood the test of time in a postcolonial, politically independent and globalized Nairobi. Understandably, some colonial-era ones have been challenged by market pressures and changing times. As a result, such buildings have been wholly reinterpreted, changed their use, or undergone modification of their architectural forms or spatial configuration. That is not the case for Nairobi City Market, which is an anomaly.

The market is a large, important landmark in the city, one that was architecturally ahead of its time. It was designed and constructed to bring order to Nairobi’s mercantile and colonial culture during the 1930s. Despite its colonial legacy, it portrays an impressive ability to persist and endure even in present-day Nairobi. The market complex has managed to withstand the effects of time and urban transformation, and continues to be exceptionally well-known and thoroughly used. Its history, however, has not been widely documented or shared. In this chapter, City Market is presented as a vehicle to describe the challenges as well as the possibilities of studying colonial-era buildings in the present day. Acknowledging the afterlives of such buildings as an issue within the study of architecture is relevant beyond Nairobi, as these cases can serve as valuable narrators of the past.

This chapter embarks on a discussion of City Market: a municipal market in the heart of Nairobi’s CBD that predominantly sells meat in its covered stalls, souvenirs in its main market hall, authentic Kenyan food in its food court, and flowers in its street-front shops. For close to ninety years, the market complex has stood witness to Nairobi’s urban development and the attendant social, economic, political, and infrastructural changes. The reciprocities between City Market’s physical form and the evolving street character, socioeconomics, and cultural compositions are reviewed to explore the qualities allowing City Market to hum, bustle and persist in a dynamically changing Nairobi.

The discussion begins with an architectural description of the market, its historic setting as well as its position in the transformation of Nairobi over the last century. The social, economic, and political conditions surrounding Nairobi’s formative years are used as a backdrop to discuss the context in which City Market was built. The contrasting and divergent conditions in Nairobi’s postcolonial setting are progressively traced to examine City Market’s ability to thrive in a versatile way. City Market’s spatiotemporal versatility contrasts with most colonial-era buildings that face decimation as a result of the modification of spaces by developers hoping to keep up with changing times. This study ultimately overturns a shared scholarly claim that most
colonial architecture has a static relationship to the passage of time in an ever-changing urban context.

The Architecture of Nairobi City Market

City Market, which was known as Nairobi Municipal Market pre-independence,\(^8\) was designed by the city’s council architects and its construction was completed in 1932. Based on contemporary reports in the *Architects’ Journal*, the consulting architects were Rand Overy and S. L. Blackburne, both of whom were well-known in Nairobi and involved in other building projects.\(^9\) City Market consists of a main, covered market hall that is flanked on both sides by one-level stalls arranged around two courtyards. Larger, closable shop spaces face the market’s main podium entrance along Muindi Mbingu Street, while the flower shops—a combination of open-air and covered stalls—face Koinange Street. A customer parking lot with sixty spaces takes up at least a third of the market’s street length along Koinange Street, leaving only one entry point to City Market from this end via the floral shops (figures 5.1 and 5.7). The market is two blocks north of Nairobi’s central business thoroughfare, Kenyatta Avenue.

While many other colonial-era institutional buildings in the city were inspired by the Classical tradition, City Market is an Art Deco masterpiece, and its distinctive architectural characteristics give it prominence in Nairobi’s skyline. This is especially evident in early aerial photographs of the city that show the market standing tall and overshadowing its neighbors; its profile is always easy to discern (figure 5.6). In fact, throughout the mid-twentieth century, City Market remained one of the most imposing structures in the city (figure 5.5). An outstanding aspect of the complex is the main covered hall. Here, a set of four soaring concrete parabolic arches form high vaulted ceilings in the interior. In the exterior, a series of stepped-back tiers support four rows of clerestories that increase in size down to the lower ends of the arches (figure 5.2). The massive, exposed arches create 17.5-meter high internal ceilings that meet the one-level stalls flanking them on either side. The resulting form facing the main Muindi Mbingu and Koinange Streets is a stepped façade consisting of extrusions at different heights.\(^10\) With the street-front shops that accommodate a covered walkway canopy on the ground level, a layered façade effect is created on all elevations.

