Selective visibility: governmental policy and the changing cultural landscape of Rwanda

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ABSTRACT: In a developing country like Rwanda, the pursuit of modernity is related to visibility through the cultivation of a particular image. Since the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has concentrated its efforts on recovering from widespread devastation and becoming a middle-income nation with a modernized economy. In the last twenty years, the Rwandan government has employed a strategy of selective visibility to produce significant impact on the built environment, through both specific policies and campaigns as well as through the allocation of funding to certain prioritized projects.

An examination of specific examples of change in Rwanda’s built environment, with photographic documentation of conditions before and after an implementation of policy, reveals how architectural research can help to make the invisible more visible and provide a basis for critical reflection on a cultural landscape. These observations are based on immersive research undertaken in Rwanda in 2011 and 2012 including participant observation, interviews, and existing condition documentation, as well as a review of documents produced by the Rwandan government.

KEYWORDS: Policy, Rwanda, colonialism, demolition, beautification

INTRODUCTION
Over time, buildings, neighborhoods, roads and infrastructure appear and disappear, correlating to parallel changes in economic conditions, political affairs, and popular tastes. One of the most critical functions of architectural research is to document and analyze the history of our built environment to ensure that future changes are made with thoughtful reflection on our cultural past.

The study of these changes is particularly important in developing countries where an ongoing pursuit of modernity is frequently prioritized by government and also vertically integrated throughout a whole society. Located in the heart of Africa, Rwanda is a small nation that still depends largely on subsistence agriculture, but greatly aspires to become modernized and middle-income, and it is trying to achieve this goal in large part by controlling visibility in the built environment.

This paper presents a series of case studies that are based on immersive research undertaken in Rwanda including participant observation, interviews, visual documentation and analysis, and document research. A number of documents consulted were primary sources produced by the Rwandan government, including speeches, master plans, and other strategic papers.

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1. Rwandan history
Rwanda has existed as a kingdom with a common language and culture since roughly the 15th century. The earliest inhabitants of the region, forest-dwelling hunters and gatherers known as the Twa, are thought to have settled the area as early as the Neolithic period. A group of agricultural immigrants, the ancestors of the modern-day Hutu, arrived between the 5th and 11th centuries, while the pastoralist, cattle-raising Tutsi arrived around the 14th century, and gained control of the area due to their more advanced combat skills. The Tutsi established a feudal-like system called ubuhake where the Hutu gave agricultural products and personal or military service to the Tutsi in exchange for the use of land and cattle (University of Pennsylvania 2010).

Tutsi kings ruled over the kingdom for several centuries, expanding its borders to roughly what they are today by the end of the 19th century. By this time, European exploration was encroaching on the kingdom. In the 1885 Conference of Berlin, the European powers declared the region to be under German control, a full nine years before the first European set foot within the kingdom. The Germans ruled Rwanda until World
War I, when Belgium gained Rwanda and Burundi as territories. The Belgian colonial administration favored the minority Tutsi for administrative positions, believing they were a more intelligent and “civilized” race. The Hutu resented this inequity, and civil unrest and violent uprisings led the UN to terminate Belgian control, with Rwanda gaining independence in 1962.

Tensions between the Tutsi and the Hutu, which had been stoked by colonial prejudices, were at an all-time high in the second half of the 20th century, and a civil war erupted in 1990 after a rebel Tutsi group (the Rwandan Patriotic Front, or RPF) invaded from Uganda. A cease-fire agreement was reached when the government agreed to a power-sharing arrangement with opposition parties, but Hutu dissatisfaction with this agreement led to continued random acts of violence, and the Rwandan president was shot down in his plane in April 1994. This sparked a genocide in which nearly a million Tutsi (and Hutu moderates) were killed, decimating the population and leading to mass exodus. After three months of mayhem, the RPF gained control and established a new government. After a transitional period that saw the establishment of a new constitution, democratic elections were held in 2003, 2008, and 2010.

Rwanda’s contemporary ethnic distribution is 84% Hutu, 15% Tutsi, and 1% Twa.

