



Nairobi: The City That Was Never Meant to Be

By Owaahh and John Kamau



More than a century ago, a brash and mostly racist decision created a small tin shack town in the middle of a swamp. Then the town became unstoppable.

The first men and women who landed in Nairobi probably considered the brackish swamp land perfect. The area was picturesque, with hills in the horizon and rivers crisscrossing the plains. While the swampy land was not suitable for farming, and certainly not for settlement, it was perfect for grazing.

For the Maasai and the Kikuyu, the plain was also a meeting ground, cutting between the highland farming community in Central Kenya and the nomadic community in the Rift. For the Kamba and other traders and adventurers, it was the easier part of the journey. The Maasai called it Enkare Nyorobi, 'the land of cool waters'; other names for the land seems to have evaded history books.

The colony's vanguard also saw it as one of the easy stretches of a long, much more arduous journey to the Western parts of what would become Kenya. The treeless plain was also curiously empty, particularly on the lush parts towards Central Kenya. They wrote of 'Nyrobe' in their letters home, a name which, in a short time, would become the name of the capital of a new country.

It was not empty or deserted though; it was occupied, just not permanently. And even less at that

point because smallpox and a few other epidemics had cut down the populations of many Kenyan communities.

In 1896, builders of the Lunatic Line set up a small supply depot and a camp on the plains. The original boundaries of what is [now Nairobi were for](#) “*the area within a radius of one and a half miles from the offices of the sub-commissioner of the Ukambani Province.*” There was no plan beyond that, and Nairobi was merely one in a chain of such supply depots. The railhead reached Nairobi, the small supply depot between Mombasa and Kampala, in 1899.

With it, a new future began.

A cultural melting pot

The railway management picked Nairobi to be their railway headquarters. But this seemingly arbitrary decision that would put the builders at loggerheads with the colonial government did not involve any proper assessment of the site. Public health would be the key issue in those early years, with the lack of proper drainage making the new town the perfect breeding grounds for epidemics.

But the railway engineers did not see Nairobi as becoming anything more than an Indian township which, they argued, could “*prosper in spite of unsanitary conditions and chronic plague.*”

As more people settled on what had become the railway headquarters, a pattern emerged. Europeans settled to the West, Asians to the Parklands side, and Africans to the East. But segregation laws would not become codified until 1908, after yet another bout of the plague. Within the first five years, what had been a sparsely occupied swampy plain was now home to 10,000 people. After Mombasa, Nairobi was now the cultural melting pot of the young British colony.

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With government funding and rich entrepreneurs like [AM Jeevanjee](#), who had made a fortune supplying material and labour to build the railway, a town sprouted from the swamp. The richest man in Kenya at the start of the 20th century, Jeevanjee would later go on an investment spree, building the first law courts, the original Nairobi Club, the first building that housed the National Museum, and many other buildings.

Before the railhead reached Nairobi, the central economic activity for the young town had been big game hunting. By 1900, the town was a single street, driven by commerce as Asian railway builders settled in tin shacks on the plain. Beyond that street “*lay the swamp where frogs lived every night at dusk they used to bark out their vibrant chorus and spread a cloak of deep, incessant sound over the little township*” as Elspeth Huxley writes in *White Man’s Country*. The frogs formed part of the ecosystem, providing a rhythmic croaking during the calm nights of a budding young town. It was free music, if not poetry, but it freaked out public health officials.

A public health hazard

Doctors were particularly concerned about the hazards the soggy grounds carried. At 1,750 metres above sea level, colonialists thought Nairobi’s temperate climate would limit the development of malaria-carrying mosquitos (an oft-repeated myth, most notably in Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*). It didn’t, and not just because the soggy grounds allowed pools of stagnant water to collect. [Malaria](#)

[would thrive in the new town](#), with 14,000 new malaria cases reported in Nairobi in 1913 alone. But malaria was just one of many health concerns that made doctors want the small town moved to higher ground.

In 1902, the small town faced its first major public health problem. An epidemic of the dreaded bubonic plague erupted along Indian Bazaar. With no sanitation or municipal plans, the main street at the time had played host to rodents, and the animals had in turn brought in the plague, killing several people. The plague was diagnosed by the enigmatic zebra-riding [Dr. Rosendo Ribiero](#). The Medical Officer, Dr. Alfred Spurrier, ordered the entire street burnt. Everyone was evacuated, and Nairobi's first CBD was torched.

This was probably the point in history when the situation could have been salvaged and the young town moved, but that didn't happen. Instead, lethargy and bureaucracy resulted in a status quo.

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In May 1903, Dr. Moffat, a principal medical officer of the East Africa and Uganda Protectorate, called Nairobi dangerous and defective. After another plague in 1904, he recommended relocating residents to modern-day Kikuyu Township. But Moffat left in April 1904, and his successors held the costs of relocation too high.

