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Panel 55: Ruined Bodies and Ageing Buildings: Architecture, Oblivion and Decay
Session 3: Decay (ruination, abandonment, eviction)
Constance Smith

[1] The Politics of Decay: Materiality and Regeneration in a Nairobi Council Estate

[2] On 14 May this year, an article appeared in the Nairobi News paper with the headline "In Comes Chinese Money, Out Go Eastlands Estates". The article describes a MoU signed between Nairobi County Government and two private Chinese companies to build 55,000 apartments on the site of current council housing, as part of the city's so-called 'urban renewal' programme. The Eastlands estates are several neighbourhoods of colonial-era housing in the east of Nairobi, built by the British colonial government between 1920s and 1960s to provide affordable housing for Africans in Kenya's rapidly growing capital city. Although today they are rundown and in disrepair, tens of thousands of Nairobians still call them home. According to the article, the new apartments are to be designed, constructed and then sold by the companies, in effect suggesting that this will be the end of publically-owned rental housing in this area of Nairobi. One of the targeted estates, Kaloleni, is the focus of my PhD fieldwork on architecture, history and materiality, where I have been exploring residents responses to this looming threat of redevelopment.

Over the past few years, large scale urban planning projects have achieved new momentum in Kenya, and in Nairobi in particular. [3] The government's Vision 2030 initiative envisages "transforming Kenya into a middle income country by the year 2030", and one key element of this is to be the reinvention of Nairobi as a 'world-class metropolis'. The Nairobi County government have just completed the development of a new masterplan for the capital, in which they foresee the Nairobi of 2030 as "an iconic and globally attractive city aimed at regional integration and sustainability". I could give a whole paper on that statement alone, not least to question where ordinary Nairobians might feature in an ambition that prioritises regional and global attractiveness before its own citizens. [4] The flagship projects within this vision are Tatu City and Konza City, brand new satellite cities planned for Nairobi's periphery. [5] Vast, glassy visions rising from the African savannah, [6] these are the places the government hopes will make Nairobi attractive to the rest of the world.

Hidden slightly deeper within the new masterplan is the less glamorous Eastlands Urban Renewal Strategy, developed as part of Nairobi County government's plans to combat urban decay in the city. Exactly what this strategy means in practice, however, is hard to tell: there have been a number of conflicting announcements, and exactly what will be demolished, what will be built, and how residents will be affected remains unclear. For example, though the recent announcement suggests new housing will be for sale rather than rental, the government has also stated that

residents will not be evicted, despite the fact that very few have the capital needed to purchase property.

Amidst this climate of uncertainty, unsurprisingly rumour and speculation are flourishing. [7] This paper follows the politics of decay in Kaloleni, as residents respond to the threat of demolition and regeneration. After years of neglect, most residents would welcome some form of state-instigated investment and construction within their estate, but many reject the label of urban decay. As a policy category imposed by the state, urban decay is a judgement. It implies material and social failure and the condemnation of a whole community, whilst simultaneously evading the culpability of those who ordered its construction or who were responsible for its management. In their refusal to be branded as a site of urban decay, Kaloleni residents deeply object to this evasion of responsibility. They argue not only that they live in a historically and architecturally important site but that the disrepair of their neighbourhood is politically motivated on the part of the local government, as they seek to condemn and redevelop it.

[8] Though they dispute the category and the ramifications it entails, decay is nonetheless a powerfully affective force in Kaloleni. [9] Homes are dilapidated, tarmac has disintegrated into mud, refuse piles up amid the houses [10] and residents lack basic services. In this paper I seek to highlight this important slippage between a governmental category and a material process. Yet it would be a mistake to see the materiality of this decay as entirely characterised by loss and abandonment. The material processes at work in Kaloleni do not fit with recent anthropological discourse on ruination, in which the terms decay and ruin are used somewhat interchangeably. [11] Instead, decay in Kaloleni is more productive, a sedimented history that residents are increasingly engaged with as they seek to refute the governmental label of urban decay.

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As with so many estates all over the world that get labelled as 'dangerous' or 'decayed' and earmarked for regeneration, Kaloleni was once a model estate, intended to generate a bright future for its new residents. [12] Built in the 1940s and based on the garden city ideals of urban design, it was one of the first estates in Nairobi aimed at African families. It marked a period of British colonial urban planning in Africa that moved away from functional "bed-spaces" for migrant labourers towards a more ideological model that would refashion domestic life and build the exemplary colonial subjects of the future. [13] [describe image of Kaloleni plan here]

The first families who moved into the estate tended to be skilled artisans or low-level civil servants, many of them recently returned from WW2. By the 1950s and 1960s, Kaloleni was at the heart of a growing urban middle class in Nairobi, and it was an aspirational place: it was the most well-to-do of the African estates, and it was a marker of some success to live there. Today, older residents are nostalgic for a time of order and maintenance, with neat lawns, playing fields, daily milk delivery and a well-equipped music room and library. But it was also in some ways quite a radical place: many of Kenya's independence era politicians, civil servants and business people called Kaloleni home, and as the principal centre for nationalist

politics in Nairobi, the community social hall was at the heart of alternative ways of imagining Kenya's future.