1.2. Motives
Since the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has concentrated its efforts on recovering from widespread devastation and becoming a middle-income nation with a modernized economy and a strong identity. A plan called "Vision 2020" was developed by the national government based on a consultative process that took place in 1998-99. The plan addresses everything from economic and technological development to gender equality, education, and healthcare. Calling itself "an ambitious plan to raise the people of Rwanda out of poverty and transform the country into a middle-income economy," it asserts that it represents the bond of all Rwandans in sharing a common wish for a better future (Rwanda Vision 2020, 2000).

The Rwandan government has implemented a range of strategies in order to achieve the goals outlined in this document. Some are purely socio-economic in nature, but others affect the built environment and have had or will have an indisputably visual impact. In essence, these policies create a strategy of selective visibility for image control. This is closely tied to national pride, to a desire to move on from a painful past, and to the reality that Rwanda still depends heavily on foreign economic aid or investment. In the last two decades, Rwanda’s government has had significant impact on the built environment, both through specific policies and campaigns as well as through the allocation of funding to prioritized projects.

2.0. THE PAST
Rwanda conversely has both pride in its strong historical traditions and a willingness to downplay or lose some of them in the pursuit of modernity. Certain historical aspects of Rwandan culture, such as the traditional Intore dance where males dress as warriors, are eagerly displayed to tourists and performed at public ceremonies. However, neither the government nor private citizens have demonstrated great interest in the conservation of built heritage. Some aspects of vernacular building, like traditional thatched roofs, are viewed as primitive, while the majority of buildings from the colonial era are seen as valueless except for the potential to recover scrap building materials. Furthermore, through exposure to other cultures due to both diaspora or exile and the increased presence of Western media in Rwanda, Western styles and ideas have slowly encroached on and replaced traditional facets of Rwandan culture.

2.1. Thatched roofing
As recently as three years ago, the hills of Rwanda were covered with thatched roof homes, but after a government campaign was launched in 2010, thatched roofing has nearly been eradicated (Fig. 1). Now the green hillsides glitter with shiny metal roofs (Fig. 2), changing the look of the entire landscape. The government has cited valid health and safety reasons such as mildew or the potential hazard of fire as justifications for the campaign, but it can also be surmised that the traditional way of roofing, which could potentially be viewed as primitive, would not fit in to the Vision 2020 image of a modern middle-income nation.

It is significant that this campaign was not in fact initially conceived by the government, but by members of the Rwandan diaspora. The campaign is rooted in the 4th Diaspora Global Convention hosted in Kigali from December 13-15, 2009 by the Diaspora General Directorate, a division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. Rwandans traveled from abroad to return to their motherland and find out how they could assist in the sectors of health, education, and culture. They visited the southeastern province of Bugesera and observed people living there in nyakatsi, or thatched houses. Dr. Ismail Buchanon, the executive director of the Rwanda Diaspora Global Network (RDGN), explained:

  "We could tell from the first sight that they were not happy with their lives. So as the Rwandan Diaspora, we asked ourselves the question, ‘What can we do to help our fellow countrymen living in such hard conditions?’ Not conditions that they created but those caused by our past…. So we thought about this project called ‘Bye Bye Nyakatsi’ so we can get rid of those
houses made from leaves. We also did this so we can fall in line with the Government’s policy and vision because, as you know, our government aims at getting rid of leave houses by 2010. *(Bye Bye Nyakatsi 2011)*

Robert Masozera, the general director of RDGN, stated that the Rwandan diaspora “saw at firsthand how those houses are similar to bird nests” *(Bye Bye Nyakatsi 2011)*. In fact, a common tagline for the campaign was “Nests are for birds, not people.” After explaining how the small *nyakatsi* would shelter a family of five or six and their domestic animals without proper sanitation or access to clean water, Masozera asserted that as a result of the campaign to replace these houses with better houses, “certainly, this will be a modern community” *(Bye Bye Nyakatsi 2011)*.

![Image of traditional thatched hut](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Traditional_thatched_hut_circa_2001.jpg)

*Figure 1:* Traditional thatched hut circa 2001. Source: (Wikimedia Commons)

![Image of contemporary metal roof](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Contemporary_metal_roof_on_a_typical_rural_dwelling_today.jpg)

*Figure 2:* Contemporary metal roof on a typical rural dwelling today (2012).

