

DIENER HERZOG MEILI DE MEURON
WS 2007-08

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Exercise types: 'P' (for diploma students) or 'e' (for bachelor-master students)
Group work in Basel and in research location
Start: Tuesday, 25. September, 2007, 10 AM at ETH Studio Basel, Spitalstrasse 8, 4056 Basel



View of the city center of Nairobi

Nairobi

Can we think of Nairobi as an ordinary city? Can we study Nairobi in terms of its basic human activities? Can we investigate how the city functions, by looking at how people live and work or how people move through the city? Can we challenge the predominant way of approaching 'the African City' which focuses mostly on issues of development, disparate temporalities and binary opposites such as formal / informal? This approach, which we have witnessed in recent examples of urban portraits on the African continent, fails to register the complexities on the ground, falling back to a mere repetition of clichés and coming dangerously close to replicating a (post)colonialist standpoint.

Capitol of the eastern African country of Kenya, Nairobi, just over a hundred years old, has developed into one of the most international cities in the world. As the third UN city after New York and Geneva and host to the headquarters of some of the main UN bodies, it is thoroughly tied into a global network of policy making, diplomacy and governance. A frequent location of large international conferences, such as the World Social Forum 2007, it possesses the infrastructure and becomes a focal point of global exchange of ideas and communication. With a population of approximately three to four million inhabitants the largest city in eastern Africa, it has experienced a large increase in population, mostly based on rural-urban migration and exhibiting one of the highest urban growth rates world wide. The city is seen as a place of potential, offering economic possibilities.

Since Kenya's independence, Nairobi has developed into a center of humanitarian aid. Most of the emergency missions as a reaction to the conflicts that the continent has witnessed in the last decades were administered from Nairobi. The city and its infrastructure are the logistical hub for collecting and distributing aid, tents and other kinds of humanitarian provisions. Apart from the various UN bodies, the city has the largest presence of non-governmental organizations worldwide, resulting in a large international ('expats') population. But it is not only the affluent expats that make up the international characteristics of Nairobi. Being politically a rather stable country, and bordered by countries like Uganda, Sudan, Somalia which have experienced long lasting conflicts, Kenya has been a host to large refugee communities since the 1970s. Leaving the refugee camps that are located within the border zones, thousands of refugees, mostly Somalians, have moved to Nairobi and settled in various neighborhoods across the city. Their links to relatives and friends in their home country as well as in other host countries all over the world, turn Nairobi into a center of global commerce and cultural exchange.



View over the roofs of Kibera

Nairobi is shaped by strong contrasts in wealth and quality of infrastructure. While some of the most affluent neighborhoods can be found in the west of the city, along with beautiful gardens and vast golf courses, Nairobi is home to one of the biggest slum of the continent, Kibera. But this simple opposition of affluence vs. poverty and its developmental logic, leaves out the very dependencies and overlaps, that tie the different parts of the city together. The binary view labels as problematic what does not conform to a western standard, unanimously declared as the goal to be achieved. Nairobi is not only a city that is grimly affected by the problems of informal housing, it is one of the global centers for research in the field of urban development and spatial studies. Being home to the two UN bodies, which directly deal with spatial planning and the quality of our environment, the UN Environmental Program UNEP, and UN Habitat, it develops programs of how to create sustainable urban environments and formulates policies of urban governance, amongst others, and applies them onto cities world wide. Thus Nairobi, hosting literally the biggest think tank on urbanism has the lever and influence to impact on urban development in cities across the globe.

Program

It is these and other issues that the Studio Basel Nairobi Project will be engaged with. After Metrobasel, the Canary Islands, Napoli and Paris, though first and foremost with the publication and our studies on Switzerland as a thoroughly urbanized country, we continue this series of international urban portraits with the study of Nairobi. In our past research, Studio Basel has developed a set of tools as well as identified a number of themes and agendas that are central to its study of cities in transformation. Instead of understanding the city as a system composed of binary opposites, such as formal and informal parts, the study attempts to unfold the very complex simultaneity and dependencies of these parameters, by carefully tracing the basic human activities and their spaces that they unfold in. Instead of an approach centered around the preconceived grand dichotomies, we would like to focus on the activities on the local scale. The research methods that have been developed in the past, such as precise observation and mapping tools, obtain an urgency and a (political) pivotal significance in an environment where facts are often non-transparent and space is the medium where debates, negotiations of power and conflict are played out.

Semester Organization

The study is coordinated with a complementary research carried out by students of architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) and in cooperation with the School of the Built Environment at the University of Nairobi, whose students will work on the same subject as the ETH students. The start of the semester is on Tuesday 25th September 2007, 10.00 am at ETH Studio Basel. The semester will commence with a series of small scale investigations into a range of themes covering Nairobi, attempting to construct an initial 'Nairobi Atlas'. As the second and main part of the research program, the students will investigate a series of specific themes and agendas in chosen locations within the city of Nairobi. All students will travel to Nairobi for a two-week fieldwork phase. Participation in this Nairobi fieldwork is compulsory for the project. In Nairobi, ETH students will conduct the research in groups with local students. The results of the fieldwork in Nairobi and the further project development will be in the shape of maps, diagrams, interviews, architectural portraits, urban biographies, but also on the level of scenarios for the future of the city. The final presentation of the student's works will be in the form of a book and a slide presentation. The project will be conducted in close collaboration with experts from Nairobi, specifically with representatives of UN-Habitat, and other local research institutes. We will be guided and accompanied by local actors, students and participants of urban research groups. The previewed costs of the project (travel, accommodation to Nairobi) will be 1.500 CHF. Students who are receiving stipends and grants, or who have been exempted from school fees can seek financial assistance by the ETH. (Application forms are available through Mrs. Giordano, HIL E 73.3)



internal spaces of a market near the city center

Winter Semester 2007 – 2008 Program

Date	Theme	Location	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
SEP	25	Start		Introduction Studio Basel	
	26	Themes		Distribution of Themes & Nairobi Atlas Project	
OCT	02	Studio Work			
	03	Studio Work			
	09	Studio Work			
	10	Studio Work			
	16	Studio Work			
	17	Studio Work			
	23	Studio Work			
	24	Studio Work		Jury / Presentation of Nairobi Atlas Project	
	27	Nairobi Trip		Nairobi Trip starts	
	28				
NOV	29				
	30				
	31				
	01				
	02				
	03			Zwischenkritik / Interim Jury	
	04				
	05				
	06				
	07				
08					
09					
10	Nairobi Trip Ends				
	13	Studio Work			
	14	Studio Work			
	20	Studio Work			
	21	Studio Work			
	27	Studio Work			
	28	Interim Jury		Zwischenkritik / Interim Jury	
DEC	04	Studio Work			
	05	Studio Work			
	11	Studio Work			
	12	Studio Work			
	18	Final Jury		All Day Final Jury	Kenyan Party