

# Hungarian Architects in East Africa

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Africa is a diverse continent in terms of its architecture. The past few hundred years of traditional architecture is filled with variety based on geography, climate and culture. We can observe a uniquely built environment based on locally available raw materials, such as stones, wood, clay, palm leaves and even grass.

The colonial and post-colonial architecture introduced new layers on top of these old layers by applying European standards and technology to local conditions more or less efficiently and successfully. We can observe two distinct tendencies recently. On the one hand, the dynamically increasing investments in the "second race for Africa" has resulted in new buildings, districts and cities rising from the ground. On the other hand, contemporary "starchitects" appeared in Africa (such as Diébédo Francis Kéré and David Adjaye) who have drawn from their cultural heritage to create their internationally recognized works.

There are several links between East African and Hungarian architecture. There are architects born and working in Hungary who also worked in Africa, professionals with Hungarian origins who work on international projects, and East African architects who studied in Hungary. The Hungarian Jews who fled persecution before World War II, including a few outstanding architects, made up a considerable portion of foreign diasporas in Kenya. Still, their life stories and works remain relatively unknown to the Hungarian public.

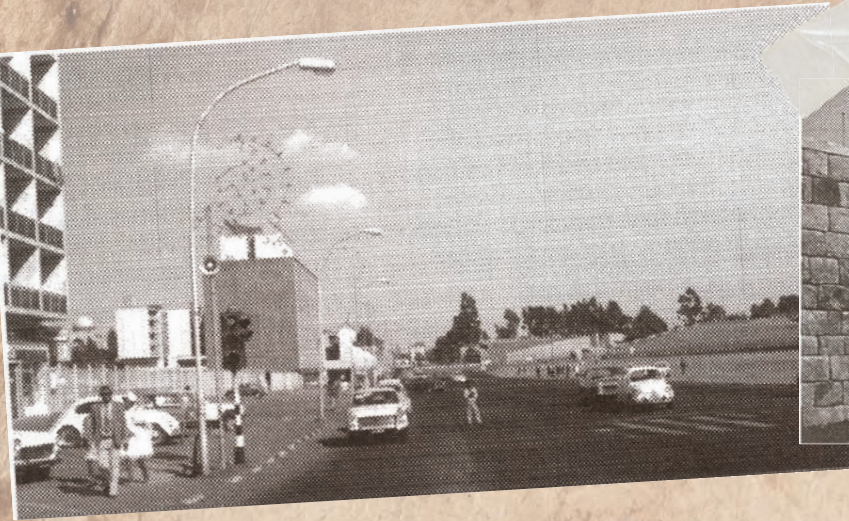
A recent photo of Meskel square, which was expanded based on the plans of Károly Polónyi.



Centrally coordinated cooperation between leaders in African countries and Hungarian architects began with the decolonization movements in the 1960s. The new governments of the newly independent states envisioned an optimistic future and undertook massive modernization projects. Therefore, they were looking for qualified, well-trained architects, designers, construction experts and teachers. With decolonization in mind, professionals from non-colonialist countries had better opportunities.

Hungary had a goal to build amicable relations with socialist and non-aligned countries. TESCO Ltd., a company founded by the Hungarian state in 1962, managed Hungarian technical and scientific development and trade projects in the developing world. The company prepared and executed agreements on technical and scientific topics (TSC) with 57 developing countries. It had permanent TSC offices in Algeria, Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tanzania until 1990.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of these agreements, several projects awaited Hungarian architects in these countries. Károly Polónyi's (1928–2002) designs and urban architecture are outstanding examples.



Károly Polónyi graduated from the Faculty of Architecture at the Budapest University of Technology in 1950 and then became an assistant lecturer at the Department of Public Building Design. After gaining experience at the Urban Planning Office (VÁTERV) and the Industrial Building Design Company (IPARTERV), he worked as the Lake Balaton Management Committee's chief engineer. The zoning plan developed at that time brought him several professional awards, including the prestigious Hungarian Ybl award for architecture in 1961.

