

# Slow death of library that McMillan built

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The entrance to the library. Photo/FILE

By Rupi Mangat

Curiosity led me to McMillan Memorial Library, an iconic building of the 1930s in Nairobi's central business district.

This followed a visit to Mcmillan's castle in Thika, which lies in disrepair and is with no trace of the belongings and artefacts of the family, who were part of Kenya's colonial history.

I was researching Sir Northrup McMillan, a man who was larger than life — literally being 7 feet tall with a girth that needed a five-foot belt to go around. The library was built in his memory by his wife.

McMillan Memorial Library is still impressive, housing priceless first edition books and works of art.

I was looking for a cloth-bound book created by Richard Minsky, a critically acclaimed American "book artiste".

After an extensive search, the book could not be found on the shelves.

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In colonial Kenya, the library was the axis around which modern Nairobi evolved — with the law courts directly in front of it and other buildings coming up around it — like the Bank of Baroda, the New Stanley Hotel, the railway headquarters and station, the Royal College of East Africa (today's University of Nairobi) and the Parliament buildings.

McMillan Memorial Library was meant to serve the White community in the then racially segregated country.

One of Kenya's most mysterious settlers, McMillan in his time played host to both Sir Winston Churchill and President Theodore Roosevelt.

He moved in the same social circles as the Delameres and Sir Ewart Grogan.

A pioneer and philanthropist, he ran the first settler farm in Thika.

It was on his farm that the politician Tom Mboya grew up by virtue of his father being an employee.

Mboya's life was cut short by an assassin's bullet in 1968 in Nairobi, at 39 years.

Today, both the McMillans' graves lie on the high slopes of Ol Donyo Sabuk, overlooking their castle and Fourteen Falls in Thika.

Standing on the top stair of the classical blue stone library in Nairobi, flanked by two enormous stone lions, one still has an impressive view of the city, which received its charter in 1950.

The state of the building outside belies the neglect inside.

Impressive as it is, McMillan Memorial Library is not Kenya's first library.

That honour belongs to the Seif bin Salim Library, opened in 1903 in Mombasa by the Indian community.

It was open to all but because the books were mostly in Indian languages, it was used mostly by Indians.

McMillan's followed in 1931. Musau Kimeu, an architect and environmental design expert, gives an interesting perspective on the building.

Kimeu is also a lecturer in the Department of Architecture and Building Science at the University of Nairobi.

### **Blue stone**

"The library is built using the Nairobi blue stone and is finished with a very well-done plaster that requires no paint on the outside walls," he says. "Buildings such as these in Europe have lasted hundreds of years. Blue stone is a hard stone. It's very good for construction.

"In Nairobi, it has been used to build the boundary walls of the August 7 Memorial (former American embassy site), Kipande House and many other old buildings.

"Stonehenge in Britain dating 2,300 BC is a collection of bluestones.

"The building's workmanship and craftsmanship are excellent," says the environmental architect. "Its intricate details are superb. In comparison, most of today's buildings are plain and lacking in serious craftsmanship."

"But wouldn't it be appropriate to replace the building with a skyscraper?" I ask

The architect says no. "The library is an icon of Nairobi. It's architecturally very good," he says.

While the building's structure and its external facade should be conserved, the inside can be modernised.

"Our architecture students often use it as a case study. Last year, my students spent three weeks studying the building and each student made a proposal on how to modernise its interior. Cutting edge interior design can easily do this."

Library space planning and library requirements continue to evolve.

Today's requirements are different from those of the 1950s and 1960s.

Kipande House on Kenyatta Avenue, which was originally a warehouse in 1913, now houses a bank. Its interior has been extensively refurbished.

I prod him further: "How 'green' is the building in terms of conserving energy since it was built way before terms like 'environmentally friendly' became everyday parlance?"

"Its thick walls help to minimise the transfer of heat from outside to inside during the day when the sun is hot. Having a high ceiling doubles the volume space. This keeps the interior cool.

"The windows are relatively small, which means the building does not require air-conditioning. This ensures that the greenhouse effect on the building is minimal.

Air conditioning contributes significantly to carbon dioxide (Co2) emission, which is the main cause of climate change. Buildings account for over 50 per cent of all Co2 emissions globally today."

Deep in the building, peeling paint and dusty shelves do little to keep serious readers away. The library is full, including the children's section — though it's adults taking up the space, even here.

McMillan's bust above the fireplace looks sternly down at all entering.

None of the readers, including the librarians I interview, know much about McMillan save that he was a "colonial man." A pair of enormous ivory tusks flank the fireplace.

An Italian carved alabaster figure of a maiden on a pedestal catches my eye. I read the inscription on it: Passo del Ruscello 1890 Cesare Lapini.

An Internet search reveals an almost identical work by Lapini, an Italian artist of the 19th and early 20th century, of a maiden wearing an underdress, lifting her skirts and stepping lightly into a shallow stream. It sold for \$2,160 at an auction.

Walking up the elegant winding staircase to the Africana section, I see portraits of African soldiers dated 1946, complete with their names.

There is also a portrait of Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) gifted by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

A Scottish-American industrialist, he worked his way up from a messenger boy to become the second richest man in the world at the time, after Rockefeller.

He made his money mostly in the steel industry. His fortune has been turned to founding libraries, schools, universities and museums in many countries.

The African section reveals a sorer state of affairs, with the books stacked in weather-beaten closets and shelves and tiles peeling off the floor. Antique furniture and canvas paintings worth a fortune lie neglected.

I don't find Richard Minsky's book. His innovative use of materials and pioneering techniques has contributed to the expanding field of book arts for over 30 years.

The artist's entire archive, spanning 50 years, has been bought by the Arts of the Book Collection of the Arts Library at

Yale.

Minsky still tours the world to promote education through book art and lectures at universities.

Examples of his work are held in museum and library collections worldwide, including the Getty Research Library, Los Angeles, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

None of the librarians know of Minsky's work titled Gerald Jackson's Adventures in Ku-Ta-Ba Wa-Do.

The limited edition book was produced in 1974 and accompanied by a 12" vinyl recording and musical score (a description is at <http://minsky.com/books.htm#kutaba>).

The book is worth \$2,700 in cloth binding and \$3,600 in leather binding. It was apparently given to someone from Nairobi visiting the US.



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