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Claiming Space: Whose Say is it on Nairobi's Green Public Spaces

*A Publication of The Nairobi Dialogue
held on World Cities Day 2025*



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1. Introduction

The question of “whose say is it on Nairobi’s green and public spaces” is now more urgent than ever before given the recent trends.

This question took center stage at a stakeholders dialogue convened at the United Kenya Club in Nairobi on 31 October 2025, marking the World Cities Day. Based on the experiences drawn from multiple actors and interest groups, the dialogue reached a consensus on emerging shared values and concerns on Nairobi’s Green and Public spaces captured within the framework of the 5Cs principle - *Coherence, Connection, Continuity, Community and Commodification*.

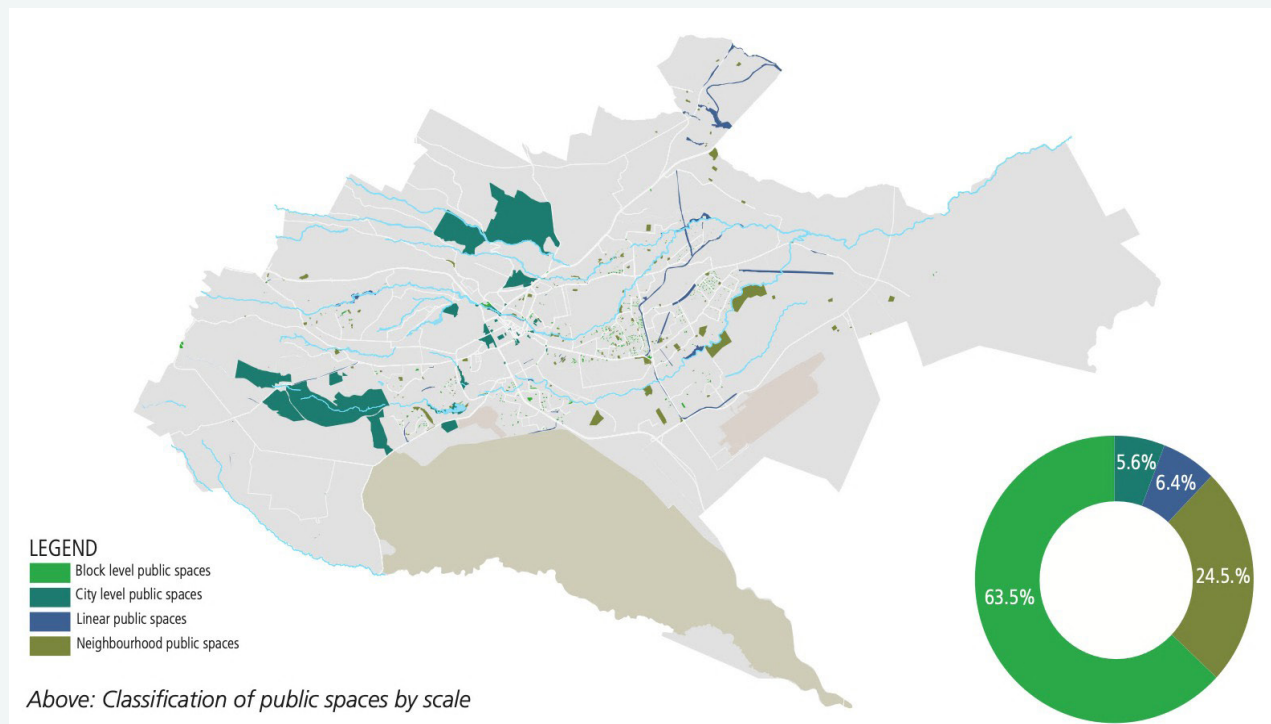
In this framing, coherence is seen as a factor of limited inter-agency coordination, connection as a factor of siloed and disfunctional alignment of the 826 green/public spaces in Nairobi, including the six major green public spaces, namely Uhuru Park, City Park, Nairobi Aboretum, Karura Forest, Jevanjee Gardens and Kamukunji Grounds.

Continuity is derived from the need for protection and carrying on the legacy of those who selflessly defended these spaces, while community emphasizes the dwindling social benefit derived by the masses from these spaces, and ultimately commodification is an expression of worrying trends towards privatization of the green public spaces rendering them inaccessible to the vast majority of Nairobians.

Classification of Nairobi’s Green Public Spaces

Figure. 1

Source: UNHabitat, 2020



This publication is an assembly of articles from Authors perspectives as shared during the 31 October dialogue. In setting the motion to debate, the authors explore the notion of diminishing role of Parks in the

societal architecture, restricted accessibility, eroding social benefits and disrupted ecological functionality of the green public spaces in Nairobi as influenced by the 5Cs.



The **first article** calls for re-imagination of the role of green spaces in Nairobi against the backdrop of intensifying urban sprawl accompanied by resurgent land values that negate the ecological wealth in favour of economic wealth, which has intensified social contestation. It suggests a relook at the green public spaces not as aesthetic luxuries, but as instruments of urban justice, democratic governance, and sustainable economic planning. It provides hope that while Nairobi's green spaces reveal the contradictions of a city in flux, simultaneously rich in nature and poor in access, it offers a canvas for transformation achievable through spatial planning rooted in justice, participatory governance, and ecological intelligence.



In the **second article**, Friends of Karura Forest (FoKF) ride on the belief that Nairobi's green spaces are more than scenic backdrops, they are living infrastructure storing water, cooling streets, absorbing carbon, and hosting biodiversity that makes the city habitable. In championing this belief, they offer a different management and development option that is activist-rooted, one that centers on community access, democratic governance, resilient economics and restorative justice. They see hope in an approach that seeks to weave, govern finance and repair. Weaving by mapping interconnected green networks such as rivers, forests, parks, and street trees linked as continuous corridors, governing finances through legitimization of co-management structures coupled with transparent funding mechanism, and repairing by embedding justice through progressive policies that prevent displacement, prioritize vulnerable neighborhoods, and create direct employment pathways.



The **third article** postulates that redemption of Nairobi's soul can be achieved through visualization of its heart as an ecological civic space. It presents an imagination of the ecological civic space as a system where human centric places are tied together by walking and cycling corridors, and public green spaces unconditionally open with no fees, no manned gates, and no intimidation, and safety and dignity communicated through design and not barricades. It concludes by providing hope that the soundtrack of a thriving settlement is children playing and women chatting and that a return to the proverbial Garden of Eden will need a unified front – “the city's battle for its green spaces succeeds only if we consolidate thoughts, efforts and resources”.



