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COLOUR AS A TOOL IN SHAPING THE CITY IMAGE  
– BASED ON THE CASE OF MOMBASA

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KOLOR JAKO NARZĘDZIE KSZTAŁTOWANIA WIZERUNKU MIASTA  
– PRZYKŁAD MOMBASY

**Abstract**

The article discusses the architectural tradition of Mombasa, a port city in East Africa. Starting from the 10th century AD, Mombasa was an important trade centre of the Swahili culture, which developed its own language, art, crafts and architecture, drawing on Arabic, Persian and Indian influences. Mombasa is currently undergoing strong urbanisation processes, which lead to its rapid expansion, spatial chaos and urban poverty. The local authorities facing these problems decided to improve the tourist appeal of the city through initiatives to make it cleaner and enhance its aesthetic values. In 2018, an administrative decree was issued that required the façades of downtown buildings to be painted blue and white. As a result, Mombasa became the most frequently photographed city in Africa.

**Keywords:** Mombasa, Swahili culture, urbanisation of Africa, colour in urban planning

**Streszczenie**

W artykule omówiona została tradycja architektoniczna Mombasy, portowego miasta położonego w Afryce Wschodniej. Od X w. n.e. Mombasa była ważnym ośrodkiem handlowym kultury Suahili, która wykształciła swój własny język, swoją sztukę, rzemiosło i architekturę, opartą o wzory pochodzące z Arabii, Persji i Indii. Obecnie Mombasa podlega silnym procesom urbanizacyjnym, czego skutkami jest proces gwałtownego rozrastania się miasta, chaos przestrzenny i bieda. Władze miasta, borykające się z tymi problemami, postanowiły zwiększyć jego atrakcyjność turystyczną, wdrażając inicjatywy zmierzające do poprawy stanu czystości i estetyki. W 2018 roku nakazano w trybie administracyjnym pomalowanie fasad średniejszych domów na biało i na niebiesko. W rezultacie Mombasa stała się najczęściej fotografowanym miastem w Afryce.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Mombasa, kultura Suahili, urbanizacja Afryki, kolor w urbanistyce

## 1. Introduction

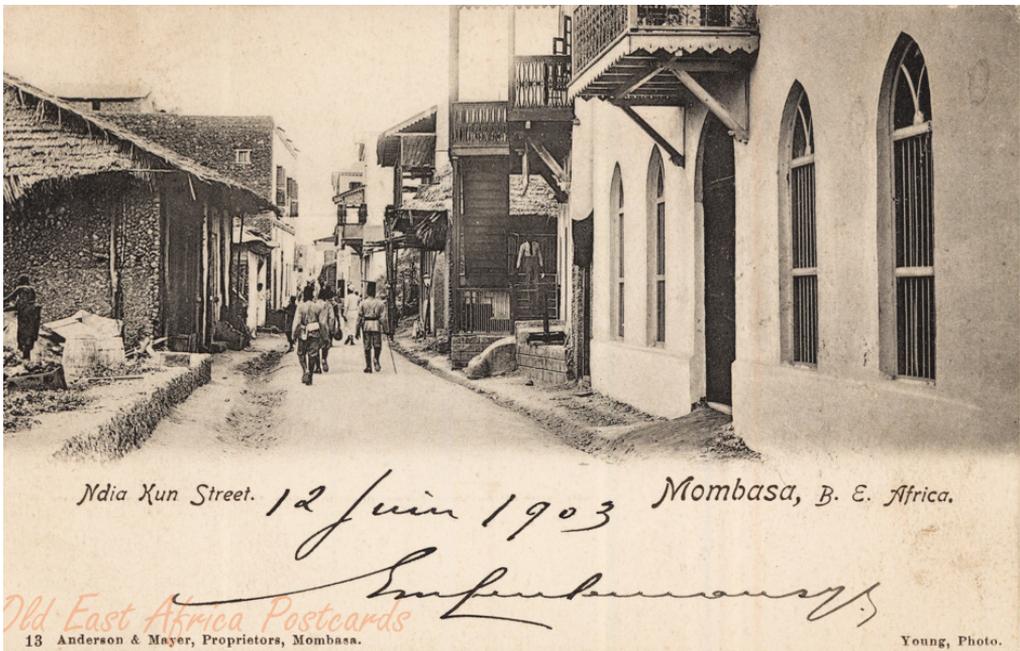
In my previous article, I described two well-known coastal cities: Miami Beach in the USA and Tel Aviv in Israel [4]. The manipulation of their original colours turned them from grey, dirty and squalid cities into global tourist attractions and fashionable style icons: pastel Miami Beach became the capital of American Art Deco, and white Tel Aviv a symbol of modernist architecture, as if straight from Bauhaus. With its downtown buildings painted blue and white, Mombasa, an African port city on the Indian Ocean, is now following in their footsteps.



