

Kenya's first skyscraper closes—and leaves a complicated legacy

March 10 2023, by Constance Smith



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The Hilton Hotel was Nairobi's first skyscraper. The iconic cylindrical

tower was opened in 1969 by President Jomo Kenyatta, six years after Kenya's independence from Britain.

The recent [closure](#) of the [hotel](#) after more than 50 years of operation comes at a time of vertical transformation in the city's skyline. As Nairobi grows ever taller, and as newer suburbs take over from the central business district as the city's commercial centers, the Hilton is a landmark from a different era of urban life.

The Hilton's modernist shape was part of a post-independence shift away from colonial hotel architecture in Nairobi. As seen in the exclusive Norfolk and Fairview hotels, the colonial style had mimicked the English country house.

Across the continent, a new African modernism emerged in the 1960s. Like the Hotel Independence in Dakar, Senegal, or the soaring Hotel Ivoire in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, the vertical reach of the Hilton was symbolic of a new era of ambition and a means to express an emerging national identity. As the anthropologist Filip de Boeck has [said](#), by "pointing towards the sky, it also pointed towards the future."

The Hilton helped to shape the character of central Nairobi. It quickly became an urban landmark and a meeting place of the new elite. It also gained notoriety for what went on behind closed doors. More recently, it has symbolized the declining fortunes of the city center. As my [research](#) has examined, Nairobi's high-rise transformation is closely linked to the politics of urban change.

Upwardly mobile lifestyles

In the Hilton's early years of the 1970s, hotels in Nairobi were an important part of the upwardly mobile lifestyles of aspirant families. Something like the Kenyan equivalent of the country club, hotels were

where you went to see and be seen. Business and [political elites](#) took their families for lunch and a day by the pool, knowing that others would be doing the same.

Hotels were places where alliances were made and deals were struck in a more informal atmosphere. Different hotels had different personalities and were associated with different social sets. Some were more exclusive; others were associated with certain political allegiances.

This was a deliberately exclusive and exclusionary scene. A world where you had to dress a certain way to get in, where you were judged on what car dropped you or on where you'd bought your dress. It was part of how new forms of socio-economic difference were established and experienced in the aftermath of colonialism. In downtown Nairobi, spaces of racial exclusion began to be overwritten by distinctions based on class and wealth.

High-end sleaze

Whereas the nearby Intercontinental or Panafric hotels were regarded as family-friendly, the Hilton was more closely associated with government and politics. It was known as a place for government-funded conferences and "trainings" that were held in its huge salon; extravagant functions that were another indication of the way power and finance circulated in the 1980s and 1990s.

Over time, however, the Hilton also gained a reputation for high-end sleaze. It was a place where the predominantly male politicians of the time would go to pick up women, where notorious parties were held, and rooms could be booked for "a short time."

Urban landmark

The future of the building is uncertain. The Kenyan government still holds a [controlling stake](#) in it through the Kenya Development Corporation, with a decision still to be made.

As an exclusive hotel, the Hilton was perhaps irrelevant to most Kenyans' lives: most have never been inside, and now likely never will. Yet many city residents still speak of it fondly, using it as a landmark to find one's way around the city.

Despite its inaccessibility, it is a familiar and even comforting part of the urban landscape. 'You see it every day almost without noticing', as one friend put it. 'We grew up with it. We'd miss it if it wasn't there'. It is like a tree in the compound that you build everything else around: an orientating feature that gives the landscape character.

Urban influence

In recent years, the declining fortunes of central Nairobi have been mirrored by the waning prestige and financial viability of the Hilton. Westlands and Upper Hill have become the new commercial and political heartlands, and downtown Nairobi is often bypassed by both visitors and residents alike.

Yet the early ambition of high-rise buildings like the Hilton can still be seen as influential in contemporary Nairobi. Since the turn of this century, the city has been experiencing a high-rise boom. Neighborhoods like Kileleshwa and Kilimani have gone from single dwelling plots to multi-storey apartment blocks. This transformation is part of Nairobi's increasing presence on a world stage, as it becomes known for its digital and tech economies, and its middle-class status.

The dark side of the high-rise

High-rise buildings are reshaping other parts of Nairobi too, with estates like Pipeline, Zimmerman or Tassia known for their densely packed blocks of rental units. Although aimed at a different type of tenant, these high-rise buildings, known as *maghorofa* in Kiswahili, often imitate more high-end tower blocks. Reflective glass, bright paint colors, pretty balconies and fancy names—Lifestyle Plaza, Jazzy Heights, Muthaiga View—indicate new aspirations, even when the interior of the building might not live up to its surface claims.

This high-rise boom has a darker side too. Just as the modernist ambition of the Hilton hid less salubrious activity, so is Nairobi's glossy vertical transformation awash with rumors of property speculation, cut-throat deals and a murky real estate sector.

The recent spate of [building collapses](#) has tragically killed scores of Nairobians and has destroyed the homes of many more.

These collapses speak to the suspect economies of the construction industry, where shortcuts are taken with little regard for safety, as well as the challenges of exerting regulatory control over a sector that is so entangled with political and business elites.

In a city like Nairobi, where urban inequality is getting ever wider, the surface promise of high-rise futures can be hollow, covering a much more uncertain reality within.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Kenya's first skyscraper closes—and leaves a complicated legacy (2023, March 10)

retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-03-kenya-skyscraper-closesand-complicated-legacy.html>

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