In fact, an alternative to thatch has been developed in Rwanda since the 1930s. With the introduction of European styles of house construction during the colonial era, the traditional circular thatched hut was gradually replaced by rectangular houses with pitched roofs of locally-made clay tiles. These tiles are more waterproof than thatch, and as they are locally produced from an abundant material, they are fairly affordable. Some maintenance is required but spot repairs can be made as needed without replacing the whole roof. The use of clay tile also supports a local industry and provides jobs. However, the Rwandan government has virtually ignored the potential of clay tile roofing in favor of the promotion of corrugated metal roofs. As conservationist and architect Robin Kent has noted,

> In recent years, corrugated iron has become a common roof covering. Despite it being cold and noisy in the rainy season and rusting quickly in the tropical climate, the government is offering it free to replace thatch. Import duty has also been removed from steel and concrete to encourage development. *(Kent 2011, 25)*

Metal is the one element of many rural vernacular houses that cannot be made by hand. The most durable metal sheets must be imported from Europe, Uganda, or Kenya, while the ones that are made locally last only about fifteen years *(Hatzfeld 2006)*. But metal is perceived as the most modern roofing material because it is synthetic, it is industrial, it is not hand-made, and it doesn’t look like a bird’s nest. And the visual impact of metal shining in the sunlight against the green hills is certainly more pronounced than clay tile would be. Visitors to the region remark that they perceive a visual contrast between rural Rwanda and adjacent areas of Uganda, right on the other side of the border, where thatch and clay tile are more common. The “Bye-Bye Nyakatsi” campaign has created a visual signifier of Rwanda’s pursuit of modernity.
2.2 Colonial buildings

From direct observation, it can be inferred that Rwanda seeks to diminish and in some cases erase the memory of its colonial period. Many colonial Belgian buildings are being torn down, with the bricks reused in construction elsewhere. Many of these buildings were perfectly sound and it would be more economically practical to adaptively re-use them, but they are reminders of an era in Rwandan history that Rwanda is trying to forget.

For the better part of a year, I worked on a construction project in the rural district of Burera in northern Rwanda. We were building houses for doctors near a new district hospital. Our site had previously been a military post, but before that, it was a colonial farmstead. There was an old Belgian house on the top of the hill (Fig. 3). One day we came to site, and the house had been torn down into a large pile of bricks. Only the foundation of the building still remained in place (Fig. 4). We were quite surprised because, as the architects in charge of the site, we had thought the house was under our control. While it had sustained some damage from shelling during the war, it was a well-built structure made of quality bricks, and could potentially have been reused in some way. We suspected that the local district government had ordered the demolition of the structure, and the military had carried it out, without consulting us.

Furthermore, when we tried to use some of the bricks as flooring in a block production yard that we built elsewhere on site, the district ordered us to cease, as these bricks were still “district property.” There clearly remained a desire for full control over this colonial building, even in its dismantled state. The demolition of it was an important symbol of power to the district government.

It is clear that colonial buildings, for most Rwandans, are a distasteful reminder of a period of history when colonial rulers subjugated indigenous groups and contributed to horrific ethnic conflict. President Paul Kagame noted in a 2010 speech in London that even after decades of post-colonial independence, nation-building in most African countries remained an “up-hill task” due to the “disruption and fragmentation of our societies caused by our former colonialists” (Kagame 2010). The desire to be rid of physical reminders of
their colonial past may seem extreme, but it must be considered in the context of the long history of Rwanda. As literary theorist Aijiz Ahmad has observed, ...in periodising our history in the triadic terms of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial, the conceptual apparatus of 'postcolonial criticism' privileges as primary the role of colonialism as the principle of structuration in that history, so that all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath. (Childs and Williams 1997, 8)

Although Western scholars tend to study post-colonial African nations largely in terms of how they were affected by colonialism, Rwandans do not want to be defined by this limited view of their own history. They seek to demolish colonial-era buildings because Rwandans do not view this built heritage as “their” heritage.

In the official national policy on cultural heritage as outlined by the Ministry of Sports and Culture, there is no mention of colonial heritage (Ministry of Sports and Culture 2008). Currently there are no formal policies in place in Rwanda for the protection of historical colonial-era sites.

