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## Lessons from ‘The Other Side’. Post-colonial Ideals and Everyday Inhabitation in the Michenzani blocks, Zanzibar.

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This paper tells the narrative of the everyday inhabitation of the Michenzani blocks in Zanzibar and is a case study of the extensive transformations that have been made to a post-colonial modernist housing project, relating to the notion of ‘lived-in architecture’. Extensive fieldwork observations and interviews reveal various changes into and onto the Michenzani blocks and are categorized according to their functionality. While *dwelling* relates to the strategies used by the extended family structures to fit the units in the block, *dwelling* + expands upon the stories where several functions are combined within the units. The category of *collective activities* relates to the adaptations inherently linked to the immediate outside spaces of the blocks, re-transforming them into more traditional social spaces. Microstories thus illustrate how the very static modernist frame of the Michenzani blocks contains extremely dynamic inhabitants and inhabitation.

**Keywords:** Post-colonial, Housing, Zanzibar

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## Introduction

Historically being a colonial and slave traders' city, Stone Town has an incredibly multicultural character. Its position on the Western tip of the island of Zanzibar is one of defined edges. The colonial town borders the sea in the West and a creek forms the division with the 'indigenous' African town, ironically labeled Ng'ambo or 'the Other Side', in the East.



*Figure 1.* Zanzibar city. Stone Town (on the tip) and Ng'ambo with Michenzani (the cross-figure) are recognizable entities within the tissue. (Zanzibar Planning Dept., 2005)

Embedded in post-colonial socialist thinking, the urban redevelopment of the Michenzani neighbourhood in Ng'ambo, was initiated in 1964, following the big revolution in 1963 and the succeeding Zanzibar Town Planning Scheme. The 10-block structure, designed by a team of East-German architects under Hubert Scholz, was a vigorous attempt to establish simultaneously a just and an egalitarian balance in a city until then characterized by colonial order.<sup>2</sup>

The redevelopment is brought about as the (re)foundation of the indigenous city on the tabula rasa of the 'cité'.

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<sup>2</sup> The original 'Zanzibar Town Planning Scheme' made by the East Germans envisioned 6,992 apartments in 229 buildings of five to fifteen stories, with no less than 30,000 inhabitants. But ultimately, the regime under president Karume implemented very little of the original plan and replaced it by the set of slabs of 300 m long and six to eight stories in height, now known as Michenzani. The total complex of the Michenzani "Trains" had about 1,102 completed apartments, a number that is already impressive, but stays far below the initially envisioned intervention. (Myers 1994: 455, 457; Wimmelbucker 2012: 424, 427)

It invents the African city (besides the Arab/colonial slave traders' Stone Town) and therefore proper, post-colonial urbanism reversed the order of terms: Michenzani and its surroundings were no longer the 'other side', but the very core of a new urban reality. Nonetheless, the everyday construction of the urban fabric has continued to be unrelentlessly transformed. Thus, if the new neighbourhood of Michenzani can be read as a post-colonial inscription on a former colonial condition, the ways in which the everyday construction of the city has continued to transform Michenzani is an inscription on an inscription. As Garth Myers has described: "The Michenzani project began as the centerpiece of a program to make Zanzibar a socialist city and society. Instead, the area has become a set of structures into and onto which Ng'ambo residents write their own texts." (Myers 1994: 463). The continuous transformations of the blocks illustrate attempts of not only re-appropriating the urban artifact, but also re-writing their histories. The duality evident in both colonial and immediate post-colonial urbanism is broken apart by a myriad of micro-stories, where indigenous realities embody the multiple reflections on the goals, accomplishments and deficiencies of the project.



