

Theatre and Architecture: *Kamirithu Decolonial Theatre, and Kamirithu Polytechnic*

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Abstract

When asked how a decolonial space should be designed, Suki Mwendwa, a professor in design, replied, "You don't have to always be in the house." (*Kamirithu Afterlives*, 2022, 5:59). The Kamirithu theatre project, led by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii sought to re-inscribe a decolonial discourse in Limuru, Kenya. Through the play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), the community sought to fight back against colonial land dispossession and a postcolonial regime that perpetuated systems of oppression in the Multinational Bata Shoe Factory and the tea plantations around Limuru. The community collaboratively designed and constructed an open-air theatre in the space formerly called Social Hall, in 1976, and staged the performances. As a metaphor, "I Will Marry When I Want" can be understood as an architectural and literary declaration of resistance, shaping the vision of the Kamirithu community through theatre and the built environment. However, due to the revolutionary content of the play and the decolonial redesigning of the space, the Kenyan government banned the play, destroyed the theatre, and built a polytechnic on the site. Acknowledging the significance of architecture as a means of activism, particularly in a country impacted by oppressive colonial and postcolonial continuities, the architectural design of Kamirithu open-air – theatre, and Polytechnic are implicated in decolonization processes in Kenya. This paper evaluates the architecture of the polytechnic against the ethos of the play that was previously staged in the space it now occupies. It then assesses the proposition of making the polytechnic a place of memory and heritage in a decolonial context.

Keywords: Kamirithu open-air theatre, polytechnic, design, performance, decolonial, proposition

INTRODUCTION

The Bata Shoe factory, in Limuru, and the surrounding multinational tea plantations provide the background for the play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), performed at the Kamirithu open-air – theatre in 1977. It dramatizes the life of Gicaamba, a peasant who works in a factory. His life is controlled by routines that are signalled by the bell. The whole environment of Limuru was conditioned to the urging of this factory bell which infuriated the revolutionary Gicaamba, in the play. The open-air theatre, constructed to freely use the factory and the tea plantations as the visible backdrop, conveyed a sense of defiance to the colonial-like post-independence continuities, and a people's ethos for a communally instigated change. The openness of the theatre transformed the whole of Limuru into a stage on which the play on-site was a way of rejecting the legacies of colonialism and

imagining an alternative future. The performance space allowed architecture and literature to participate in the Africanisation challenge to adapt and abandon colonial bearings. This decolonial objective sought to propagate and reorient theory and practice to engage with Africa's ordinary, lived realities. However, the Kenyan government forcibly replaced the theatre with a polytechnic, an architectural setup that employs an industrial assembly-line spatial orientation, which is not conducive to community participation.

This paper uses excerpts from interviews done with a group of the original performers of the Kamirithu Theater, as well as other community members since 2020, during the Kamirithu Afterlives project (Cupers & Kitata, 2023). Part one examines the architecture of the polytechnic, measuring it against the philosophy of the play and

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the destroyed open-air theatre. The second part of the paper explores the idea of transforming the polytechnic into a place of memory and heritage within a decolonial context.

THEORY

The study utilises grounded theory and builds on the concept of “coloniality and infrastructure” developed by Kenny Cupers (2021), who argues that infrastructure is inherited from the past, not only through material artefacts and physical configurations but also spatial imaginaries, affective relations, and shared memories.

RESEARCH METHODS

The method involved a collaborative ethnographic approach, in which we worked with a group of original actors from the play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), now in their 70s and 80s, and Kamirithu community members since 2020. We toured the site and spoke with the original actors at their homes and at the site of the destroyed theatre, now occupied by Kamirithu Polytechnic. We asked them to share their stories and the photos they had kept.

Additionally, we spoke with other stakeholders, including trained architects, the polytechnic administration, and community members. Since there are not many photos of the destroyed theatre, we conducted a digital reconstruction of the theatre in collaboration with African Digital Heritage (ADH), utilising information gathered from the original actors and the few available photos of the theatre. We also visited Education Theatre 2 at the University of Nairobi to familiarise ourselves with theatre dimensions and perspectives, including a digital drone view.

We sourced archival information from publications and conducted biographical interviews with the designers and builders, who are also the actors who participated in the play enacted on the site. We recorded the interviews from all participants in both photo and audiovisual formats.

Upon editing the material, alongside other information and reflections from the research, we created an online archive and uploaded it to our Kamirithuafterlives website and YouTube channel.

RESULTS

Decolonial Design

The interpretation of time and space in the Kamirithu theatre project is a reaction against the concentration camp mindset where Africans were kept in reserves and detention camps for control. Kamirithu was one of these British Colonial camps. To counter this, the Kamirithu community constructed the open-air theatre. The Kamirithu Educational and Cultural Centre's open-air theatre stood where the polytechnic was later constructed. Previously, it was a centre for adult literacy where learners under Ngugi wa Mirii used songs, dance, theatre, and creative interaction with space for learning. The open design arrangement fostered equality and a sense of community.