The overall effect of this complex on the city streetscape cannot be underestimated: its bold, sleek aerodynamic interior and clean, bright exterior distinguishes it from the surrounding urban fabric.
Large-Span Hall Typologies of the Interwar Period

Importantly, a closer look at the market hall’s layout, structure, massing, and proportions reveals its close connection with concrete vault and parabolic arch typologies of large-span spaces in Britain, Germany, Poland, and France that were designed and built between the interwar periods of 1919 and 1940. So far, no studies concerning the history of concrete architecture have included Nairobi’s City Market. Nonetheless, it is evident that this building sits within the global development of large-span concrete buildings. One of Andrew

Saint’s studies of concrete architecture offers an overview of parabolic and elliptically arched buildings, an assemblage that reads like an extended family of the Nairobi market (figure 5.3). Globally, in the early 1900s the development of reinforced concrete transformed its structural possibilities. The expressiveness of concrete was seen not only in engineering projects like bridges and dams but also in large-span buildings, including offices, schools, markets, factories, and hangars.

Saint’s discussion on the advent and development of reinforced concrete after 1900 offers examples of large-span buildings. Some of these are predecessors of Nairobi City Market, based on structural resemblances and through their use of large concrete arches as structural elements (figure 5.3). In France, for instance, the Voirin-Marinoni Factory in Montataire, built between 1920 and 1921 and designed by the Perret brothers, has characteristic clerestory windows along its stepped arches that resemble those of City Market. Other projects located in Paris integrated concrete arches or vaults akin to those of the concrete arch design of the Esders clothing factory by the Perret brothers (constructed in 1919 and since demolished), or the baths at Butte-aux-Cailles by Louis Bonnier (built between 1921 and 1923). In Britain, the parabolic arch structure of Lawrence Hall (figure 5.4)—one of the Royal Horticultural Halls in Westminster—designed by Murray Easton and Howard Robertson and built between 1927 and 1928, has strong similarities to Nairobi City Market’s hall. All the designs have a similar interior expression of a full-height hall with stepped clerestory windows on elliptical concrete arches. The main difference is that one does not appreciate the expressive nature of Lawrence Hall’s structure from the outside of the building.
From the street level, Lawrence Hall’s structural system is not noticeable. The brick and stone plinth surrounding its street elevation tucks it away, presumably to make the hall blend in with and respect the nearby domestic buildings.

Structurally, a close relative to the Nairobi City Market hall can be seen in Poland’s Breslau (Wrocław) Market Hall (see figure 5.3b), designed by Heinrich Küster (architect) and built by Karl Brandt (contractor) between 1906 and 1908. The Wrocław Market Hall has elliptical concrete arches that support stepped clerestories, resembling the Nairobi City Market hall structure. The ramped back clerestories of the Wrocław Market made an appearance in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1927, with the Heslach baths, built by E. Züblin, a specialist contractor. Poplar Baths, designed by Poplar Borough Engineers Department and built between 1932 and 1934 in Britain had similar characteristics (see figure 5.3c). Other buildings constructed outside Europe also embody design traits akin to those of the Nairobi market. An example is the market built by the British Municipal Council in the British concession in Tientsin. Overall, the expressive potential of a combination of exposed arches, vaults, ribs, buttresses, and undivided spaces free of columns provided for large-scale openness. The apex of this form of large-span building construction was reached between the interwar periods of 1919 and 1940, when Nairobi’s market emerged.

City Market’s Pivotal Role in Urban Development

Modern architecture arrived in East Africa in the 1930s. As the first modernist building in Kenya, Nairobi City Market instigated an important conversation between architecture in East Africa and developments much further afield, both in Europe and other cities that were part of the British Empire. Between 1920 and 1940 Nairobi witnessed an increasing population of British government officials, Indian merchants, and local settlers. It was during this time that it was officially named the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, and as a result, intense and more permanent building development occurred. Additionally, the effects of World War I altered power relations among different groups residing in Nairobi. City Market was then, and continues to be, pivotal to Nairobi’s urban development.

For a present-day visitor to appreciate City Market fully, they must understand the market’s role and meaning within colonial-era city planning, which reveal how the British used urban design to construct social, economic, and political control. In fact, Nairobi has come a long way since its establishment as a colonial capital in 1905, and as the capital of independent Kenya since
1963, in terms of demography, city planning, politics, transport, economy, housing, education, health, and culture.