*Figure 2. Michenzani. The 10-block structure as a rigid figure within the tissue. (Author, 2012)*

This paper specifically aims to unravel some of these texts and the life-stories of Michenzani's inhabitants. It will consider the spatial transformations of a range of meaningful dwelling units during their life span. Not only do inhabitants change and are apartments adjusted according to needs, but also the common spaces that link the several blocks are being transformed by indigenous life patterns. Although the city landscape of Ng'ambo was written over by introducing the blocks, the process these buildings have undergone ever since is constantly rewriting the story of the Michenzani blocks, often referred to as 'trains' because of their longitudinal appearance. The architecture of the dwellings was reflecting the East German idealist view on standardization in architecture, introducing rationality, order and control within public housing projects, often referred to as Existenzminimum housing. The East German design expresses a very functionalist view on architecture and is at the same time largely influenced by the (monumentality of) Soviet models. The interplay that is therefore being introduced between the socialist state's spatial ideals and the 'inhabited' ideas inherent in the dwellers' material is made manifest by the 'lived-in'- chronicles of the 300m-long iconic slabs. This 'lived-in' architecture is characterized by the valuing of the physical structure as the base for a continuous change in use. As South African Hannah le Roux has claimed, 'Modernism, at worst, is a sort of landscape of recyclable material and at best serves as scaffolding for the renewal of the city's social structures.' (2005: 52) Besides this flexibility that can be

found in modern housing types, dwellers' eager and inherent attitude to progressively adjust dwellings to fit their expectations, - also embodies the interpellations space is subject to over extensive periods of use. The narrative presented here is equally on people and places. It tells the story of the lives in/of Michenzani, and most importantly, the interrelation between the people and the space.

## **Adapting Lifestyles and Transforming Concrete Frames**

Interviews and observations in the Michenzani neighbourhood allow us to distill out of individual stories common patterns. Even though the 10-block structure has a very uniform setup at first sight, the complexity of its inhabitation becomes apparent through the diversity of dwelling experiences. At the same time, the positioning of the different blocks within the urban figure, as well as the time span over which the project has been realized, make that there are inherent differences between the buildings and the image of uniformity is being nuanced. Significant categories of change that occur within the Michenzani blocks were already investigated and defined by Garth Myers in the early 90s. He discusses various adaptations (of the life patterns within the blocks) and transformations (of the architecture itself) through the 'Voices of the Other Side'. Those express that the apartments originally were out of character with local customs as they were rather an attempt to make a shining example of socialism out of the chaotic mass of underdevelopment that was Ng'ambo (Myers 1994: 455, 458). Adaptations are mostly applying to the changes in dwelling culture due to the profound impact of the Michenzani 'Trains'. They are not adapted to traditional family dwelling- and lifestyles and therefore often change lives completely. Consequently, the apartments are used for the more extra-ordinary family compositions compared to the ones that are appearing within the Swahili compounds in the low-rise tissue along the blocks. Apart from the 'specialized' destination for the younger couples (with few children) or second/third wives, Myers also discusses how the flats become the base for speculative investments or illegal activities, like prostitution or drug trafficking. Moreover, there is the aspect of accessibility, where the lower floors are considered more suitable for old people, leading to transfers of apartments to the elderly amongst the family (Myers 1994: 459-460). Transformations on the other hand apply really to the aspect of (re-)introducing the material culture of the Swahili families back into the foreign, and at the same time idealist, project. This mostly becomes evident in the creation of meeting places in front of the buildings. Moreover, there is an extensive development of kiosk-shops, common in all of the urban fabric. Other, more practical, aspects of transformations are the introduction of water pumps, because of the very low pressure on the higher floors, as well as the protective iron gates and bars, for crime prevention (Myers 1994: 461).

## **Beyond the duality**

Being a witness of the processes of change after at least one more generation of Michenzani inhabitants, it becomes a valuable exercise to build upon, re-think and question the categories of adaptations and transformations that Myers had set up. It is precisely the interplay between and overlap of both categories that seem very relevant in the investigation of today's Michenzani neighbourhood and its multitude of changes. Thus, a frame can be proposed which is based on another logic, one of processes and activities happening in and around the blocks, revealing simultaneously the diversity of Michenzani's inhabitants and inhabitation. For this specific narrative, the social structures are investigated through the spatial changes that occur. This overlay of physical and non-physical elements becomes an indication of the transformations within the 'trains', their relation to societal shifts and the positioning of the Michenzani project within Zanzibar city.



