

# The Alleys in the Central Business District of Kampala: Uses and Implications for Urban Renewal

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the structure and form of the Alley spaces in Kampala Central Business District, with purpose to examine their uses, and the potential for urban renewal. The study employed multiple methodological approaches and procedures including document review, case study approaches and analysis and deduction of empirical findings, and explanation building. The study findings reveal that alleys in Kampala's CBD are significant outdoor spaces of linear nature, each with a distinct identity with respect to location, size and quality initially designated for municipal service infrastructure but now taken over by the informal commercial enterprise that sees value of these spaces and from them harnesses a means of survival, henceforth defining their character and quality. The paper concludes that the users most often focus on subspaces of activity concentrations without necessarily noticing the configuration of the whole space. For effective urban renewal to take place and for the alley to perform effectively, it should be perceived not only as a space for movement but also a place of social interaction of a diverse urban population.

**Keywords:** *Alley, Form, Use, Urban Renewal*

## INTRODUCTION

Alleys are integral to the urban fabric of the city and provide insight into the city's built form, but this is still a relatively neglected area of study. The overall objective of this paper is to examine the structure and form of alley spaces in the CBD of Kampala, their uses, and the potential or possible strategies to make alleys more attractive and contribute to the formation of more enhanced urban form.

The term alley is derived from the French verb *allee*: to walk, designed in sixteenth century French renaissance gardens and were intended as walkways. However alleys have existed in one form or another for at least two thousand years in various urban cultures and locations in the world. The oldest form of alleys was created in 1702 in Philadelphia as a strip of land between two properties and "in the 19th Century they were seen as a common element in the urban morphology allowing access to the rear of shops where stables, privies, and other

unwanted elements were kept away from street view" (Karlo, 2014,11).

In this paper, the term 'alley' is used to mean a narrow lane for designated service access or pedestrian access that runs between or behind buildings. Alleys were planned into cities for trash access, deliveries, electrical, plumbing, and mechanical services, fire engines, and in some cases for parking. As a secondary circulation pattern, many pedestrians and cyclists use alleys for shortcuts or back access. The form of alleys is defined by the buildings that enclose them. Furthermore, alleys are categorised as linear spaces because they are often narrow in width with strong linear qualities due to the length the space runs. This is in line with Samuel Gross' submission that alleys are linear and parallel planes used for circulation and movement "spanning as little as half a block or connect across intersections and traverse miles of city blocks... Alleys come in many shapes and sizes; they go by many names such as passages, lanes, narrow streets generally utilized by pedestrians or service vehicles between or behind buildings. In older city centers that were developed before the early 1900's,

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alleys were standard streets utilized for moving people and goods on foot, horse, or bicycle, and after the invention of the car, they were planned or converted for deliveries, maintenance services, emergency vehicles, and for parking” (Gross, 2015, 1-3).

The appearance of Kampala along the main streets is that of a fast advancing city. However this is not representative of the concealed derelict alley spaces between and behind the building masses. Many of the buildings within the CBD were designed placing most emphasis on beautifying the facades and spaces that face the main streets, and internal functionality while the exterior rear sides of these buildings are under-looked, leaving the alley spaces as victim to the haphazard and in most cases informal commercial spill. These alleys are often narrow and not substantive for regular vehicular traffic. Contrary to the Uganda National Physical Planning Standards and Guidelines (Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, 2011, 27), which provide that commercial buildings must observe 5m sanitary line that is sufficient space for rear servicing for standard plots and minimum rear line of 3m for non-standard plots, these spaces lack clarity of function, distinct identity and contribute to urban environmental challenges that require some planning intervention. However, like many other third world cities, alley revitalisation efforts are limited in Kampala. In the era of globalisation and fast growth of cities, it is important that these spaces are given due attention to ensure development of efficient economically viable public spaces that promote environmental sustainability.