City Market was built to be more than an Art Deco landmark. During the colonial era, it was not only central to the urban development of Nairobi, it was also an imperial symbol. The colonial government devised urban plans that embodied and enforced social and political order. Retail was the most conspicuous function in the capital’s central area. Commercial land use occupied 60 percent of the city center. Beyond the civic buildings of law courts, the town hall, railway headquarters, a library, and religious facilities, City Market was central to the first-class shopping district, given that it was the only fruit and vegetable outlet in this zone. Surprisingly for that time, City Market was open to all races and attracted both Indian and African retailers. It is not clear whether it allowed buyers from all races, especially at a time when the colonial segregationist agenda was enforced. Segregation divided the city into racial zones, consisting of European, African, and Indian socioeconomic and political compartments.

Postcolonial times continue to pose a challenge for African cities like Nairobi, a city that still struggles to adjust to an enduring spatial legacy of colonial segregationist urban planning. Today, Nairobi is a “characteristic blend of modernism and traditionalism.” It is a city that enjoys a dynamic mix of cultures, opinions, beliefs, enterprises, heritage, histories, and implications of globalization. The spatial manifestation of these changes across time in the city’s architecture, urban form, and spatial extent is quite conspicuous (figure 5.4). In both colonial and postcolonial Nairobi backdrops, however, City Market continues to thrive and accommodate these transitional forces of change.

**Nairobi City Market’s Design and Calculated Versatility over Time**

The Changing Urban Morphology of Nairobi

Since its establishment as a colonial capital in 1905, Nairobi has been in an almost constant state of systematic morphological transformation. The streets and blocks surrounding City Market have changed to such a degree that it is sometimes difficult to recognize earlier renditions in archival photographs (figure 5.5). Through all this change, however, the market itself has held fast, maintaining its singular form of expression. The interplay of its design features makes it a versatile and dynamic structure that can accommodate urban change. While it is no longer tall enough to be a part of the city’s skyline, its design—in particular its relationship to the street—has enabled it to remain an
important and practical landmark in the everyday urbanism of Nairobi. Figures 5.5 and 5.6 illustrate how the City Market has always contributed to a coherent urban context, even as a stand-alone building. This contradicts a shared view that most colonial architecture has a static, isolated presence in the ever-changing urban context of African cities.22

Versatility in Public Health and Wellbeing Concepts

Another significant preconfigured potential of City Market may be seen in how it has accommodated public health and wellbeing concepts over time. The colonial policies shaping public health in the 1900s, not only in Kenya, but across the British Empire, emphasized sanitation planning, waste management, and the regulation of congestion.23 In today’s globalized and postcolonial world, public
Figure 5.6. Site context plan of city market and elevation drawings from Muindi Mbingu Street across time—1930s, 1960s, 1990s, and 2020. This depicts the kinetic urban context that has formed City Market’s backdrop for decades. Drawings by author, 2020.
health trends, efforts, and solutions focus on connecting health, wellbeing, sustainability, and energy neutrality.\textsuperscript{24} In many ways, City Market has and continues to fit into these evolving public health goals, but it is important to consider in more detail the particular context in which the market was constructed.

The historical backdrop of the public health ecosystem in Nairobi’s formative years has been discussed by several scholars.\textsuperscript{25} At an urban level, public health conditions deteriorated during early colonial rule. A 1900 report by Colonel T. Gracey of the Whitehall-based Railways Committee called for “the improvement of the housing, sanitation and drainage of Indian residential areas.”\textsuperscript{26} This was an early basis of aligning race to hygiene and public health that led to racial segregation in Nairobi’s urban plan. In 1929, Nairobi established its own municipal Public Health Department (PHD) that was responsible for vital statistics, sanitary administration, rodent and vermin control, public health education, and licensing business premises (particularly food markets, which were known to be sources of communicable diseases).\textsuperscript{27} The PHD developed sanitation regulations and had oversight and enforcement roles in buildings. Sanitation requirements ran the gamut of measures, from the provision and location of toilets and sinks to types of floor finishes that are easy to clean; they also included wider measures like drainage regulations. When it opened, City Market complied fully with the 1929 regulations and was a model for the PHD implementation, albeit not without challenges in later years.\textsuperscript{28} As a model, the market offered a new, formal and easily overseen space to organize and control the sale of food. The design conformed to sanitation measures and ensured sellers and vendors followed specific guidelines.

