

# Structure is magic. Architecture, policy and design.

by Ssempijja Robert, November 2022.

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*Fig 1. Nakulabye-Kiyayye aerial view photo by Ssempijja Robert, November 2022*

Nakulabye-Kiyayye is a magical place seen through the brown eyes of a six-year-old child. Kiyayye was the street I spent most of my childhood. It's where my feet grew rough and my knuckles grew tough. Every minute of every hour and every hour of every day we, the children of this street, raised each other. We formed our friendships, we fought our battles and we did what we had to survive. When a big person, a grown up, interfered it was like they did not understand our world. The big person would just beat us up, they didn't listen to who did what or why. Life was never easy but you grew accustomed to it. This paved the way for what to expect of life. We lived with the belief that we could create our own rules in life and that we, the young generation, were the future.

A loose translation of Kiyayye would be 'a place where delinquents reside'. Seen through the eyes of an adult, most people would consider it to be a slum where poverty is so widespread that it has become the norm, until you step outside. I remember thinking that our neighbors were rich because they could afford to eat three times a day on most days. I always wondered when they were going to start sharing their wealth with us.

If you ever visit, you will find Kiyayye in the valley at the foot of Namirembe hill in the main capital of the small landlocked east African country - Uganda. The capital is called Kampala and I've always considered it to be my home, without questioning how the structures of the city actually affect the people who live and die there. I didn't start questioning my home until the Covid pandemic hit in 2019.

It's a bustling city built on seven primary hills, with movement at its core. The people here always have to move to survive. If you sit too long, you'll miss your opportunity and for many that means no food or sleep that day. The traffic never moves but the cars do. You have to be vigilant when you walk so that the cars don't hit you when they use the pavement to try to reach their destination. The recently installed traffic lights are taken more as a recommendation whenever they actually have power to work. The Boda Bodas, motorcycle taxis, are everywhere in mass. You should learn how to bargain so that you'll get a fair price when using their services. The light of the sun is vibrant and warm. Too warm some say and the air is full of humidity as well as pollution from cars and from the burning fires of garbage. The sweet smells of ripe fruit from the street vendors and their discarded piles will make you hungry and a bit nauseous. Don't ever buy meat if you can't see which part of the animal it comes from, it's the only way to be sure of what you get. Make sure that you try the street food Rolex, Pizza and Kikomando, it won't be anything similar to what you think it is but the taste is positively unforgettable.

Survival of the strongest, smartest and the most ruthless is the law at Kiyayye. The food is never in abundance and what you'll notice there is the dust from the dirt roads, the many children and the smell of rotting and burning garbage. You'll hear the music flowing out of broken speakers, the constant chatter between people, the many hair salons and bars. You can see and feel the people struggle even when they have a brave face on. It doesn't take much for someone to have a breakdown or to get into a fight, usually for something which would be considered a small thing in another place. But here everything is precious and if you don't fight for your things or yourself no one will. The mob too often becomes the lawmaker and executioner and you don't want to find yourself being in the middle of it. Despite all of this there is also love in Kiyayye. It's in the small things, like getting a smile of encouragement from someone, knowing that your friend will have your back in a battle or having someone's leftovers for dinner with a cup of warm water.

### A confusing national history

I can't tell my story of Kampala's structure without mentioning the history of Uganda. Bear with me if it gets confusing, because I found out that it is really confusing for us too, the people who live in it every day.

Uganda is a constructed country with its borders drawn up at the Berlin Conference in 1884/85 by Europeans who had just recently started to explore the African continent and who did the division with little or no regard to the natural borders of the land. This is something which most African countries have gone through. As a result, the land and the people who lived within the Uganda borders became a British colony under British rule. Before the British, the land of Uganda consisted of many different tribes which had formed themselves into kingdoms. The largest one and the most advanced was the Buganda Kingdom, which ruled over a vast land area and many clans.

