

## NAOMBA Square

*An occasional series on Dar es salaam's possible urbanity.*

What we need is a square. What Dar es salaam needs is a square. Make that three and more. Spread them around the city.

A square, an essential ingredient of any urban fabric, an enclosed public space bounded on three or four sides with buildings or trees, can be found in most cities round the world. Even small towns have them.

Rome has hundreds, London, Madrid and Berlin as well; Havana and Moscow have enormous ones awash with people and colourful banners on important occasions. Bangkok's are regularly filled with young people, rock music and cheap beer. For those who are sniggering at this point, lets add Maputo, Cairo, Nairobi and Luanda.

A square overflows with a multitude of activities, which, in Dar, are restricted to the ubiquitous bars, and scraps of space around the edges of the central business district.

It brings people together; any environmental determinist would prescribe one for a healthy society.

People sit and ponder, have lunch; lovers arrange and rearrange their rendezvous, groups of hot blooded youths traverse the diagonals, eyeing and being assessed at the same time. Children play, mobiles irritate, the old reassure themselves with the sound of their walking sticks on the pavement, newspaper readers fill the air with their raucous (and understandable) laughter; the unemployed debate where they will have their bones fixed now.

Does conversation have to be restricted to street corners? Does roadside lunching under the umbrella of dust or being lashed by kerosene fumes have to be the norm? Give Dar workers a square – at least.

It's not an impossibility.

Take a city centre block or half (there are quite a few doused with cars at the moment): clean it up, plant trees for that essential shade, banish the cars to the edges, ensure rainwater drains away, conjure benches, toilets, paving and perhaps some food stalls. Add guards and lighting at night. It doesn't cost much.

Dar es salaam is perhaps well suited for such urban interventions, as all the land is owned by the state; and government institutions own most of the leases in the city centre. Land transfers and exchanges are possible – the city centre is so crowded that some institutions should be glad to dislocate themselves to say, Kinondoni.

The present policy of jamming any available space in the city centre with seven or ten storied apartments in an effort to replicate say Kampala or Nairobi, or perhaps console lift suppliers, is just not feasible. The roads, which groan under a geometrical expansion of cars (18,000 per year at the moment?), date from another era.

Lets have a square and squares. Such generous acts will be appreciated by the inhabitants.

And lets not have yet another petrol station.