Considering Plurality and Miscegenation: the case of Michenzani Blocks, in Zanzibar

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Ng'ambo was, until the mid–19th Century, an agricultural area adjacent to Stone Town, Zanzibar. With the city's development, Ng'ambo became progressively residential, revealing typologies of urban, residential and constructive settlements typical of the Swahili culture. Its apparent 'disorganization' made this territory a fertile field for international urban planning models, and Ng'ambo became a laboratory for a political program aimed at a post–colonial and socialist city. Within the scope of international collaboration, plans and projects designed in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) brought an interventionist vision disconnected from the local culture, a condition considered indispensable to the ambitioned modernization. Living standards would be increased through an urban organization based on western logic, and apartments would replace Swahili dwellings. Under the direct intervention of President Karume, Michenzani underwent the heaviest intervention through the construction of apartment blocks bordering extensive avenues that overlapped the pre–existing organic fabric. Over time Zanzibari families redesigned the domestic space, adapting it through various occupancy strategies. Thus, the Michenzani neighbourhood has incorporated activities that enrich its mono–functional fabric, often recreating public–private relations and sociability areas. Yet, despite this apparent socio–urban acceptance, the buildings function as extensive dividing walls. It seems necessary, along with the qualification of the surrounding space, to find strategies that *perforate* these barriers, transforming Michenzani "Trains" into a catalytic and porous membrane.

1. Ng'ambo, a Swahili city

Stone Town is the historical centre of the capital of Zanzibar. Together with the largely residential area named Ng'ambo, it forms one of the cities that most expressively represents the Swahili urban universe, which spreads along the East African coast between Mogadishu and Sofala. Materialising a process of confluence and miscegenation of Bantu, Shirazi, Arab and Indian cultures, this cosmopolitan city was the main *entrepôt* of an important trade route of the Indian Ocean. Having developed from a fishing village of the 12th century, it underwent significant growth in the 19th century, thanks to the rising productive and commercial development of the island and the establishment of the Omani capital there in 1841. Zanzibar was a British protectorate (1890–1963) when it became independent. The Zanzibar Revolution in 1964 overthrew the sultan, and

Figure 1. Aerial photography of Ng'ambo. © Maria Manuel Oliveira, 2019.

the city witnessed the arrival of a strong contingent of people from rural areas and a very significant increase in its population.

Ng'ambo ("The Other Side", in Kiswahili) was, until the mid–19th century, an area of agricultural plantations, mainly of spices, added to Stone Town.[1] In 1858, on his approach to the island, Richard Francis Burton wrote: "We distinctly felt a heavy spicy perfume (...). The night breeze from the Island is cool and heavy with clove perfume".[2] As the city developed, Ng'ambo became progressively residential, and at the turn of the 20th century covered an area larger than Stone Town itself. Yet, whereas the latter was home to primarily Arab, Indian and European citizens in an urban fabric defined by narrow and winding streets, "The Other Side" mainly welcomed the African working population, with a strong presence of descendants of former slaves.[3]

Separated from Stone Town by a creek that ebbed and flowed with the tides and crossed by a single bridge, Ng'ambo was characterised by types of urban, housing and constructive settlements typical of the Swahili culture. The buildings were organically implanted along sand paths, frequently lined with palm trees. In the 19th century, it was described as a more organized and cleaner area than the overcrowded Stone Town.[4] With a configuration that remains to this day, the houses, rectangular and single–storied, were built using local materials, in mud or with walls in mango wood structure filled with coral fragments connected by a mortar of lime or earth, and a hipped roof covered with tiles of woven palm leaves (*makuti*). Over time, the wall material was progressively replaced by cement blocks and the *makuti* by corrugated metal roof sheets, giving rise to the Swahili dwelling that we mostly find today.

The building conforms to the Swahili extended family. Inside the house, the bedrooms are located along a corridor connecting the entrance door to a small back walled–in courtyard. Families mainly live in this courtyard, where outhouses facilities are located: cooking and a large part of the daily life of women and children takes place there. The front of the dwelling overlooks the street, and traditionally it houses a covered area where there is a *baraza*, a bench always present in contact with the public space and a significant locus of social life in the Swahili community.