The Hungarian architect attended the last congress of the CIAM (Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) and then became a member of the prestigious Team 10 modernist architecture group, which offered him a valuable network of international contacts. Later, he used his vast network of contacts built over the decades to develop and teach English language courses at the Budapest University of Technology.<sup>2</sup>

Károly Polónyi arrived on the continent driven by his passion for seeking out new challenges, and fleeing the political climate in Hungary, which often stood in the way of his creative spirit. As an internationally renowned expert in urban architecture, he worked on large-scale plans as a building and urban designer in Ghana, Nigeria, Algeria and Ethiopia for about twenty years starting in 1963. His career in Africa began in Ghana. He expanded the Faculty of Architecture at Kumasi City Technical University and became an organizer of the first postgraduate architect program in West Africa. He also took part in designing low-cost and efficient model farms and housing estates. He worked on a regional development project on River Volta with his multinational team involving Hungarian professionals and local students. He and his students received the Perret Award from the International Association of Architects for their work on the "Tongo Development Project".<sup>3</sup>



The Meskel square

From 1969 he was the deputy chief architect of the Budapest Metropolitan Council. Meanwhile, he had assignments in Africa simultaneously as the chief of the Public Building Design Company's (KÖZTI) design team. He prepared the development plans for Calabar in Nigeria and three Algerian cities.<sup>4</sup>

Károly Polónyi began his work in Ethiopia in 1977 as a consultant to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, which would last for three years. In 1974, the two states signed a bilateral agreement when the Marxist military junta (Derg) came to power in Ethiopia after removing emperor Haile Selassie. In addition to the bloody fights to secure their rule, the Derg also articulated several development ideas. Polónyi's first assignment was to create a development strategy for the agglomeration of Addis Ababa. This metropolis which had an estimated 143,000 inhabitants in 1938, and today there are more than 4,500,000. Therefore, several development plans were created for this city during the Italian occupation (1936-1941) due to the ever-increasing speed of urbanization in the area. Around 1955, the population was about 500,000 and the airport that opened in 1959 resulted in another population boom. Several organizations, such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) founded in 1993, had their headquarters in the city, which also affected population growth.<sup>5</sup>

Polónyi and his colleagues envisioned a decentralized solution for the crowded area: they planned to develop six or seven regional centres at least 200 kilometers away from the capital. An essential condition for the decentralized settlement network concept was constructing an appropriate road network or developing existing trails and paths. When designating the locations of smaller settlements, they did not go with the traditional principle of not occupying potentially valuable production areas because the settler families wanted to continue gardening

on the estates planned to be 800-1200 squared meters. They intended that the settlements' permanent centre buildings would be built by locally available materials. They designed the buildings to have two chambers and two terraces with roofs. Public offices, post offices, first aid stations, meeting rooms, and schools would have a place in the centres. According to their plans, 50-60 families would make up a village community with 20 acres of land. Approximately 6-8 of these would constitute a collective, and these collectives would be managed from the local centres and towns with a planned population of around 2,000 inhabitants. Unfortunately, most of these plans never came to life.<sup>6</sup>

Formulating a plan for the development of Addis Ababa city centre also presented a creative challenge. The Hungarian architect and his colleagues had three aspects to consider: developing built-in areas, demolishing existing buildings and constructing new buildings on empty estates. They recommended expanding the settlements along the highway and railroad connecting Djibouti to Addis Ababa. Additionally, they set out plans on more efficient use of the neighbourhoods around Churchill Road and Menelik II Avenue. However, an urgent problem had an impact on construction as well, which was the expansion of the Revolution (Abiyot) Square (today Meskel Square). This square was located next to the city stadium, the Imperial Palace, the Ghion Hotel and the Filwoha Healing Spring. It was a former starting point for urban planning and had long been an important site for church holidays.<sup>7</sup>

According to the plans of the communist junta, nearly half a million people in the square could have, in the ironic words of Károly Polónyi, "exercised their right and duty to express their solidarity with the government through disciplined marches."

The construction of the square had already begun based on the plans of a Finnish architect. In March 1978 (simultaneously with the elaboration of the agglomeration development strategy), Polónyi was commissioned for the second phase of the square's construction. The architects intended to connect the square to the city's infrastructure to allow continuous and diverse utilization of the square throughout the year. They were hoping that in addition to political rallies, they could develop the oval-shaped square into the capital's heart, which would host church ceremonies, cultural festivals, sports events, fairs and exhibitions. By 12 September 1978 (the revolution's anniversary), they had finished building stands on the square to host

an audience of up to 300 people. He recalls his experiences about this job in his book *An Architect-Planner on the Peripheries*, published in 1992 and translated into Hungarian in 2000:

*"I intended to create the triumphal arch with six reinforced concrete columns shaped like elephant tusks. On its inner surface, mosaics depicting scenes from 3,000 years of Ethiopian history would have been featured. And the zero-mile marker placed under the "theatre of remembrance" would have symbolized the continuity of history. We visited the site at 1:00 p.m. every Saturday with Addis Ababa's mayor and the ministers or deputy ministers responsible for building the square. They made decisions on the spot, which made the construction go faster. In my opinion, we could not start building the triumphal arch for two reasons: one is that the Ogaden war was still going on and the other was that it would increase the cost of building the Revolution Square by 2 million DMs...But the mayor interrupted me: "That's excellent news. The gentlemen will end the war two days earlier, and we already have the two million deutsche marks."<sup>8</sup>*

The Meskel square



Polónyi's vision of the square operating regardless of the ruling political parties and ideologies came true. The square got back its old name in 1992 after the fall of the communist regime, and now it hosts many community events, including the spectacular Christian Meskel festival.