Another element that becomes evident from the investigations in the field is the dynamism that appears in various ways throughout the cases. Not only are the inhabitants of the blocks extremely mobile. They move throughout the urban landscape from place to place, they also allow dynamism between the different blocks by inhabiting multiple units within one extended family. Moreover, dynamism is sensible in the high range of activities expanding onto the common spaces and is as well part of the evolution of the interior of the units. Leaning therefore more towards a definition of the (African) city as composed of flows, Michenzani can be labeled as a strong frame that is subject to a continuous flux.

Consequently, three categories are defined to structure the socio-physical changes: dwelling, dwelling +, collective activities. Whereas the first two apply on the inside of the dwelling units, the latter one focuses on the interface zone linking the Michenzani blocks with the surrounding (low-rise) tissue.

## Inside

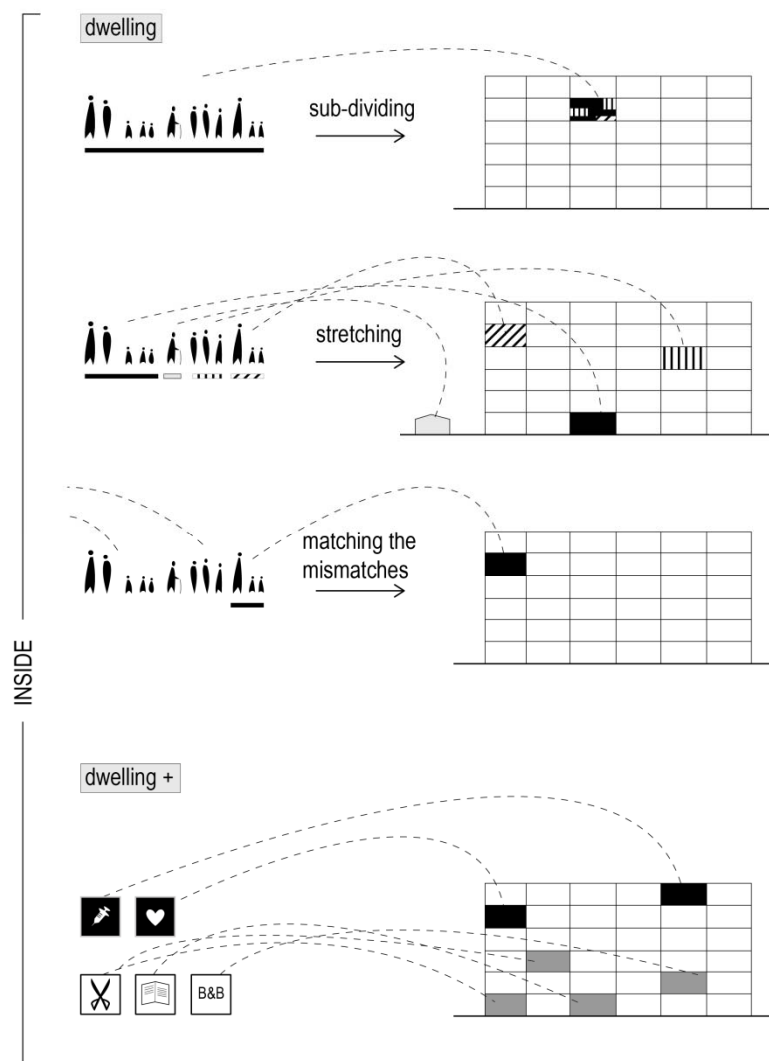


Figure 3. Inside transformation strategies. (Author, 2012)



### *Dwelling*

In the first part of the paper, the significant elements of change appearing in the inside of the Michenzani units are identified. A first category then considers the act of dwelling, under which three specific strategies of inhabitation are outlined. Those strategies are reflected in the spatial results of the everyday residential landscape of Michenzani and its environment.

