

# Habitat Apartments high-rise tower is Nairobi's first 'vertical village'



Architecture and interior architecture practice Paragon, in conjunction with Design Source of Nairobi, is overseeing Habitat Apartments in Kilimani, a 24-storey, 160-unit mixed-use apartment tower. Under development by Ekco Investments, the project is scheduled for completion by mid-2020.

The design brief was for a tall building that maximised the development potential, while containing excavation and foundation costs. At first, the project was envisaged as a long-stay apartment-hotel. However, both the brief and the sales process evolved over time, explains Paragon Founding Director Henning Rasmuss, who attended the official site-handover ceremony on 8 November 2017.

Habitat Apartments “rethinks the concept of a vertical village” in a site that straddles the urban network of Nairobi’s Kilimani Central Business District. “The idea was to be as efficient as possible, and afford the city perhaps its first vertically-articulated building,” Paragon Architect Edwin Seda comments.

In this context, the smallest unit size, a studio apartment, explores the same level of spatial discipline as the largest penthouse at the very top. The building’s verticality was emphasised in the planning and massing through a series of linear signatures on the façade, with multiple occurrences on the lighting fins, façade openings, and an overall perforated concept to the building that fades as the building rises.

The design brief was developed by Paragon in conjunction with Design Source of Nairobi, a multidisciplinary firm of architects, interior designers, and project managers. Design Source provided local expertise, with joint design sessions to ground the scheme to fit the city’s reality.

Both the client and the project were introduced to Paragon by Design Source, its preferred architectural partner in Kenya. “We have a long working history, and share most of our Kenyan opportunities with Design Source. It is a two-way strategic working partnership,” Rasmuss elaborates.

While Ekco Investments is a new client, its profile is fairly common to Paragon’s business ventures in continental Africa. This powerful and influential local land-owning family has proven success in a number of business sectors, including property development.

“The project is very important in its visibility and location, and in terms of its height,” Rasmuss stresses. Not only is it the tallest building Paragon has overseen to construction phase to date, it also strengthens its position in the Kenyan market. Rasmuss adds that Paragon has already been in the construction phase of the 24 000 m<sup>2</sup> Crystal Rivers Mall in Mavoko for over two years, for example.

Highlighting the challenges of working in Kenya, Rasmuss points to the quality of the structural engineers as the biggest hurdle. In this regard, Paragon now collaborates with Natacel, a proactive and dynamic local Kenyan practice.

The main raw material used, Nairobi blue stone, added an element of “cubic permeance” to the scheme. The brise-soleil articulation of the stone took a simple material and advanced it a step further in how traditional materials are used in the modern age. “This is especially important as an aspect of identity, and to reduce the carbon footprint,” Seda notes.

The brise-soleil articulates the podium and shapes the building, while at the same time shading the parking structure and allowing these spaces to ‘breathe’. The total green area – comprising planted sections vertically across the building – accounts for 30% of the site, including the landscaped street interface, the planted podium on the entertainment level, and the rooftop entertainment level gardens, which comprise 430 m<sup>2</sup> of the 1 400 m<sup>2</sup> site.

“This was important in ensuring a somewhat ‘giving back the green’ approach. Taking the planted screen into consideration, the ratio almost balances out at a 50/50 percentage of building coverage to site greening,” Seda reveals. Lighting was also a key element. The striped façade introduced a new multiple identity, with each floor transitioning seamlessly into the next.

The intimate balconies, tucked away from the streets as somewhat internal amenities, are really just nooks that spill out from the internal spaces, terminated only by the façade that stops short to stagger the planes vertically.

Rasmuss reveals that Paragon plans a staff exchange with Design Source in the near future. “We are already compatible in terms of software adoption and working methods. More importantly, we share values and ethics that are similar and very compatible.”

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