Fig. 1. The colourful streets of Mombasa, with the newly painted blue and white façades of downtown buildings in the background. Photo by the author

## 2. The architectural tradition of Mombasa

Situated on a coral island, with a population now numbering over one million, Mombasa is the largest port in East Africa and the second largest city in Kenya, after Nairobi. Its history dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, when the cities of East Africa began to play a significant role in the trade developing along the coast of the Indian Ocean, connecting Arabia, India and Africa. The regular monsoon winds were conducive to ocean navigation, bringing in waves of merchants and slave traders. The mixing of native Africans from the Bantu tribe with newcomers from the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf gave rise to a new, strong and distinct Eastern African culture – Swahili, which developed its own language, art, crafts and architecture, drawing from Arabic, Persian and Indian cultures, as well as its own local traditions and materials: coral and mangrove [7, p. 53].



[MB22C1]= Ndia Kun Street - Dated 1903 - BY: Anderson & Mayer, Proprietors, Mombasa -Series #13 - 1900s - Verso

Fig. 2. Ndia Kun Street in Mombasa: a Swahili house on the left, with an Omani house behind it and an Indian house on the right. A photograph from 1903, source: [www.oldeastafricapostcards.com](http://www.oldeastafricapostcards.com)

At around that time, a chain of port cities developed on islands along the East African coast. They included Mombasa, Malindi, Lamu and Zanzibar, all of which still exist. These were places where people traded in ivory, wild game skins and slaves to be sent to Arabia and India – from where china, metal products, patterned fabrics and spices were brought in return. Along the narrow streets of Mombasa’s Old Town, one may still find *Majengo* – hip-roofed houses characteristic of coastal Swahili settlements, with an entrance hall leading to an elongated yard that separated the front residential part from the outbuilding. Other building types include the African Lamu house – a cuboidal one-level house built of coral with a yard enclosed by a wall at the front, and the Omani house – a cuboidal two- or three-storey building with window openings overlooking the internal yard. The entrance gates to these houses originally featured rich ornamentation, with wooden shutters on the window openings. Starting from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became increasingly common to cover houses with mono-pitched roofs of corrugated metal to protect them from the sun and rain.

Vasco da Gama arrived in Mombasa in 1498, probably as the first European to see the city with his own eyes. Soon the Portuguese took Mombasa by force, and in 1593 they built Fort Jesus (which still exists) with a view to colonising East Africa. Over the following years, the city continued to change hands – it was controlled by the rulers of Oman, the British Empire and the Sultan of Zanzibar. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the British protectorate era, East Africa attracted a plethora of Indian settlers, mostly from Gujarat. Usually traders and craftsmen, they still remain the economic elite of Kenya. With them came the development of another type



Fig. 3. An Old Town street, the 16<sup>th</sup> century historical Mandhry Mosque in the foreground.  
Photo by the author

of house in the region, known as an Indian shopfront house – a two- or three-storey masonry building with a balcony and a shop on the ground floor. Erected side by side, such houses formed whole street frontages. Many of them have characteristic four-wing folding doors, known as Gujarati doors, which make it possible to open the establishment wide to the street. The compact rows of these houses brought a certain order to the mazes of narrow streets and dead ends of traditional African cities. They mostly form shopping streets in the old port districts, and are the rock of the local economy and a tremendously popular attraction for tourists [8, pp. 69–70].