Whenever discussing the act of dwelling in an Eastern African urban condition, a reflection has to be made on the notion of the extended family. Tradition allows families to live in a nucleus, where generations cross, occupations are shared and space is communal. The compound architecture that is related to this type of inhabitation was and is omnipresent in Ng'ambo. Although current trends of younger members that move out of the family unit are more common, fieldwork has confirmed that attachment to this compound lifestyle is still very present. Nonetheless, these extended family structures are not always possible within the socialist German architecture of the Michenzani trains. Therefore, there are several solutions that have been investigated during intensive fieldwork observations. Mr. Aboud summarizes as follows: 'If you live in a place, you have to adjust to it and like it. And the Michenzani flats, that's what they call development.' (interview Mr. Aboud, 03/08/2012)



*Figure 4.* Extended Family. (Author, 2012)

A first strategy that is employed, working on the tension between family size and architectural delimitations, is *sub-dividing*. Staying within the limitations of the apartment, often obtained as a resettlement house, is for some families the only option or exactly what they desire out of custom. Therefore, the unit is filled as efficient as possible, while trying to keep the cultural identity of the compound architecture as close as possible. Traditionally, there should be at least a separate room for the parents, one for the boys, one for the girls and preferably one for the grandparents. Since Michenzani flats

only have two to three bedrooms, typological problems occur and creative solutions are sought. In this respect, the Existenzminimum dwelling is still divided into parts that are even more minimal. Another aspect of friction is the courtyard, which is traditionally linked to the kitchen, and replaced in the apartments by a balcony. Again, families use the spaces creatively and adapt mostly to the new and often inconvenient conditions. The case of Ms. Mwanajuma, a 63-year old woman living in a two-bedroom apartment in block two, illustrates how the physical space is restructured according to the needs of a growing (and shrinking) extended family structure. After having received the flat as a compensation house, she lived there with her husband, parents and subsequently with up to seven children. In order to meet the demands for bedrooms, an extra partition wall was made in the living room, where the boys then could sleep. Two years ago, when she divorced and all but one son had left the house, she decided to remove the extra wall in order to have a larger living room again. One could recognize a certain pride with Ms. Mwanajuma concerning the house; although its typology is difficult to live in with eleven people, she is not planning to move out. 'I was very proud about the new house when I received it! Others that didn't like this kind of house, tried to get money instead. We stayed and built up our lives here...' (interview Ms. Mwanajuma, 01/08/2012). A significant case study is the one of Mr. Hatib and his family, who live in a two-bedroom apartment in block 5. The compensation house they received was very welcome, since the family lives in extreme poverty. Almost nothing has changed in the apartment since their arrival; the walls have received one coat of paint. Similar to the former family, the apartment was too small for the parents and five children; therefore the storage room had been transformed into a bedroom about ten years ago, in order to provide more privacy for everyone. Sometimes also bedrooms are split up into two parts by division walls. This is the case for Ms. Salama, who lives with her husband's family in a two-bedroom flat in block 7. Although the family is not extensive at the moment, the structure of two bedrooms is still inconvenient. Salama and her husband have one room, while her mother in law and the niece of her husband share the divided room. When they will get children of their own, she thinks the living room will be divided in order to have even more rooms. All three cases thus illustrate transformations of the units that go along with the changing family structure and a dynamic approach to interior architecture. The units are filling up and being subdivided against all odds, according to the family size and inventiveness of its inhabitants, reflecting the logics of the extended family in the low-rise compounds.

Whenever the spatial conditions are expanding over the borders of one unit, a second strategy identifiable is the one of *stretching*. This implies that an extended family is taking up multiple apartments or even reaching over the interface zone towards the low-rise tissue. In a certain sense this is a vertical translation/interpretation of the traditional compound, since it works as a cluster of (family) units, sharing the same common space. Only now the traditional courtyard is suspended in a certain way; it became the staircase, corridor or the interface area. It allows also a certain degree of privacy, which is not possible in the courtyard house and is therefore welcomed mostly by the younger couples. The following cases illustrate, in various degrees, the spreading of units over the blocks, being part of one cluster. Whenever possible, families try to group within one block or its vicinity. The family of Samir for example has a flat in block 7, where he has lived until he got married and moved to his own apartment in the same block. According to Samir this was necessary for allowing his own household to have enough space. But at the same time he is convinced about the advantages of being close to the rest of his family and he is happy that they often go to the parental unit for visits. The idea of the compound where the kitchen is the gathering place becomes more evident in the case of Salma. She lives, together with 11 family members, in a three-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of block 1. In the same block, her sister rents a flat (4<sup>th</sup> floor) and her brother as well (5<sup>th</sup> floor). The distribution along the different floors does not keep them to spend most of

