

From Vernacular to Modern: *Transitioning East African Traditional House Design to Contemporary*

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Abstract

Looking at the present through the perspective of the past is not a new idea (Kamenju, 2013). This paper involves insights into the traditional house design transition in East Africa. It entails the process of development of African house design from traditional design to contemporary design. The paper discusses a brief background of African traditional house designs. Using desk study methods, it analyzed in depth - from a design perspective - three key cases of three East African communities; the Agikuyu of Kenya, the Swahili of Kenya and Tanzania and the Buganda of Uganda. From the research, it is evident that East African architecture has evolved and has been influenced by foreign cultures. However, significant African elements still remain testimony to the enduring nature of East African traditions. The traditional African houses play a significant role when it comes to trying to understand African roots. It is extremely important that East Africans embrace and uphold traditional houses and get inspiration from them.

Keywords: Contemporary, Current trend, House design, Traditional African, Vernacular African.

INTRODUCTION

House design in East Africa has been transitioning slowly and progressively. As people become more educated and as the economies grow, there has been a rise in western inspired house designs. It has been observed that economic status determines the type of house for an individual's life (Dowsing, 2016).

This is unlike in ancient East Africa where houses were built depending on climatic conditions, topography and geographical location, cultural beliefs and availability of building materials. Nowhere is this transition exemplified as with the Agikuyu of Central Kenya. The Agikuyu is a community in Central Kenya whose housing culture has evolved over time. They had a specific design which has been changing gradually (Hess, 2013a). Currently, as a result of this gradual change, a big percentage of the Agikuyu has been using modern and contemporary designs to build their houses. Other communities, such as the Swahili at the East African Coast (Kenya and Tanzania) and the Buganda are affected as well. Studying these three communities helps understand the transitioning process from the ancient period

to the current. However, there are individuals who have incorporated the traditional African design to contemporary designs whose outcome is positive, functional and acceptable to human beings (Aliyu, 2015).

The objective of this study was to establish the diversity of available traditional architectural styles domiciled in East Africa. It was also to analyze the design, materials, shapes and sizes, and cultural influences informing such designs. Finally, it was the paper's objective to draw parallels between the old and the contemporary to document the extent of such transition from vernacular to current western influenced architecture of East Africa.

THEORY

Ideally, traditional African houses are associated with low income households. In Kenya, African traditional houses are only found in rural areas where they are associated with poverty. These types of house designs are cheap to construct as materials are readily available in rural areas. However, other regions embrace the traditional houses, such as the coast of Kenya and Tanzania

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