The genesis of alleys in Kampala city can be traced to the evolution of planning of that central part of the city whose spatial character and form is a direct result of colonial planning influences with rapid changes taking place after independence (Omolo Okalebo, 2011, 53). After independence, the city experienced a rapid sprout of uncontrolled and substandard developments resonant with the growth of the informal sector. These effects are still evident today. As a result, the commercial space within the central business district is constantly evolving and spilling into the formerly redundant city corridors initially designated for municipal service infrastructure. Alleys were designated as spaces for rear servicing of buildings. This was to keep service trucks, deliveries, and fire trucks, deemed important off streets.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This paper is a by-product of a detailed study conducted in selected alleys identified to have been present for over 80 years dating back to the colonial planning period in Kampala City. The Case Study Strategy was used as a means to explore the cases under study. The study was carried out using multifaceted methodology through detailed in-depth data collection involving triangulation, followed by deduction of empirical findings, and explanation building. In this paper, figure-ground drawings are important graphic tools used to illustrate the mass-void relationships bringing clarity to the structure and

order of the urban spaces. Figure-ground drawings not only reveal the character of the urban form, but also directly affect the perception of the spaces on ground. This perception is then translated in the use of the space. Beyond revealing the character and aggregate urban form, figure-ground drawings help articulate the differences between urban solids and voids, and provide a tool for classifying them by type (Trancik, 1986, 97-100). Alleys are an example of urban void types, together with networks of streets and squares, inner-block voids and parks and gardens, and these are as important as the buildings surrounding them. These urban spaces create edges and linkages of the built environment.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Case 1: Alley between Wilson Road and William Street**

This is one of the oldest and longest alleys in the city centre of Kampala. It is located between two secondary roads, William Street and Wilson Road. This alley is about 170 metres long, typically of the I-shape with open ends on either side. Trade has been dominant in this area since the late 1920s, with majority of shop buildings owned by the Asian community that originally controlled and dominated trading activities in the city. The majority of the businesses conducted in this alley are part of the thriving informal economy in the City. The rent for space per square meter in the alley is affordable as compared to formal rentable spaces in commercial buildings.

The buildings at the edge are generally of rectangular and square forms with respect to the form of the main streets that frame the plots. The average number of floors of these buildings is four with a maximum of ten floors along the entire alley. This alley comprises of mixed use buildings with business premises and dwellings on upper floors. Majority of these buildings have flat roofs with parapets. Concrete is the dominant construction material especially used for the structural frame, in filled with brick work. The buildings have simple painted or tiled wall finishes.

The buildings have metallic doors along the alley edge, some with concrete or mild steel balconies. The balconies for most of the buildings that face this alley start at the second or third floor leaving only bare walls or back service doors facing the alley on the ground level. The ground was partly covered with concrete pavers at one end and bitumen at another. (Fig.1 and Fig.2)

The alley was also observed to be highly crowded affording only about 0.85metres of the 3.7 metre wide space for walking. This emphasizes the linearity of the space amidst the compact built mass. The overall shape of the built mass takes on the morphology of the streets. (Fig. 3)

The study reveals that the major (70%) activity carried out in the alley is food preparation and distribution. Food is prepared in the alley and served to clients both indoors and outdoors within the alley. Food buffet preparation is done on a large



Fig. 1: Back doors, bare walls and balconies on 2nd floor defining the alley edge

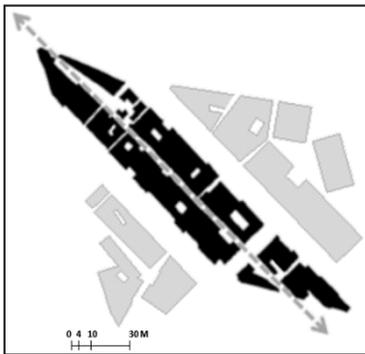


Fig. 3: Figure-ground diagram showing the alley in solid void relationship

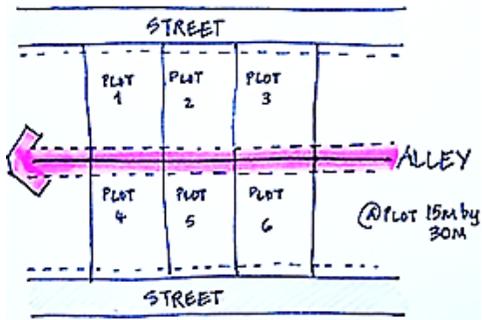


Fig. 2: Sketch of plot layout



Fig. 4: Activity and Space Use within the alley

scale from 8:00am to 4:00pm and occupies the largest amounts of space till the evenings when the activity subsides. (Fig. 4) The indoor spaces that face the alley are poorly ventilated with no openings aside from entry doors. The air is generally hot and filled with the aroma of various foods. The heat from cooking stoves as well as overcrowding within the alley may be responsible for the high temperatures experienced in the alley especially during the busy hours.