The **fourth article** exemplifies the resilience of local communities and innovative potential to revamp areas of natural ventilation when faced with a calamity that threatens to choke the settlement and break the social fabric. Using the case example of Kamukunji Park rehabilitation in the wake of Covid pandemic, the article exposes the inherent desire of vulnerable communities to

derive equal benefit from nature's green spaces and their collective resolve to make this a reality. It provides hope for community unification through well maintained and accessible public spaces using evidence that children playgrounds are interlaced with mental health corner, group meet-up paces, personal reflection areas, and cultural interaction, especially amongst the Maasai culture.



In the **fifth article**, the author brings on board the debate on the city of commons, spaces that belong to everyone, serve everyone, and cannot be claimed by the most powerful bidder. It grounds reclamation of Nairobi's green future in the fight that must begin where land is lost, mainly inside our estates and neighborhoods, presenting five areas of immediate concern; the disappearance of everyday green spaces, peoples role in green governance, the economics of losing the commons, justice for those who suffer first, and a city defended by its residents. It concludes with an appeal that green spaces will not be saved by speeches or slogans but in moments when a resident notices a fence being erected where none was approved, when a community demands transparency in land allocation, and when families insist that their children deserve public space, not another parking lot.



The **sixth article** is deeply rooted in the historical journey of City Park, expressing a strong desire to conserve this value as well as the ecological ecosystem to the extent feasible given today's reality. The positioning of the park has exposed it to the pressures of commodification that has germinated intensive institutional conflicts attributed to the scramble for ownership and management. The 'Peoples Eye', through the Friends of City Park, continue to provide hope, rescuing the Park from eminent death through defence of private acquisition attempts and championing for public interest benefit. This hope is embraced through a campaign championing green spaces as the lungs of the city; a place to simply exhale, interact with nature, play for both adults and children, an open learning area, a space to ground yourself, and to maintain mental health.



The **seventh article** uses a case study of the Hilton Park, situated right at the heart of the central business district, to articulate the benefits of human-centric approach. Using the model of transformative change making, it challenges the notion that inner-city parks must remain derelict for fear of unearthed contestations. It concludes by providing hope by challenging professionals to take more human-centric approaches towards both planning and managing spaces other than capital intensive projects, noting that change occurs by building workable alliances, identifying feasible entry points, and recognizing that modest interventions can sometimes lead to long term positive effects, even with existing barriers.

In conclusion, Nairobi's green future need not be a contest between conservation and development, neither should be a contest between people and nature. It can be an ecological civic space that knits the city together and where human centric places are all tied together in a seamless ecosystem that

respects the social stratum of society. The efforts from all the actors, interest groups, agencies, communities and institutions can be coalesced to harmonize the diversity for a unified approach to governance and management of the green and public spaces in Nairobi.

2. The Change Narratives

2.1 Reimagining Nairobi's Green Spaces: A Vision for Access, Governance, Economy and Justice

Dr. Mildred Ambani

Nairobi is one of the few major cities in the Global South with a wealth of green assets —Karura Forest, Uhuru Park, Nairobi Arboretum, City Park, Ngong Road Forest, Michuki Memorial Park, and various community parks and riparian zones. These spaces are more than aesthetic flourishes; they function as critical ecological infrastructure, supporting biodiversity, buffering against climate extremes, and offering public health benefits (Freeman, 1991). Yet despite this ecological wealth, Nairobi's green spaces are unequally distributed, under-protected, and often socially contested. As urban sprawl intensifies and land values surge, the role of green spaces must be reimagined—not as aesthetic luxuries, but as instruments of urban justice, democratic governance, and sustainable economic planning.

“Nairobi's Green spaces are not luxuries — they are urban rights and belong to its people. The future of Nairobi depends on how fairly we share the right to breathe, play, rest, connect, and belong.”



Historically, Nairobi's green footprint reflects both its colonial planning legacy and present-day inequalities. Early versions of the city plans, such as the 1948 Master Plan for a Colonial City, emphasized green belts and segregated recreational spaces (White, Silberman, et al. 1948) — typically serving wealthier European populations (Ikawa, 2015). Africans were confined to densely populated areas without recreational greenery. Post-independence planning attempted to democratize these amenities, but urban growth has consistently outpaced infrastructure and policy capacity. Despite the 2014 Nairobi Integrated Urban Development Master Plan (NIUPLAN), the city falls short of the WHO's minimum recommendation of 9m² of green space per capita, especially in informal and high-density neighborhoods (Onyango, 2024). Access to public spaces is intertwined with citizenship and democratic rights.

First forward to today, green space distribution mirrors Nairobi's present socio-economic disparities. Major parks like Karura, Ngong Road Forest, and the Arboretum are situated in affluent neighborhoods, supported by better infrastructure and security (Omangi, 2023; Mbugua, et al, 2024). Conversely, residents in Eastlands, including Embakasi, Mukuru, and Kayole, have limited or no access to well-maintained parks (Mwaura, 2023). Access barriers include: Entry fees (e.g. Karura Forest); poor transport linkages to park entrances; and perceptions of exclusivity (Omangi, 2023). These green spaces are becoming a class marker — determining who can breathe clean air, jog safely, or find shade.

In Nairobi, well-maintained green spaces like Karura Forest and Ngong Road Forest are concentrated in affluent areas, while neighborhoods such as Embakasi and Kayole have limited access. Costs, poor transport, and exclusivity make access to green spaces unequal and class-based.



This situation today is contributed by three main factors, namely; *fragmented Governance and Policy Incoherence, Economic Misvaluation and Underinvestment, and Environmental Justice, Safety, and Inclusion.*

→ Within the *governance and policy* realm, multiple institution, including the Kenya Forest Service, Nairobi City County, National Museums of Kenya, and various Community Forest Associations (CFAs), claim overlapping mandates, resulting in institutional fragmentation and inconsistent maintenance standards (Mbatia, 2016). Furthermore, developers take advantage of the weak enforcement of zoning regulations under the Physical and Land Use Planning Act (2019) and park redevelopment projects have often occurred with minimal public consultation, further eroding trust (Mwaura, 2023).

→ In the realm of *economic misvaluation and underinvestment*, green spaces are often treated as ‘idle land’, particularly in planning and real estate narratives. This economic undervaluation contributes to: minimal public budgets for green maintenance, delayed infrastructure upgrades, and pressure to convert parklands into commercial or transport projects, such as the Nairobi Expressway through Uhuru Park (Mwaura, 2023) and the standard Gauge Railway through Nairobi National Park (Ambani et al, 2021). This short-term lens overlooks the long-term economic and public health benefits of green infrastructure, including property value stabilization, reduced urban heat, and decreased healthcare burdens (Onyango, 2024).

→ Finally, through the lens of *environmental justice, safety, and inclusion*, many green spaces are underutilized due to perceptions of insecurity, especially among women, children, and the elderly (Omangi, 2023). Poor lighting, lack of public toilets, and absence of inclusive design deter everyday use. Moreover, commercialization trends such as event

permits, parking fees, or gated sections, turn public parks into quasi-private spaces, excluding low-income Nairobians from full participation (Mbugua, et al, 2024) .