On 18 May 1906, Sir [James Sadler, commissioner for the Protectorate, wrote to Winston Churchill](#), Undersecretary of State for the Colonies, complaining about the emergence of Kenya's capital: *"...at the commencement of the 1902 plague...the then-commissioner, Sir Charles Elliot, was strongly of the opinion that the site, which had been selected three years before by the manager of the Uganda Railway without consulting medical or sanitary authorities, was, with its inadequate drainage, unsuitable for a large and growing population. [It is a] depression with a very thin layer of soil or rock. The soil was water-logged during the greater part of the year."*

The letter further reminds Churchill of the 1902 recommendation to move the city "to some point on the hills." Sadler told Churchill this was a critical point in Nairobi's history; that his predecessor had said: *"...when the rainy season commenced, the whole town is practically transformed into a swamp."*

But the Board running the city decided instead to try drain the swampy bazaar area.

Six years before, in 1898, a 25-year-old man called [John Ainsworth](#) had disembarked from a ship at the Port of Mombasa. He was an employee of the colonising company called the Imperial British East African Company, and was ambitious to make a career for himself. Before that year ended, he travelled from Mombasa up to Machakos, and into the tin shack town called Nyrobe. He built his house at Museum Hill to found the colonial administration, much to the chagrin of influential railway builders. Eager to make the swampy plains work, he planted Eucalyptus trees on the swamp to drain the water. Ainsworth's legacy remains to date, with most of his efforts being the only reason why more and more parts of the swamp could be occupied.

Nairobi continued to develop quickly and Sadler finally threw in the towel: *"It is, I admit, too late to consider the question of moving the town from the plains to the higher position along the line some miles to the north. We had a chance in 1902, and I think it was a pity that we did not do so then as advocated by Sir Charles Elliot."*

But even Sadler did not anticipate the growth - eightfold since 1969, from 500,000 people to 4.4 million today. He said Nairobi would never become "*a city like Johannesburg or a large commercial centre, for if there is a rapid development of industries or minerals in any of the new districts, the centres would spring up around them.*"

Churchill accepted this idea and [made the final decision](#): "*It is now too late to change, and thus lack of foresight and of a comprehensive view leaves its permanent imprint upon the countenance of a new country.*"

The colonists had given up, and the town they had once thought would only be occupied by Indians became the centre of the new colony. It would take another six years for the Nairobi Sanitary Commission to be appointed, by which time the city was home to thousands of people. The swampy grounds would pose challenges for builders, medical officers, and town planners.

From tin shack town to city

[Settlers like Ewart Grogan](#) believed that the Europeans should have occupied the area from Chiromo up towards and past Westlands. They could then leave the lower plains and its tin shacks to Asians and Kenyan natives. The plan never came to be as the influence of the railway builders carried the day, and by the time it became clear the city would grow, it was too late to move it.

In 1919, Nairobi Township became Nairobi Municipal Council and the boundaries were extended. It would be extended nine years later to cover 30 square miles. Seven years after that, Jim Jameson presented a town planning report with great plans to plant Jacaranda trees. The tin shack town was well on its way to becoming a city, and the future generations of city fathers would have to find a way to deal with the thin layer of soil.

It hired a consultant in the mid-1920s, by which time the town's economic importance made it a *fait accompli*. One colonial officer wrote that the new plan was ambitious, but until it bore fruit, "Nairobi must remain what she was then, a slatternly creature, unfit to queen it over so lovely a country."

More than three decades later, when it became the official capital of a new country, Nairobi still did not have a blueprint.

The initial stubbornness of the railway engineers trumped those of the colonial government and its health officials. For that, the latter would pay dearly, facing many epidemics and having to dedicate finances to further drain the swamp. Most of the swamp has now been replaced with skyscrapers and road networks, with insufficient footpaths, drainage and leadership.

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More than a century after its unlikely birth, Nairobi is home to more than 4 million people. The city still reminds that it was once a swamp where rivers criss-crossed at will. One pending idea, which has been revived in the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) Taskforce report, is to grant the city special status as a capital city. It would mean Nairobi will not have a governor, but the report hopes that it would not "*impede the rights of the Kenyan people to representation at the ward and parliamentary levels.*"

In this scenario, only a special status would allow the central government "*the means to provide the services and facilitation necessary to maintaining as a capital city and as a diplomatic hub.*" Whether

that's likely is a toss-up, but whoever runs it will always face the same problems as its first city fathers. Indeed, the city that was never meant to be, and probably should never have been, is now the epicentre of the Kenyan economy and society.

Perhaps the time is ripe to ask ourselves whether Nairobi should be the epicentre of Kenya, because today, amidst the floods raging in the city, poor drainage and the chaotic streets, Nairobi leaves much to be desired as a capital city and is still an unfit slatternly creature to queen over the country, despite what the BBI report claims.

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