The downtown streets of Mombasa are filled with buildings dating back to the colonial period, when Kenya was a British protectorate, as well as modern buildings. These were built to touch the edge of the pavement, and followed the same principle as the Indian-type buildings, with ground floors devoted to retail and the residential part on the upper floors. After all, these houses were still being erected mostly by Indians, who monopolised the local markets of trade and services. The British usually lived in the exclusive residential districts of Tudor and Kizingo, which drew from the model of the garden city. The architecture of public utility buildings was based on British colonial motifs, with arcades and neoclassical colonnades. Newer post-war edifices usually represented the modernist style, sometimes alluding to Mendelsohn's rounded bay windows. A British import that proved highly successful in Kenya was the veranda – a characteristic feature of the typical Anglo-Saxon bungalow, referred to by Anthony King as a “tool of the Empire” [5]. The veranda became a popular element of numerous types of buildings, providing their inhabitants with a space that protected them



Fig. 4. A downtown street in Mombasa, with house façades painted blue and white, with a Hindu temple between them. Photo by the author

from the heat and rain but also allowed them to relax and enjoy social interactions. Another, later import to Mombasa consists of devastated and dirty blocks of flats, scattered along the main access roads into the downtown area.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the railway arriving in Mombasa, with the port being modernised, new residential districts (Tudor and Kizingo) created, and the city starting to expand beyond the island, to include both port bays. As a result of its one-thousand-year history, Mombasa became a polygon of numerous architectural typologies, both native and imported, colonial and modern, mixing various building traditions and styles. This multicultural dimension of Mombasa is particularly visible in its temples. It is a place where Muslims, Hindus and Christians have long and peacefully coexisted. Islam currently prevails, and is the most dynamically developing religion in the coastal zone of East Africa. Some mosques though, such as the Mandhry Mosque in the Old Town, are almost 500 years old. Mosques are usually modest buildings, standing out only due to the minarets. The less common churches and Hindu temples feature many more embellishments.

Traditional architecture was certainly not blue and white. This is how Karen Blixen describes it: “The narrow-street town of Mombasa is all built from coral-rock, in pretty shades of buff, rose and ochre, and above the town rises the massive old Fortress, with walls and embrasures, where three hundred years ago the Portuguese and the Arabs held out against one another; it displays stronger colours than the town, as if it had, in the course of the ages, from its high site drunk in more than one stormy sunset” [1, p. 288].

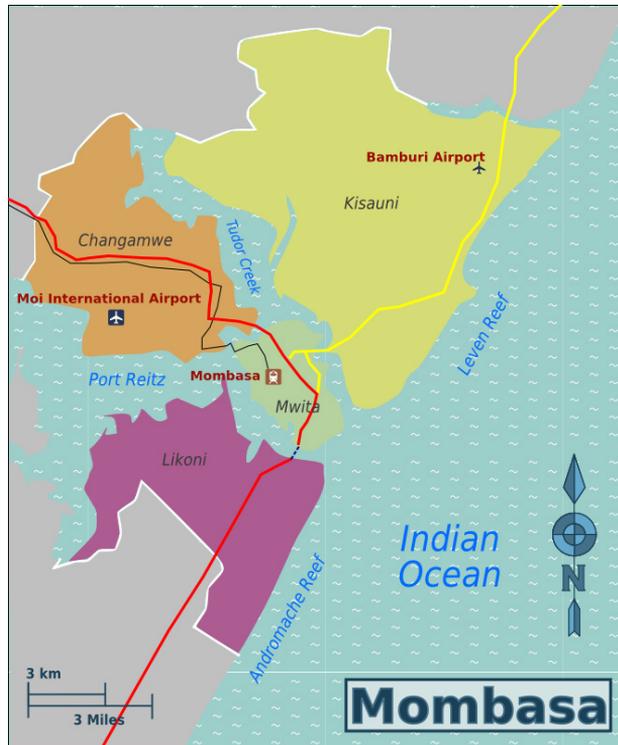


Fig. 5. Mombasa city map. After: <https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Mombasa>

Although the downtown part of Mombasa is situated on an island, its contemporary section is not so densely built-up, the streets are wide, and there are several parks and green enclaves. However, the character is far from typical for an island, and one could say that the city is ugly and chaotic, turning its back on the sea. Both bays of the downtown island of Mwita are in fact industrialised and contaminated harbours, which is why there are no palm promenades or white sandy beaches, so typical of East African coasts. Still, the island's location proved valuable for the central part of Mombasa, as it naturally cuts off the circle of slums that penetrate the majority of African cities. Those in Mombasa, except for several downtown enclaves, do not begin until the southern side of the Reitz harbour bay, where the ferries connect the city centre with the suburbs scattered over the mainland.