All is however not lost as cities like Bogotá with its Green Corridor bike lanes, Cape Town’s community-managed parks, and Singapore’s Park Connector Network offer tested models of spatial justice through design, community stewardship, and public investment (Mbugua, et al, 2024).



In reimagining Nairobi’s green spaces, this paper postulates that a just green future for Nairobi must be built on four pillars: access, governance, economy, and justice. We envision a Green Nairobi 2035 built on targets such as maintaining a publicly accessible inventory of all parks and green spaces; every conversion undergoes an EIA, SEA and public consultation; integrate green infrastructure into affordable housing projects; embed green infrastructure equity indicators in the next Nairobi County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP 2026-2030) and zoning reviews; embedding co-management and co-design models with CFAs, youth groups, and local residents—modelled on *Karura’s Friends of Karura Forest; a Nairobi Urban Green Authority (NUGA)*; and make Nairobi a model of green urban justice in Africa by 2035.

Nairobi’s green spaces reveal the contradictions of a city in flux, simultaneously rich in nature and poor in access, but offering a canvas for transformation. Through spatial planning rooted in justice, participatory governance, and ecological intelligence, Nairobi can reclaim its parks as spaces of belonging, resilience, and renewal.

2.2 Alternative Vision for Nairobi's Green Spaces

Prof. Karanja Njoroge

Nairobi's green spaces are more than scenic backdrops; they are living infrastructure — storing water, cooling streets, absorbing carbon, and hosting biodiversity that makes the city habitable. Yet, too often, these spaces are treated as isolated parcels to be protected or sold off, rather than

woven into a coherent urban common that serves every resident. Friends of Karura offers a different management and development option that is activist-rooted: one that centers on *community access, democratic governance, resilient economics and restorative justice*.



Community access to green spaces means more than physical entry. It requires safe routes into the space, security systems that are affordable, and a transportation services that are reliable. The opening hours of these spaces must match workers' schedules. There should be facilities (toilets, seating, play areas), and special spaces earmarked for children, elders, people living with disabilities. In between forest lands (areas) there is need for roads that have walkability, including footpaths along roads with green shaded areas that could also be separated from cycling paths. Public access must also be culturally inclusive. In addition, green spaces should host markets for local artisans, music and performance by slum-based artists, and environmental education sessions in Swahili and local languages. Compact pocket-parks, riverbank promenades, and tree-lined pedestrian boulevards are all part of an accessible network — not luxury amenities, but essential urban infrastructure. Karura's success on accessibility is based on hosting community activities, special trails for people living with disabilities and special areas for children. This approach shows how intentional designs can normalize daily walks, rides from one place to another, enabling connection between neighborhoods and pathways with green corridors along rivers and streets so that a child can walk or cycle safely to a park.

Walkways and shoulder furniture in Karura Forest

Source: Ninara, Flickr

Figure. 2





Governance approach is based on democratic stewardship and guardianship of green spaces, whose foundation was laid by Prof Wangari Maathai through law establishing the Kenya Forest Service as a quasi-independent custodian of forest in Kenya. This law also legitimized the participation of communities in forest conservation and management through the establishment of Community Forest Associations (CFAs) in the management of a forest station, which currently stand at about 250 forest stations. The Friends of Karura Forest CFA (FKFCFA), set up under the patronage of Prof Wangari Maathai, brought together communities living adjacent to Karura, namely, Muthaiga, Ridgeways, Runda, New Muthaiga, Spring Valley, Thigiri and Peponi. With a current membership of 950, the Karura CFA organizes annual general meetings (AGM) that evaluates the relationship with KFS, amongst other concerns.

An important governance approach is embedded in partnership between civil society, community volunteers and government agencies, including Kenya Forest Service. Other approaches include transparent public budgets, and democratic co-management of Karura with the Kenya Forest Service, with unrivaled 16 years experience in recovery, conservation and management of the Forest, presently averaging 70,000 visitors every month. FKFCFs success in governance is anchored on distributed responsibilities, upholding set standards of conservation and management of the resource, engaging community workers to maintain specific standards of cleanliness and upkeep of trails, pathways and tracks, and stewardship of forest regeneration. Others include institutionalized participatory planning cycles through regular town hall meetings, and citizen monitoring of users habits. Importantly, our governance approach seeks to protect forest land from capture by private developers through statutory zoning, public trust frameworks, and penalties for illegal encroachment.



The *economics approach* is rooted on the notion of green spaces that pay their way, equitably. FKFCF believes that green spaces do not need to be a perpetual fiscal drain and has demonstrated this through a blended financing model that includes small user fees for special services (bike rentals, guided walks), philanthropic seed funding, corporate sponsorship for conservation projects, and government budget lines for core maintenance. In addition, ecosystem service payments for flood mitigation, water purification, and carbon sequestration, has been monetized through green bonds or payments from utility budgets that benefit from improved watershed protection. Local micro-enterprises (community nurseries, guided-tour cooperatives, eco-café staffed by residents) has created green jobs, especially for youth and women. Importantly though is that revenue models must always be progressive, meaning, basic access stays free, and income-generating amenities are layered so that low-income users aren't priced out. FKFCF success in the economic model is driven by the belief that investments in green spaces should be evaluated not only on financial returns but blending social returns such as reductions in heat-related health incidents, improved mental well-being, youth employment, and safer public realms.



The *restorative justice approach* adopts the principle of repairing past harms and preventing new ones. Nairobi's land histories are fraught with displacements, unequal access, and marginalization of poor communities. The leafy suburban areas have received more than their fair share of urban greening and public safe walking spaces along roads in stark contrast to the poorer neighborhoods where children grow up without ever seeing more than three trees at once. FKFCFs an alternative vision pursues restorative justice,