Although vehicles are not permitted to pass through this alley thus creating an interactive intimate space for the pedestrians and other users, the alley is also congested with other activities including sale of electrical appliances, textiles and hawking. Some activities involve furniture additions to the path that narrow the space further. The meat roasting activity is most popular in the evenings attracting passers. The congestion hinders utility maintenance along the alley. The situation is worse during the busiest time of the day, usually between 12pm and 3pm.

The accumulation and management of especially biodegradable

waste is key issue in the alley. Food preparation and informal businesses generate tons of waste, which is usually heaped in sacks along the alley. Delays in collection of waste by two or three days, leaves the entire stretch of the alley with unbearable stench. The interviews conducted revealed that people working in the alley often fall ill due to poor sanitation and hygiene.

### Case 2: Kikuubo Lane

This alley is generally linear with two bends and is approximately 400 metres long. Its width permits both vehicular and pedestrian circulation creating zones of conflict between pedestrians and motor traffic especially in the southern end of the alley. The alley is prominent for diversity of business and is therefore a 'one stop' area that caters for a variety of needs. This alley was recently transformed by ground surface works that have further intensified the vehicular circulation. It was however observed that the character of the alley varies at both ends. The Northern end is characterised by the shop buildings and arcades that front the alley while the southern end is

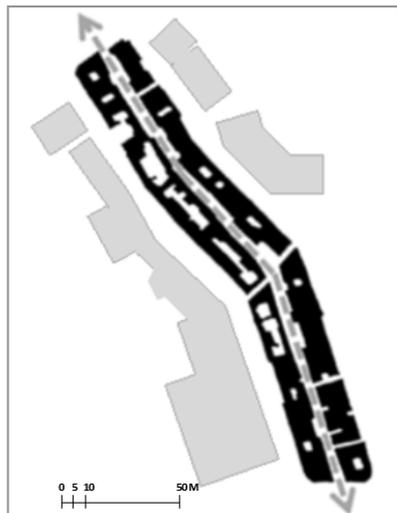


Fig. 5: Figure-ground diagram of Kikuubo lane

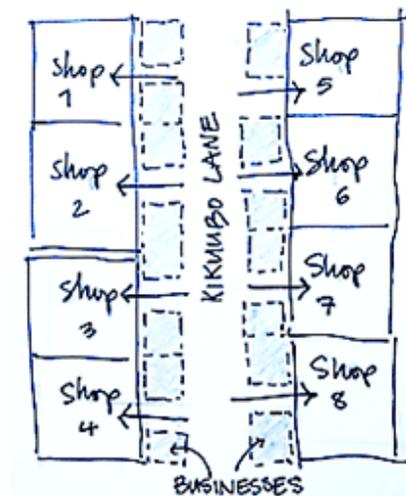


Fig. 6: Edge of Kikuubo alley

cluttered with all sorts of informal businesses along the path which in turn narrows its width and limits vehicular passage. The figure-ground diagram (Fig. 5) shows the relationship between the building mass and open space that gives a sense of compactness of the built edge of the alley. There is spatial continuity of the alley bounded by the built edge creating a well-defined linear space, thus depicting the street grid.

The built edge of Kikuubo alley comprises business premises, mainly shop buildings of two to five floors and one exception of eight floors. The ground and first floors are crowded with signage and display of items. Vertical expansion is visible on this lane with an on-going building extensions and construction works of some partially completed structures although already utilising the lower ground floors. The scale of the buildings is relatively uniform along the lane defined by buildings of rectangular and square forms, with balconies lined with mild steel railing facing into the alley. Most of the buildings appear to be framed structures of concrete with brick in-fills for the walls finished with paint or tiles. (Fig.6) The 5 meter wide lane is aligned on either side with shop buildings and outdoor display stands made out of timber. Merchandise is left along the alley overnight and in most cases uncovered.

The height of buildings along Kikuubo lane versus their width allows sufficient amounts of light and flow of air throughout the day. When it rains, business owners cover their commodities using various materials; some improvise with polythene synthetic coverings. Others simply shift their commodities into the shops to avoid exposure to rain.

Although originally planned as a service lane to facilitate delivery of goods to shops, Kikuubo lane permits both vehicular and pedestrian circulation. However, it is difficult

for the delivery trucks to access except for very early morning hours before shops open. During the busy afternoon and evening hours the trucks act as obstacles to pedestrians shopping along the lane and at times knock off some commodities as the drivers attempt to manoeuvre through the congestion.