### 3. Urbanisation of East African countries

East Africa is one of the least urbanised regions of Africa, but the high dynamics of the urbanisation process, around 5.35% per annum, speeds up the development of cities. Over the past four decades, the city population has grown from 11.2 million in 1970 to 77.2 million in 2010 [3, p. 5]. It is estimated that by 2050 over a half of the population of some Eastern African countries (Madagascar, Somalia, Mauritius and Sudan) will live in cities,



Fig. 6. Downtown buildings on Mwitia Island: a tower block surrounded by slums, view from Tudor Creek. Photo by the author

while in others, such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, the rural population will still be in the majority. The urbanisation of Kenya has been progressing since colonial times, and currently centres around three regions: around the capital city of Nairobi in the western part of the country, along the railway line that connects Kenya with Uganda, and in the coastal zone, with Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu being the most populous [11, p. 8].

The rapid growth of the urban population in Kenya stems from its uneven economy, where cities generate much higher revenues and offer better job opportunities than traditional rural economies. Ever since the colonial period, cities have been home to key administrative, economic and cultural processes. Their transportation hubs, industrial plants, railway stations, ports and markets continue to attract growing numbers of people, who settle in the outskirts, in temporary housing. During the colonial period, the downtown districts inhabited by white people were separated from the local populations by open green areas, used exclusively by white people. Parks and gardens, polo fields, rugby and cricket pitches as well as golf courses – together these formed a kind of cordon sanitaire that separated the colonisers from the colonisees. After independence was restored, the white elites were replaced by local elites, and the urbanisation processes gained momentum. The main urban population growth drivers are: demography, migration from rural areas to cities, and the growing number of refugees coming from areas affected by warfare, hunger and natural disasters.

African urbanisation is sometimes referred to as the urbanisation of poverty. Paul Theroux notes that: "... as they kept expanding, African cities became more awful – more desperate and dangerous – as they grew. They did not become denser, they simply sprawled more, becoming gigantic villages. In such cities, women still lugged water from standpipes, cooked over wood



Fig. 7. Blocks of flats in the suburbs of Mombasa



Fig. 8. Local market in the Likoni district

fires and washed clothes in filthy creeks, and people shat in open latrines. ‘Citified’ in Africa just meant bigger and dirtier” [8, p. 352]. As a consequence of urbanisation, a 19.9% unemployment rate was recorded in Kenyan cities in 2006. Among city youth, the unemployment rate is twice as high, at 40.6%. Over half of the people in Mombasa suffer from malnutrition, with 37.6% living below the destitution threshold [3, pp. 12–13]. According to estimates, more than half of the population of Kenyan cities live in slums (called “informal settlements”), without owning the land where they live, and without access to running water or a sewage system. Only 14% of the population has a sewage system in their homes, with just 50% of them having access to electricity. As a result, Kenyan cities, and especially their outskirts, are overpopulated and characterised by spatial chaos and pollution of the natural environment.

The effects of the automotive development are yet another significant problem. The combination of an insufficient number of roads, their very poor quality and the suicidal practices of drivers makes Kenyan streets a very dangerous place. Drivers of *matatu*, the minibuses that are the basic means of transport in Kenya, represent a particular hazard. Even the police ignore such conduct as overtaking into oncoming traffic, driving in the wrong direction, passing a red light and halting suddenly in the middle of the road. To enforce the speed limit in especially dangerous places, the authorities install speed bumps in the roads and streets.

African cities could be the drivers of civilisation and economic progress, but they are a hotbed of social inequalities and an epicentre of urban poverty. Still, they offer more opportunities and chances than traditional agricultural areas, which is why they continue to attract people who hope for a better life.



Fig. 9. Slums along the access roads into Mombasa – Likoni district

#### 4. Initiatives to improve the appeal and aesthetics of the city

Modern day Mombasa covers an area of 229.9 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 14.8 km<sup>2</sup> comprises the central island of Mwitwa and 65 km<sup>2</sup> the area of the port bays that surround it. The majority of people live on the outskirts, while the central island is inhabited by the local elite. The average population density is 6131 people per km<sup>2</sup>. Tourism, next to the maritime economy, heavy industry and commerce, forms a crucial branch of the economy, capitalising on the presence of an international airport and the proximity of popular coastal resorts [11, p. 9]. The Mombasa authorities recognise the Old Town and Fort Jesus as the main tourist attractions, and essential economic resources. We can read in local planning documents that “there is enormous potential in the tourism and hospitality sectors, which have yet to be optimally tapped”. They also mention that spatial planning and policies are needed to “enhance the aesthetic value of Mombasa City as a beautiful tourist destination” [8, p. 74].