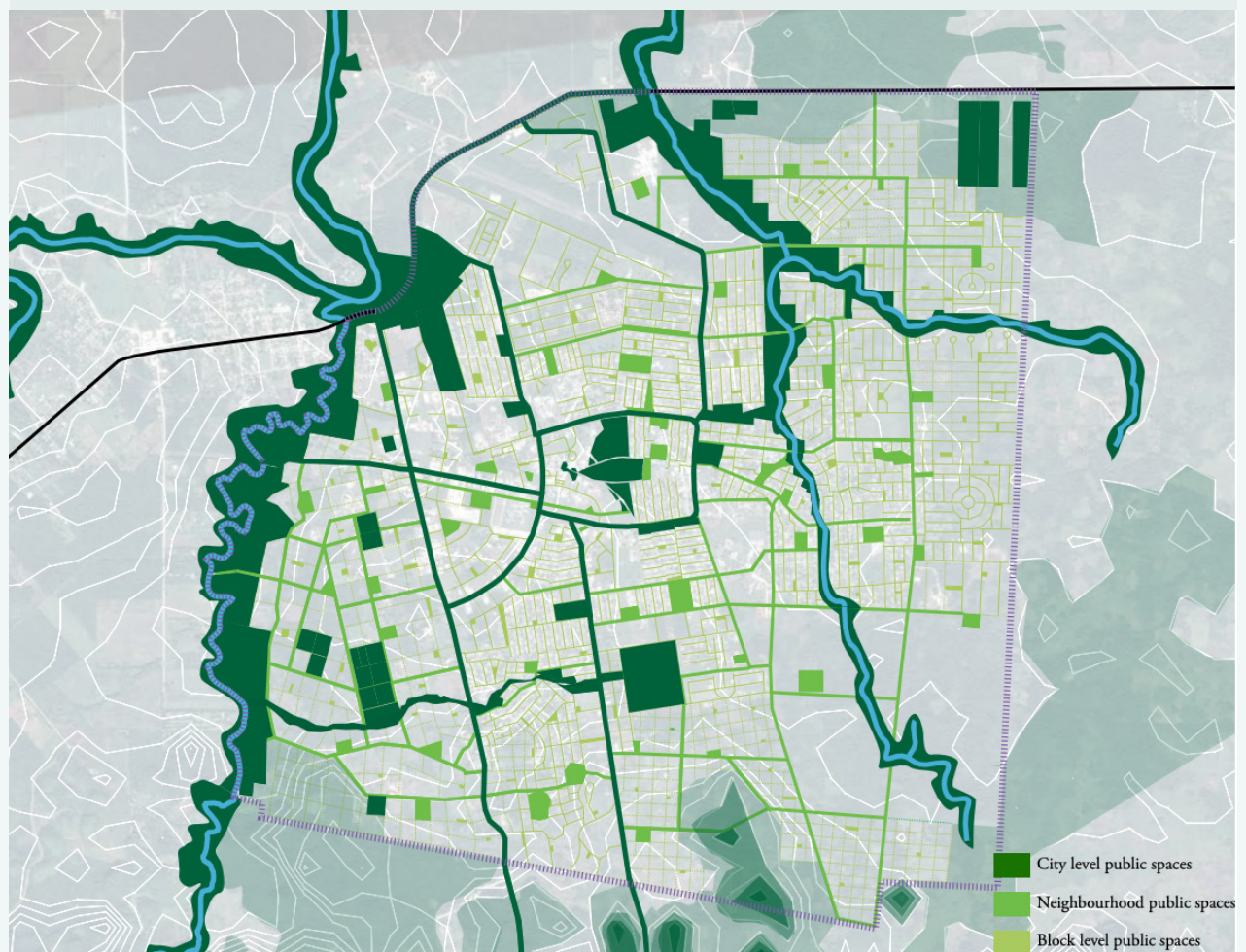
recognizing communities that were dispossessed, prioritizing access for undeserved neighborhoods, and preventing green gentrification that displaces poorer communities who are long-term residents. It recognises some practical steps, which include; establish affordable housing options near upgraded parks; create employment quotas for residents from adjacent informal settlements in green space projects; provide land tenure clarity where custodianship was historically insecure; include restitution clauses in development plans when green upgrades intersect with vulnerable communities, and prosecute illegal land grabs and commercial encroachments quickly and transparently, not selectively.

As a pathway forward, FKFCF approach seeks to weave, govern finance and repair. To weave, we start by mapping interconnected green networks such as rivers, forests, parks, and street trees linked as continuous corridors. In governing finances, we legitimize co-management structures with guaranteed civil-society seats and transparent funding mechanism in addition to adopting blended financing measures – green bonds, ecosystem service fees, and community enterprise incubation – with safeguards to keep basic access free. To repair, we embed justice through policies that prevent displacement, prioritize vulnerable neighborhoods, and create direct employment pathways.

Classification of Public Spaces in Nairobi

Figure. 3

Source: UNHabitat, 2020



2.3 Pathways that can Save Nairobi's Green Spaces

Arch. George A. Ndege

To redeem Nairobi's soul let us try to visualise its heart as an ecological civic space. Instead of viewing the city's public open spaces as a collection of isolated parks, forests, squares, and river edges, imagine a system where human centric places are tied together by walking and cycling corridors. Public green spaces should, by principle, be unconditionally open: no fees, no manned gates, and no intimidation. Safety and dignity should be communicated through design, not barricades.

On paper Kenya's capital possesses a green urban core; the tragedy is that it remains simply inaccessible to its majority. The proximity of a 2.5 km radius from the Galton-Fenzi Monument, located at the in-

tersection of Kenyatta Avenue and Koinange Street carries most of Nairobi's major public spaces within a walkable distance of each other. Some of these spaces have rich colonial and political histories, some predating the nation itself. However, these existing spaces are an underutilized urban asset. Poorly designed, or entirely "undersigned," open spaces are often defensive by default, sending subtle signals that keep ordinary people away. We must agree that fencing off parks and brutalising squares in the name of policing will not secure public spaces either. A solution lies in stitching the spaces into the average Nairobi resident's daily routine. We can address the people's movements and the yearning to connect with nature through a tiered network of green spaces.

- In one case, the Arboretum, Uhuru Park, Central Park, and Nairobi River edges could create the primary green of this "city in the sun". Small parks like University of Nairobi grounds, Michuki Park, Jeevanjee Gardens, public school grounds, and pocket squares downtown could link beautifully as transitioning spaces between motorised and non-motorised nodes.
- In another case, areas such as the KICC, National Library, National Museums, Aga Khan Walk, and Tom Mboya Square, Railways and Muthurwa bus terminuses are great urban spaces that can be elevated by safe thoroughfares. These nodes provide the "urban third spaces" that every Nairobiian, regardless of economic standing, can enjoy if they are accessible.
- Another classical case is the Michuki Park, an instructive example of user tension. Before 2010, it was a chaotic strip overrun by mechanics and waste. Today, while lush and well-maintained, it is fenced, guarded, and despite its "free" access, hardly welcoming to passersby. This illustrates that true accessibility must avoid the over-commercialisation of public spaces in the name of sustainability, a regressive approach where commercial activities often take precedence over the rights of ordinary users. Nature may be free, but questions of affordability in Nairobi linger.

In a city where over 50% of the population regularly commutes by walking, it is only fair that walkways are as wide as driveways and well designed with appropriate budget allocation. Corridors such as Uhuru Highway, Processional Way, Kenyatta Avenue, and the future river trails can be used to connect residential and commercial neighbourhoods such as Westlands, Ngara, Kariokor, Pangani, Eastleigh, Gikomba, and Upper Hill.

These linkages must be provided with pedestrian-friendly tree-shaded walkways that are separated from motorways. Furthermore, these networks of active mobility should be intentionally designed to accommodate street furniture and infrastructure such as drinking fountains, and street vendor stalls. These are the amenities that unlock the true African urban culture.

