



A Park Named Freedom

By Lutivini Majanja



If you are ever walking or caught in traffic in Nairobi's central business district, you might notice the yellow school buses. Many of the schools are not based in Nairobi some traveling a fair distance to get to the city. Having attended schools with limited resources for travel, these sightings always remind me about the excitement I felt every time I got to be part of a student group travelling anywhere. These trips made for some of my best school memories. That children from all over Kenya travel to Nairobi, to see monumental places like the National Assembly, the Nairobi Stock Exchange, the Supreme Court, the Nairobi National Park, museums, universities, and historical sites such as Uhuru Park might be a small thing, or it might be significant.

I wonder what the teachers in Uhuru Park, walking alongside their students, say about this place. What makes this park significant enough to warrant these daily visits? Have you ever been to Uhuru Park? People I have asked this question tell me that they've only ever been there for organised events - walks, runs, or public protest.

Last year, in 2018, while attending the NaiNiWho tour organised by The Godown Arts Centre, I learnt that this space was at first a waste disposal site for the predecessor of Kenya Railways Corporation. The 12.9-hectares was designated as a recreational park in 1969 and launched by Kenya's founding President Jomo Kenyatta. Uhuru Park is one of few free access recreational green spaces in Nairobi. It has a small and thriving pond with lilies, and a vast manmade lake, where people can enjoy boat rides. The park has a few monuments, the Pope's pyramid slab installed in

1985, the Nyayo Fountain, one of many monuments Moi monuments installed across the country during President Moi's 24-year rule. There is plenty of open space to do nothing. It is a place where people could enjoy picnics, take long walks, sleep, play, dance, pray, and rest. Every day there might be approximately 5000 or more people just walking through or relaxing in Uhuru Park.

Nairobi's other free- green public spaces are Jeevanjee Gardens created by Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee in 1906, Nairobi City Park declared a public park in 1925, Central Park where a monument to President Moi's Nyayo era stands out prominently.

Green spaces in Nairobi's colonial physical design were markers of the colour barrier and they continue to serve as indicators of how Nairobi's physical space - housing, schools and other social amenities, remains [segregated](#) along racial and class lines. Uhuru Park borders Kipande House. During colonial times, this building was the place where Africans had to stop and their much-loathed passbooks verified before entering the town. It also borders Nairobi hill, Valley road and Statehouse road which were the locations of the more affluent residential neighbourhoods of Nairobi. Though many of these homes have now been converted into nonresidential commercial buildings, the churches these residents founded and used among them, All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi Central SDA Church, The Holy Family Basilica, St. Paul's University Chapel, St. Andrews, The First Church of Christ, Scientist and the Lutheran Church close to University of Nairobi continue exist.

Nairobi's public parks largely stem from Kenya's colonial legacy before evolving into spaces held for the public in trust post-independence. The John Michuki Memorial Park (named after the late [John Michuki](#)) in contrast has a different history. This park was created in 2008 after the state violently evicted mechanics along the Nairobi River adjacent to Kipande Road, and cleared what was an enormous dumpsite behind the buildings on Kijabe Street, away from the view of the uptown publics. This insistence on creating a thing of beauty while simultaneously disenfranchising its purported beneficiaries is best exemplified by this park. The tiny forest with footpaths might have been an attempt to increase access to green spaces for all Nairobi residents. The Michuki Park project was part of a larger goal [to rehabilitate the Nairobi River basin](#). The awful stench from the polluted river remains a major feature of this park. Even here, people find relief resting under the shade of growing trees. Still, Michuki Park - without benches, without public toilets, is far from being whatever ideal recreation space, that was so aggressively restored.

Public Green spaces in Nairobi have a littered history of contestation from the state or government agents intent on hiving off chunks and converting them into private and commercial properties. As a result, there is an ever-present paranoia around the threat to civic space alongside the demand for prime real estate. So significant is the threat that a common response to any significant maintenance is viewed with skepticism. For example, at Jeevanjee Gardens, the loud [resistance](#) witnessed in 2015 when Nairobi Governor Evans Kidero launched a project to rehabilitate the park can be traced back to the memory of the government's 1991 and 2007 attempts to convert Jeevanjee Gardens prime green space into commercial property.

For some Nairobi residents and visitors, recreation happens at Uhuru Park despite the present-day deficiencies. There is drinking water close to the lily pond, there's a foot bridge that looks good in photographs. A section of the park has amusement rides including merry-go-rounds, trains and bouncing castles for those desiring more activity. Though the park's newest memorial monument has cracked and missing tiles, you'll see people walking past Greenbelt's rusty Freedom Corner proclamation sign, straight to this monument [dedicated to Kenya's Mau Mau heroes](#), to take pictures. Maybe to learn about and to honour Kenya's freedom fighters. Perhaps to just sit on the benches provided and stare into space, read newspapers, or wait for friends.

If your walk into the park starts at the top of the hill from Cathedral Road, at the flagpole and flag

erected to commemorate the Constitution of Kenya 2010, you might wonder about the heaped uncollected rubbish and old tyres at the Ministry of Agriculture offices, so close to the Ministry of Health offices, so close to this flag. Marabou storks. You can't miss the flag though, you might even dream. Remember where you were, if you existed, when Kenya got this Constitution, and what your part in it was. How you were dreaming. Looking down from the viewing deck that is adjacent to the flag, beyond the terraced field facing the raised podium and the lake reflecting the city's skyline, Nairobi is tranquil.