the time all-together in the apartment on the ground floor. Basically, only during the night, the family members spread out to their own flats. The ground floor apartment has the advantage of the link to the outside space (where it is easier for the women to cook and dry laundry and where the children can play), and in this case it is also the larger unit. Similar cases have been crossed, for example in block 6, where the family of Rukaiye is spread over 3 flats throughout the block. Again the ground floor flat is used as meeting point, where family members discuss life, where children play and women cook together. The extended structure of Rukaiye's family reaches several generations, includes divorced family members and many children. The possibility to still live in the same block is very valuable for them and helps to get things sorted out easily; verticality in that sense does not really create a problem. 'We moved to Michenzani to have enough space. But then it is a very complicated project, especially with the extended family structures that do not fit in the flats. It is sometimes difficult for families to manage, but we are lucky to all be in block 6.' (Ms. Rukaiye, 15/08/2012) A more extreme condition can be observed with a family that is spread out over the interface between block 3 and the low-rise tissue surrounding it. Since one of the two family houses was demolished for the Michenzani plan, the son could live in block 3 as compensation. A strong relation has been established between the family flat and the family house since the beginning and is being reinforced by the direct visual relation between both. Although the entire family considers the flat still as the "new" house, the family gatherings almost exclusively take place in the traditional house. It seems thus as if the apartment is "something extra" and not completely part of the compound. At the same time, this setup is triggering a more semi-private use of the interface. The stretching out of families over different floors, blocks and tissues is thus quite common and shows almost always a re-interpretation of the traditional life in the compounds, adapted to the physical reality of the blocks.

If we leave the well-defined context of the extended family-structure, while staying in the same category of dwelling, another strategy is called *matching the mismatches*. This strategy implies a certain shift in thinking from the traditional family to new forms of living. The dwelling, which is not applicable to the norm, becomes the destination for types of families that are ab-normal too, creating thus a match of mismatches in the physical and social sense. One case shows how Mr. Mbaruk lives in a two-bedroom flat in block 4 together with his wife, sister and 4 grandchildren. The parents have left the flat after the first child was born and are living and working in the countryside. This jump in generations leaves the flat more spacious for the inhabitants (although the living room still has to be transformed in a bedroom at night to fit all); the children are close to good education, while the parents are able to make a living in the countryside. In the same block lives Mr. Hamid, 27-year old and looking for a job, together with his brother. The family flat has known a very dynamic inhabitant structure since their uncle received it from the government in 1982. After most of his family members have left for the countryside, he and his brother are the ones left in the flat, allowing each of them a room. Nevertheless, they still transformed the (never used) kitchen into a bedroom, which allows friends or relatives to stay over more easily or it can be rented. This illustrates how the extended family structure is sometimes reduced to fit the limits of the Michenzani apartment. Another type of re-organization, which leans towards the bachelor housing that Garth Myers has elaborated on, is a student house in block 7, where at that moment 11 boys collectively live in a two-bedroom apartment. Most of the parents live in the countryside, but they want their children to have good education in the city and therefore they rent one flat together where the boys study and sleep collectively. As one of the students says: "It is very easy here, because it is the city centre" (interview Mohammed, 28/07/2012) We could thus say that re-organization or re-structuring of the inhabitants can result in



‘specialized’ compositions beyond the family sphere, which illustrates the capability of people to leave the traditional idea of the extended family behind if the house demands this.



Figure 5. Inside the living room of a unit. (author, 2012)

#### *Dwelling +*

Next to the category of dwelling, a second category of dwelling + is defined, where the flats are used for other activities apart from dwelling, mostly linked to commerce or occupation. Reaching from commercial activities, over renting pieces of the apartment, to ‘illegal’ activities like prostitution and drug trafficking. The case of Mr. Salum illustrates how a compensation house in block 3 got partly transformed (one bedroom) into a beauty saloon where his wife has an informal business. Although no advertisement announces the business on the second floor, there are enough customers, which indicates that it is based

on a network of fixed clients, mostly from the neighbourhood itself. The combination of having the beauty saloon in the apartment, allows for Salum's wife to take care of the small children at home while earning some more money.



