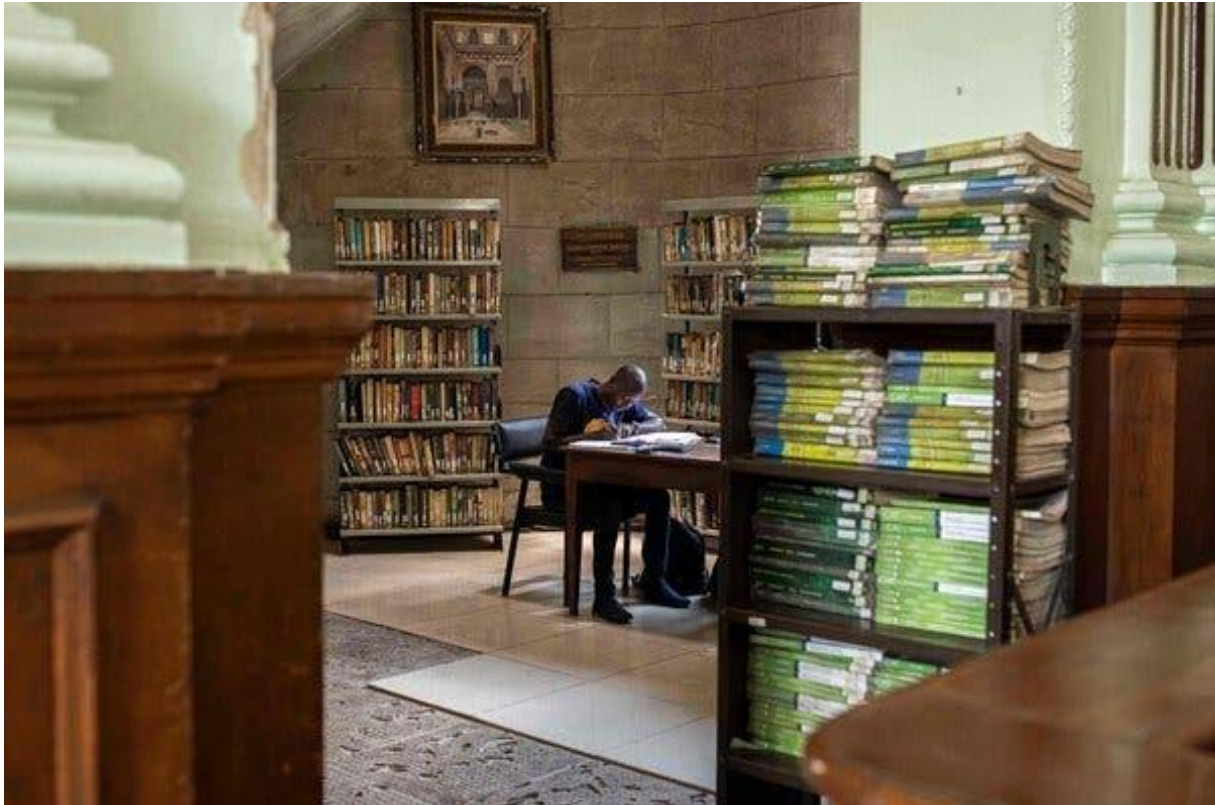


Turning Nairobi's Public Libraries Into 'Palaces for the People'

A Kenyan nonprofit is restoring iconic public libraries, leaving behind a segregated past and turning them into inclusive spaces.



The archives of the McMillan Memorial Library are being digitized. Kenyans are also being invited to bring items such as photographs or letters to create an archive anchored in collective memory. Credit...Patrick Meinhardt/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



By [Abdi Latif Dahir](#)

Feb. 4, 2023

In 1931, the first library in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, opened its doors — to white patrons only.

Nearly a century later, Kenyans dressed in the slinky gowns, flapper headpieces and tweed suits of that era streamed into the now-dilapidated space in a celebration that was part fund-raiser for the remodel of the iconic building, part reclamation of the city's public libraries as "palaces for the people."

"Our public libraries can be glamorous spaces of storytelling," said Angela Wachuka, a Kenyan publisher. But, she added, "we are here to also reclaim history, to occupy its architecture and to subvert its intended use."

The restoration of the McMillan Memorial Library and others in the city was the brainchild of Wachuka and the novelist Wanjiru Koinange, who founded [Book Bunk](#), a Kenyan nonprofit, in 2017 to restore and reclaim the city's public libraries. The aim was to leave behind their excluding past and remake them into inclusive spaces where Kenyans can archive and share collective memories, engage in creative and civic pursuits, and have at their disposal the technology to gather and disseminate information.

Among their goals is to bring more books in African languages to the libraries, and incorporate services catering to those with visual, physical or reading disabilities.

Image



The Kenyan publisher Angela Wachuka at the Kaloleni library, in Nairobi. Book Bunk, founded by Wachuka and the writer Wanjiru Koinange, is working to restore colonial-era public libraries. Credit...Daniel Irungu/EPA, via Shutterstock

"The aim of Book Bunk has been to turn libraries into palaces for the people," Wachuka said, "a refuge where they can gather and share ideas and dream of a better future."