This alley is a major business hub strategically located in proximity to the busy old and new taxi terminals, and generally serves the multiple commercial arcades within the City.

Kikuubo is crowded with majorly wholesale and retail businesses dealing in various commodities such as scholastic materials, cereals, clothing, weighing scales, kitchen ware, electrical appliances and many others. The business owners are organised under the Kikuubo Business Community. This is an association responsible for maintaining order, conflict resolution at community level, maintenance of cleanliness and security for commodities and liaising with Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) on behalf of the traders through mobilisation of tax fares since the businesses are not legally registered. This relationship is helpful to protect the interests of the business owners.(Fig.7)

### Case 3: Kiyembe Lane

Kiyembe lane is approximately 5 metres wide with an approximate length of 120 metres and generally of the I-shape sloping towards the western end of the lane. Planned in the colonial era, this alley provides an alternative place that is not as noisy, but is fairly safe for pedestrians due to limited interference by motorists.

The alley is conveniently located between two activity nodes; the Nakasero market and old taxi park, and is thus frequently



Fig. 7: Transporting of commodities



Fig. 8: Contrasting built edge of Kiyembe lane

used by pedestrians as means of connection from Dastur street to Burton. The alley gently slopes westwards towards the old taxi park and has the view of Mengo hill and the minaret of the Old Kampala Gadhaifi mosque, a significant symbol in the Kampala City scape.

The built edges of the alley contrast in height, materiality and age. The building heights vary from single level buildings to four, five or six storey buildings. The older structures are of single level with simple painted wall finishes. These older shop buildings are windowless; with folding shop doors fronting the pavement. The newer buildings have more floors and are clad with aluminium.

The new buildings have distinct signage and are business premises with hotels or accommodation on upper levels, and premises to a variety of companies and enterprises on the ground, first and second floors. (Fig. 8)

The built forms are disconnected at some points and in between there are undefined voids like courtyards. The buildings masses are ordered in relation to the streets. The figure-ground diagram below shows the footprint of the buildings that form the edge of the alley. (Fig.9)

The building height versus the width of the lane allows for adequate natural day lighting and circulation of air. There is crowding during peak hours especially in the afternoons except Sundays as vehicles, pedestrians, shoppers and business owners compete for the same space.

The ground cover is made of rough layer of tarmac and slopes westwards with its six metre width permitting both pedestrian and vehicular access. Surface water runoff naturally follows the slope. However, there is need to direct the flow of surface runoff into the drainage channels. The slope allows visibility to

pedestrians of the view of Mengo Hill and Gadhaifi mosque as the key distant landmarks.

The success of the businesses in this alley depends on the attractiveness of their displays to the customers. The businesses vary from sale of plumbing appliances, electrical equipment, and textile sewing to household items such as carpets, curtains, and to personal items like clothing, school uniforms. The sewing of clothes is done outside on buildings varandahs. Majority of businesses along this alley are legitimate and conducted within the shop buildings that face the alley, except for those involved in vending light order goods such second hand clothes, and other household items. However, in attempt to create sanity in the streets and to curb informal trading and vending within the alleys of the CBD, Kampala Capital City



Fig. 9: Figure ground diagram of Kiyembe lane and its immediate built environment

Authority often disperses and arrests some of the vendors for illegal trading in the alleys.

### **Design Considerations**

Cities are increasingly recognizing the importance of alleys as key assets to their social landscape and therefore architects and planners have a role to play to guide their planning. Winslow (2009) elaborates that transcending their traditional role as corridors of commercial delivery and trash collection; many alleys can be repurposed into pedestrian friendly, economically viable public spaces that promote walkability and community. This argument is in line with Gross' (2015, 4) scholarship that there is a potential in activating alleys – “alleys can be both destinations and passages. When properly planned, they can generate safe and effective space typically for pedestrians and bicycles as well as space for social uses”. Alley revitalization efforts are now front and center in the push to make more efficient use of urban space (Cassidy et al, 2008). The hope is to attract pedestrian activity into these spaces, thereby turning dark passages into catalysts for civic and economic vibrancy, but this needs to be done while incorporating environmental practices into the framework.