*Figure 6.* Informal hair saloon inside block 3. (author, 2012)

Sometimes however, this combination of living and working in one apartment becomes impossible, as was the case for Ms. Turkiye, who owns a hairdressers saloon on the ground floor in block 9. Whereas she started several years ago as a combination working – living, this became impossible since she has a son and the two-bedroom apartment became too small and thus she moved to the countryside, but kept working here. A vast amount of changes have been carried out in the apartment, as the living room was completely changed into her hairdresser's corner, the balcony was taken up as part of it, the two rooms had been transformed quite a bit in order to combine working and living there. "The extra door at the roadside was officially not allowed, but people did it anyways. Recently they started to allow these things that stimulate private businesses." (interview Ms. Turkiye, 07/08/2012) This case shows a more formal business with official announcements along the street, where customers are mostly from outside Michenzani. Another type of business is the renting out of one room to guests, as is the case with Mr. Hamid, who rents himself a two-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of block 4, making it an illegal business. He decided to transform one of the bedrooms to get international guests, while the entire family then sleeps in one room. More out of social than financial motivation, Hamid sets up this extra business. One more example of flexible use of the flats is demonstrated in the house of Ms. Asha (two-bedroom apartment, block 3, ground floor). The house is a family flat, where has always been a muslim school during the daytime. Therefore, the living space can easily be transformed into a classroom and the blackboard is permanently hanging to the wall. Most pupils come from the neighbouring houses.

Although this cannot be interpreted as a straightforward business, it is still an extra occupation held in a structure solely intended for dwelling activities. These cases clearly illustrate how transformations in and the flexibility of the block allow businesses to be established, especially on the ground floor. Whereas the formal commercial structures are on the lower floors of the blocks, the more illegal and ‘unseen’ activities are taking place on the higher floors. There, prostitution is more common, as well as drug trafficking, which goes hand in hand with the presence of the drug addicts on the upper stairs and rooftops. A vertical section through the blocks thus reveals different aspects of the dwelling + category and its changes according to the floor levels.

## Outside

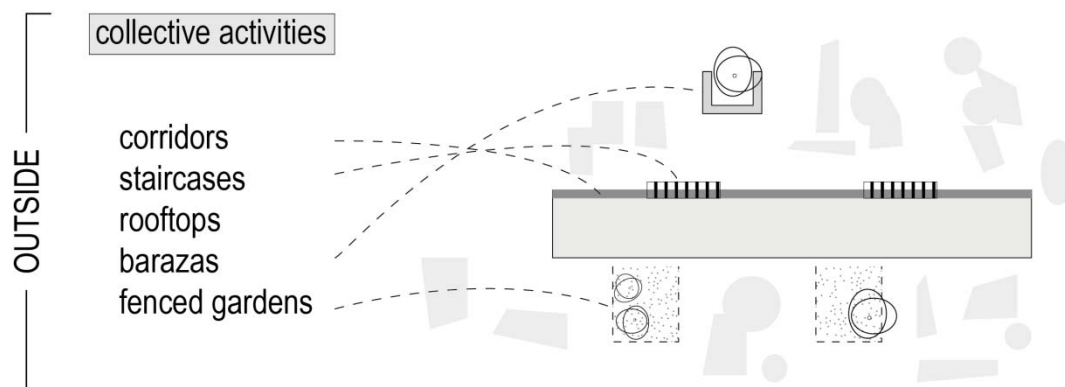


Figure 7. Transformation outside of the block. (author, 2012)

### *Collective Activities*

The second category is looking at the transformations, appropriations and adaptations concerning the immediate outside space of the blocks. This external space consists of the staircases and rooftops of the buildings as well as an intriguing interface zone between the traditional low-rise tissue and the modernist high-rise blocks. In a way the transformations and use of these spaces are incorporating cultural elements back into the concrete giants.