Ultimately, to maintain green spaces, we must guard against the risk of encroachment, isolation, and poor management. Public open spaces that are neglected will invite misuse: social misfits, illegal parking, and informal “ownership” by those quickest to occupy what city planners have abandoned. In this context, the Architectural Association of Kenya (AAK) recently highlighted this struggle at the Lang’ata Road overpass, an unforgiving concrete expanse that embodies the city’s struggle with human-sensitive public space. Without strong planning frameworks, road reserves, sidewalks, and vacant public land become targets in an informal contest for municipal territory.

In conclusion, it is not negotiable that the Constitution of Kenya enshrines the right to a clean and healthy environment. The soundtrack

of a thriving settlement is children playing and women chatting. The growth of the city doesn’t always mean more concrete jungles that prioritise returns on real estate over the dignity of human life. To return to the proverbial Garden of Eden, we need a unified front. The city’s battle for its green spaces succeeds only if we consolidate thoughts, efforts and resources. Nairobi City County must urgently rehabilitate major parks like City Park and immediately reopen Central Park, while the National Government accelerates the Nairobi River Rehabilitation Programme to reclaim riparian zones. Concurrently, agencies like the Kenya Urban Roads Authority and the county government should jointly manage road reserves to create pocket parks and safe pedestrian corridors. As Friends of Nairobi’s Green Spaces we can save the city, not one space at a time, but all at once.

Well demarcated walkways in the Park

Source: Author

Figure. 4



2.4 Participation and the Fight for Neighborhood Spaces – the Case of Kamukunji Park Restoration

Zelpha Ingasiah

In 2020, the entire world paused. It was no longer business as usual. A pandemic, like an angry dragon had spit venomous flames – what we refer to as Covid 19, ravaged the world, streaming death in its wake! This highly infectious virus did not discriminate the developed or under developed worlds, instead it impaled any person that came close. Few barely survived. All social-economic engagements were paused as health practitioners advised governments to ensure physical contact among people was reduced and people wore protective gear. Cessation of movement and curfews were imposed. Companies and other commercial ventures were closed. Consequently, many people had to stay at home with their families.

In a slum in Nairobi, staying at home was not homely. Here, most houses are barely 7 feet by 7 feet and have to host families of about six members. Moreover, most breadwinners hardly have stable livelihoods. Therefore, they survive from hand to mouth. So, the pandemic did not only threaten their survival due to its lethal nature but also their sustenance as it affected sources of nutrition for most families. With little trickling in, frustrations rose and many spouses quarreled, with increased incidences of domestic violence. Most men were hard hit by their incapability to provide for their families, most ending up with psychological issues.

Against all this background, the only community park in the vicinity where families would ventilate and get a breath of fresh air was poorly maintained. With scattered trees, long grass and bushes, it harbored criminals. Amenities like water taps, benches and signages were dilapidated or vandalized. Criminals lurked in the long grass and pounced on unwary pedestrians robbing and injuring them, adding to the suffering already inflicted by the pandemic. It took the singular effort of one Josephat Karomi, who while passing by the park, got an idea of reclaiming the park for the community. Before, the community had to

go to City Park or Uhuru Park to get the ‘nature’ dose. With the pandemic’s directive on cessation of movement, the community could not visit these parks.

Originally, eighteen groups formed Kamukunji Environment Conservation Champions (KECC), a network registered as a community-based organization. Permission to rehabilitate the park was obtained from the county and other relevant government departments. National Museums of Kenya and Nairobi City County permitted (KECC) to volunteer at the park. Engaging volunteer representatives from the youth groups, clearance, restoration of demarcations and pathways, arrangement and maintenance of the park was carried out, including coordination with the city county to collect garbage that had been irresponsibly disposed in the park. Trees were planted, increasing the green canopy of the park. Government agencies supported with tools and expertise.

In recognition of the efforts, Public Space Network NGO organised a competition for public spaces – *Changing faces 2020* - where KECC enrolled and emerged the winners with an award of KES 150,000, which was invested in additional transformation work like painting the wall, installing play structures (swings and a see-saw). With an initial focus on contributions from members of KECC network, investing the cash award from the Competition gained publicity, which attracted NGO partners. The new partners sponsored activities and events held in the park. Organizations such as Public Space Network (PSN), Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO), CRAWN Trust and Slum Dwellers International (SDI) have since partnered with KECC to set up tree nurseries, grow and nurture trees as a means of contributing to climate change adaptation efforts.

The park is open to everyone and has several sections for the public. Children who used to lack safe spaces for playing now have Children's corner to play. Mental Health corner, a cylindrical sitting site was inspired by the state of mental health during the covid pandemic and serves for group meet-ups or private personal reflections. Leisure corner is usually where social banter is exchanged by park users. The Maasai also converge at the park to hold meetings here, preferring the open green space for its connection spiritually. Other features include pathways, gardens, wall of fame, tree nursery, event square and ablution block.

Notably, most interventions at the park have been implemented through popular public consensus, for example one spearheaded by PSN - 'from Contentious to Consensus' (C2C), where members of the public participated in envisioning the park's masterplan.

Transformation of the park brought back birds and bees. Witnesses claimed that before transformation only scavenger birds would be seen scavenging in trash. Yet after planting diverse trees and plants at the park, different species of birds are spotted at the park.

Improved facility for children at Kamukunji Park

Source: Charity Kilei / eastleighvoice.co.ke

Figure. 5



2.5 Defending Estate Commons: Why Resident Associations (Local Governance) is the Key to Saving Nairobi's Green Spaces

Sixtus Odumbe

Nairobi's story has always been tied to its open spaces. Tree-lined avenues, communal playgrounds, river corridors, and shared gardens once formed the foundation of the city's identity as the "Green City in the Sun." But today, most residents encounter a harsher reality—privatized parks, fenced-off wetlands, vanished playgrounds, and public land quietly converted into commercial property.

The crisis is not just environmental; it is constitutional and democratic. At stake is the idea

of the urban commons: spaces that belong to everyone, serve everyone, and cannot be claimed by the most powerful bidder. If we are to reclaim Nairobi's green future, the fight must begin where land is lost most urgently, inside our estates and neighborhoods. Within the estates, our arguments focus on five areas; the disappearance of everyday green spaces, Green governance must move closer to the people, the economics of losing the commons, justice means protecting those who suffer first, and a city defended by its residents.



→ Within the context of *the disappearance of everyday green spaces*, we note that while discussions about conservation often revolve around national parks and citywide land-use plans, what Nairobians feel most acutely is the disappearance of *local* spaces: the pitch where children once played; the riparian path where elderly residents walked; the community garden that held holiday gatherings, all are vanishing at an alarming rate. Some estates are now planned without even an inch of green space, a social and environmental time bomb. These spaces are not luxuries. They are social infrastructure. They cool the air in dense estates, absorb stormwater, relieve pressure on families who cannot afford private recreation, and build bonds of trust among neighbors. When they are grabbed, fenced, leased away, or even excluded from the building plans, the damage is not only abstract, but it is personal.



