



Building down: How Kampala is digging its way out of a land crisis

As Kampala and other Ugandan cities grow, buildings will go higher and dig deeper. Land will stay expensive, and permits will remain strict but by building deeper, the roadside kiosks will disappear, becoming just a memory of how things used to look.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

For decades, Kampala built outward and upward in equal measures of ambition and chaos. Semi-permanent kiosks huddled against glass office towers. Verandahs doubled as retail corridors. Parking was a negotiation rather than an amenity.

But a convergence of forces has now ushered in a new design paradigm. The government has moved to evict informal structures nationwide.

The National Building Review Board (NBRB) has tightened permitting requirements.

And the land market has become so prohibitively expensive that developers can no longer afford to think only in two dimensions.

The revolution

Ask any architect what keeps them awake at night in a rapidly growing city, and they will give you the same answer. The ground plane, they will tell you, is where the battle is either won or lost. Above ground, Kampala's skyline is already transforming. Cranes punctuate the horizon. Glass curtain walls reflect the equatorial sun. But the real design story, the innovation that should command the attention is happening well below the datum line.

Blick Obita is a civil engineer and a member of the Uganda National Association of Builders, Suppliers and Engineering Contractors, an organisation known by its acronym UNABSEC. He has watched this shift from the inside of excavation pits

across the city. By pushing part of the structure below the surface, Obita explains, engineers are able to free up valuable space above ground for commercial and residential use.

This is not a basement in the suburban sense. This is a programmed subterranean floor plate that is used to accommodate secure and well-ventilated parking that removes thousands of cars from congested streets. It contains retail concourses that once spilled chaotically onto verandahs. It houses dedicated service and storage zones that keep upper floors pristine and uncluttered. And hosts building systems and logistics hubs that would otherwise consume premium above-ground square footage.

Obita notes that this is a remarkably elegant solution to a stubborn urban problem.

"Remove the street-level chaos. Submerge it. Then reclaim the entire ground plane for lobbies, retail, and public space that breathes. In some of Kampala's newer buildings, parking has moved entirely underground,

which provides a safer environment for vehicles that are increasingly prone to theft," says Obita.

The approach not only increases the usable floor area of any given plot but also improves the functionality and aesthetic appeal of the building.

The aesthetic argument

Stephen Makumbi, a valuation surveyor who has watched Kampala's property market mature over two decades observes that properties with organised parking, dedicated storage areas, and service zones, tend to command higher rental and resale values.

But this is not simply a financial argument. It is also an aesthetic and functional one.

"A building that tucks its parking underground and hides its loading docks and mechanical rooms presents a cleaner, more gracious face to the city. The entrance can be a proper lobby rather than a negotiation between a turnstile and a parked delivery truck. The retail can spill onto a landscaped plaza instead of a dusty

GOING DOWN

The new Kampala is still being built, using concrete, steel, engineers, and environmental checks. The city is choosing to create order from the ground up. Now, under the streets, basements that were once just empty holes are being used for businesses, parking, and building systems. The city is digging deeper, and it shows no sign of coming back up.

A building that tucks its parking underground and hides its loading docks and mechanical rooms presents a cleaner, more gracious face to the city. PHOTO: FREY OYET OKWERA.



development does not lead to environmental degradation, unsafe settlements, or conflicts with nearby communities.

He reiterates that the requirement is aimed at promoting proper physical planning and guiding the country toward organized and sustainable urban development. This obligation is anchored in Section 39 of the Physical Planning Act, Cap 142, which makes environmental compliance a mandatory part of the planning and approval process for all major developments.

For the architect and developer, this means that the romantic era of building first and asking permission later is over. The new Kampala requires drawings, approvals, impact studies, and professional oversight from the moment the first stake is driven into the ground.

Three Kampala buildings defining the new era

The Pearl of Africa Hotel

Standing at the Pearl of Africa Hotel is a mind-blowing experience. This luxury tower represents the upper extreme of Kampala's new vertical ambition, incorporating deep foundations, reinforced concrete and steel frameworks, and the kind of advanced engineering typically reserved for capital cities with far longer histories of high-rise construction. The hotel's basement levels house extensive back-of-house operations, secure underground parking for guests and VIPs, and mechanical systems that would have consumed valuable above-ground real estate in an earlier era of Kampala architecture. Above ground, the hotel offers unobstructed views of the city's evolving skyline, turning the building itself into a vantage point from which to observe the transformation that it also represents.