The organic urban tissue does not obey geometric plans but endogenous rules that guide its distribution. The progressive densification of Ng'ambo and its apparent "disorganization" – how it was interpreted from colonial and western concepts – made this territory vulnerable to the imposition of international models in an attempt to eradicate previous vestiges that were considered stigmatizing.

During the 20th century, two urban plans sought to redesign Ng'ambo, one of colonial origin ('Zanzibar town planning scheme', 1958, by Kendall–Mill[5]) and the other after independence, in 1968, with a strong post–colonial ideological assumption. If the first tried to regulate the urban fabric without necessarily destroying its spatial matrix, the second envisaged the total suppression of autochthonous urbanism.

With the Revolution of 1964, Zanzibar adopted a policy of approximation to socialist countries, finding the German Democratic Republic its most relevant partner in urban and architectural terms. This collaboration materialised in the archipelago through a housing programme tested in several neighbourhood urban plans that integrate stylistic and technical innovations advocated by the modern international doctrine. In this perspective, intentionally disconnected from the local circumstance, living standards would be enhanced with a spatial organization based on austere geometry, where apartment buildings replace Swahili dwellings. Even if only small parts of the plans were implemented, Ng'ambo, Karume's vision for a Zanzibar New Town epicentre, became a laboratory for a political programme aiming at building a socialist city that would reflect post–colonial African society. Urbanism and Modern architecture emerge here as instruments of the Revolution.

2. The revolutionary approach to the *New city*

The 1968 master plan, designed by the GDR architect Hubert Scholz, was aimed at creating a new city that would reflect a civilisational advance, endowing the whole area of Ng'ambo with a spatial structure rationalised under western logic, which included non–existent infrastructure networks (namely water supply, sewage, electricity and street lighting).

This standardised urban approach had a substantial impact on the family sphere by introducing a radically different frame for everyday life and some

Figure 2. Michenzani blocks insertion over the existing urban fabric (© superimposed on an extract from ca. 1927 Zanzibar Town survey and GoogleEarth 2022; Maria Manuel Oliveira).

absolute novelties in Zanzibar: multifamily housing, serviced by a system of collective access points, representing "territorial" management unknown to families until then; high–rise housing, preventing direct extension to the outside, and imposing that all family life takes place indoors; inappropriate layout of the internal space for the extended family; and detachment from everyday life from the public space, in the distance marked by the lack of elevators. But also new construction technologies were introduced, bringing to Zanzibar, where until then building was almost exclusively based on insular products, materials such as reinforced concrete and cementitious mortars with direct consequences in the reduction of the house's thermal comfort and in the local constructing ecosystem.

During a process that lasted from 1964 to 2008, the Michenzani neighbourhood, whose design was redefined under the direct intervention of President Karume, represents the most extreme expression of this strategy. Contrary to the proposals of the GDR architects (that recommended 3 or 4 floors, with a maximal length of 70 and 110 metres), Karume radicalized the urban transformation programme by imposing the construction of apartment blocks 300m in length with six to eight floors.[6] Approximately 1102 apartments were distributed across ten blocks, bordering the two grand perpendicular avenues, *cardo* and *decumanus* of the "New City", which overlapped the pre–existing organic fabric, cutting across it without contemplation.

Michenzani "trains", as vertical housing designed for Western family and domestic structures, poses various challenges to the Swahili/Zanzibari extended family organization, which found its ideal space mould in the vernacular single–storey compound dwellings. These indigenous houses, which constitute the dominant urban tissue of Ng'ambo, spread horizontally, allowing for the co–habitation of multiple generations who share domestic activities and communal spaces. Zanzibari extended family units are