Independence in 1963 opened up new residential opportunities for the new African political and economic elites, and gradually the most successful began to move away from Kaloleni to bigger and smarter homes elsewhere in the city, often previously White areas such as Lavington and Muthaiga. From the 1980s, widespread corruption and mismanagement at both municipal and national levels meant that the administration and upkeep of Kaloleni began to decline, and today there is almost no formal state presence in the estate at all. [14] Previously tarmacked roads have turned to dust, only small islands of asphalt remaining. Water no longer runs in the pipes, [15] broken streetlights lean precariously at awkward angles, the bulbs long gone. Rubbish is no longer collected, electricity is intermittent and the sewerage system is at breaking point. Families are now at the poorest end of the spectrum, and the estate has become dirty, congested, and unsafe. Despite still being council tenants, residents are now largely left to fend for themselves. Whereas once the council repaired everything – one had only to report to the estate officer and arrangements would be made – these days the council has abandoned any pretence at maintenance and it is up to the residents to fix their own homes. [16]

Many residents regard the material degradation of Kaloleni as a political act on the part of the city authorities. They feel that the council are deliberately running things into the ground so that they can condemn the estate as decayed, and so justify the demolition and redevelopment of the site, evicting the current residents in the process. This gives a very different gloss to the visible signs of neglect. These are not neutral processes, the product of some natural cycle of decay, or the consequence of Kaloleni being simply 'forgotten' by city authorities. Household maintenance is a political issue for residents, and their practices of management and repair inscribe the houses with their own personal histories. They are not simply repairing their homes for functionality and comfort, but in a small way trying to stem a much bigger tide of institutional neglect, and making a statement about their right to reside in the estate.

In some ways, there is a sadness and nostalgia to this decay, a loss of pride in an estate which was once desirable and orderly. But Kaloleni should not be regarded as some kind of ruin, a relic of a colonial past destined for oblivion. Much of the scholarship on decay implies ruination, abandonment and desolation. The quintessential image of ruins is one of loss, a monumental relic of a decaying past: a decrepit fort, an abandoned factory, a deserted village. But the kind of processes I have been following suggest that ruin and decay are terms that should not be conflated.

Ann Laura Stoler has encouraged us to consider the political life of imperial debris, "the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities and things" (2008: 194). This afterlife is vibrant in Kaloleni. Far from being abandoned, the population is today many times higher than its original intended capacity. [17- extensions] Amidst the decay is also a sense of opportunity, of new possibilities as formality and stricture give way to informality. Where previously economic activity was limited to formal outlets in the centre of the estate, today kiosks, [18] hair salons, car

mechanics and market stalls [19] are flourishing across the neighbourhood [20 – new/old]. Governmental failure to fulfil mundane responsibilities of maintenance is countered by [21- house A8], opening a front door to reveal a dramatic modification and vivid redecoration of a proud resident's home, [22] whilst many others have hedged and planted beautiful front gardens to create private outdoor space and keep the[23] encroaching rubbish and mud at bay.

What is this kind of decay that is not ruination? In one sense, we could simply say that this is what happens when formality is replaced with informality. This is a trend widely observed across many so-called developing countries: With structural adjustment policies in the 1970s and the shrinking of the state, so the informal sector proliferated; the informal economy in Kenya now accounts for roughly 35% of Gross National Income, according to World Bank figures. Similarly, the high rates of institutional corruption and lack of government accountability have led to poor infrastructural investment. At the level of the neighbourhood, what this means for council estates such as Kaloleni is an abandonment by the state, an end of the council's maintenance of and investment in their social housing. For residents, this then leads to a 'making-do' culture, in which citizens make the best of what remains, coming up with ingenious fixes and creative solutions to issues such as lack of piped water, unreliable electricity provision and poor sanitation.

At a certain level, all of this may be true. But for me, it doesn't really get at the social and material implications of such neglect. As I followed the materiality of decay in Kaloleni, tracing what was disintegrating and what was not, and questioning how people felt about this apparent decay, I began to see decay not as something associated with loss, disappearance and oblivion, but to see it as accumulation. What I was observing was a build up of material traces, a sedimentation of the remains of lives lived. If rubbish is not collected, broken objects are not removed, houses are not repainted, what we are left with is not less, but rather more – what we might term an excess. [24 – mtaaro and new ground from clothes scraps]

There is no ruined enchantment to these residues, they are not often beautiful or aesthetically pleasing, but they reveal the way in which a landscape can be inscribed with multiple ordinary histories as they accumulate in the estate. I began to suspect that living within and among such sedimented histories generates an engagement <u>with</u> the past, a way of relating to the material structures of the estate that has helped to shape the resentment and rejection of the label urban decay.