→ In respect to *green governance must move closer to the people*, the greatest weakness in Nairobi's urban management is the distance between those who make decisions and those who live with the consequences. Zoning approvals, environmental assessments, and land allocations are handled in distant offices, often without the knowledge or consent of the very communities affected by short-lived government officers and politicians. Real stewardship begins at the smallest level of competence: estate-based committees, resident associations, ward forums, and organized neighborhood groups. These structures are better equipped to detect encroachment, guard riparian reserves, manage playgrounds, and challenge suspicious land transfers. They do not need to wait for political will; they already have social capital, vigilance, and local legitimacy. If Nairobi can decentralize housing, markets, and waste management, why can't it decentralize the defense of green space as well?



→ While considering *the economics of losing the commons*, developers, speculators, and even some public officials often treat green spaces as idle land waiting to be "productive." But the economics of commons are long-term and profoundly local. Well-kept parks raise property values and stabilize neighborhoods.

A shaded estate field attracts weekend sports, vendors, and community markets. Trees and wetlands reduce heat, absorb runoff, and prevent floods at a fraction of the cost of disaster response. When green commons disappear, the public does not simply lose grass and trees. It loses wealth, safety, and cohesion. The cost is ultimately paid in higher rents, poorer air quality, and increased insecurity.



→ Furthering our belief that *justice means protecting those who suffer first*, it is evident that some communities have always paid the highest environmental price. Informal settlements lose flood buffers. Working-class estates lose playgrounds. High-density neighborhoods lose tree cover while leafy suburbs gain imported landscaping. Restoring justice begins with restitution: returning grabbed public land to communities, not to new investors under rebranded “public-private partnerships.” Green spaces must be preserved for those least able to manufacture alternatives for families without private yards, children without school fields, and seniors who depend on safe public walking paths.



→ Finally, in the context of *a city defended by its residents*, urban planning experts sometimes suggest that Kenyan citizens including *Nairobians* are not planning experts, they should simply wait for better policies. But the truth is that no metropolitan plan will save Nairobi’s green spaces unless residents insist on it and advocate for it. The defenders of estate commons are not abstract institutions they are neighbors, estate committees, mosque congregations, church communities, market associations, and youth groups determined to protect the land beneath their feet. A city becomes what its citizens are willing to defend. If *Nairobians* allow communal spaces to vanish quietly, they will vanish permanently. But if they insist that the commons remain common through local governance, vigilance, and collective action the “Green City in the Sun” can still be reclaimed.

In conclusion, Green spaces will not be saved by speeches or slogans. They will be saved in the moments when a resident notices a fence being erected where none was approved, when a community demands transparency in land allocation, and when families insist that their

children deserve public space, not another parking lot. Nairobi’s future will not be negotiated in boardrooms. It will be shaped in neighborhoods. And the city we defend today is the city we leave to those who come after us.

Validation of Nairobi County’s draft Policy on Community Development

Figure. 6

Source: Kara



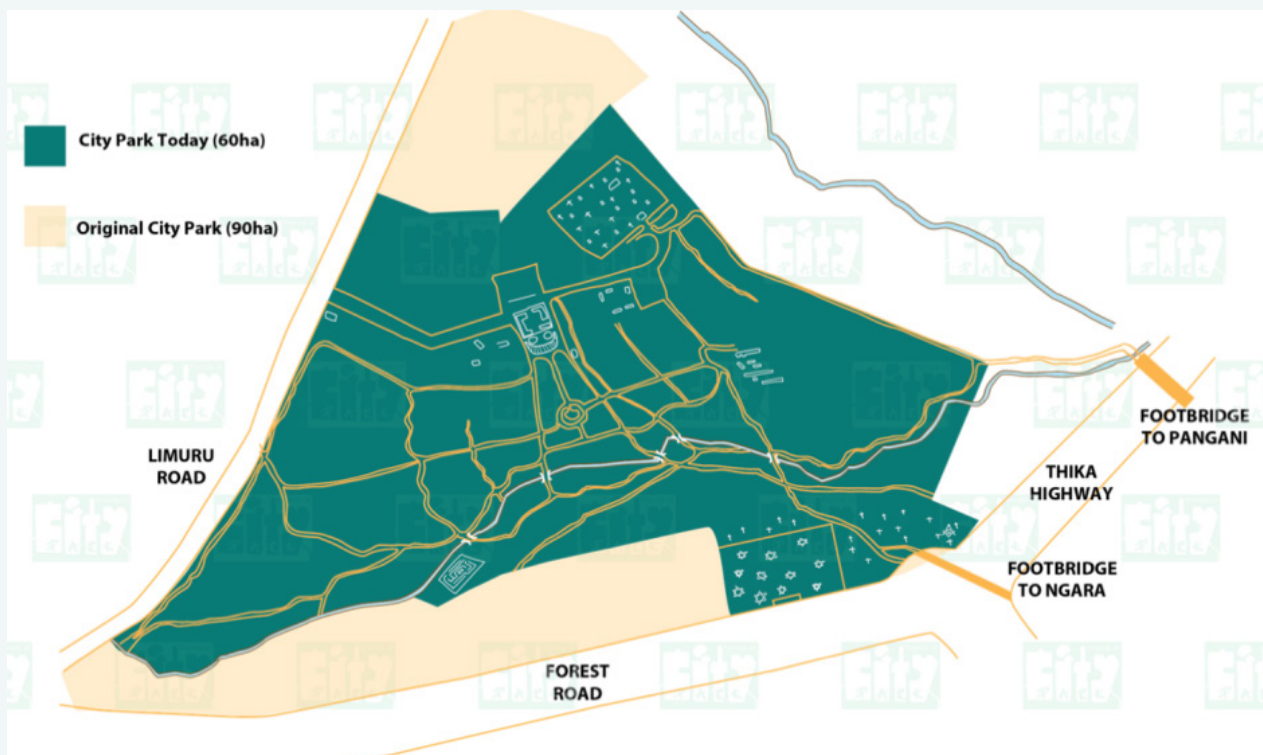
2.6 City Park, The Peoples Park

Cynthia Wambaa

City Park is part of indigenous dry upland forest vegetation that historically covered the Nairobi area. Its history is rich and vibrant; during the First World War it was used as a hunting ground – buck and leopard were on the menu, the proposed site of a zoo, a bandstand that is still standing, that hosted the tunes of the Kings African Rifles and dancing troupes from India. To date, adults still recount their childhood experiences at the ‘*Mtego wa Panya*’ (the Maze) and how it was the dating app of the time as well as the sunken gardens that were used to join many a couple. The park remained popular from 1923 with globally acclaimed gardens that received many a popular visitor including, in 1959, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, of Britain, and later the great Indian philosopher, statesman and orator Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, then first Vice-President of India. It hosts a rich cultural legacy as the site of the final resting place of the former Vice-President, Joseph Murumbi, Pio Gama Pinto who was a human rights activist assassinated in 1965, the site of World War One Memorial Cemetery, the Jewish and Goan cemeteries.

