



Demolition of the museum is equal to destroying Ugandans

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THIS article is in regard to the demolition of Uganda's only National Museum. In 2010, the Government initiated a proposal to establish the East Africa Trade Centre to replace the museum at Plot 5 Kira Road. The details of the proposal can be accessed on www.mtti.go.ug.

On April 12, 2010, a local daily reported that Uganda's Museum land title had gone missing. On November 6, 2010, the same daily again reported that Uganda's only museum faces demolition.

On January 14, the Government through the Ministry of Tourism, Trade and Industry (MTTI) ran an advert in the New Vision inviting for bids from investors interested in undertaking the task of demolishing the museum to pave way for the construction of a 60 storied ultra-modern building.

Once complete, the building will house the Ministry of Tourism, Trade and Industry and the museum will be given two floors.

The Uganda Museum was established to conserve, promote and interpret Uganda's cultural and natural heritage through research, collections, documentation and imparting knowledge for today and the future.

According to Kato Lund, the museum was designed by Ernst May, a German architect and planner.

The Uganda Museum, the oldest in Eastern Africa, was established in 1908 at Lugard's Fort on Old Kampala Hill. The museum was relocated to Makerere University's School of Industrial and Fine Arts (1942-52) and from there it was moved in 1954 to Kitante Hill, Plot 5 Kira Road where it stands today.

In 1977, the Uganda Museum was put under the Government by amalgamating its services with the department of antiquities.

Due to inadequate funding, the Uganda Museum has lost its place as the best museum in East and Central African region. In 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) prepared a Report for the Government providing priorities for improvement and development of the museum.

In 2007, a cultural village was established by the Government in preparation for the Common Wealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM).

The museum is a true reflection of Uganda's multicultural past displaying the countries indigenous culture, archeology, history, science and natural history.

Apart from being a national historical monument, the museum houses a collection of historical artifact. It is also a source of information about more than 650 cultural heritage sites dotted across the country.

This means that the museum is a centre of learning about the life, culture and heritage of Ugandans. The museum has exhibits of traditional culture, fine art, archeology, science, ethnography, paleontology and natural history and is a vivid display of Uganda's colourful past. It also has an education service unit, with qualified staff.

The museum houses the country's cultural heritage where one can see ethnological and natural historical exhibitions of all ethnic groups in Uganda. The museum has a remarkable collection including many of the items that were in the original collection housed in the old building at Lugard's Fort.

It is appreciated by many and should be preserved for its historical and architectural value; as a point of reference for research and education, heritage; and most importantly, as a source of foreign exchange.

The demolition of the museum will be a historical setback. Many Ugandans, foreign visitors and scholars have all appreciated both the museum and Ugandan society as treasures of Ugandan intellectual life and a testimony to the love of Ugandan culture that is important for a nation state.

Museums, by their nature, require special facilities that may not be in line with the broad requirement of offices.

The conservation policies and ethics of museums are different from those of ordinary offices and so combining the museum with the East African Trade Centre is a step in the wrong direction.

The museum is a historical piece that should stand alone. Destroying it, therefore, is a cultural crime and is tantamount to destroying Ugandans.

The proposed structure has no elements associated with Ugandan culture or history; architecturally the building poses construction risks since the location is said to be a wetland.

Uganda still needs the museum and every effort should guarantee its existence for posterity.

The idea of demolishing this historical monument must be scrapped. Instead, plans should be made to upgrade the museum to capture and reflect the country's cultural and socio-economic transformation over the years.

All advanced societies have preserved such centres because of their unique and vital functions, including enhancing a national identity.

Uganda has exhibited several weaknesses in the promotion and protection of tangible heritage. For instance, many buildings are being modernised at an increasing rate almost destroying their original character and others are knocked down.

There is also a general lack of awareness of the intrinsic value of the historic buildings as a heritage.

There is also a weak legal framework because planning regulations are poor due to corruption.

Bearing in mind the above scenarios, Historic Resources Conservation Initiatives (HRCI) in Uganda in collaboration with Cross Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), initiated a campaign code named "Save the Uganda National Museum Crusade" specifically to stop the demolition of the museum.

The main objective of the campaign is to compel the Government and other stakeholders to reverse the decision of demolishing the museum.

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This article can be found on-line at: <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/459/748641>