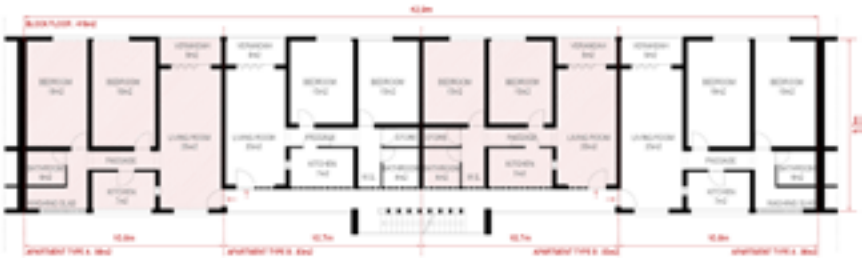

Figure 3. Plans of 3 room apartments (from the original plan, May 1970). © Maria Manuel Oliveira, 2022.

in constant expansion and find a mesh of great ductility in this type of architecture. A tension thus arises between this compound culture and the vertical and somehow static architecture of the so–called "German blocks".

In the 1990s, Garth Myers analysed the adaptations and transformations which had occurred in two decades of inhabitancy in the Michenzani blocks highlighting the inappropriateness of its space to fit local families and their domestic culture (scarcity of bedrooms, no courtyard for cooking and communal activities, no neighbourliness and conviviality with relatives, among other reasons). Such an uncooperative architectural frame led residents to use it most commonly for investment, for families of unusual composition such as childless or newlywed couples, bachelors, housing for co–wives or mistresses and, on the lower floors where transport is more accessible, for older people.[7] This aspect of Myers's work has been considerably extended and complexified by de Annelies de Nijs' comprehensive case study of the processes underlying the occupancy strategies adopted by the dwellers of the Michenzani buildings, then counting around 40 years of existence. Through a series of interviews, she shows how this apparently static and awkward frame of two or three–bedroom flats (as well as its surrounding grounds) was re–conceptualized, re–worked and re–read by its inhabitants to become a dynamic lived–in space and architecture.[8]

De Nijs recognises three main dwelling strategies adopted by families who rented or received these flats as a resettlement compensation trying to deal with the inaptness of this new space to suit the pattern of their lifestyle: (1) The subdividing of rooms to create sufficient bedrooms for the size of the family, in this way ensuring privacy as well as gender and generational separation; (2) The "stretching" of one single–family by various flat units in the same or different blocks using one of the flats as a space of sociability and shared domestic activities and the remaining flats as dormitories. This solution replicates the vernacular dwelling pattern but in a vertical setting. Expansion of the family can also stretch out to the neighbouring low–rise tissue. In both these inhabiting strategies, the traditional courtyard–kitchen ensemble is replaced by the balcony, the staircase, the corridor or the outside area in the interface between the blocks and the single–storey urban fabric that coexists behind them. A third solution for the occupancy of the blocks, thoroughly

described by Myers before, is the usage of the flats to install families of "odd" composition, students, etc.

Further transformations to this given frame include the use of rooftops for clothes–drying, children playing and some illicit activities. Michenzani blocks have also incorporated commercial activities and informal businesses (namely shops, hairdressers and beauty salons, rental of rooms, classrooms, and prostitution) that enrich its mono–functional structure. In the surrounding area or at the bottom of the stairwells, following a prominent local feature of Zanzibari architecture, meeting and sociability benched spaces called *barazas* were created. Some gardens and kiosk shops thrived in the border area linking the Michenzani blocks to the low–rise vernacular fabric.

While it becomes clear from de Nijs' interviews how this new and unbecoming architectural mould is conceptually re–shaped and converted to shelter a different lifestyle, a lot less is said, and little data is gathered to elucidate the ways in which Michenzani blocks can induce or contribute to the transformation of Swahili family and domestic structures or affect the logic of public–private relations which characterise this Muslim society. Additional interviews would have to be conducted targeting precisely this other transformational effect. We are indeed facing a biunivocal movement in which both inhabitants and architectural frames shape one another, the latter having no doubt repercussions on the processes of change occurring in the "traditional" family and domestic organization in Zanzibar.

