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Planned housing in *Komarock* Nairobi, changes due to ten years of illegal densification

Abstract.

In the south after years planned housing acquires new additions and thus characteristics. These are necessitated by needs of the owners. While there are those planned majority are not. Local authorities require all addition to existing built types to be approved. Depending on the particular zone there would be laid down planning and design bye-laws.

Data for the paper was collected in *Komarock* a housing project that was sponsored by Housing Finance Company of Kenya (HFCK). The targeted population was the middle class, a disappearing group in Kenya. Since its inception ten years ago, individual housing blocks had experienced severe form of densification physical change. This was more prominent within the perimeter and settings that were located at a corner. Although n-approved additions are illegal, local authority had continued to ignore their development. In most cases both in scale and with proportion, new built types have completely overwhelmed the original one. Developments have brought in new experiences. New built types exist side by side with addition.

Addition to existing built types is illegal in cities of the south yet they provide important attributes to a neighborhood. They become dominant themes and. Apart from this and in most cases they provide subsidy. And for those who are unable to afford higher rents, they provide alternative housing. Compared to those who were rental the original blocks, tenants of this paid less. Research concludes by recommending ways of introducing limited control of additions.

1.0 Introduction.

Komarock was a mortgage-housing scheme that was developed by Kenya Building Society (KBS) under sponsorship from the Housing Finance Company of Kenya (HFCK). The first phase of the project was started in 1990 and the latest one is phase four. To date there is a total of 2700 housing units. The largest unit is a four bedroomed dwelling unit and the smallest a single bedroom dwelling one. Efforts that informed development of this particular neighborhood included: moving the activities of Nairobi from the current center and developing a medium density housing program that would be affordable to the “disappearing”¹ Nairobi’s middle class population.

This neighborhood was not comprehensively planned as a residential neighborhood. Save for phase two with one planned shopping development in other phases developers have merely provided dwelling units. No other facility for example schools or reserve land for such has been provided in all phases. In the ensuing confusion residents have

¹ In Kenya over the years drastic economic changes has affected the existence of different urban classes. Current situation has on the one the affluent class, and on the other extreme the impoverished masses.

provided for some of the facilities for example kiosks and schooling facilities within the left over spaces of their homes. Depending on the number of rooms and built type width of dwelling blocks were ranging between 6.3-8.5 meters with lengths ranging between 12.8-18.3 meters. Average land allocated for a three bed-roomed maisonette was 0.026 acres.

Between the time when the first occupants took over the neighborhood and today the original typology had gone through severe change. There are places where it is impossible to distinguish between the original and later on addition. There are settings where the original types have been subdued by the later development. This is both in scale and in proportions. Cases were identified of slender blocks that were five floors high. Original dwelling blocks were a mixture of low spread row houses alongside single storeyed row house blocks.

Developments are against local authority requirements. In each case only a single dwelling unit was to be allowed. Nonetheless local government would not demolish any of the new developments. This means that in *Komarock* both legal and illegal built environment are an extension of one another.

Apart from the problems of scale and proportion new building types have brought into the neighborhood unplanned for community. Original planning did not take cognizance of some of the vices that would be introduced by the new development.

From the beginning developers formed a community association that would serve as a platform for the different matters that would generally arise within the neighborhood. This is the current *Komarock* Resident Association (KRA). Majority of resident's saw the association as ineffective. For example they are unable to enforce some of the resolutions by the community.

2.0 Location.

Komarock is located 18 Km to the east of Nairobi. It lies at an urban edge – between the rural and urban environment. To the north of this neighborhood is a thinly populated industrial strip with a narrow strip road that links the city to the immediate rural district running between the two neighbors. Before coming into contact with the rural district there are the abandoned quarry mines. There were advanced plans to convert this into site for domestic waste disposal. To the south of *Komarock* is the sprawling high-density *Kayole* neighborhood on the one side and the medium density *Donholm* housing to the other side. Another road that links the city to its immediate rural district separates *Komarock* from this two. To the immediate west is a 600-acre open land that is meant for future expansion of *Komarock*. This give way to sprawling high density USAID sponsored *Umoja* scheme.

Regular buses and *matatus*² ply the route between *Komarock* and other city neighborhoods. The later mode of transport had unpredictable schedules. This factor makes travels between the neighborhood and central business district a problem.

3.0 Aims and Objectives.

The wider objective of the research was to identify new built types and their influence on the original one. Specific objectives of the research included identifying:

- 3.1 Common built types that were being added on to the original blocks that were located within the much bigger corner plots.
- 3.2 Common built types that were being added on to the original blocks that were located within the seemingly advantaged perimeter blocks.
- 3.3 Reasons that were behind the increased densification.
- 3.4 Effectiveness of community based association.
- 3.5 Recommend ways and or model that may introduce level of control in the way that physical additions to existing blocks would be controlled and/ or carried out.