The baraza, a stone bench that appears traditionally in all built environments in Zanzibar and that is a place of reception, gathering, business, discussions, can be seen as a male place of socialization while it bridges the threshold between the semi-public and the private spheres. This aspect of urban life was completely absent in the design of the Michenzani blocks and is therefore, in various ways, re-introduced by local organizations or the inhabitants themselves. These newly introduced barazas are providing meeting places, shade and often water access for the blocks. Obvious differences can be seen between the both sides of the blocks, giving a different degree of domesticity to the baraza with the backside being the more semi-private. Field observations have confirmed the widespread use of the baraza structures and their role in building relationships amongst the inhabitants of the Michenzani area.



*Figure 8.* The baraza as a meeting place. (author, 2012)

Another type of outside space that is balancing between public and private is the fenced garden. Often just claimed by the inhabitants of the ground floor apartments, these outside spaces on the front side of the blocks, are used as protected green space, spaces to dry laundry, hold a few chickens, prepare the cooking and are occasionally transformed into private parking lots. Often, these gardens also help to prevent garbage to be thrown from the upper floors in front of the building. Being more linked to direct household tasks, they are rather associated to the female space, opposed to what the baraza is. In this sense, the appropriation of these spaces corresponds apparently to what the courtyard is for the traditional compounds.

Looking at these first two examples, an extra reflection has to be made related to the compound typology. The baraza as well as the fenced garden explicate elements that used to be part and parcel of the compound architecture and were missing in the original design of the blocks. By adding them, even in another format, one could see these changes also as a re-introduction of the 'inside' dwelling architecture, rather than outside. Question thus remains whether they are more part of the family sphere or of the collective activities, traditionally and today.

Looking at the collective spaces that are inherently part of the blocks, important elements are the activities on the staircases and the rooftops. They could be seen as platforms for collective activities of inhabitants of one floor or even an entire block. However, reality is not always as positive. While children are playing in the corridors and on the roofs, criminal activities are equally happening. The upper stairs as well as the roofs are linked to drug users and criminality and therefore often the inhabitants of the upper floors close the access to the roof with a gate. This links evidently with the vertical logic in general which is present in the Michenzani case and indicates territorialities at different levels of appropriation. The higher the unit, the less positive its positioning for water and accessibility, but at the same time the social status is lower



and the criminality increased. Between direct neighbours, the corridors and stairs often are a meeting place and thus important as a social landscape. The corridors are used to dry the laundry even more than the balconies, which indicates again the function of the courtyard that is being re-introduced into the public sphere.



*Figure 9. Appropriations of the outside spaces. (author, 2012)*

The list of transformations and appropriations of the outside space is evidently not exhaustive. Anyways it clarifies how processes of change are constantly adjusting the dwelling environment to the cultural habits of the Michenzani people.

## **Conclusion**

A paradox is being revealed through the lecture of several dwelling processes in the Michenzani area: the very static modernist frame contains extremely dynamic or fluid inhabitants and inhabitation. Hence, the reality of inhabiting a socialist container seems to be one of flows. Everything in Michenzani is always in motion, as nothing and nobody wants to get caught standing still.

The changes made are bringing the local culture and tradition into the blocks, mostly through introduction of the compound typology. The stereotypical visions of the German socialist typologies are becoming a base for everyday reshaping, where the enduring reality of the extended families and their Ng'ambo logics and compound structures become evident.

It should also be noted that the inhabitants are not making the adaptations solely out of necessity, but merely as a cultural expression. Michenzani does not house the lowest class only; hence the transformations described are more than survival architecture. Therefore this reading tries to go beyond this basic layer to understand the complexity of the processes that relate to the inhabitants, the architecture and the positioning of the project within the (idea of) the city.



Another element that becomes evident from the case studies is the vertical logic of the Michenzani blocks, something which is in contrast with the pronounced horizontal logic of the traditional tissue. Verticality becomes a scale for social status, age, water access as well as commercial activities. The reading of this (new) direction of dwelling is something that brings lessons for collective housing projects within the Zanzibar context.

Thus, it could be stated that the ideological design in this case seems to work as an appealing condition for everyday transformations, which leads to the questioning of fixed functional designs in a dynamic dwelling culture more in general. The most standard and traditional family-structures often result in the most pronounced transformations, something that indicates at the same time a sufficient flexibility of the frame and a devoted dynamism of its inhabitants.



*Figure 10.* Drying laundry in the corridor (block 1 looking towards block 5) (author, 2012)

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