Mbarara hilltops: The new frontier in Uganda's real estate boom

The Mbarara City authority has prioritised extending infrastructure to the city's peripheries, and the hilltop communities have been among the primary beneficiaries.

BY RAJAB MUKOMBOZI

From high-end luxury homes and elegant cottages to sprawling apartment complexes and boutique hotels, the mad rush for hilltop property is reshaping the Mbarara City's skyline and its real estate sector. The catalyst, as with so many changes in urban Uganda, is status. Since the elevation of Mbarara from a municipality to a city, development has accelerated dramatically. Areas that used to be considered remote or even undesirable are now commanding premium prices. Among the most coveted locations are Karugangama and Kakoba in Mbarara City South, as well as Koranorya and Biharwe in Mbarara City North. These hilltop communities, once overlooked, are now the epicenter of a property gold rush.

The price of prestige

The numbers tell the story more clearly than any description. According to Herbert Tushabe, director of Amity Realtors, a standard plot of land measuring 50 by 100 feet that could be bought for as little as Shs2m just a few years ago now sells for Shs10m in Biharwe and Kibega.

"And because of the growing demand," Tushabe explains, "the market price is going to be very high in the future. We have not yet reached the peak."

He attributes the sudden interest in hilltops to several converging factors. The most obvious is the increasing pressure for space within Mbarara City itself. As the city expands and the population grows, available land in the flat, central areas becomes scarcer and more expensive. Residents and investors alike have become innovative, looking upward to the hills that ring the city.

"These spaces that used to be looked at as having no value are being turned into tracts for development," Tushabe says. "The hilltops were always there, but nobody wanted them. Now they are premium real estate."

Tourist appeal

Beyond mere necessity, however, there is genuine desire. The hilltops of Mbarara offer something that the crowded lowlands cannot; natural beauty. Elevated landscapes provide sweeping, panoramic views of the city and its surrounding countryside. The air is cooler, the environment quieter, and the natural surroundings remain largely unspoiled.

"Because of the landscape, these hilltops have scenic views, but also the environment here is very cool," Tushabe adds. "That is why we are seeing so many investors in the hospitality sector, hotels, lodges, and private accommodation, being constructed in these areas."

The tourism potential, he notes, has been a significant driver. Even before the current construction boom, some of these hilltops were already attracting visitors for activities such as hiking, trekking, stone climbing, camping, and nature walks. Strategic investors recognised the opportunity and began developing permanent structures to cater to this growing market.

Infrastructure paves the way

None of this would be possible, however, without basic services. Ambrose Twesigye, a resident of Katete, an area experiencing similar rapid development, points to the extension of roads, electricity, and water as the foundation upon which the hilltop boom rests.

"When you have good roads, when you have power, when you have clean water, a remote area becomes accessible," Twesigye explains. "Previously, these hilltops were difficult to reach. Now, you can drive up smoothly. That changes everything."

The Mbarara City authority has prioritised extending infrastructure to the city's peripheries, and the hilltop communities have been among the primary beneficiaries. As connectivity improves, so does land value.

A dream home on a hill

For those building private residences, the motivation is often deeply personal. Edinah Mbabazi, who owns a high-end home on a hilltop in Biharwe, speaks with unmistakable satisfaction about her choice.

"When you have toiled for your money, you need to put up a dream home," she says proudly. "Its location is important. I settled on a hilltop as an ideal site where I can relax with my family in a cool environment with good scenery."

She lists additional advantages with the ease of someone who has clearly considered them carefully. Elevated areas, she notes, are not easily affected by sanitation challenges such as air and noise pollution. Flooding a recurring problem in Mbarara's low-lying neighbourhoods, is not a concern on the hills. And because the hilltops are less crowded, there is a measure of privacy that is increasingly difficult to find in the city's denser areas.

"People who prefer these areas are not so many," Mbabazi explains. "And it is not possible to have congested developments in such areas because of the scenery. You cannot build wall-to-wall on a hilltop. The land itself does not allow it."

The engineer's warning

For all the enthusiasm, however, there are voices of caution. Isaac Beebwa, a construction engineer at IBEA Construction Company in Mbarara, warns that building on hilltops requires expertise, preparation, and significantly more investment than constructing on flat ground.

"Hilltops are prone to soil erosion and mudslides," Beebwa explains. "Before you pour a single bag of cement, you must test the soil stability. Is it strong enough to hold the structures you plan to build? If not, you must take corrective measures, and those measures are not cheap."

Foundations, he notes, must be deeper, stronger, and often reinforced with concrete. Standard building materials may not be sufficient; specialised materials may be required to improve structural stability. Drainage is another critical consideration, water seeping into walls can undermine even the most carefully constructed home.