The kingdom was kept together largely by the process put in place to choose the king's successor. Each clan provided the king with many wives for him to have children with, who all followed the clan of their mothers. When the king died his prince brothers chose the next king among the former kings' sons. This way the kingdom ensured that the throne was never the property of one single clan for more than one reign. Furthermore, the important ruling structures were spread throughout the kingdom as were all the royal children. The royal children were brought up in local working-class families, who would teach them about the potential future subjects' lives. The thought was that the king's men had to be living amongst the people and be accessible for the people to be able to help the king rule the kingdom.

When the British rule started, the role of the kingdoms was reduced. The land of the Baganda Kingdom was now the land of the British colonizers who chose to set up their structures to be able to rule the new Uganda country. The British knew that they couldn't take over the land from other kingdoms residing within Uganda without the support of the Baganda king so that's what they did the first years of colonization. Later on, they further diminished the power of the indigenous King so that the people would start to see the British as the legitimate rulers. This however, was never fully successful. One way of limiting the king's power was to claim most of the land of the Buganda kingdom as their own and give it to British colonizers to build homes or colonial structures such as governmental buildings, embassies, airports, hospitals etc. Another way was that the British imposed different rules, which counteracted the traditions of the Buganda Kingdom, so that the rule of the kingdom would better match the way things were done in the English monarchy.

It wasn't until 1962 until Uganda was declared an independent country and since then Uganda has had a presidential system that was put in place before the British left the country. However, almost all of the presidents Uganda has had have come to power by a military coup and the current president, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni Tibuhaburwa, has been in power since 1986. At the same time the kings of the old kingdoms are still there and the kingdoms are still more or less powerful when it comes to ruling the people, although it is now in an unofficial capacity. Today Kampala stands for 60% of Uganda's GDP and it has a population of over 4.4 million people. The country consists of 56 tribes and the population is growing rapidly.

As a child, the history and the ruling of my city, my home, was nothing I was aware of. I only knew that we lived near the king's palace. Kiyayye is located on land which 'belongs to the people' and can't be owned by anyone as a property. The Baganda King is the caretaker according to the government of Uganda. At Kiyayye I've struggled, I've been hungry, I've been abandoned and I've been found. Moments of my childhood have been magical, but there is no doubt that I also spent my childhood in a world of absolute deprivation.

### How I came to discover Kololo Hill

About six kilometers away there is a place called Kololo Hill which is the opposite to where I grew up. It is situated on one of the seven hills surrounding Kampala's city center. I can access most of the things on that hill today, but I have come to understand that this access isn't given to everyone born in the city. When I asked people about their experiences of Kololo one man said:

*"The place is very gated and exclusive. It has long gates; you wonder what goes on inside them. A normal Ugandan can not afford to stay there as landlords demand 6 months rent in advance. It is very green with high end apartments. It is strategically located with the infrastructure to rule, administrate and defend the city. It has a well-planned drainage system compared to other places in Kampala. These privileges have attracted the elites who now inhabit it."*

During the Covid-19 pandemic I found myself stuck in Uganda. I was unlucky because I was not allowed to leave the country. On the other hand, I was lucky as lockdowns and curfews gave me a chance to see the streets of my city when empty. Ever since my travels outside the continent, I had started to feel alien in the city I was born in. I had longed to return to a place that I called home, but due to my experiences and exposure, everything was different and at the same time familiar.

I started researching Kampala, the place I had called home for more than 20 years of my life. Why was I feeling like an alien all of a sudden?

I came to learn that Kampala was designed in 1933 by Ernest May. After being repeatedly thwarted in ambitious planning work in Silesia (1919-25), Frankfurt (1925-30) and the Soviet Union (1930-33), the German modernist planner surprised even his closest friends when he announced that he would *“withdraw to the African bush in order to think about it [all] in peace”*. The transition from his grand European and Soviet projects to a colonial hierarchical mindset came quickly. May regarded the African landscape as a tabula rasa, where *“there was no trace of visible human civilization”*. He worked with great passion and energy to develop a productive and self-sufficient farmscape ‘from nothing’, complete with a small village and infrastructure for his many ‘primitive’ farmhands. He wrote condescendingly that both the Indian and the African workers, *“which are here at our service [...] often need to be taught even the most elemental tasks”*.