Polónyi had a unique carrier, unlike any of his colleagues living in Hungary or abroad. Perhaps he was the only one who was aware of the latest international and Hungarian trends, while also combining his European perspectives with his African experiences in his works.



There is another notable figure in development projects to mention here. László Mester Parajdi (Laszlo Mester de Parajd), the Hungarian-born architect who moved to France with his family at the age of eight. He designed numerous hospitals, schools, and other buildings as the architect of several French development projects. He lived and worked in Africa for decades. His best-known work on the continent is the building of ONERSOL (Office nigérien de l'énergie solaire – Niger's solar power agency), which he designed in 1979 and received several awards. His two-year mission to East Africa was partly related to crisis management. After the 1994 crisis in Rwanda, he planned five refugee camps for the masses arriving in Burundi under the coordination of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It was a difficult undertaking because in 10 days they had to create a camp that could accommodate 25,000 people.<sup>10</sup>

However, Hungarian ingenuity helped the developing world, including African countries and other areas as well. In the socialist era, bilateral educational agreements provided young African people opportunities to study and graduate in Hungary, mainly in the applied sciences. Among them is Solomon Obedie Kimaro, the current Honorary Consul of Hungary in Tanzania, who began his civil engineering studies at the Budapest University of Technology in 1977 with a Hungarian state scholarship. After graduating and gaining some corporate experience, he returned to his homeland. With his partner he then founded a company called Mac Contractors, one of Tanzania's largest design and construction companies. The company, which employs hundreds of people, designs and builds public buildings, roads and schools, often in collaboration with foreign companies. In addition to a number of professional recognitions, the Contractors Association of Tanzania awarded them a prize for being the largest domestic company in 2005.<sup>11</sup>

Another group of Hungarian architects in East Africa is made up of designers who found their new home in Kenya. They fled from Hungary because of Jewish persecution before and during World War II. Their life stories and careers are mostly unknown to the Hungarian architectural profession and the general public.



György Vámos was born in Budapest in 1910. He graduated from the Zsigmond Kemény High School of Sciences and studied architecture in Vienna. Due to the advancement of Nazism, he joined the British government and got a job in Iraq. He later joined the British Army. However, as he was a Hungarian citizen, he fell into the “foreign” category and was interned to Uganda with many others. A newspaper article published in Hungary in July 1943 covered this story about the internment of Hungarians in Iraq, including Imre Rózsa and his wife who are introduced below.<sup>12</sup>

When he was released from the internment camp, he rejoined the ranks of the British Army, but his time in Uganda left a deep impression on him. He was impressed by the beauty of Africa’s natural environment and the coexistence of cultures. After he resigned in 1946, he did not return to Europe but settled in Nairobi, where he opened an architect firm with Heini Lustmann.

György Vámos designed several significant buildings in Kenya and neighbouring countries. In a 1969 interview, he said the following about his work: “Today, it is not yet possible or necessary in Kenya to have specialized jobs as much as in Europe. So here, being an architect (in terms of social status) means more than the European understanding of the expression. During my more than two decades of living in Nairobi, my company has designed and built hundreds of facilities in East African countries including Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Our buildings include residential buildings, churches, schools, industrial plants and hospitals.”<sup>13</sup>

His works conceived in the spirit of international modernism include, among others, the Kenya Commercial Bank building and the headquarters of the country’s most prestigious multi-ethnic association, the United Kenya Club, founded in 1946. He has held various positions at this club, and he also had two significant church assignments. One is the Siri Guru Singh Sabha Sikh temple (gurdwara), built in 1963. Its 25-metre dome offers a spectacular view from the top. He planned the dome to eliminate echoes, which provides extremely clear acoustics during ceremonies. Numerous consultations with the Sikh community preceded the elaboration of the final plans. “When an architect faces the problem of designing a religious building today, conflicts can arise that are difficult to overcome – this is an ancient debate between traditional and modern architectural notions,” he later said when recalling the challenges of this project during an interview.<sup>14</sup>

The Kenya Commercial  
Bank building



The Siri Guru Singh  
Sabha Sikh temple



The cathedral he designed in Bukoba, Tanzania opened in 1968.