Mapeera House

Mapeera House occupies a special place in Kampala's architectural imagination. It sits in the middle to upper range of the city's new building economy, but its significance extends beyond its price tag. Mapeera House demonstrates how a landmark commercial building can integrate subterranean space without sacrificing architectural character or public presence at street level.

The building's design balances the demands of modern office tenants, who require efficient floor plates and secure parking, with the need to present a human-scaled face to the surrounding neighbourhood. It has become a reference point for developers who want to build vertically and deeply without becoming purely anonymous glass towers.

The standard multi-storey

The standard multi-storey building with typical finishes represents the most common expression of the new vernacular. These buildings are appearing across the city on plots that would have previously supported only single-level commercial structures or residential houses. Each typically features at least one basement level given over to parking and service areas, with three to five floors above containing a mix of offices, apartments, and retail.

What makes this building type significant is its replicability. Unlike the headline-grabbing luxury hotels and landmark towers, the standard multi-storey is the pattern that will define the look and feel of the new Kampala for most residents and workers. It is modest by international standards but transformative by local ones, proving that the shift toward vertical and subterranean construction does not require a budget of hundreds of billions of shillings.

sidewalk. The resident can arrive home through a sequence of spaces that feels intentional rather than improvised," he explains.

Investors and occupants, Makumbi Plains, recognise the added value that comes with extra usable space, improved amenities, and enhanced building efficiency.

The price of digging

Of course, none of this comes cheap. Makumbi says the cost of constructing a storey building, can range between Shs5b and Shs10b, depending on factors such as size, architectural design, finishes, and the intended use of the building.

He notes, however, that there are structures such as the Mapeera building that can cost as much as Shs100b, while others can surpass even that figure. The Pearl of Africa Hotel, for example, carries a price tag of Shs300b. Developers who opt for simpler storeyed structures with modest finishes, Makumbi adds, can still complete projects at a lower range of about Shs2b.

What makes multi-storey structures particularly expensive is the demand for specialised building materials and stronger structural systems capable of supporting heavy loads and greater heights. Such projects require reinforced concrete, steel frameworks, deep foundations, and advanced engineering designs to ensure stability and safety. In addition, these buildings depend on highly skilled and specialised labour, including structural engineers, architects, quantity surveyors, and experienced contractors. The logistics involved in transporting materials to higher floors, hiring lifting

equipment such as cranes, ensuring strict safety standards, and managing longer construction timelines all add to the overall cost.

The regulatory framework

Any architect working in Kampala today will tell you that the regulatory environment has changed fundamentally. The National Building Review Board now requires all developers to obtain an operational permit before embarking on any construction project. The board has warned that failure to comply may result in penalties for non-conformity. According to the latest requirements, any new building design proposed by a developer must first receive formal approval before the commencement of construction.

This requirement is part of the board's strengthened oversight, which aims to streamline the construction sector and minimise cases of substandard developments. The board has adopted a stricter approach to ensure that all civil engineers and developers adhere to recognised professional standards and best practices. The move is intended to safeguard public safety, improve the quality of infrastructure, and promote professionalism within the building industry.

Despite these tighter regulations, some developers had already begun taking the right steps before the crackdown. Many had proactively followed the required procedures and engaged professional engineers to oversee construction on site, demonstrating a growing awareness about compliance and the importance of safe, approved building practices.

At the same time, the government moved forcefully to evict traders operating in semi-permanent structures, li-

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oks, and temporary tents across the country. The move is intended to create room for more organised and permanent developments that must go through the official approval and planning processes.

And then there is the environmental layer. Dr Akankwasa Barirega, the Executive Director of the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), cautions developers that any project in-

tended for a specific location must first undergo an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, or ESIA. This process, he emphasizes, is not a formality.

Barirega explains that conducting an ESIA helps authorities and developers understand how a project may affect ecosystems, drainage systems, surrounding communities, and existing infrastructure. The assessment also proposes mitigation measures to ensure that