A solution to soothe the changing effects of this architecture upon local lifestyles is, in our view, to increase the porosity between the two sorts of urban tissue which live side by side at Michenzani. One way of achieving this would be issuing housing policies that would grant priority of rental to people who had already relatives living in the same or neighbouring blocks (and could thus reproduce the logic of communal domestic organization in a vertical axis) or had family links in the low–rise compound fabric adjacent to them (horizontal porosity). This strategy would also benefit from intensifying the relations of neighbourhood and neighbourliness (*ujirani*), already pointed out as crucial in local ethos and indigenous street planning by Myers.[9] By increasing the overlapping and interaction between the two kinds of urban tissue, compound culture could be more easily recreated and maintained, contributing to an emic approach to urbanisation based on the "local frame of awareness".[10]

3. *Embodying* Michenzani

More than 50 years after its construction began, and despite its spatial newness, Michenzani is already integrated into the city's life, also incorporating the huge avenues that the blocks shaped. Throughout the week, the heavy and noisy car traffic dominates the ambience, the generic daily life occurring mainly among the pre–existing Ng'ambo's fabric. But at the weekends and

Figure 4. Cross–section of Michenzani blocks with photos (2019) montage © Maria Manuel Oliveira, 2022.

on holidays, the avenues become a wide–ranging stage for markets and celebrations, life taking over the design in a rich and complex process of reverse acculturation.

However, despite this apparent socio–urban acceptance, the buildings function as extensive dividing walls, hindering the articulation that should take place within the city that continues vibrant around it. Therefore, it seems necessary, along with the favouring of the rental policies suggested above, to increase the spatial flexibility and diversification of the use of apartments in order to find strategies that pierce these barriers, amplifying their tiny crossing points. This evolution should occur through new tears and uses that will transform the Michenzani "trains" into a powerful catalytic and porous membrane.

Contact with the ground emerges here as a fundamental key to this hypothesis by reconnecting structuring pedestrian links that were lost with the autistic establishment of the blocks; qualifying transitional and interchanging areas; recognizing the spaces adjacent to the buildings as spaces of conviviality and potential meeting places; stimulating new urban toponymies, such as those of the various *maskani* (popular meeting places for men) who since have emerged;[11] and encouraging the resurgence of public spaces for women, so vehemently requested by the organization Reclaim Women's Space,[12] thus supporting female empowerment.

Directly related to lifestyles that are progressively acculturating as globalisation and tourism become increasingly influential in Zanzibari society, new questions arise whose answers can only attain their full meaning if constructed in active interaction with the Michenzani blocks dwellers, as well as their surrounding inhabitants.

In this tense and even paradoxical situation, but undoubtedly in the process of metabolization by the citizens, one wonders how the modernist architectural

ideas could absorb the local texture, with both morphologies keeping their best characteristics? How to integrate this plurality, amplifying and exploring the urban potential that the Michenzani neighbourhood represents? How can it consider and promote contemporary urban ideals based on social and environmental justice?

Apparently, and in some way contrary to the expectations that were had until recently, the rigidity of the modernist blocks is responsive to readjustments in the face of the various family ecologies that cohabit in Zanzibari society and are available to contamination by the intense sociability, shapes and colours that the development of Swahili culture maintains. To foster such a metamorphosis will be imperative to generate alliances and collaboration between political determination, social will and architectural design.

In this process, it is believed that rescuing the ground, redesigning it, recovering and creating spatial transversal continuities – that furthermore have always been invoked by the Modern Movement – would immediately be a strong stimulus in this urban colonisation movement, driving a virtuous cycle that will transform the alien body of the Michenzani set into a powerful device in favour of a renewed urban landscape for Ng'ambo, as the New Zanzibar Town City Centre.

Notes

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4 Anthony Folkers, Muhammad Juma, et al., "Ng'ambo Tuitakaio: Reconnecting the Swahili City", 17thIPHS Conference, Delft, 2016, 30.
5 Department of Urban and Rural Planning, Zanzibar, African Architecture Matters, *NG'ambo Atlas*, Edam, LM Publishers, 2019, 53.
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10 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, New York, Basic Books, 1983, 6.
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12 https://www.facebook.com/reclaimw/, accessed February 25, 2022.