May saw little irony in the fact that after being forced to abandon his work in the Soviet Union because critics had attacked his planning methods as overly bourgeois and ‘Western’, he was unable to return to his native Germany because Nazis had condemned his architecture in Frankfurt as ‘primitive’, ‘un-German’ and ‘Bolshevik’. Nazi racial purity laws had also attacked May’s Jewish family background.

Taking advantage of Kampala’s hills, May designed the structure of the city. He was inspired by a model called ‘the garden city’ where each hill had its own center surrounded by agricultural land. The name Ernest roughly translates to the English meaning for ‘something which is serious’. If you look at his designs, he was a serious person and this is evident in the fact that his design implies who gets what, when and how. Kololo was designed to be an affluent neighborhood and still is. The roads lead out from the city like sun rays.

Recalling fond memories of his first years in Africa, May described himself as an ‘Architect-Farmer’, writing in terms that suggested the traditional, rooted, ethnic inheritance he had tried to install in Germany through his garden colonies:

*“For the first time I was able not only to design a small region on paper, but could organically shape everything down to the smallest detail: an achievement that was physically demanding, but satisfied me immensely.”*

Although not as vast as his European planning projects, he suggested a parallel to his earlier work when he wrote proudly that he had created *“my own Third Reich”*, an alternative to the ominous conditions in Germany. This desire for control and the ability to shape an entire environment, including its native inhabitants, lies at the center of both the colonial project and May’s ambitions for modern planning.

When you are visiting and you are walking through the noise and the chaos of Kampala’s streets your feet may take you to Kololo hill to sleep in a better hotel, go to the cinema, visit a shopping mall with air-conditioning or just enjoy yourself with music and a cold drink in your hand at one of the many bars. If you are Western, you may even feel homesick and want to eat food which you are more familiar with, you’ll find it all here. Maybe you want to come away from the busy city atmosphere and all the people everywhere and find a smooth tarmac road. It’s all here. In the middle of the city, you will find a place where you will no longer believe that you are in Kampala. You can even take a round on the golf course.

There are mostly expats here, young volunteers from the western part of the world and a few very rich government people. You’ll see predominantly white people and the black ones will usually be there to serve, not to enjoy. The class differences are evident in the structure between both ends of the main street as well in the people who have access to the area. One respondent shared:



*“It is for those considered to be with a successful folk mindset. It has an airport, clubs and restaurants, NGOs, embassies, hotels, and golf courses. It is where the celebrities and government officials sleep. How worthy do you have to be to stay there?”*



Fig 2. Kololo aerial view photo by Ssempijja Robert, November 2022

### The divide between the privileged ones and the others

Kololo is structured in a ring architecture and on the top of the hill is where the British built their houses during the colonization. Due to its strategic location, you can see most of Kampala from here. The British occupied the hill, and to surround it was the ring circle which the Indians came to occupy. The Indians came with the British to build the Ugandan railway in 1869 and then they stayed since they were considered more intelligent and knew how to relate with the British better than Ugandans and most Africans. The Indian population was the filter, and after that, in the valleys in between the hills, you found mostly Africans. Another respondent describes it as:

*“A burial place for prominent people. During colonial times, there were three classes created, the political (Whites), economic elites (Indians), and ordinary Ugandans (Blacks), the latter stayed in the valleys. Kololo is for the rich and those who can afford expensive tastes, it is for Museveni and his friends, first class people.”*

Inside the ring is where all the important governmental structures were built like the Ugandan Parliament, Ugandan National Theatre, the Uganda Museum, all the European embassies, and schools. Just opposite from

the ring is the biggest national hospital in the country and the biggest university. This made everything accessible for the British without leaving the circle. Three respondents sum it up as:

*"It is where the Ugandan communication base is located and where all other communication systems tap in. It was constructed first for colonialists, based on the nature of their structures. The hills host the administrators and officials, and the other areas host the middle class, and then there are the swamps located between the two hills where the locals live."*

*"The most secure place in the country. It has the three ring police stations: Kirra Road, Wandegaya and Jinja Road. They have the Prince Charles Road which might now be named King Charles Road."*

*"It was designed to be exclusionist. A city fortress from everyday Kampala."*

I have been in Kololo numerous times, to visit, eat and perform. But I do not understand why my performances are always shown here and not in other places within Kampala. My peers from Kiyayye never come to attend my shows. I came to realize that there are only a few people in Kampala who are privileged enough to have the time, finances and space in their minds to appreciate art. When you're hungry you don't have any of these things to spare.