It is important to emphasize that the space production of the theatre took shape through the cultivation of the landscape into a design as if appropriating nature without exploiting it – a statement about a sense of belonging to the place.

According to Sultan Somjee, who contributed the conceptual model for the theatre, the design was a collaborative effort led by the local artisans: “It was the carpenters and crafts people of Kamirithu who came forward to design the theatre. They discussed and worked on the design to fit their environmental needs” (Somjee, 2023, 14:23)

Figure 1.



FIGURE 1

Kamau Daktari working on the timber for the construction of the open-air theatre. Photo by Sultan Somjee

Source: Field survey, 2025

In Kamirithu, the open architecture represented wholeness and unity and conveyed a sense of harmony and connectedness. Constructed using timber offcuts from the local timber yard at Kwa Mbiira market in Limuru, the theatre's architecture emphasized the regeneration of natural ecosystems and the recycling of materials. The open (circular) architecture (vol zero, 2025) operationalized the dialogic space, enabling collaborative creation and discussion. It is a concept of innovative architecture in urban landscapes in which cycles represent inclusivity and equality. In cycles, everyone can see each other and be seen by others in a setting that also pulls in the natural environment **Figures 2 a&b.**



FIGURE 2a

A photo of the open-air theatre under construction, with people and livestock. Photo by Sultan Somjee, courtesy of James Mwaura Githiga.

Source: Field survey, 2025



FIGURE 2b

A digital reconstruction of Kamirithu open-air theatre @ African Digital Heritage, Cupers and Kitata.

Source: Field survey, 2025

Design and Colonize

Kamirithu Polytechnic is the product of an architectural approach guided by the history of colonialism that designed the Kenyan landscape into spaces for colonial exploitation **Figure 3a.** After independence, the postcolonial regime maintained oppressive structures. Mwendwa describes the architecture of Kamirithu Polytechnic as “a representation of linear time, with schedules and designated times for activities **Figure 3b.** It functions as a control system for behaviour.” (0:20). The plan of the polytechnic follows the design philosophy of public schools, which is a part of the heritage of the Industrial Revolution. As Uduku (2010) writes of the challenges to new school design and pedagogy, “Public schools were not only created in the interests of industrialism – they were created in the image of industrialism.



FIGURE 3a

Kamirithu Polytechnic classes and administration block.

Source: Field survey, 2025



FIGURE 3b

Suki Mwendwa explaining the Kamirithu Polytechnic Linear Design Photos @ Gitonga Mwangi

Source: Field survey, 2025

In many ways, they reflect the factory culture they were designed to support.” Such a spatial policy is against the ethos of the people because it does not propose movement. In Kenya, this was adopted to achieve a colonial agenda at the expense of the Africans, who were patronized as less human and at best children. As Cupers (2021) notes, “Infrastructure shapes territories and governs the movements and processes within and across them. But infrastructure excludes, contains, and subjugates as much as it includes, moves, or liberates.”

The design of Kamirithu Polytechnic implies that mechanical routines are used to train students for conformity. This conditioning echoes a classical Pavlovian approach to curtailing intellectual freedoms (Lottich, Kenneth, 1967) while dealing with human subjects. It transforms humans into mere objects in a mechanical process. Reflecting on the effects of the polytechnic architecture, on the community, (Mwendwa, 2022, 1:05), observes: “The way this is set up reflects a very controlling approach to time, which we refer to as linear monochromatic time. This perspective creates a sense of exclusion; it doesn’t invite participation. It also conveys a lack of trust. When it communicates that I don’t trust you and you don’t trust me, it raises the question: why would I want to engage in this environment? That’s the underlying message.”

In a postcolonial space with a history of conflict, the polytechnic is an emblematic monument of the “intersections of architecture, space, bodies, and the media of thought control.” (Hamann, 2017). By its design, it serves as a space of exclusion, occupying a venue that the people of Kamirithu intended for open discussions about postcolonial corruption and industrial exploitation.

Unlike the freedom communicated in the design of the open-air theatre, the polytechnic reassembles a factory set-up with controls for workers.: “School bells mark the start and end of classes, conditioning us to follow a strict schedule. This linear approach to education resembles an assembly line, where specific sounds signal when to transition between activities. The focus is more on achieving outcomes than individual engagement,” (Mwendwa, 2022, 1:45). In the play *I Will Marry When I Want*, the siren urges workers to the factory, regardless of their thoughts and actions. In the morning, it served as a signal

to the workers in the tea plantations to report early for work. The polytechnic, therefore, not only reintroduces structural colonialism but also sonic coloniality, (Kanngieser, 2023). Unlike the open-air theatre that sought to use the people’s environment as a reference for their understanding of their life, the polytechnic reintroduces Anglo-European architecture and onto-epistemology that reinforces the separation between humans and nature as a way of sense-making, thus recolonizing the Kamirithu space.