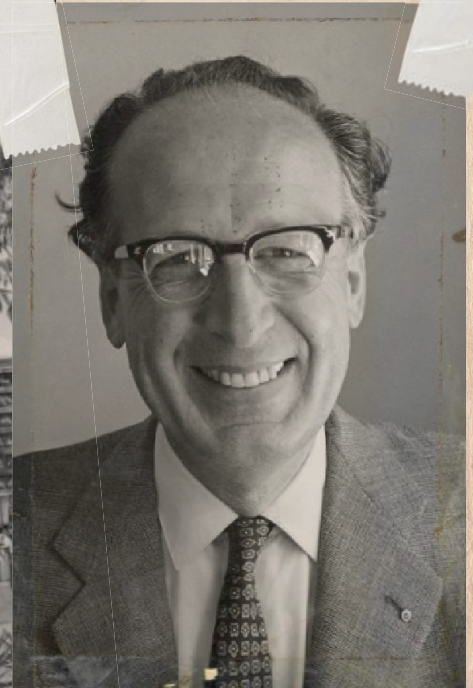
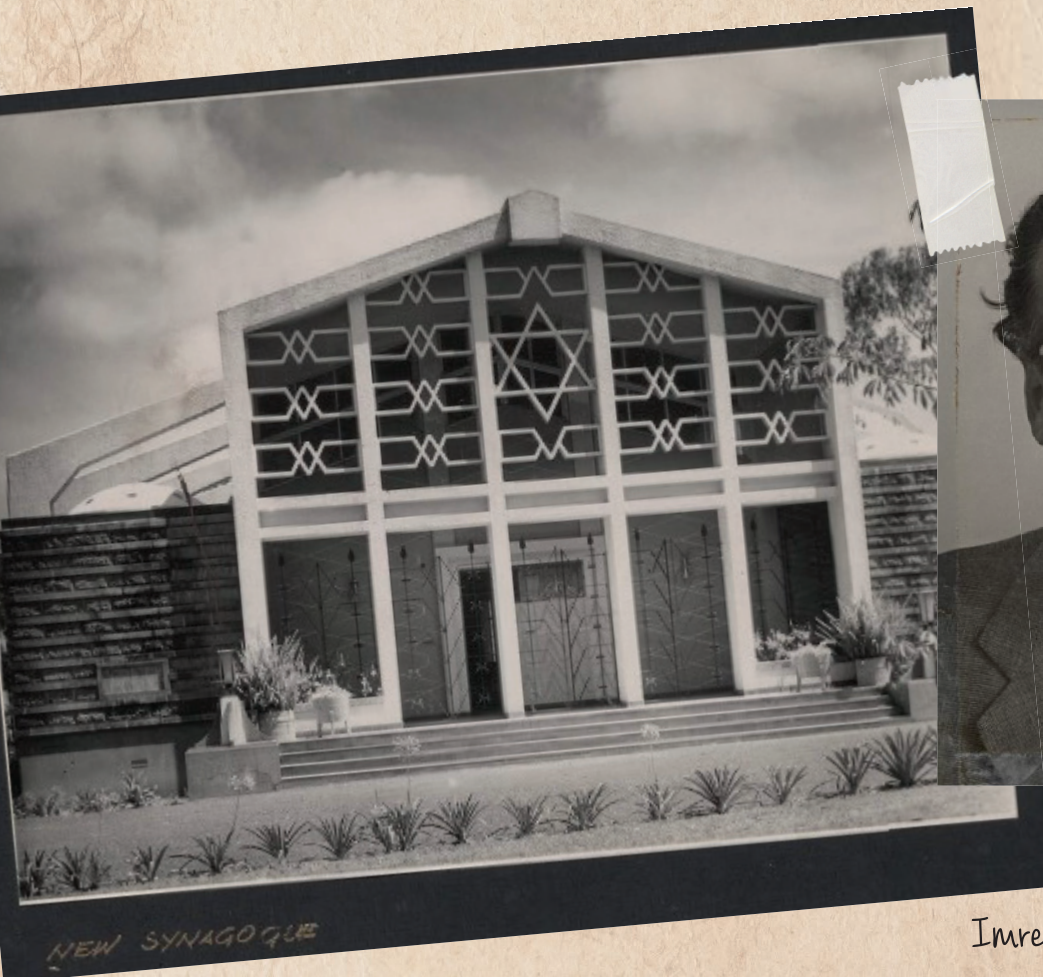
On 22 August 1978, Jomo Kenyatta, the legendary figure of the African independence movements and the first president of independent Kenya died. György Vámos had the honour of designing the mausoleum of the world-famous president, whose final resting place was designated to be next to the Parliament. The funeral ceremony was scheduled for August 31, leaving a hundred workers to build the 34-square-meter building in just a few days.<sup>15</sup>