Beyond public regulations that anchored the market’s existence in its early years, the design of City Market addresses today’s existing global energy and consumption concerns, which emphasize holistic human comfort, public health and wellbeing. Design and space utilization strategies have diverged from water- and sanitation-central design seen during the colonial era, and from energy use reduction to the current design emphasis on occupants’ thermal, visual, and acoustic comfort, productivity, health, and general wellbeing. Passive design and space utilization strategies that achieve cross-cutting sustainability in tropical climates have been proposed and discussed by scholars over the years. These include built form orientation, internal heat gain minimization, as well as façade design, solar control, and ventilative cooling strategies.\textsuperscript{29} City Market was ahead of its time because its design incorporated passive thermal comfort, daylighting comfort, and indoor air quality maintenance that saves energy consumption.

The continued significance of the market’s environmental design strategies almost a century later is hard to overstate. In tropical climates like in Kenya, heat and its mitigation are the dominant factors for comfort.\textsuperscript{29} As
discussed by Loki and Njoroge in their respective theses investigating the state of City Market’s indoor thermal comfort, the market boasts of a myriad of passive design features that makes it a unique building, while affording its indoor users sustained levels of thermal comfort even in the hottest months of February and March. The market hall, for instance, has a rectangular floor plate with longitudinal façades facing north and south. Its shorter eastern- and western-facing façades ensure that the hot morning sun and even hotter afternoon sun have a shorter façade surface area that would let the radiant heat into the spaces. Additionally, the market hall’s stepped tiers support clerestory windows that occupy 30 percent of the building envelope. Each window is inset and protected by horizontal concrete projections running along the stepped façades, and these maintain the horizontal sun-shade device, a typology of sun-shading devices (figure 5.2). This reduces the transmittance of radiant heat waves through the clear glass panes.

Indoor thermal cooling is enhanced further by two top-stepped tiers that have permanently open louvre windows for ventilation cooling via a constant stack air movement to the interior market spaces below. Additionally, the market stalls that flank the hall on either side (figures 5.1d and 5.2d) are organized around a series of open courtyards that ensure cross-ventilative cooling. This is further complemented by entrance canopies with deep eaves for extra sun shading. As the world becomes warmer, mitigating indoor overheating risk levels in tropical buildings is key for public health and wellbeing. Studies undertaken by Gichuyia on non-residential buildings in Nairobi show that the market’s passive architectural features may keep the market complex at minimal risk of overheating even in the worst-case climate scenario of A2 in 2080 projected by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). To maintain minimal indoor overheating risk, the market’s percentage of openable window area would have to be increased. More of the fixed clerestory windowpanes must be operable. Other than that, no other major structural reconstructions are likely needed to maintain healthy indoor thermal comfort levels even in the hottest climate projected by the IPCC.

City Market’s passive environmental design also stands out due to the visual comfort of its spaces. Daytime visual comfort is emphasized by the stepped nature of the market hall, which ensures the even spread of indoor natural light through the clerestory window system. This minimizes glare in interior spaces and emphasizes constant ventilation through its stack effect. The open courtyards assist not only with natural ventilation but also with the provision and propagation of natural light (figure 5.1d).

In addition, the market complex’s ability to accommodate diverse use over time is supported by these environmental design strategies for the provision of
natural light, passive thermal comfort, and ventilation. The market’s passive design features show that its preconfigured environmental adaptability allows for several user-driven changes around its immutable infrastructure. In this way, City Market is a sustainable space, as buildings should be, that will adapt with minimal demolition and restructuring of the built form and its spatial configurations.