3.0. POVERTY

In addition to the selective disappearance of elements of built heritage, Rwanda’s government has also implemented a strategy of selective visibility in dealing with poverty. Without question, real efforts have been made by the government to lift Rwandans out of poverty, and many have been effective. The exemplary Mutuelle de Santé health insurance system is one such example. However, there are also shortcuts that have been taken in order to give Rwanda the appearance that it is leaving poverty behind faster than it really is. The Rwandan government understands the critical importance of image, of the way Rwanda is presented to outsiders, to its ability to receive these funds and move forward toward its goals. To stay involved, foreign governments and NGOs want to feel like they are assisting a country that is stable, uncorrupt, and demonstratively able to make good use of their funds for improvement. Thus Rwanda feels motivated to decrease the visibility of slums and increase strategic urban beautification.

3.1. Demolition

The high visibility of the urban poor is a difficult problem for the Rwandan government: the existence of poor neighborhoods in the capital of Kigali cannot be fully denied due to the hilly nature of the city, as the blighted areas can always be seen across a valley. However, urban design measures are taken to ensure they cannot be seen up close, as story-tall concrete walls painted with brightly-colored ads distract visitors and hide the slums from the eyes of drivers and passengers on the street. However, this is not the most drastic measure taken by the government to ensure the poor are not visible. On certain main boulevards in Kigali, entire neighborhoods have recently been razed, seemingly overnight. One way to make the poor invisible is to make them simply disappear.

The city government estimates that 70% of Kigali is presently ‘unplanned’ (City of Kigali, Urban planning and land management use 2008). There was no official property registry in Kigali until 2002 and no building code in Rwanda until 2007, and even after these were established, most residents were unable to register property because their plots did not qualify (being too far from a road and basic infrastructure, or too small) and/or were unable to build to code because the code-required materials were too expensive (traditional materials like adobe or wattle-and-daub were not acceptable). Furthermore, city regulations currently require Kigali residents to buy a house in a subdivision, so they cannot build their own house in a location of their choice (Ilberg 2008). These restrictions led to the existence of many informal settlements.

This community in the Kacyiru neighbourhood is a typical example of the informal settlements that are common in Kigali (Fig. 5). However, this one is actually visible from a major road, and located right near the American Embassy and several government ministry buildings. It should not have been a surprise, therefore, when it disappeared one day. Children used to run and play in the narrow spaces between houses, while chickens ran around and squawked. Then one day there was only dirt (Fig. 6).
The Vision 2020 plan calls for “Pro-Poor” growth and development, which seems important in a country that is 60% below the poverty line. Neighborhood clearance is discouraged by the Kigali City Master Plan of 2007. However, in my year in Rwanda, I observed no less than three major neighborhoods within the city proper demolished. This would seem out of line with official policy, but because land management and urban renewal are a lower level administrative duty, national policies are often violated (or interpreted creatively) to support particular agendas. Furthermore, there is an unexpected complacency of the Rwandan people toward expropriation. Its necessity is not widely questioned, and residents seem happy to receive any small compensation (Ilberg 2008). The long-term informality of their living conditions seems to resign them to their fate. While alternative housing on the fringe of the city is offered to the displaced residents, it is usually too expensive for them to afford, and most people end up going elsewhere, with some small sum of extra money in their pocket.

A major problem facing the Rwandan government is the conflict between land shortage (and the resulting need for centralization/decongestation) versus traditional settlement patterns. Rwanda has an ancient pattern of single dwellings scattered throughout the landscape on small farmsteads. Local identity was traditionally derived from one’s district and hill; the rise of imudugudu, or rural villages, is a fairly recent phenomenon that resulted from a national program to cluster rural dwellings (Ilberg 2008). Thus, the government is trying to convince people against their cultural instinct to cluster together in order to relieve pressure on the land and develop economic bases other than agriculture; however, it doesn’t want them to do so informally in the city where they could blight the vision for Kigali as a modern economic and political hub. By displacing people from dense urban neighborhoods, the government forces them to resettle on the margins of the city or the surrounding rural land, compounding the problem of too much density on the already saturated landscape. The demolition of urban settlements is obviously not a workable solution, and the government should aim to develop a plan to support urban density in a more acceptable configuration.