4.0 Methodology.

Data was collected during 2000 over a period of six months. Descriptive survey design that was quantitative in nature was relied on. The design gives characteristics of a sample that reflect a given situation at one period of time. To facilitate this collection of data, following steps were taken:

- 4.1 Firstly a list was prepared of required identifiable setting types and/ or building types that would require attention.
- 4.2 Secondly a list of items with a check mark on the column “observed” or the column “not observed” was prepared.
- 4.3 A rating scale of 1-7 was prepared. This was used to record the intensity or a range of frequency for certain built types. 7 implied that the built type is always present to 1 that stands for not at all.

In order to identify sampling cases, several steps were taken. Firstly the entire neighborhood was sub-divided into 95 cluster units. These were identifiable built environments that were viewed as being capable of defining one. Among elements that would be used to define such a community boundary were court(s) and road networks.

Clusters were such that each was similar in character to the other; and within the individual cluster the unit was heterogeneous. Being only 95 clusters, research decided to sample each cluster. This was meant to provide a clear representation of the qualities and characteristics of the general typologies. Descriptive method has been used to present the data.

² *Matatu* is a local term for the mini-buses that are used by the public to travel between different parts of Nairobi. This are owned by different individuals.

5.0 Results.

5.1 Introduction.

A single cluster was made up of both perimeter as well as courtyard blocks. The former blocks were taken to be strategically located. Compared to the other types, perimeter blocks were judged as having the necessary potential that would have attracted capital. Other strategically located blocks were those that would be at the corners or settings where planning would be negotiating a turning. The blocks would be sited within a much larger open space. Large-scale additions to the original block were being undertaken within these strategically placed plots.

Most times a cluster comprised an average of 35 dwelling units. Discussion with community members identified semblance of community activities in some particular clusters'. There would be co-operation to collectively dispose domestic waste as well as with providing some common form of security. This level of co-operation was identified in over 75 percent of clusters.

Three factors were identified as being among those that inform on development trends of the original dwelling unit. Firstly was the location or setting of the unit within the cluster. Secondly was the amount of open setting that had been allocated to a dwelling block. Thirdly was the level of community based groups in monitoring developments of their built environment.

5.2 Setting, built type and development of these.

5.2.1 Perimeter blocks.

These were the row blocks that were located along some of the road networks. These are of two types. The first category are those that link up this neighborhood to the outside world for example, *Kayole* that is the immediate housing neighborhood. The second category links up the different cluster units. It is the level of both human and vehicular traffic through these that had influenced developments of perimeter blocks.

Three typologies are evident in the emerging perimeter block. Firstly were the low spread addition that were located within the left over spaces in the front and at times the back. Secondly were the single storey blocks. Commercial activities dominated ground floors (fig 1 and 2). Thirdly were temporary kiosks. Some of the landlord unable to raise money for addition would rent out their yard. Such tenants would put up temporary type of building by using unplained timber and metal sheet materials (fig 3 and 4).

Discussions revealed that additions did not follow any planning guideline. Firstly those that were involved saw no need in engaging a professional. Secondly some of the developers saw no need for approval of their plans by the local council and were actually ignorant of the city hall regulations that guided approval of additions to existing blocks.

Fig 1 and 2 The top photo shows building types that have been added on to the originally low spread built type that is noticeable between the two. Bottom photo shows three storeyed additions to a block that is similar to the ones at the left foreground. Original type is behind three floors (source, author).

Fig 4 and 5 Temporary built type (kiosks) are added to the main block that is seen on the foreground (source, author).

In general professionals were viewed with suspicion. More than forty five percent of residents felt that professionals for example architects charge far too much considering that similar services would be obtained from the several building technicians. They would engage the service of local *fundi*³. These builders would copy what they had done in other blocks within the same neighborhood.

About thirty percent of those who gave their views did not see the local government agency as beneficial since they would not approve of more than single dwelling unit per piece of land. Participants were of the opinion that their financial needs far outweighs the need to conserve the original built type.

They had commitment to service their mortgage loans and also they had social commitments. Most families had school going children. Majority of participants expressed concern over the state of deteriorating national economy. Participants opinioned densification of their housing unit as a way of raising the much needed funds. Majority of the participants viewed intrusion into their privacy as secondary to their financial needs that was prime.

More than thirty percent viewed this as a private territory where the owner could carry out any project that (s)he wished.

Most of blocks that were located within the perimeter had undergone some additions to their original type. Initial planning was for residential blocks. Addition has introduced kiosks in the front facade. There were hardly any controls for speeding motorists. Children were hardly safe to play within this setting.

While there were those kiosk businesses that were being run by residents of *Komarock*, most were owned by people from outside *Komarock*. Everyday during daytime these people assume over the control of the neighborhood. For example they roamed the streets, played loud music, and sat with their visitors outside the shops.

Crime takes place within these blocks. There were complaints of dangers that were posed by shopkeepers. During the year 2001 alone three armed robberies have taken place in the shops. Those discussed with suspect drug dealing especially by *Matatu* touts within these blocks.