Ecologically, City Park is a living slice of nature cradled in the heart of the bustling metropolis - known for its unique flora and fauna, it is home to trees of at least 100 species, 560 plant species, 390 genera in more than 120 botanical families. It is a safe haven for endangered plants from East Africa, the park is also a seed bank for plant nurseries and reforestation centers bolstering conservation efforts. Children and adults love the monkeys, admire the birds and some have been known to chase the butterflies – over 120 species.

Fast forward to 1996 when a concerned volunteer group of citizens banded together to protect the park from its down-hill slide - Friends of City Park. The Park had become a dumping ground, was extremely vulnerable to land grabbers and needed to be revived. What was valued by citizens and other decision makers seemed to have changed and was now seen as ‘useless’ and that it needed development in order to have some significance.



Source: Author

*City Park is a biodiversity-rich urban sanctuary with **over 100 tree species and 560 plant species** across 120+ botanical families. It protects endangered East African plants, supports reforestation as a seed bank, and hosts diverse wildlife, including monkeys, birds, and more than 120 butterfly species.*



Stepping into action, Friends of City Park have championed revocation of 14 illegal titles, though some pending issues remain around 'Mtego wa Panya' as well as an area behind Simba Union where individuals still claim ownership. A significant feat is the official gazettement of 60 hectares (almost all of City Park) as a National Monument under the Government of Kenya's National Museums and Heritage Act (No. 6 of 2006) on the 4th of September 2009.

Undesirably, the park has undergone many fluxes over the years, most distinctively being the increase in built up spaces around the park. Conversations with long serving staff reveal concerns on changes in the quality and quantity of water that flows through the park, which evidently has a foul smell that impacts park users as well as Kibagare River that flows through the Park. As one park user put it; "Hii maji ni chafu hata hauwezi pata chura hapa". This condition has been exacerbated by the effect of climate change, contributing to regular flooding of areas such as the 'Mtego wa Panya'.

Traditionally, the management of this green space has been under the then Nairobi City Council until 2019 when a presidential decree assigned this to Kenya Forestry Services. The transition affected the resurgence in Park attendance, especially in the Covid period, due to management challenges. The situation has prevailed long after Covid, with repeated conflicts between Nairobi county and KFS, especially on fees to be levied for access to the Park, denying users the benefit of the Park. However, one glaring concern for the Friends of City Park is the perceived militarization of the Park with visible presence of armed KFS personnel, which is incongruent with expectation of users to find peace of mind, and have ease of socialization at the Park.

Due to concerted efforts by the Friends of City Park and other like-minded partners, Nairobi

County seized back management of the Park as of October of 2025, reverting back to public free access. While this has come with relief to users, the Park has generated concerns over security with rising cases of muggings and theft, both during the day and night. Women and children are most vulnerable, forcing them to keep away from the Park in the hope that the insecurity concerns will be addressed. In addition, threats from land grabbers persist and Friends of City Park have stayed alive to this existential threat, strongly advocating for the fencing of the whole Park.

While these struggles continue, Friends of City Park are advancing a campaign on green spaces being the *lungs of the city*; a place to simply exhale, interact with nature, play for both adults and children, an open learning area, a space to ground yourself, to maintain mental health, just to name but a few. The campaign recognises the necessity to make the Park more secure without limiting accessibility through entry fees and charges. There are also efforts to improve coordination and collaboration between Nairobi County, Friends of City Park as well as interested community members to ensure sustained management of the Park for future generations.

As a vision, Friends of City Park foresee a safe, free, secure, well maintained park. To that end, the next generation are making their contribution to the preservation, protection and regeneration of this green space. Children from Peponi School have been sponsoring improvement efforts such as the rebuilding of bridges and their major project – the pollinator garden. Contributions have also come from LCVR who shared their art to be auctioned and the proceeds given to the park for projects. Finally, the child ambassador program in its beginning stages, seeks to have children mentor and teach their peers to become green champions. The future is bright, and joining forces with other interested parties will be the key to the desired changes.

2.7 Transformative Change: From a Jobless Corner to a Centre of Aspiration

African City Planner

Nairobi has about 826 public open spaces, making up 5.3 per cent of its built-up area (far below UN-Habitat's suggested 15–20 per cent for healthy cities). SDG Target 11.7 calls for universal access to safe, inclusive public spaces, with international guidance recommending at least 30 per cent of land for streets and 10–15 per cent for open space. The Nairobi Integrated Urban Development Plan (NIUPLAN) aligns with this by proposing the reservation and expansion of parks, green corridors and public squares, particularly around transport nodes, improved zoning controls and stronger governance for public space.

These public spaces in Nairobi has always been highly contested. Studies continue to show some of the broader challenges facing public open space in Nairobi. Land grabbing remains a persistent threat to affordable and accessible public spaces. Other pressures include the increasing 'privatization' of open areas through entry fees, the absence of public space in dense low-income neighbourhoods, and weak enforcement of planning controls—such as ground coverage limits—in middle-income neighbourhoods. Nairobi Hilton Park is one such contested public space.



Nairobi's public open spaces cover only 5.3% of built-up land—far below UN-Habitat's 15–20% benchmark—despite Sustainable Development Goals Target 11.7 urging universal access to safe, inclusive public spaces.

Popularly known as 'jobless corner', Nairobi's Hilton Park, was for many years, a centre of socio-economic disparities. It borders what was once the exclusive Hilton Hotel while its main occupants were citizens believed to be unemployed. The park lay along a busy pedestrian route linking the nearby KENCOM bus and Ambassadeur Bus stops. Many would avoid eye contact with beggars or street children, who had created a temporary home at the abandoned sewerage smelling building in the middle of the approximately 0.003 Km square park, which once housed the Nairobi tourism information centre.

In the period 2021-22, a group of interested artists and urbanists, under the Nairobi Placemaking Network, began to make some minor transformations to the space. Initially, they painted some simple artwork on the lengthy concrete bench that runs around the perimeter of the park. The centrality of the park, and the attention that their artwork received, gave them inspiration to consider attempting artistic and cultural interventions or activities within the space that could attract more citizens.

Using a Transformative Change Making (TCM) approach, the group mapped out the main stakeholders they would need to involve: those likely to be allies, those unlikely to understand their concerns, and those whose approval would be necessary. They built up on existing partnerships with the Nairobi County and Ministry of Tourism, to identify other key allies in the national government and other sectors. Through a series of discussions and meetings they were able to all agree on a critical entry point: approval to hold a monthly drum circle at the park.