3.2 Beautification
Rwanda prides itself on the cleanliness and attractiveness of its capital city. Indeed, upon first arrival to Kigali, a visitor who has experienced other nearby capitals in Africa might be amazed at the litter-free
streets, the well-manicured medians, and the roundabouts with their decorative fountains. However, Kigali and several other large towns and cities in Rwanda implement a selective beautification that is focused on the places and elements with the greatest visibility.

This discrepancy can be viewed easily by traversing the main boulevards of Kigali and then venturing one or two streets off the main road. A great amount of effort is put into the beautification of the main boulevards, with painted curbs, evenly spaced palm trees, and street lighting (Fig. 8). One could travel from the Kigali airport to a meeting at a large NGO or ministry, to a restaurant downtown and then to a hotel, and think that the whole of the city is paved like this. In reality, however, the side streets, which lead to the neighborhoods where most city residents actually live, are most often still dirt, with no street lights or sidewalks (Fig. 7). Riding down these streets in a car or on a moto-bike can be quite a bumpy ride. In the better cases, the dirt has recently been smoothed and compacted, and the road is wide enough to fit a vehicle. In the worst, the road is more like a ravine, and there is no access to some houses except on foot.

Figure 7: Typical dirt side street, Kigali (2012).

Figure 8: Main boulevard, Kacyiru neighborhood, Kigali (2012).

This selective beautification again ties to the government’s need to encourage continued external aid and investment. Thus, the greatest effort is made in the places that will be seen and experienced by the typical NGO director, philanthropic donor, or political ambassador. This desire to sequester and dazzle the international visitor is evident in the master plan, which describes particular projects to be undertaken within several developmental zones within the city. The plan for Rebero, a neighborhood “on top of one of Kigali’s hills with an exquisite view,” is for it to undergo a “beautification process” to become an “alternative resort area” that will support “5-6 star exclusive hotels”:

With the growing influx of tourists and investors attending a variety of meetings, this will not only provide a peaceful environment away from home, but also a secluded area for key meetings that call upon a large delegation of participants. (City of Kigali, Kigali Master Plan implementation projects 2008)

The word “secluded” is particularly telling in this context. It is important for these visitors to perceive that Rwanda is succeeding with its funding, and that it is a stable and economically promising sink for aid money; thus they cannot see the slums or the poor, lest that image be dispelled.

However, there are also deep-seated cultural factors that affect this beautification strategy. Cleanliness and presentability are ingrained in the Rwandan consciousness, and personal image is greatly valued. This can be observed in the cultural tendency to dress fastidiously, and the pride with which formal dress is worn at
ceremonies. The desire to present Kigali and Rwanda impeccably to outsiders is more than just an economic strategy; it also reflects the Rwandan culture.

CONCLUSION
It is important to reflect on the difference between official policy and practical action. Rwanda’s formal visioning and master planning documents contain undeniably positive intentions, but they are not always carried out to the letter. This is due to many reasons including a complex administrative structure, but one of the main reasons is that as human beings, we tend to prioritize and understand best what we can see with our eyes. After the collapse of their country in the mid-90s, Rwandans now look to put the past behind them and seek pride in their current status as one of the most stable and progressive nations in this region of Africa. They want this progress to be visually reflected in the built environment. Although previously torn apart by ethnic divisions, the priority now is to develop a feeling of Rwandan heritage and pride that supersedes ethnic differences. Furthermore, while there is a goal to become self-sufficient, Rwanda still relies heavily on foreign aid and investment, which is dependent on image. With these considerations in mind, it is easy to see how these factors have led to an unwritten policy of selective visibility.

To reconcile both its long cultural history and recent turmoil, Rwanda seeks to simultaneously retain and re-define its identity, which is no easy task. Luckily, there is hope that in attempting to do so, it will continue to do so thoughtfully and critically. Alphonse Nizeyimana, the vice mayor in charge of finance and economic development of Kigali, recently told a room full of architects and engineers, “If the ‘urban excellence’ vision is to be achieved, architects and engineers have an important role to play. Policy makers conceive plans, but you are the ones to realize their implementation. That’s why your support is highly needed.” (Karinganire 2013)

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REFERENCES


