

## Living with Ruins: Workshop on Future-Making amid Rubble and Debris

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As our collaborative research center seeks to find original ways to research future-making in Africa, we met at the British Institute of East Africa in Nairobi to discuss how ruins of past prosperity, or ruins of promising but stalled infrastructure projects, tell us much about future-making in contemporary Kenya. We are a group of postdoctoral researchers and PhD students at the CRC “Future Rural Africa”, and we met with scholars based in Kenya and Germany for a workshop entitled “Living with Ruins: Future-making and Infrastructuring in Contemporary Kenya”, to present individual papers and chart a way forward for collaborative writing and publishing.

The papers (six in total) focused on different ways that Kenyans curve their futures in remains of promising but unfinished infrastructure projects, in ruins of once thriving but now collapsed industries, or in informal settlements built from scraps and rubble.



Picture 1: Flower farm. Photo courtesy of Anna Ramella

Some examples are useful here. One paper explained how laid-off employees of once thriving flower industry continue to maintain the disintegrating flower farms, hoping for future compensation from their former employer. At the same time, they use the scraps laying around the farms to design alternative futures, such as fishing and trade.



Picture 2: The incomplete Kamariny stadium in Kenya. Photo courtesy of Uroš Kovač

Another paper showed a stalled construction project, in particular a lavish international stadium in the Rift Valley, and how it makes a modernist future tangible and exciting for many Kenyans, yet at the same time reveals it as uncertain, contingent on political bickering, and potentially a ruin of once famous and useful piece of infrastructure.

One presentation showed how informal settlements can be historicized as products

of long-term processes of ruination, from the colonial times until the present. The residents build their settlements from scraps and rubble, and see themselves as *Matigari*, “people who remain”, all this while being perceived as ruining the image of a modern and prosperous Kenya.

Another one explained how Kenyans seek to chart a future in ruins of dilapidating hotels on the Kenyan coast, finding their bearings in the rubble amid a thriving tourist industry.

The papers and topics were diverse, but they made clear that much of future-making in East Africa today takes place in ruins – ruins of unfinished promising projects, ruins of failed capitalist enterprises, and ruins of decades of colonial and postcolonial exclusion and marginalization. When we discuss future-making in Africa, we need to account for ways that it emerges from ruins and rubble of past failings and undelivered promises.

We discussed theory as well. We talked about ruins as remnants of the past that continue to inflict violence and dispossession in the present (Stoler 2008). Additionally, we also discussed about “ruins of the future” (Gupta 2018), the half-finished structures that stand for suspension of hope in progress. Other distinct themes of discussion are the material infrastructures, sometimes as “para-sites” (Marcus 2000), places that people use as alternative and originally unintended (parallel) ways, and social infrastructures (Simone 2004) that emerge among people who continue living, willingly or not, in skeletal remains of past capitalist projects, what some anthropologists have called “capitalist ruins” (Tsing 2015).

The papers drew focus on the processes rather than static categories in which; instead of discussing whether a certain aspect qualifies as a ruin or not, we discussed how certain actors, be it a state, a group, or an individual, participate in long-term processes of ruination, as well as how people actively reconstruct their futures among the rubble of once promising but now failed or suspended projects.

The presentations showed that modernist projects on the surface promise linear progress, but in reality, leave many ordinary Kenyans in suspension or waithood. Attention to how Kenyans’ lives unfold in the ruins of these projects reveals the modernist promise of linear progress as a myth (Ferguson 1999). Suspension and waithood in the ruins of modernity are frustrating and restrictive, but many Kenyans also use them to order their lives in unexpected ways, and to begin imagining a future different to the one prescribed.

Finally, we discussed how visual and ethnographic methods can help us understand such large-scale processes that always take place on different scales, between the local and the global. All presentations relied on photographs that showed the imposing structures of failing projects or minute aspects of everyday ruination. We agreed that images, along with the usual anthropologists’ “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973), can communicate the affective aspects of future-making amid ruins, aspects that are largely overlooked in conventional scientific publications. To that end, we came up with a publication timeline, and started drafting a proposal for a journal special collection, hopefully accompanied with photographs and other audio-visual materials.

Here is a list of the workshop participants.

1. Wangui Kimari (Mathare Social Justice Centre)
2. Eric Kioko (Kenyatta University)
3. Prince Guma (British Institute in Eastern Africa, Utrecht University)
4. Franziska Fay (Goethe University Frankfurt am Main)
5. Mario Schmidt (University of Cologne)

6. David Greven (University of Cologne, CRC Future Rural Africa)
7. Anna Lisa Ramella (University of Cologne, CRC Future Rural Africa)
8. Uroš Kovač (University of Cologne, University of Münster, CRC Future Rural Africa)

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