Transforming Kamirithu Polytechnic to a Place of Dialogue: A Proposition

Architecture is implicated in the proposition to make the polytechnic space dialogic and open to accommodate the community. Broadening dialogic space would be achieved through convergent tasks, such as open forums for the polytechnic to showcase what it produces in a garden setting. Artistic performances would be useful for education and elicitation of discussions.

This design perspective emerged from our research project in collaboration with various stakeholders, including James Gichanga Njuguna, the polytechnic director. In an interview with the Kamirithu Afterlives project, he shared his vision: “I hope we can create a space that addresses two key needs in the community: the need for a social venue where people can express their opinions and the need for training opportunities. By combining these elements, we can adopt a holistic approach. We envision a future where performing arts and technical training occur here, achieving the primary purpose for which this institution was established as a social hall.” (Gichanga, 2024, 4:05).

In a sense, it would be a creative compromise; designing the concept from the destroyed Kamirithu Cultural and Educational Center to work with the present-day Kamirithu Polytechnic. The architectural task is to merge the ethos of a cultural centre with the idea of a polytechnic. As Mwendwa, (2022, 1:50). observed: “This could become an area of interactivity: circular; you can have talks; poetry, plays, and interaction. People can come in for performances, know what the polytechnic is about, and what it can do for them.”

The objective is to transform the design of the polytechnic and remedy the disconnect between

the people and the institution. Njaramba Kaguura, (2022, 12:20), the actor who played Gicaamba in *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, says, "President Moi approved building the polytechnic after ordering the theatre's demolition. Although the polytechnic is beneficial, few children attend it because many are still upset about losing the theatre." While education is present, many feel that their history is not valued. The closed-out design of the polytechnic reinforces this antagonism between the governing authorities and the community. "A design encouraging interaction would be an effective way to re-engage with the community and foster collaboration between the polytechnic and the people" (Mwendwa, 2022, 1:57).

Such a relationship would be achieved by opening the gates and allowing access to the space for different age groups and community voices in Kamirithu. Such a proposition would include:

a) Creative Performance Space as a Library

The concept developed in Denmark in 2000 (<https://humanlibrary.org/>) aims to create a space of dialogue and respect for human rights. The polytechnic would become a place for sharing knowledge and experiences of the community's history of dispossession, exploitation and exclusion. It would serve not only technical education, as contained in the Kiambu County Strategic Plan, (2024) but also historical and performance objectives as contained in the Polytechnic's Strategic Plan, fifth thematic area, as James Gichanga the Polytechnic's director confirms. "we are in the process of preserving that history in form of a library, a computer lab, a structure just in remembrance of what happened here some years back."

This design vision promotes technical training and encourages community attitudes aimed at "decolonizing the mind." (Ngugi, 1980). According to Suki: "The concept is akin to a library, where you can document all interactions and build the library you envision. To effectively engage the community and connect it with the village polytechnic, you need to create an interactive space that encourages better understanding." (Mwendwa, 2022, 2:30). The objective is to be anchored in creative dialogue, involving students and faculty, actors around the Kamirithu village vicinity, practitioners in cultural and creative industries, social justice institutions, and government agencies. In this way, the

polytechnic would build community ownership, and preserve the ethos of the destroyed theatre.

b) Imagining Kamirithu Polytechnic as a Monument and Heritage

The vision for a heritage restoration of the theatre ought to be a curatorial gesture, that brings in truly commemorative architectures and spatialities. James Gichanga, the director of the polytechnic, proposes, "Kamirithu theatre, along with Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, is an important cultural brand that we must preserve. The Board of Management (BOM) has proposed dedicating a building at the polytechnic or constructing a new facility that combines modern features, like a library, with traditional aesthetics to honour our culture" (Gichanga, 2024, 4.08).

According to Mwendwa (2022, 5:59), "At the same time, instead of presenting avant-garde architecture, the space would be framed as a location that both rescues the ancestral past and incorporates experiences of the contemporary." A) This would recreate future spaces and temporalities that are both ancestral and present. In a way, this vision advocates for an architectural curation that pays attention to history, and communal ways of dealing with the land in Kenya, a central theme in the play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, aiming for more fair and complete possibilities for the present and future.

CONCLUSION

This focus and proposition seeks to invite architects, the community, and visitors to reflect not on the personalities that made Kamirithu world-famous, on a commemorative plaque, but on what the space could mean to the community as they live on it. It is an invitation to think of what is to come – possible futures; potential futures.

Towards this vision, Kenny Cupers, (2025) a co-researcher in the Kamirithu Afterlives project, suggests, "...to have architecture and literature students become interested in this project, and perhaps make it a design studio, together with Professors from the departments of Architecture, and Literature, University of Nairobi."

This is a memorialization of the space that makes it an evolving heritage. Like the play and the open-air theatre, it seeks to make the space a living

venue for interactive communication between the people's history and spatial activities that have re – designed it over time.

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