György Vámos was a well-known figure among Nairobi intellectuals. He spoke several languages and was active in public life. He loved to travel, which he often connected to his other passions of painting and drawing, though he considered himself above all else an architect. At the end of his career, he received an award from the Architectural Association of Kenya for his outstanding contribution to the country's architecture. He moved to Vancouver with his family in his senior years, where he died in 1999.



The Maendeleo House

Imre Rózsa, another architect based in Nairobi, had a similarly adventurous life. He was born in Nagyvárád in 1911. He studied architecture but took a job in Baghdad due to anti-Jewish laws in Hungary. His fiancé moved with him, and they eventually married in 1939. The couple left Iraq in 1942 and moved to Palestine and then Mombasa, Kenya. After that, they lived in Entebbe, Uganda for some time. Imre Rózsa joined the British Army, and then he settled in Nairobi and founded an architectural firm. His three children were born in Kenya. He and his wife and kids were active members of the Jewish community. Imre Rózsa designed the new synagogue in Nairobi, which still stands, and later he became the head of the congregation.



Imre Rózsa and the synagogue

The first synagogue in Nairobi was built in 1913. After World War II, a new and larger building was needed due to the Jewish community's growth. The old synagogue was demolished and replaced in 1955 with a building designed by the Hungarian architect.<sup>16</sup>

Rózsa designed many public buildings, such as offices or department stores. He designed the building which used to house the Hungarian embassy in Dar es Salaam.

The architect and his family left Kenya in 1978 and moved to California, where two of his children were living. He died there in 1991. The family's documents are uploaded to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum database. (<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/>)



Gaál Tibor (1938-2019), mentored by Rózsa, fled to Wien after 1956, where he finished his high school studies. He graduated as an architect in 1965, and then he set out to make his fortune in the world. After a short detour to South Africa, he moved to Mombasa, where he joined the Bamburi cement company's design team. There he designed low-maintenance concrete buildings. (One of the largest construction companies in East Africa was founded in 1951 by Felix Mandl, member of an adventurous Croatian-Jewish cement dynasty.)

Tibor Gaál met with Sbish Trzebinski, a Polish architect in the design studio of Imre Rózsa, with whom he had a fruitful working relationship for about forty years. Their architectural activity contributed significantly to the boom in tourism, accounting for much of Kenya's and Tanzania's revenues.

Flamingo Beach  
Resort Spa,  
Mombasa



One of their first significant works is the building known today as Serena Mountain Lodge Hotel in Mount Kenya National Park, which they designed together with Rózsa. From the elevated structure, guests can view animals that come for water. At the same time, they built underground tunnels to give tourists access to the pond from their accommodation, where they could safely photograph animals up close. This building was the first of its kind.



*Serena Mountain Lodge*

They designed and built many hotels for their clients on the shores of the Indian Ocean with their "trademark" swimming pools that began from the reception desks through the garden to the sandy beaches.<sup>17</sup>

Typical characteristics of their style can be seen in the Tamarind Restaurant and Village Complex (Tamarind Village) in Mombasa and the Flamingo Beach Hotel. They even built an excellent water amphitheatre on a hectare of coral reef.



Tamarind Village Hotel



Their assignments in Kenya included the Severin Sea Lodge, Traveller's Beach, Two Fishes, Jadini, Saki Beach Hotel, Kaskazi, Swahili Beach Resorts, and the Blue Bay Resort in Zanzibar.

The two architects often used local materials such as traditional Swahili makut roofing. In this roofing method, they use palm leaves to cover the roof. They creatively combined this traditional coastal architecture with modern motifs.

Severin Sea Lodge



The Kunduchi Beach Hotel in Tanzania features a Swahili style that combines African and Arab architectural traditions. This building was selected as one of the top 300 hotels in the world.<sup>18</sup>

Gaál served as the honorary consul of Austria in Kenya for many years.

Kunduchi Beach Hotel