This was particularly clearly articulated by one resident, Limush. He explained to me that Kaloleni should not be demolished because of the emotional attachment to it, and that this is crucial for community, and even Kenya as a whole. "It would affect the history of this country", he says, adding "without the buildings you cannot remember, you have no memories". He compared Kaloleni to the new Thika Superhighway, [25] one of the Kenyan government's flagship infrastructural projects in recent years. He commented how the area bisected by the road has now changed so much that it is unrecognisable to him. It has been cleared, obliterated, all traces of what was once there removed. Importantly, he said not only can he no longer remember what was there before and how it looked, but "I can't remember what I used to <u>do</u> there". That is to say, he has lost his embodied knowledge of that

area, its location in his lived experience. He says "if the buildings come down, Kaloleni will be gone".

What I realised in conversation with Limush was not only how the materiality of the estate is seen as crucial to its historical existence, but that oblivion and loss emanate not so much from decay as from its elimination. The relationship between people and architecture is generative; the accumulated traces of decades of habitation have left their mark, and provoke practices of relating to the past and ways of imagining the future. Conversely, once branded as a site of urban decay, that place becomes dead-end, futureless. The terms which follow – decanting, demolition, regeneration – seem equally ominous. It is a condemnation, an obliteration of slowly amassed material and corporal micro-histories.

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But this is not a tale of development-averse preservationism. Interestingly, though residents reject the term urban decay and its concomitant threat of demolition and possible eviction, after years of neglect they do not reject the idea of development outright. Renovation of the estate, or even the promise of new homes, is welcomed by many – if the process is gone about in the right way. What they argue is that they should be participants rather than bystanders in this process. Instead of forcing developers out, residents hope to force their way in, to be involved in developing alternative visions of regeneration.

To attain this participation, where the requirements and concerns of current tenants are taken on board, residents sense they will need to slow down the process, and awaken different kinds of narratives to their cause. The existing architecture of Kaloleni is seen as a crucial site of this negotiation, and one group of residents have turned to the National Museums of Kenya and the process of gazetting historic buildings as national monuments. [26] This process is still underway, but so far NMK have been encouraging about the possibilities of gazetting at least the public buildings of Kaloleni, such as the social hall and library. In this process, residents strategically draw on a preservationist language of architectural heritage, and the urgency of preserving a crumbling but historically and politically significant district of Nairobi's past. They argue that it is not only the iconic colonial public buildings of the CBD that should be protected, but the everyday architecture that marks African presence in the city. In response to the article I discussed at the start of this presentation, the Residents' Association of Kaloleni contacted the main media house in Kenya, and invited reporters to come to the estate and see the place for themselves. The result was a feature on the main evening news, in which they discussed Kaloleni's architectural significance as a still extant garden city estate, related the numerous important figures of Kenya's independence who had once been resident in Kaloleni, and showed the houses in which they had lived. They also recalled the 1952 visit of the future Queen Elizabeth to Kaloleni, when she took tea in house number L1.

However, for these residents this is about much more than national heritage, or the conservation of a building as a monument. Their deployment of world heritage-flavoured narratives is vey strategic. If the buildings of Kaloleni can be protected, these residents argue, then rather than rolling out an off-the-shelf design for a

housing estate, demolishing all in its wake, developers will have to slow down and come up with a bespoke proposal. To do so, they will have to engage directly with the material realities of Kaloleni, opening up new spaces for residents' involvement in the design of their own futures.

Here we can see a real recognition among residents that Kaloleni is a site co-constituted by the interactions between people and place. If this sense of place is to remain meaningful, then residents argue they need not only to protect its buildings, but to protect the relationship between those structures and the people that live in and use them. Their estate may be decaying, but this accretion is essential to their history, to an embodied understanding of home and community, and to its continuation in any future regeneration.

By starting to see decay as a process of accumulation rather than loss, new possibilities begin to emerge. Instead of a descent into oblivion, decay remains unforeclosed, an ongoing process of sedimentation. For residents in Kaloleni, it is this potentiality, awoken through their engagements with the estate's sedimented histories, that has opened up ways to dispute the government's potent but ambiguous label of urban decay. Instead of a dead-end, futureless estate, residents' daily negotiations with the materiality of decay through their practices of household maintenance and the necessity of 'making do' in the absence of the state, evoke alternative visions of social housing, national heritage and urban regeneration.