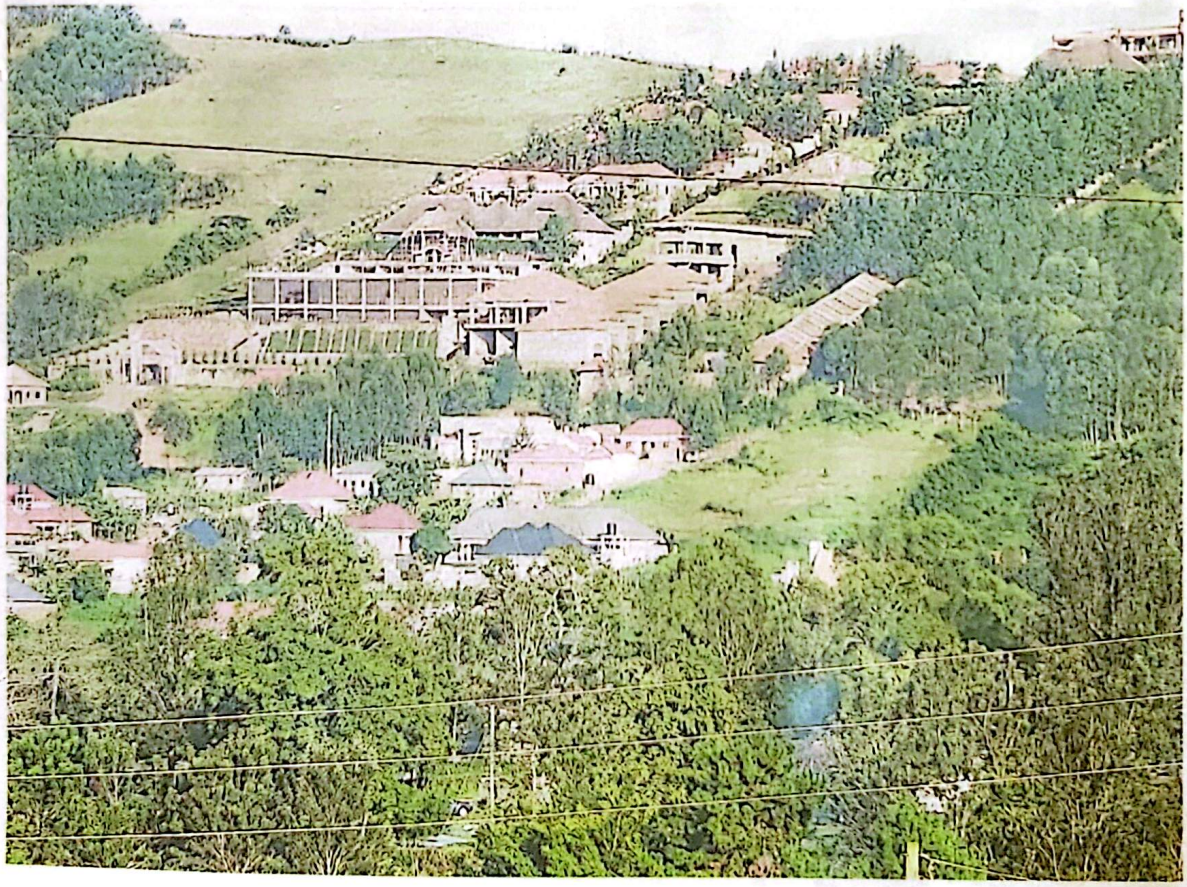
"You also have to consider the weather conditions," Beebwa adds. "Hilltops are exposed. They receive heavier rains and stronger winds than the valleys. Your building must be designed to withstand that."

Finally, there is the simple matter of cost. Transporting building materials up steep, winding roads adds expense. Levelling uneven terrain adds expense. Extending utilities such as water and electricity to remote hilltop plots adds significant expense.

"A dream home on a hilltop is beautiful," Beebwa concludes. "But it is not for everyone. You need the right budget and the right team. Otherwise, that dream can become a nightmare very quickly."

THE FUTURE OF MBARARA'S HILLS

As the sun sets over Biharwe, casting long shadows across the valley below, it is clear that Mbarara's hilltops are no longer the forgotten corners of the city. They are its future. Whether that future is one of sustainable, well-planned development or chaotic, unregulated construction remains to be seen. But one thing is certain; the mad rush has begun, and there is no turning back.



The hilltop area in Kakoba, Mbarara City South, is currently experiencing significant developments. PHOTO/ RAJAB MUKOMBOZI.

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