As the guests streamed into the gala, in December, organizers urged them to think of themselves as “rebellious gate-crashers” who, while dressed as those in the past, were about to embark on a radically different future in which libraries are an essential public good.

Nairobi, a fast-growing city of over four million people, has very few bookstores or well-funded libraries. Book Bunk’s work comes amid heated conversations about [urban design](#) and about how corruption and colonial systems continue to shape the way [public infrastructure](#) and spaces are designed and who gets access to them.

“In the case of Nairobi, there’s almost an acceptance that certain social divisions should exist across social classes and different societal groups,” said Constant Cap, an urban planner who has collaborated with Book Bunk in the past.

Restoring public libraries, he said, could be an opportunity to break those barriers and bring together people from different socio-economic, ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds.

Image



The McMillan library was built in 1931 and before restoration was in a state of disrepair. Credit... Daniel Irungu/EPA, via Shutterstock

For Wachuka and Koinange, the journey began a decade ago as they searched for a venue to host an event for the [Kwani? literary festival](#). The two thought the McMillan library — built by Lady Lucy McMillan as a memorial to her American husband, Sir Northrup McMillan, and later bequeathed to the Nairobi City Council — would be an ideal venue given its centrality and connection to the city.

But when they walked in, Wachuka said, they were surprised to see its crumbling state: Its interior neoclassical architecture was fading, its floors and walls were in ruinous condition and its collections were gathering dust.

While they found another location for the event, the two immediately began researching the history and management structure of the McMillan library, and soon after, left their jobs to focus full time on its restoration.

One of their earlier discoveries was that the McMillan library was the first of a series of other libraries built in the city. Only two were still open: the Makadara and Kaloleni libraries, in the city's low-income eastern suburbs.

Image



A view of the Kaloleni library. As part of the update of colonial-era libraries, the nonprofit is also updating book collections and introducing more books by African authors. Credit...Daniel Irungu/EPA, via Shutterstock

After forming a partnership with the Nairobi city administration in 2018, Book Bunk first focused on restoring the two smaller libraries, prioritizing the needs of the communities there.

The two branches have since reopened, with the Makadara library hosting storytelling sessions, film screenings, [music performances](#) and a literary festival. The Kaloleni branch is in a neighborhood built in the 1940s by Italian prisoners of war, and has become a hub for youngsters to do their homework and participate in workshops that help them, for example, learn how to make money using their creative talent.

Joyce Nyairo, a Kenyan academic and cultural analyst, said that the restored libraries have the chance to be “great equalizers,” particularly for people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These libraries, she said, can be places where young people can read, but also connect and collaborate with peers who share their interests or challenge their worldviews.

Image



In 2020, the nonprofit started digitizing the McMillan library’s more than 137,000 books. Some of the books and documents, shown here, were in a fragile state. Credit...Patrick Meinhardt/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“We need spaces in which we can perform our urbanity unashamedly and feel recognized and legitimized by it,” Nyairo said. “These are spaces we can come to, interact with, contribute to, take from and belong.”

Over the years, Book Bunk has undertaken several initiatives to complement its vision of restoring libraries. In 2020, it began a research project that has so far identified 1,323 public, private, institutional and community libraries in at least 12 Kenyan counties. They have [produced a podcast](#) about the history and design of the McMillan library. They also launched “Green Bunk,” a project that installs solar panels, establishes community gardens and recycles waste to make libraries carbon neutral.

A [massive digitization project](#) has also preserved tens of thousands of photographs, newspapers and government documents at the McMillan library dating as far back as the 1800s. Book Bunk also partnered with the Nest, a Kenyan creative collective, to curate an exhibition from English and Kiswahili newspaper archives from the years 1963, when Kenya became independent, 1973 and 1983.

Image



A project to preserve libraries such as this one is not a sprint or even a marathon, but a relay, said Lola Shoneyin, a Nigerian novelist. Credit... Patrick Meinhardt/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

And there's still much work to do to restore the McMillan Memorial Library. The organization is raising \$6 million to help repair the building and maintain it for two years after it opens. McMillan is the only building in Kenya protected by an act of Parliament, and renovation plans will have to go through strict approval measures spearheaded by Kenya's national museum.

Before that, Wachuka also said public hearings will be held to ask Kenyans what design aspects they would like to see preserved or added — and whether the library's official name should be changed.

Lola Shoneyin, the Nigerian novelist who delivered the keynote speech at the fund-raising gala, said that the work being done now is for the benefit of future generations, who will find support in the spaces they are creating.

“The work Book Bunk is doing is not a sprint. It is not even a marathon. It is more of a relay,” Shoneyin, who is also the organizer of the Ake Arts and Book Festival in Lagos, said in her speech. “For them to win, we must all be prepared to take the baton and run with it when the occasion demands.”