In their attempts to improve the aesthetics of Mombasa, the city authorities see two basic obstacles, the first being the non-regulated activity of local estate development companies, which erect tall office and residential buildings in the downtown part of the city. The architecture of such structures is based on global models, and as such they disrupt the atmosphere of the city and distort the traditional three-storey building scale. Secondly, the authorities acknowledge the squalid wharf area, whose potential is underutilised. The waterfront causeways, viewing areas, and public-access water is available only at certain points. Other reports mention the issue of bad management and the omnipresent corruption, and highlight those phenomena as significant impediments to the sustainable spatial development of Mombasa [11, p. 51].



Fig. 10. Mombasa: a downtown street near the main city market

The Integrated Strategic Urban Development Plan is to serve as a tool to improve the economy and the infrastructure of the city. The urban planning works financed by the United Nations are to regulate the construction requirements, develop a network of public infrastructure, improve the mobility of the inhabitants, and improve the quality of life by providing access to education, healthcare and homes as well as improving the natural environment. These are far-reaching goals, and actions have to be taken at national, regional and local levels to achieve them. Training is provided to those members of the city authorities who are in charge of developing appropriate structures and the tools to create and successfully implement local spatial development plans.

In the meantime, the most spectacular results have been yielded by two ad hoc activities undertaken by the city authorities to increase the tourist appeal of Mombasa: painting of the façades of the downtown buildings and elimination of the huge dumpsite situated beside the causeway connecting the downtown area with the Changamwe industrial district, which has not only a harbour, shipyard, cement plant, sugar factory and refinery but also an international airport. Until recently, the tourists visiting the seaside experienced a culture shock: the buses taking them from the airport, driving the crowded, bumpy roads, would first pass the refinery and smoke-enveloped factories, then they a smelly dumpsite before entering the crowded and dirty slums surrounding the city.

Ecological thinking is already noticeable at the airport: you are not allowed to bring plastic bags into Kenya, so once you arrive products are packed either in newspaper or biodegradable bags. In 2018, the downtown dumpsite was closed down, and is now being reclaimed: soil is being brought in and vegetation planted. It is planned to turn it into a public park; however,



Fig. 11. Blue and white: the new colours of Mombasa. Photo by the author

the situation is still out of control, and protests are multiplying. There are protests concerning the location designated for the new dumpsite from the aviation authority, as it is situated within the airport approach area and there are fears that birds looking for food at the dumpsite will pose a hazard to aircraft as they take off or land. There is also the suspicion that, as a result of corruption, the area being reclaimed has already been sold to property developers, who will use it to build skyscrapers rather than a park [2].

The façade painting project initiated by city governor Hassan Joho for the downtown buildings has yielded much better results. In March 2018, he issued a decree that ordered all the owners of the houses situated in the administrative centre of the island and in the Old Town to paint the buildings white at their own cost and to highlight window borders and architectural details in Egyptian blue, the famous *lapis-lazuli* – a pigment known since antiquity, with a failure to obey punishable by a fine. The owners were given two weeks to prepare and another two to implement the decree. Furthermore, no advertising signs were allowed on building walls. The statement of the grounds explained that the purpose of the initiative was to make the city more beautiful: the blue colour alluding to its heritage and cultural ties with the Indian Ocean. “The ocean is dear to our hearts”, a local clerk stated. The selected colour code is “aimed at promoting culture, preserving heritage and promoting the county as a tourism hub” [10].

This initiative was not protest-free either – at first the decree was unsuccessfully opposed by the Commissioner for Human Rights and Justice, and then a local cosmetics shop owner complained. In his application the latter claimed that his shop had been operating for 15 years, pink was his brand colour and his shops in other Kenyan cities were painted the same way. His attorneys stated that the change of colour might affect his business and that, according to the law in force, the colour of buildings could not be imposed through an arbitrary decision of the governor but only through a spatial development plan. The court shared those arguments and repealed the governor’s decree, stating that it violated the rights and limits the freedoms of real property owners [6]. However, in the meantime, the majority of the proprietors of downtown real properties followed the governor’s order and so Mombasa gained a new look. Until recently ugly and squalid, it has become the most photographed city in Africa, and the blue and white buildings form a perfect background for the colourful street life. Many people, including representatives of the tourism sector, congratulate the governor on the idea, as he made the Mombasa city centre beautiful without spending so much as a penny.

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