The Ability to Diversify without Changing Its Main Use

City Market was the main retail outlet in Nairobi selling fruits and vegetables in the 1930s. In those early years, the main market hall used to hold boxing tournaments and other sporting activities.\textsuperscript{35} It was even suggested during its opening in 1932 that the hall could be used to hold Kenya Defence Force army drills. However, in 1937, the use of the market hall for sports and entertainment was banned, lest its primary purpose be lost. Importantly, the facility was carefully planned in relation to the railway line that ran along present-day Loita Street, which is located one block west of the market.\textsuperscript{39} Over the years, the market has housed several types of businesses. While in the beginning it was entirely dedicated to fruits and vegetables, it gradually changed over the decades to accommodate a meat market, flower sellers, arts and crafts vendors, and now ready-made food outlets.\textsuperscript{36}

The gradual change in use is permitted by the versatility of the design. City Market today comprises four types of vending spaces that maintain physical independence as business units (figure 5.7). The shops fronting the adjoining streets, and the lockable stalls around the inner courtyards may be considered formal and house diverse activities, like meat and butcher shops, foreign exchange bureaus, art galleries, and convenience stores. These spatial modules have housed different users over time with minimal interior design restructuring. In comparison, the market hall outlets and hawker stands along the corridors that lead to the shops, the market voids, and the courtyards are informal. All these vending areas are linked. The walkways leading to the lockable butcher shops, for instance, are lined with small-scale sellers who operate from rented fridges that flank the accesses to the meat stalls. The open-air florists and food court stalls similarly occupy the market voids and courtyards that abut covered shops, offering complementary goods. In this way, they operate symbiotically with alongside lockable stalls. Some of these informal open-air enterprises operate at certain times of the day, not necessarily throughout all business hours. Thus, the building’s functions extend and contract at various times of the day.
The market’s flexibility allows for the covered market hall to host several businesses under one roof. The hall’s footprint and structure allow for refitting and customizability. For example, the plan of the covered market permits trader-defined stall spaces where circulatory flow is facilitated by corridors that weave through the market hall and eventually link with the market’s court-yards and voids (figure 5.7). Each stall consists of temporary timber frames that are easily dismountable, extendable, and collapsible without affecting the market hall’s structure (figures 5.2e and 5.2f). These spatial aspects allow the changing activities that the market hosts over time.

Figure 5.7. Spatial configuration and flow of movement in City Market. Drawn by author, 2020.
Versatility in Accommodating a Continuum of Formal and Informal Businesses

Beyond its accommodation of diversity of use over time, another reason City Market has endured is its ability to accommodate both formal business and informal vending. In its early years, it provided only formal shopping experiences; street hawking and vending were forbidden in the business district during the colonial period. Yet the design of the building was ultimately amenable to change, and in the present day, it accommodates a hybrid economy of several formal and informal businesses that interlace and evolve together, albeit not always without conflict. It is important to underscore that informality is persistent both in the working and living conditions in Nairobi today. According to the World Bank, about 60 percent of the city’s population lives in informal settlements, while informal sector businesses contribute 34 percent of Kenya’s gross domestic product and account for 77 percent of the country’s employment. The urban context of Nairobi’s CBD, where City Market stands, was originally a formal space (figures 5.1b and 5.1c). However, today it combines both formal and informal businesses.

Some scholars affirm that “there is no formality without informality.” The often-unacknowledged symbiotic relationship between formal and informal processes has partly led to the lack of a real bridge between these two processes in Nairobi’s rigid urban planning, urban design, architecture, and building, and more so in a regulatory sense. Today, the city’s inflexible land-use zoning separates formal and informal settlements and businesses, and architecture has been purely aligned to formal responses. Thus market spaces and buildings in Nairobi house either formal businesses or informal ones but rarely a combination of the two. Because of the high percentage of informal businesses in the country, spaces are needed that acknowledge the hybrid nature of Kenya’s economy: ones that allow for the formal/informal continuum in varying but sensitive ratios.

City Market’s architecture has allowed for the mutual existence of formal and informal businesses in three ways. First, its external boundary, interior edges, and spatial boundaries delineate formal and informal businesses in such a way that one activity, either formal or informal, complements and minimally obstructs the other (figure 5.7). The same physical edges in its internal spaces allow for the layering of activities, such that informal businesses progressively pitch camp through accretion and decamp when they need to move, depending on daily business cycles or yearly businesses changes. Second, City Market’s internal design arrangements delineate spaces that maintain the hierarchical flow of informal spaces, which are mostly open-air, while formal businesses mainly occupy closable shops. Their permeability is reinforced by visual edges.
and entryways to the formal shops and the flexible areas right outside these shops where informal businesses can stack up. Third, City Market boasts numerous voids, courtyards, and arcades that open to walkways leading to single-banked shops. Although not originally intended, these areas have adequately accommodated a flux of informal traders and hawkers, allowing an infill of varying sizes and logistical needs.