Three years down the line, there have been gradual but observable changes within the space. Open man-holes have been covered and drainage repaired through regular maintenance making the park attractive for other activities including small

concerts and exhibitions. A routine for garbage clearance is in place and the abandoned building sealed off with large barriers. In addition to that, the opening of the walkway adjacent to the now closed Hilton hotel has resulted in more uses of the park as a meeting point, resting space and photography spot.

This case study is a classical example of the transformative changemaking approaches. Other than using traditional approaches like starting with physical redevelopments, it's revamp started by identifying shared interests among the different stakeholders and levelling their interest for minimum resistance. To limit resistance, the drum circle introduced a regular, human centred and predictable activity to the space, building on awareness that enabled incremental technical improvements. A key element to the success can be attributed to the understanding of the beneficiaries, the excluded and the main players who have continued to shape the outcomes realised in the park. By enabling community stewardship, the development of the park has embraced different forms of co-creation to achieve affordable, accessible and inclusive public space.

The process has not been free of challenges however. Some of the prominent challenges have included continued privatization pressures given the strategic location of the park, car-dominated planning approaches that has created persistent competition for use of the space, and limited inter-agency coordination that has often generated conflicts of jurisdiction and mandate. Investing

in strengthening the human-centric approach has played a significant role in minimising the impact from these challenges.

The Hilton Park is one amongst many examples in Nairobi of small scale interventions that have led to impactful change in public space. Some examples include the community micro-parks in Baba Dogo and Mwiki that involve playground and urban agriculture, the redevelopment of old public spaces in Dandora, the re-development of riparian reserves in Korogocho and the initial re-design of Jevanjee Gardens. As part of the Parks continuum, these interventions have led to increased local use and reduced unsafe activity.

In conclusion, cities require spaces that are attractive, affordable and inclusive to all. At the centre of this discussion should be the ordinary citizen and the kind of engagement that will attract him or her within the city. In order to achieve this, professionals need to take more human-centric approaches towards both planning and managing spaces other than capital intensive projects. Change occurs by building workable alliances, identifying feasible entry points, and recognizing that modest interventions can sometimes lead to long term positive effects, even with existing barriers.

Cities require spaces that are attractive, affordable and inclusive to all



3. Synthesis and Future Pathways

The foundation for the conversation on “*whose say is it on Nairobi’s green and public spaces*” was laid out at the vibrant and deeply engaging dialogue that convened as a commemoration of the World Cities Day on 31 October 2025. The energy exuded through the robust debates that were guided by highly enthusiastic Experts, who are leaders and champions on green and public spaces, germinated a strong and collective interest to carry this conversation forward. Moreover, the expression of commonness of purpose that was unanimous amongst all present at the dialogue, not only signified the shared interest in the subject matter, but revealed a desire to commonly and jointly rally efforts towards advancing the common agenda.

This publication is therefore the first in a series of documentation that is designed to capture the spirit of the debate on Nairobi’s Green and public spaces and inspire progressive conversation geared towards correcting the ‘wrongs’ and upholding the ‘rights’ in the governance and management of the green and public spaces. The articles carried in this first publication are seen as a catalyst for the progressive conversation. The perspectives expressed therein

present an accumulation of various efforts that are in place and provide a useful baseline for the collective work going forward.

As an immediate next step, this publication will form the reference point for the next convening that is expected in the early part of the year 2026. It should therefore not be treated as conclusive, but instead visualized as informative contribution to the collective journey towards determining the future of the green and public spaces in Nairobi. We acknowledge the fact that the views at this point may not be all encompassing and hence suggest that we use this publication as a trigger for building upon the change narrative under the transformative change making process. While we focus on determining the alternative vision for the green and public spaces, we take cognisance of the fact that the change agents already onboard have expressed determination to travel the entire road of the transformation.

Lets all keep to the journey that has been started with the belief that, collectively, transformation is real.

About the Authors

African City Planner is an urban planner and researcher keen on sustainable mobility, social justice and resilient planning. He spearheads active mobility initiatives in cities, contributing to the global effort to transition towards zero and low emission transport. He is also a prolific writer documenting the evolution of Kenya's urban fabric.

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Professor Karanja Njorge is a distinguished Kenyan conservationist and community leader who served as the deputy to Professor Wangarĩ Maathai at the Green Belt Movement. As the long-standing Chairman of the Friends of Karura Forest, he spearheaded the transformation of a once-neglected wasteland into a world-class model for sustainable urban forest management. His work focuses on ecological justice and public participation, bridging the gap between grassroots activism and strategic natural resource policy.

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Zelpha Ingasiah is a dedicated community leader and mentor at the forefront of the Kamukunji Environment Conservation Champions (KECC) in Nairobi. Through strategic partnerships with organizations like UN-HABITAT and local government, KECC spearheads the transformation of neglected public spaces into safe, vibrant hubs for recreation. Her work focuses on empowering local youth to take ownership of their surroundings, fostering a culture of environmental stewardship and sustainable urban development.

Sixtus Odumbe is a notable advocate for responsive urban planning and the Programs Manager at the Kenya Alliance of Resident Associations (KARA). As a proponent of community advocacy, his work amplifies "resident voices" by building strategic partnerships with government bodies and private sector entities like Kenya Power and the National Construction Authority (NCA) to improve essential service delivery. Notably, KARA led the submission of a comprehensive memorandum to the Nairobi City County Assembly, proposing policies to formalize the role of resident associations and integrate environmental sustainability into the city's urban development framework.

Cynthia Wambaa is an environmental specialist and a leading member of Friends of City Park, where she advocates for the protection and reclamation of Nairobi's public green spaces. Her work focuses on ensuring urban parks remain accessible and inclusive for all residents while pushing for stronger community-led conservation and development controls. As a prominent voice for public space equity, she frequently collaborates with city coalitions to safeguard the ecological and historical integrity of Nairobi's urban forests.

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Claiming Space: Whose Say is it on Nairobi's Green Public Spaces

Claiming Space: Whose Say is it on Nairobi's Green Public Spaces explores the urgent question of access, governance, and justice in the stewardship of Nairobi's parks, forests, and open spaces. Drawing from diverse voices at The Nairobi Dialogue held on World Cities Day 2025, this publication examines the growing tensions between conservation, commercialization, and community rights. Through the lens of the 5Cs—Coherence, Connection, Continuity, Community, and Commodification—it highlights the unequal distribution of green spaces, the threats of privatization and land grabbing, and the power of citizen-led action. From Karura Forest to Kamukunji and City Park, the contributors present bold, practical pathways toward reclaiming Nairobi's green commons as inclusive, accessible, and democratically governed spaces for present and future generations.

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