I associate Uhuru Park with [Wangari Maathai and Greenbelt's work](#) in securing the park in 1989 against the force of the state, the Release Political Prisoners campaign by the mothers of political prisoners jailed by the Moi government who subsequently staged a [mothers' hunger-strike](#) in 1992. This place is also evangelist Reinhard Bonnke and many more preachers after him always so loud. It holds the memory of my classmates at University of Nairobi escaping dreary study to attend that historical [Rainbow Alliance Rally](#) and the free of charge Kool and the Gang [concert](#).

In 1996, during a ceremony at Uhuru Park, the Catholic Church in Kenya presided over the [burning of condoms and AIDS-awareness material](#).

For me, it is a place where teargas has been used in response to peaceful processions. After the General Elections of December 2007 elections, and the disputed presidential election results, there was violence across the country. For a while in 2008, it was an eerie empty inaccessible place guarded by GSU officers. Uhuru Park is a symbolic space, a National centre, with a podium where presidents are sworn in Along with restricting free movement the State did not want to risk ceding control of this space to the opposition movement. Following the 2017 General Elections, in 2018, the same tension was witnessed in the park prior to Opposition leader Raila Odinga's controversial swearing in ceremony. This time though, security forces [stayed away](#).

It is much easier to associate this park named freedom, with rage, insecurity, tear gas and physical harm. Just recently, in June this year, protesters gathered here in solidarity with the people of Sudan, had their protest disrupted with teargas. In July, the SwitchOffKPLC (Kenya Power and Lighting Company) march was also disrupted with teargas. At the end of July, more people held a memorial for the late Kibra MP, Ken Okoth.

A recreational park is a place we visit when we have free time, or a place we might go to get temporary relief from our immediate troubles. Gabriel Omollo's song [Lunch time](#) chronicles the struggles of Nairobi's workers including not having enough money to buy good food or any food at all...

*"wengine wanakwenda
kulala uwanjani
kumbe ni shida ndugu
njaa inamwumiza"*

The song refers to workers going to sleep in the park when they have no food to deal with their hunger pangs. Even when one cannot improve a situation, going to a green space can be cathartic. More than any other green space in Kenya, Uhuru Park is a place Kenyans return to, to assert and proclaim freedom whenever it threatened. Uhuru means freedom.

Not just for Kenyans. In July 2011, some of South Sudan's citizens living in Nairobi, congregated at Uhuru Park to celebrate their independence.

That this park remains open and fairly easy to access suggests that even the most cynical among us

agree that everyone, no matter their station in life, deserves to have a beautiful and peaceful place to relax. How is it that many of us, in middle class Kenya, are grateful and even proud to have it at the centre of our city, willing to celebrate it, defend it, but unable to imagine ourselves relaxing here, ever? Who is it for, and why is it not for us? Are free-of-charge places only for people without money?

The sorts of things we do for rest and relaxation often look like crimes in a city that enforces [bylaws](#) that punish people for being present in public spaces. A leisurely walk looks a lot like loitering and vagrancy when the walker meets the stereotype of the undesirables. A person using a camera is so easily assumed to be a terrorist. A bulky bag filled with food always looks suspicious. A person standing still for too long can be confused for a hawker. Those who have regular jobs often grapple with the guilt and the discomfort around taking necessary breaks or using up designated breaks to rest. To be seen to be resting in an unmeaningful way can be a problem. To be visible, and to be seen resting in certain places, another problem. We have a situation where it is acceptable only to have our bodies visible during particular respectable or performative acts of civic duty while simultaneously accepting the invisibility of other types of bodies, often the bodies of disenfranchised people, who make full use of Uhuru Park.

Visiting Uhuru Park in its present state means resting with homelessness and destitution, deciding what to feel or not feel about people cleaning themselves and washing their clothes at that stream so close to the big All Saints Cathedral and the Serena Hotel. It is coming to terms with the fact that there are people for whom the minimum charge for a public toilet is too much. You could argue that more ought to be done to make this park friendlier or safer for those who do not feel welcome here. Then you might have to consider what to do about not excluding those whose bodies are presently considered undesirable or even threatening.

There may be comfort in imagining and defending Uhuru Park as a particular type of civic space. For many Uhuru Park is reduced to Freedom Corner and all its accumulated symbolisms and not the rest of the park. Even when we by right occupy these spaces, do we stop to think about those we displace with our proclamations? What use are our victories for those who have to stay behind, make themselves comfortable with the residue of whatever good or bad we leave? Claiming all the things Uhuru Park could be to Nairobi and Kenya by extension would require constant presence. This could ignite the public participation we desire. We would have to imagine that many of the destitute people who use public spaces also need private spaces, roofs over their heads and shelter.

It is better if you have a little money, you can go to Nairobi Arboretum or Karura Forest. Take pictures. It is less work.

I think about the imperative *Tembea Kenya* which is often interpreted to mean tourism and spending money. Does going or not going to Uhuru Park then signal one's position in whatever hierarchies we imagine for ourselves?

It forces one to consider again, the students from all over the country stopping at Uhuru Park. What freedom dreams do these visits ignite? What dreams do they transport back to friends and family? What must we do to make Uhuru Park a place where all of us, in our different bodies, Nairobi residents and Nairobi's visitors, are free.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society

by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