City Market accommodates more than it was planned for. Its ability to host a formal/informal continuum without losing its architectural character is what gives it an added advantage. With this ability, it can readjust to multiple renditions presented by the city of Nairobi. In this way, the building resists the homogenizing process of imposed modernization often reflected by formal processes. City Market shows that formal and informal businesses can mutually exist and thrive. The spatial representation and understanding of this coexistence as presented by City Market’s preconfigured adaptability could inform the current need to integrate informal businesses into the formal fabric of the city.

Versatility in a Changing Socioeconomic and Cultural Landscape

Beyond its versatility in use, City Market has continued to thrive through Nairobi’s economic transitions. Trade liberalization, information, and communication advancements, market geographic expansion, changing trade regulation, and broadening resource allocation have fostered economic changes in the consumer, retailer, and market space globally. In Nairobi, the combined effect of these forces in varying magnitudes, frequencies, and ranges over time has resulted in changes to the consumer and market landscape reciprocated by corresponding commercial building design styles proposed and built over time. While markets in Nairobi have come and gone, City Market is exceptional in that it has undergone only superficial upgrades, such as painting, over the years.

In Nairobi’s early years, Kenya’s consumer trends were underpinned by the need to buy and sell goods for basic human existence and community survival. This early commerce was a neat transition from barter trade that was practised by cultural communities long before colonization. Buying and selling goods for essential existence required basic shop architecture referred to as “odd one-storey structures for shops” during the interwar period when City Market was built. Some consisted of a basic countertop that divided the stored goods for sale and the trader on one side, and the buyer on the other side who could see the goods on display and purchase what was necessary. These simple shop designs worked for one-product vendors. The construction of City Market brought many goods under one roof in an organized fashion, which corresponds to present-day markets.
Moreover, the market facilitated social integration in Nairobi over the years. Racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political segregation were significant factors that underpinned the establishment of Nairobi as a railway town in 1899. Containment and social exclusion in those early years secured the British imperial government’s control and ability to impose colonial rule. Given this segregationist context of Nairobi as a colonial capital, City Market stood out as a contravention to the prevailing rule. It was in the heart of a secluded first-class shopping zone, an exclusive *European zone*. However, City Market was open to all races, including Indian and African traders.

Almost six decades after independence, the city is still organized around segregationist urban practices despite the end of colonial rule. Accordingly, and perhaps without deliberation, some aspects of Nairobi’s built form and urban practices today still entrench socio-spatial segregation. In Nairobi’s CBD, for instance, the spatial manifestation of socio-exclusion can be seen through the physical organization and design of the built form. Examples include intentionally erected physical barriers around some buildings or armed guards manning fences and barriers, as well as nonintentional exclusionary spaces caused by imposing office blocks, commercial and institutional buildings. Several buildings in Nairobi today may not have been designed to align and reconcile with the impact of the social statements they make. Instead, the design of the buildings is attributed to development control guidelines and the assertion of their visual prominence in Nairobi’s skyline. Additionally, market forces have a way of defining how space is produced, exchanged, and appreciated by the public. As Mike Davis points out, even though people are legally free to enter all areas in the city, subtle and not so subtle aspects may signal that some people of a particular gender, age, race, or income bracket might not be welcome. Some of these buildings and spaces project a sense of social control, which does not acknowledge the inherent heterogeneity of the individual(s) who occupy them.

City Market’s architecture continues to accommodate these emergent sociocultural compositions in various ways: through its indoor/outdoor encounter that encourages uninterrupted access to the market; its indoor spatial configuration that allows for porosity and the free flow of pedestrian traffic into and across the market; and via indoor market spaces that allow for the four types of vending spaces (i.e., an open-air market, market stalls, covered shops, and hawking spaces as illustrated in figure 5.7) to mutually exist. From Muindi Mbingu Street, the market boasts five pedestrian access points: a centrally placed main entrance via a podium and four other entrances located in chamfered corners to create side entries. Additionally, each of the street-front shops have independent access off the main street. These multiple entry points ease the sense of a *policed access* as experienced by similar establishments. Multiple
access points, including the one from Koinange Street, and the patterns of permeability and interconnectedness formed within spaces in City Market, give it an inclusive social quality. The diversity of activities in the market increases the presence of different people in the building. The reality of working as a trader—meat, curios, flowers—or using the space as a buyer illustrates that the market spaces offer an increased frequency of meetings: encounters across the trader-trader, trader-customer and customer-customer dyads (see figure 5.7).