Renewal of these spaces is dependent on a thorough understanding of the existing character of space in order to appropriately enhance their uses. Here the designer is only tasked with enhancing the already existing layouts of the alleys. Simply put as making necessary subtractions or additions to the spaces to enhance their function and quality. The following are important considerations:

### **Accessibility and Connectivity**

The alley between Wilson road and William street (case 1), was identified to be accessed by pedestrians only unlike the other cases (two and three) that allowed both vehicular and pedestrian access, but characterised by congestion and collisions. Also notable in the latter cases is the frequent pick-ups and deliveries made to back doors of business premises as well as movement of garbage collectors, a situation that disrupts and interferes with the movement of pedestrians through the alley and the informal businesses operating in the alley.

The aspect of connectivity of alleys to areas in the city as discussed cannot be ignored. The improvement of visibility of the alleys by character or spatial quality is paramount since alleys play a significant role as reference links to and fro specific areas. Their quality should be improved through integrating significant visual elements at its ends so as to visibly mark significant positions in the city. These visual elements could be sculptural allowing pedestrians gradual glimpses of the element as they move along the alley. This can help people easily orient themselves within the urban environment. This is in line with Kevin Lynch's advice on the concentration of special activity along the margins of paths with a characteristic spatial quality of; a special texture of

floor or façade, a particular lighting pattern, a unique set of smells or sounds and a typical detail or mode of planting. They can be applied in a rhythmic, repetitive or continuous pattern reinforcing the spatial character (Lynch, 1960, 96). The linear quality of alleys cannot be ignored therefore the line of motion should have clarity of direction, useful as places of connectivity within the urban fabric. He adds that observers are impressed, even in memory, by the apparent “kinaesthetic” quality of a path, which is simply the sense of motion along the path; turning, rising, falling (Lynch 1960, 96-97)

However, it is also important to note that the majority of the alleys in Kampala are not named. This creates difficulty for people in the city to relate with these spaces any further than just passing through. The difficulty in defining the alleys means that they continue to function as undefined spaces rather than places that people attach meaning to. Being unnamed means that the alleys, in effect, remain the unclaimed spaces in a city. Therefore to highlight their importance, the Kampala Capital City Authority management should take responsibility to name these spaces.

### **Night Lighting and Safety**

When businesses close at the end of the day, the safety of alley users is questionable, especially along Kiyembe lane (case 3). Poor or no lighting is also a major factor that compromises the safety of users of the alleys at night.

One of the ways to encourage people to move through these spaces even in the night would be to improve the quality of lighting. This can be done in a manner that creates interest in the alley. Safety can also be ensured through some form of policing as well as encouraging night-time economies such as fast-food outlets, cafes with Wi-Fi hot-spots and live music, grills or simply supporting social and artistic events like festivals in some of the alleys. This will guarantee that the alley has activity even in the night.

### **Landscaping of Alleys**

There is limited effort placed on landscaping of the alleys, making them unattractive urban spaces. The alleys do not provide spaces of rest and interaction for pedestrians. It was also observed that there was plenty of hardscape in each alley with the majority lacking in green cover. However, all the cases have potential to be transformed into soothing environments through incorporation of several elements such as green spaces and other furniture depending on each individual case context. For example, plant species would be important in the purely hard landscaped alleys, and these would not only contribute to the aesthetic appeal of the alley but also improve the overall air quality in the alley. This should be achieved partly through building planters in the alleys that would not hinder other activities but rather improve the quality of the alleys. This argument of treating each case based on its merits is in line with Tibbalds (2000), advise that there is a tendency

for architects and urban designers in the course of renewal of urban space to try to fill it up with all manner of street furniture, bollards, planters, seats, kiosks and spindly trees, the result being a visually chaotic, obstacle course for pedestrians. This is contrary to the aim of achieving attractive public space. These obstructions also pose as potential hazards especially for persons with disabilities. Therefore each situation should be examined and designed on its merits, with general advice to keep it simple derived from the overall form and enclosure of the urban space, the views out of it and the nature of uses and activities lining it (Tibbalds, 2000).

### **Pedestrian Experience**

The pedestrian in the alleys studied was seen to be uncomfortable and generally rushed through the space. The businesses that are at the periphery of these alleys as a result do not benefit from a variety of customers on the basis of the attractiveness of the pedestrian experience in the alley. The social aspect of use of the alleys can be enhanced through integration of scale variation, colour and texture. Alleys are essentially useful for connectivity in the city; therefore any additions should be placed in a way that does not compromise the ease of circulation in the space. Some built-in furniture can be used to allow people to sit in the alley and watch activity going on which also creates natural surveillance of the space. The Kampala Capital City Authority should consider customising built stalls to be used by traders so as to manage the space use.