One of the few famous people to have made it out of the valleys surrounding Kololo is the musician, now turned politician, Bobi Wine. This explains partly why he is so popular among the Ugandan young population, who are mostly from poor backgrounds. Although I'd never like to compare myself with Bobi Wine, I too have made a class journey which has allowed me to access Kololo in a way many of my peers can't. A good example is what happened to a friend of mine recently. He is a good musician, better educated than me and still when he tried to gain access to a club at Kololo hill he was denied entry. Only when I came to pick him up at the door did the bouncer decide to let him in. The bouncers were familiar with me due to my frequent visits with some German expats.

### Dreams and realities

I've come to realize during my travels that places of exclusivity and elitism aren't unique to Uganda. But it is problematic and perhaps even more so when it's a relic from widespread Colonial oppression. The most surprising thing for me is that there isn't a discussion about the implications of these structures among the everyday Ugandans. How then, do we change this system that was designed to make some people fail and others succeed? I myself wouldn't even have reflected on the structural divides of the city if it weren't for the exposure I've had in other parts of the world.

My travels have taken me to many different countries and places. I can't tell you about all of them, but I'll tell you this: Inside me I've always believed I could fit in anywhere because I'm the one creating the rules. My dream was the same as many of my peers, I wanted to go to Europe. I thought that as soon as I stepped on European soil I'd have everything that the expats and tourists had when they came to Uganda. Everything would be easy from then on.

I quickly realized that my dream of Europe and later of America was just that, a dream. There were many houses taller than the tallest building I had ever seen. There were roads everywhere and everyone was driving a car that looked brand new. I saw fewer people living outside and less children walking around doing their thing.

People started to expect things of me. I wasn't a troubled young man with a traumatic life story. I was a successful young man with talent.

It took me many years to start seeing what others had seen in me. It took me even longer to find the few who came from a similar background and who did the same thing as me: Using our art as a way to a better life rather than conforming to take a secure, unskilled and low-wage job. The more time I spent outside of the African continent the more I noticed how difficult life was for most black people in the predominantly white societies I spent time in. I started to experience how the color of my skin could be an obstacle for me, especially once I moved outside of my bubble of artistic colleagues. It was here I came to question, can my skin color be a limitation to what I can get? Where I can be? What others might think of me?

Similar to when I had been in Kololo, I had the reverse experience in Europe when I went out to celebrate my friend's birthday. She was white and local to the city we were in. She went ahead with some friends to the club and I was to join later since I had been held up at work. When I reached the club, the bouncer denied me entry and told me that *"Your kind always party down the street"*. My friend came out and we left, but the night was spoiled. It's not the first neither the last situation of casual racism I would encounter.

In one city I found segregation was so obvious that even the architecture reflected it. The part of the city where predominantly white people lived was developed and taken care of, while the area predominantly black and colored people lived was neglected and had a lot of abandoned buildings and unsafe places.

I started to ask myself, where is the black person's kingdom? Where are they made to feel home, loved, motivated and encouraged? A black person who has broken out of the first expectations which were set on them because of where they were born, where is their future home? I still haven't found the answer to these questions.

Another thought I wanted to explore was if the physical structures of our everyday environment affect us in any way. Is money and education a universal key for everyone to be able to access these elite places? I believe this question is a bit complicated to answer, because when do you gain access - is it when you are in that location or is it when you feel at home there?