City Market’s spatial qualities respect human participation across several levels. The market’s expression of boundary, spatial edges, and spatial continuity, and its control of space enhances the interdependence between different demographic sectors of the community without discrimination. It is almost as if the market has a complementary layer that connects people as they move into, through, and beyond the building into the rest of the urban fabric. Overall, this makes it an inclusive urban platform for exchange that accommodates the evolving societal and cultural dynamics of Nairobi.

**Conclusion**

This chapter tells a story of a timeless market complex and the implication of time: moments that have the potential of changing the functional and physical demands placed on buildings during their service life. The City Market building is a rarity due to its versatility, which has allowed it to fit into a postcolonial world despite it having been designed and built at the height of the colonial hegemony in Nairobi. The market has continued to reinvent itself within the prevailing socio-cultural, economic, environmental, cultural, and urban morphological conditions without any changes to its architectural structure and form. Its adaptability stands out notably in a context where other colonial-era buildings in the city have had to be wholly reinterpreted, change their use, or undergo modification of their architectural forms or spatial configuration to keep up with market pressures and changing times.

Scholarly interpretation of colonial architecture within a postcolonial world has indicated that existing colonial-era buildings face extinction as they attempt to keep up with change in rapidly urbanising and politically independent countries. However, Nairobi City Market is one of the few such buildings that has maintained its relevance throughout the years. This is despite it being a commercial building, a typology that is prone to obsolescence given changing demands to accommodate spaces for buyers, sellers, and products. Even with its colonial legacy, City Market continues to thrive decades after it opened its doors as a fruit and vegetable market hub for the colonial capital, without any alterations to its original architecture.
When it was built, City Market belonged to a global architectural language that offered large-scale openness by exploring the expressive potential of combining exposed arches, vaults, ribs, buttresses, and undivided spaces free of columns; a language that can be traced across France, Poland, Britain, and Germany. In the 1930s, it stood as an imperial symbol for a European-centric first-class zone (figure 5.1) and was pivotal to Nairobi’s urban development, as one of the first modernist buildings in Kenya. In addition, it was built to adhere to the controversial public health regulations of 1929, which largely led to racial segregation. Even with the market’s existence anchored in colonial hegemony, it is surprising that it still thrives, almost nine decades on. Following the different conditions of today’s postcolonial Nairobi as traced in this chapter, City Market has a high level of adaptive capacity. The building is progressive and egalitarian despite its colonial urban design setting, which was deeply flawed and unjust from the beginning. A combination of its historical factors and present-day abilities makes City Market an exception. Indeed, it is as if the market has a series of complementary layers that keep reinventing themselves in a loose-fitting, long-life formwork because of its persistence through immense urban changes without adjustments to its structure and spatial design.

This study of City Market’s afterlife illuminates the broader challenge of existential vulnerability that is not only experienced by colonial-era buildings. It also speaks to whether we can fully anticipate and design for the unforeseen. In architecture and related fields, flexibility and adaptability are terms that have been used interchangeably to maximize the value of the built environment in changing circumstances over time. However, this preconfigured potential seems to have less to do with the building’s modularity, edges, and components, in terms of flexibility and adaptability, and more to do with spatial connection and interfacial properties coupled with reserve capacity and passive design features. The underpinning properties of City Market that ensure its timelessness are less about its construction method and more about the relationship of its architecture to the prevailing context, be it urban morphology, socioeconomic and cultural composition or ambient microclimate. Thus, City Market resists obsolescence and continues to accommodate heterogeneous and emergent needs over time.