Two social groups appear to be in control of this neighborhood. On the one hand there was one hand there is the community-based organization

³ *Fundi* is a local artisan. They would be assigned work as an individual. They bring in whoever they felt was needed.

that should be in control. There are also those occupying the new addition built types.

5.2.2 Corner Block.

Every cluster has some housing blocks that are located within strategic positions. Compared to the rest they are located within grounds that are larger in size. These were common in two places. In the first example they would be identified at the corner of a court. In the second example they would be identified in setting where the block was changing direction.

Storied built types were identified as common in corner settings. They were an average of three floors. These were of two sub-types. First sub-type had a shopping facility at the ground level with residential taking up the subsequent floors. In the second sub-type, all floors were for residential purposes. In general first sub-type were common to blocks that were located within strategic public alleys, for example, along the main street while the second type was to be found within an inner court.

Corner blocks that were observed had densified so that the addition was overwhelming the original type both in scale and proportion. Majority of the landlords who had added on viewed this as a method of raising funds. Apart from other commitments they needed to service their mortgage loans. Majorities of these landlords were salaried workers with an average monthly earning of US\$450 against a monthly repayment of US\$260. The salary alone could not service the loan, hence the need to densify their blocks with rental block.

Local government authority had not approved the developments. Legally, Only a single dwelling unit per parcel of land was permitted by regulations. The density of this new typology far overwhelms the original block both in proportion and form. They were dominant themes (fig 5).

One of those that we discussed those issues with was a practicing attorney. Like the rest, he saw nothing wrong in what he had done. He had constructed a four storeyed residential block. His view was simply, "this is Nairobi." He retorted, "We all need to raise funds." He was of the view the local authority lacked the necessary resources and/ or commitment that would enable it to enforce its requirements against illegal extensions. It seemed as if the council has decided to politely ignore the new developments. With this the new building types had become important attribute of the neighborhood.

This development had brought into the neighborhood residents who were lacking total commitment to the overall community. Majorities of those

that were renting additions were for example surprised when about their participation during community activities. They were not active. The landlord represented them during such.

The new type of renter was on transit. They were in their early teens with most having young families. Compared to average rents in originally blocks that were ranging between US\$100 – 180, new built types fetched between US\$50 – 100.

Fig. 5 the four storeyed is a an addition to the corner block that is the low spread building that is on the foreground (source, author).

5.3 Komarock Resident Association.

At the beginning the developers Kenya Building Society (KBS) motivated the buyers to come together under a community based association. This was to be the *Komarock* Resident Association (KRA). The association had since

empowered different phases to form sub-committees that were in turn answerable to it. Residents were supposed to subscribe to the association. Objectives included:

- 5.3.1 Helping with monitoring and controlling any future developments.
- 5.3.2 Electing trustees for among residents.
- 5.3.3 Providing a forum for residents.
- 5.3.4 Monitoring and provide organs for control of security.
- 5.3.5 Arranging for disposal of domestic waste.
- 5.3.6 Monitoring provision of services for example water supply.

The association had achieved very little in terms of success. Several reasons were cited. Firstly there was lack of commitment by the office bearers. They had sat and watched as illegal developments came up. Secondly the institution lacked the necessary backing that would have helped it to reinforce its regulations. An example was cited when KRA officials were arrested and harassed by police after they tried to intervene in one of the developments. Thirdly residents were not fully committed to the association. They hardly showed up during community events, for example when during universal cleaning day in April 200 KRA organized for everyone to be involved e neighborhood and hardly many people showed up. Fourthly, majority of people that research discussed with hardly knew much about the KRA.

For KRA to achieve its original goals there is need for committed office bearers, also it should try and discover its role in the legal framework and to be able reach out to residents of *Komarock*.

5.4 Conclusions and Recommendations.

Both perimeter blocks and those that are located within strategic corner settings had been identified as having great potential for physical addition. Attributes identified in this included being sited within parcels of land that were slightly larger in size when compared to the rest. On the other end perimeter blocks were located within settings that were considered as being strategic, in that they attracted enough traffic. Decline in national economy through the 1990's and current state of this was identified as a parameter that informed additional housing within the first ten years of founding of *Komarock*. Additional housing was opinioned as a way of subsidizing individual income. KRA was identified as a community based association that lacked necessary infrastructure and commitments to achieve its objectives.

To try and solve the problem at hand several approaches are recommended. Firstly there is need to develop parcels of land or settings that allows minimum level of intervention by residents. To achieve this there is need for continuous and close working collaboration between different professionals. Secondly settings that are located within perimeter should have a minimal controlled front yard. An individual should not be permitted to control a very large open setting, rather this should be planned and designed to accommodate community activities. Thirdly, *Komarock* Residents Association (KRA) should re-define itself with sole purpose of strengthening its roles.