### Conscious and Subconscious change

Not only in Kampala but throughout the city there are street names explicitly named after the British Royalty: Princess Anne drive, Prince Charles Road and Queen Victoria Road. Nowhere to be found are street names which are connected to our indigenous kings. There have been recent discussions in Uganda, and all around the world, whether the renaming of these streets would have an impact on the people's conscious and subconsciousness. Would it encourage them and make them realize this is their country, now that the colonizers have gone? Maybe Kololo Hill, as the symbol it has become, can have another meaning to people and the ruling structures become more accessible to local people again. Maybe it can make people feel responsible for what is going on within their own city and country. Responsible for the election of politicians who care about the poverty in the country, who care about the constant flooding of the valleys which kills people every time the rain comes, who care about decent living conditions and access to clean water and sanitation. One respondents expressed:



*“When you mention Kololo to everyday Ugandans, they say how it is representative of the classes that were created during colonial times. Such classes came because of design. Such a mindset was further emphasized by buildings.”*

As it is right now the old architecture is built to keep people in their ‘category of humans’ and will just be inherited by the next government in power, without any reflection on it. For every government that comes into power, comes with its own people: ministers, bureaucrats, and members of parliament. Additionally, due to the tribal nature of Ugandan politics, people from the ruling tribe coincidentally make up the bigger proportion of those who get to stay in the mansions in Kololo, this also changes with whoever is in power.

### My creative mission

In my work I always try to explore questions which are important to me on a personal level. I believe that others may relate to them in their own unique way depending on their own stories. I enjoy when the audience or a co-creator shares their view on my work or the experience they get from watching it. It is never the same from one person to another. Art is in a way universal, and it can transcend generational gaps, language barriers and cultural misunderstandings if you allow it. My work called “Alienation” stems from me starting to question where I belonged and my concept of home.



Fig 3. Project Alienation by Ssempiija Robert, 2021

My story unfolds in the gaps between Kololo and Kiyayye, both mentally and physically. It is harder now for me to relate to my peers in Kiyayye. It was a long time ago I could have their backs in a battle and be accepted amongst them as equal. For them I’m the one who has succeeded. Instead of being with them in our common



struggle, I'm now the person they go to when they have no hope. They expect me to save them. Some of them are now dead, some resorted to drug use, others strive to feed their many children each day without success.

Yet, in a way, I'm also still struggling. It was many years ago that I came to understand that with continued travel I'm going to be living two separate realities, one in my home country and the second abroad. When in Uganda I'm a success and very privileged, when abroad I'm no different from other immigrants who struggle to get through everyday life. No more, no less. I have just chosen to do it my own way.

My brother sometimes reminds me that I'm no longer in the same situation that we grew up in. I'm now well-traveled, I make a living out of art and I don't need to worry about whether I can eat from day to day. That is a privilege and yet I know that I still have to work hard to make sure the projects keep coming in. I still feel like that brown eyed boy on the streets of Kiyayye. I work on my flaws and grow as a human being every day. I move within communities I dreamt about and can access many elitist places if I do it with the right people. Usually, I already know the right people and the people know me. That's the privilege I've come to know, but not to enjoy.

I'm grateful for my life as it is now, but I don't always know what to do with it. I never feel like I belong and I'm having a hard time connecting to the easy conversations the people around me are having. My mind is elsewhere, often thinking about my other reality which is equally as vivid to me. It is hard to live a life where you feel that one foot is touching the ocean and the other one is still in the lake and in between there is a mountain. How can you be expected to reach both sides without getting lost or torn apart?

To leave Kiyayye behind is both impossible and necessary. I often ask: Can one man carry a whole community on his back? Would Kampala be different if the kingdom of old was brought back in a modern way? What is your Kiyayye and your Kololo? Can I find my home when I step on the land where I was born? Can you?

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**Robert Ssempijja** is a Ugandan contemporary artist and dance researcher who works in traditional and non-traditional spaces in an era of post-colonialism and decolonization. In his practice, he presses against the body's physical limits to create work that is utterly sincere. He addresses social, political and cultural issues, creating meaning through the interplay of the physical body, the psychological world of the mind, human emotions, and the soul. He is committed to constructing a sustainable scene for contemporary dance in Uganda. Ssempijja is also curious to know how the body creates and transfers information and secrets into a movement that builds up the body's own vocabulary. He assumes that our bodies are composed of archives of information which are activated when it comes to movement.

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