The lessons learned from this in-depth study of City Market could be used for critical dialogues on the versatility of stand-alone buildings or building complexes and to complement urban discussions for more inclusive and time-conscious cities. To support what Appadurai quite rightly identifies as “the locality of a space by what it has evolved from, against, in spite of and in relation to” is to conquer the existential vulnerability of space as expressed by Christian Norberg-Schulz in his book, *Genius Loci*. Nairobi City Market is truly a market and urban experience with an understanding of time.
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Notes

1. Muindi Mbingu Street was formerly known as Stewart Street up until 1964 when Kenya gained independence.
2. Koinange Street was formerly known as Sadler Street up until 1964 when Kenya gained independence.
3. This barbecued meat slow roasted in large chunks over an open fire (select charcoal from specific trees) brought to you in cut pieces is one of the most popular dishes in Kenya. It is served with Ugali (cornmeal) and green vegetables.
4. A typology of colonialism, distinct from exploitation/plantation colonialism. Using the description by Veracini (2010, p. 4), settler colonialism can be defined as “the domination imposed by a foreign minority, racially (or ethnically) and culturally different, acting in the name of a racial (or ethnic) and cultural superiority dogmatically affirmed, and imposing itself on an indigenous population constituting a numerical majority but inferior to the dominant group from a material point of view.”
9. See O. Faber, “Building Structures,” Architects’ Journal 77 (March 22): 391–92. Following the Nairobi municipal regulations published on April 16, 1900 (see Smart 1950, p. 17; Ibid, 35.), a municipal committee was created to manage the city’s development. It later grew into a council, and it is believed that the council architects sat on this advisory group. The council architects made substantial contributions to the city’s architecture during the colonial period. See also: S. Longair, “Visions of the Global: The Classical and the Eclectic in Colonial East African Architecture,” Les Cahiers D’Afrique de L’est/The East African Review 51 (2016): 161–78.
10. Ibid, 2.
12. Ibid, 11.
13. See this volume, chapter 4.
18. The first-class shopping district was centered around the streets now named Moi Avenue, Kimathi Street, Kenyatta Avenue and Bazaar Road (figure 5.1b) and housed quality and specialty shops selling luxury and semi-luxury goods. Second-class shopping areas were aimed at those with lower standards of living and they offered cheaper goods in small ranges.


According to Achola (2001), “these licensed markets frequently attracted spontaneous markets around them, thereby multiplying the challenges faced by the council in sanitation control and revenue collection.”


More can be said about its building envelope’s combined U-value, solar absorptivity, and thermal mass, all parameters that complement its adaptive potential to the warming microclimate within which the complex sits (Loki 2009; Njoroge 2012).


The term “passive” or “passive design” in this study applies to low energy design achieved not by electromechanical means but by the building’s particular morphological organization to enable the indoor temperature of the building to...
be modified through natural and ambient energy sources in the natural environment. (See Yeang 1999, 202)


36. The future, as indicated in Nairobi County Council’s 2018–2022 strategic plan, points to a mix of variegated market activities. Given the historic importance of the building and its prime central location in the city, the council intends to expand the remit of the site to include additional activities: operationalizing a tourist information center, an art gallery, a cultural night selling food, entertainment, and flowers. These uses could increase the number of local and international tourists, boost trade at the market and include more fun night activities that promote Nairobi’s CBD as a secure tourism destination. See Nairobi City Council. *Nairobi City County Integrated Development Plan* (2018).


39. Informal businesses in the country are not registered and are based on individual effort and small enterprise. They mainly remain unprotected by labor-related regulations and mostly lack social security. There is a shared scholarly view that both informal settlements and informal businesses often fill the void left by the failure of formal urbanization processes. The spatial forms associated with informality are shanty structures erected without the support from any built environment professionals.


41. These processes have mostly ignored the existence of 60 percent of Nairobi’s informal settlement population and 34 percent of Nairobi’s businesses, which remain informal.


44. The essence of how Nairobi’s colonial urban plan and buildings embodied social segregation between the African, European, and Indian populations has been exhaustively discussed by Salm and Falola 2005; Demissie 2012; Greenwood and Topiwala 2020; Ogilvie 1946; and Myers 2003.
46. See Anyamba, 2005.
50. Sinclair et al. (2012) have defined adaptive capacity of a building as the ability “to cope with future changes with minimum demolition, cost and waste and with maximum robustness, mutability and efficiency, and which leads to building agility and resilience.”
51. Of course, the term flexibility itself embodies many qualities and conditions, such as adaptability and the latitude for accommodating change. Sinclair et al. (2012) have defined spatial flexibility in a building as “the capacity of change in a spatial structure.”
52. Ibid, 6.

**Bibliography**