Colour is a useful tool that can be used to brighten the alley spaces. This would particularly be useful in Case 1 that had charred black and grey walls that created a dull experience in the alley. Use of uplifting and warm colours on the walls can be used and artists can be involved to create interest on the blank walls with paintings.

Introduction of patterns and textures would help to reduce the linearity of the space and this can be used through creating a patterned floor or wall finish that uniformly defines the alleys in the City.

### **Socio-Cultural Adaptation**

The study showed that the alleys are congested with diverse forms of informal business which untidily crowded the alley spaces. On discussion with urban professionals, it was pointed out that informal activities cannot be eliminated from Kampala, but can be efficiently managed instead. Identification of informal activities that are popular or part of the culture in Kampala could be encouraged in some of the alleys. For example; aspects of the food culture can be captured in the popular 'rolex' (chapatti<sup>1</sup>, eggs and meat wrap) preparation as well as the roast chicken and sausage stands. Particular days in the week or month could be consistently scheduled when particular businesses could operate in an organised manner, so as to prevent them from constantly crowding the alleys; similar to the system of market days that were dependant on seasons.

### **Integrated Renewal Approaches and Key Stakeholders' involvement**

It is important that the various stakeholders directly or indirectly concerned are involved through creating strong and active partnerships with local businesses, property owners and local governing organisations so as to effectively devise means to improve the quality of the alleys to their benefit. KCCA should amicably forge a way forward with the informal sector that does not involve unsustainable approaches such as simply confiscating their merchandise or displacing them. They should therefore be involved in the process of renewal in order to capture their interests and put forward their ideas. Also, rather than simply involving urban managers or law enforcers, KCCA ought to engage professionals such as architects, urban planners, designers, engineers, among others in alleys revitalization process. These are people that are highly skilled and together can creatively resolve issues pertinent to the success of alleys as significant places in the city. This can be boosted through setting up of competitions in the city that require participation of various stakeholders to practically demonstrate their ideas on space remodelling.

### **Environmental Health**

Proper waste management systems are lacking. The alleys were untidy and littered with waste, which poses as a health risk. Storm water drainage was also a major challenge identified in all the alleys studied. Cases of illness were noticed particularly in case 1 due to the poor state of the alley environment. Observing good hygiene and sanitation are seemingly obvious but are important aspects not to be ignored. It was observed during the field survey that there is need for sensitization of the users of the alleys on the healthy use of space. Respective KCCA officials concerned with planning and management will also need to be sensitized on their roles and responsibilities as regards the hygiene in alley.

Maintenance of a clean and healthy environment can be managed through placement of garbage bins at intervals along the alleys and more efficient emptying of these bins should be enforced by KCCA.

Proper drainage channelling is required to direct the surface run-off when it rains. Use of permeable pavements that allow rainwater to sip through and reduce surface run off would be better option as opposed to the tarmac surfaces observed in majority of the cases studied.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has explored, analysed, compared and described the existing urban built form and edges defining the alleys, the spatial quality and use of the alleys of Kampala, the impact of the activities within alleys on the quality of the urban environment. The paper also identifies ways in which design can transform the alleys into better used urban spaces connecting different parts of the city. The research highlights the significance of the alleys in the circulation network of the city especially from the

pedestrian front. It was evident that they have the potential to be attractive pedestrian friendly places for exploration in the city; that would bring life to the unpleasant walking experience in Kampala.

The research identifies that alleys are significant outdoor spaces of linear nature, each with a distinct identity with respect to location, size and quality. It is evident that the informal sector identified the value of these spaces and from them harnesses a means of survival, and therefore defines the character and quality of the alleys. The level of unemployment in the city is high, and therefore people must forge their way ahead with whatever they can either by formal or informal means and processes.

For the alley to perform effectively, it should be perceived as more than a space for movement but rather also a place of social interaction. It is also important to note that most alleys are long spaces that easily create the discomfort of tightness of space; however the presence of physical or visual activity in the space allows the user to focus on subspaces of activity without necessarily noticing the configuration of the space. Renewal of these spaces is dependent on a thorough understanding of the existing character of space in order to appropriately enhance their uses. Here the designer is only tasked with enhancing the already existing layouts of the alleys, what Trancik simply calls making necessary subtractions or additions to the spaces to enhance their function and quality.

## ENDNOTES

1. Chapatti maybe defined as a thin pancake of unleavened wholemeal bread cooked on a griddle.

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