

## **Incorporating Informal Markets into Nairobi's Urban Realm**

The informal sector has wide presence in most developing countries. In many cases it arises from the failure of the formal economy, both public and private, to absorb the growing numbers of jobseekers eventually leading to the informal sector stepping in to fill the gap. Unfortunately, the sector is often viewed as illegal and its activities barred by the government and despised by people working in the formal sector. This comes as an irony, as most of its people's livelihood in one way or another depends on the informal sector – for subsistence, household goods and services. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, the sector provides 60% of all jobs – 90% of all new jobs created in the 90's (Mitullah, 2003).



Number Nane market – Ngong road, Nairobi



Kangemi market – Waiyaki way, Nairobi

Selling fruits and vegetables, food operation, sale and processing, selling clothes and shoes (both second-hand and new), kiosk selling various items, small retailers or hawkers who sell cereals, home suppliers, fuels and other goods, small manufacturing, production, construction and repair of goods constitute among others, the informal sector (World Bank, 2006). Such activities require and occupy space in very creative ways within the urban domain.

The informal-markets are known to occupy spaces that are not designated for the use. Such spaces include areas along streets, within bus terminuses and on bus stops. Street trade and service provision exclusively occurs on the streets and roads. Most traders locate themselves at strategic points with heavy human traffic, while others walk from one place to the other. They locate themselves along main roads and streets, near shopping centers or at corners where they can be seen by pedestrians and motorists. Traders settle in streets spontaneously without any official allocation.

On-site traders within the informal markets normally have temporary structures that they use to display their products. In Nairobi, such markets include: Ngara market, City stadium market, Namba-nane market, Kangemi market etc. Studies show that such markets utilize various methods in locating and operating within the site. Some traders consult the owners of the neighboring yard e.g. Kangemi market, others negotiate with acquaintances e.g. Ngara market, others are allocated spaces by the Local Authorities e.g. Westlands market, while some share with friends and colleagues.

Informal markets have certainly come a long way in Kenya. They have survived waves of evictions, demolitions and fire attacks to street chases and battering by the City Council and Police. The City authority in Nairobi generally views the informal traders as a menace. According to city authorities, they contribute to much of the dirt in the city streets; they crowd the pedestrian routes forcing people to squeeze with speeding vehicles. They dump organic and inorganic waste into the already strained drainage systems of the city. Indeed, they are the main source of noise, hustle and bustle, characteristic of Nairobi's streets, avenues and lanes.



Kangemi market demolished when traders refuse to move

To the average customer, the informal trader provides access to low cost goods and services at convenient places and times. They provide a variety that would not be easily accessed within the formal sector. However, majority of customers tend to be ordinary Kenyans on their way home. They have no time to bargain much. More often than not the customer is unlucky to fall for an inferior product.

These businesses flourish and blossom each new day because of the high traffic of visitors. More and more informal traders flock to the market areas. Without proper checks, the market areas become clogged leading to most streets being impassable. Also, most of the informal traders don't pay rates, thus not contributing to the formal economy and the provision of the necessary services and infrastructure.

A number of steps have been taken by the City council, such as garbage collection within the informal markets, relocation of street vendors to designated market areas such as Muthurwa, eviction and arresting of hawkers who remain on the streets. Such actions aim to maintain a sense of law and order. But, from a study done by the Department of Urban and Regional planning University of Nairobi, it only ends up with the customer losing the convenient service and the hawker losing a livelihood leading to an increase in urban poverty. This dichotomy creates an interesting dilemma for all the stakeholders on the future of the informal market.

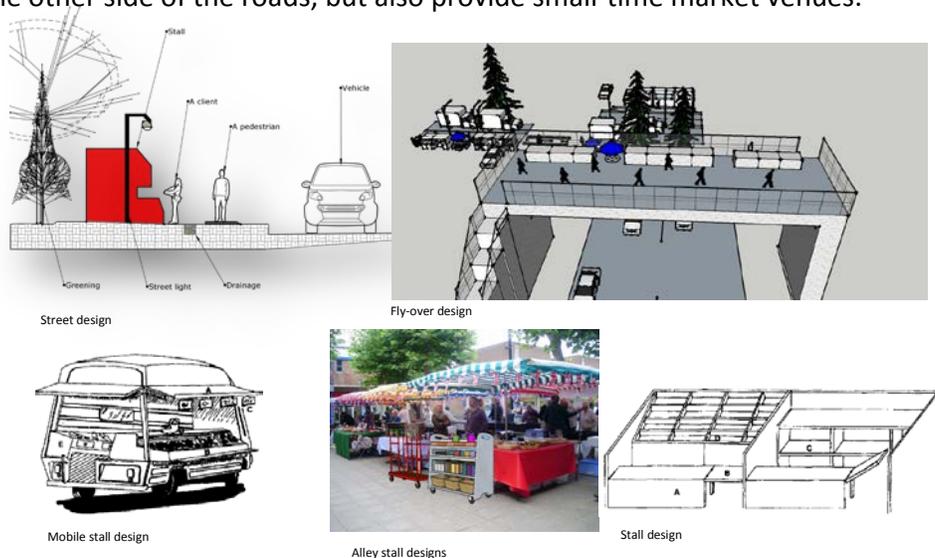


Muthurwa Market built for the hawkers - launched in 2008

## So what is the future of informal markets?

A number of critiques say that informal markets are here to stay – a reality that is slowly catching up with the City council of Nairobi and other local authorities. The city council, on the other hand insists that the rule of law must be upheld. Such laws include the paying of rent and rates for revenue generation, maintenance of law and order on the streets, having healthy and clean environments to quality control for the consumer's gain.

A recent University of Nairobi study came up with some good proposals. The first step towards accommodation is acceptance that informal markets are part of current socio-economic reality. Second, to stop the phenomenon of uncontrolled informal markets we must understand the trade and come up with ways of facilitating the activities. This would call for major policy reforms on integration of the informal markets in the urban realm. Rules and regulations should be considerate of the informal trader. That would also be accompanied by an urban plan with architectural designs that could provide the necessary schematic solution for the persistent spate. One proposal forwarded was in regard to the hawking question. The solution would be the utilization of important pedestrian routes, lanes, alleys, tunnels, footbridges etc. to serve as hawking zones. Well defined areas would be laid out to allow street businessmen and women to carry on with their enterprises. Footbridges over, and tunnels under busy highways could not only get pedestrians safely to the other side of the roads, but also provide small-time market venues.



A city like Nairobi is always begging for practical measures, of a kind (Arabbu, 2013). Having the uniqueness of a third world country characterized with lots of informalities, the city needs to accept some of these informal activities by designing our planning around them as opposed to through them.

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