

# CR



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# Urko Sanchez Architects

*Anyone visiting Urko Sanchez's beautiful offices in the plush Links Plaza, Nyali, might get a surprise when they find Urko and his staff all barefoot! There is a notice which says it's an optional choice for visitors, but it is rather refreshing and innovative – which perhaps describes the architect himself as Patricia Scott found out.*



Urko Sanchez was born and raised in Spain, where he completed his architectural studies – which, he says took him 10 years to complete as they were interspersed with travel, which he loves to do. As part of his studies Urko participated in various architectural projects with NGOs in several countries, working as a volunteer, giving him invaluable experience in many different countries.

“I worked in different conflict zones” he recalls, “mostly building camps, schools and clinics. One of my first assignments was on the border of Somalia and Kenya, and I think perhaps that is where my love of East Africa first began.” After some years of experience, Urko decided to

make his base in Kenya and started off living in Lamu, enjoying the peace and tranquility after the high conflict countries he had been working in. He was commissioned to go back to Spain to renovate special up-market projects like the Real Madrid Football Club and the Salamanca Cathedral, before returning to Kenya after a couple of years. He built a hotel on Lamu island and found himself drawn more and more into building in Swahili structural style - with modern innovations where required.

About 8 years ago, he and his family moved to Mombasa where they set up a home and an office, establishing and working with a well honed multi-cultural team with both local and international track records. The company's aim is to focus on quality architecture, and to be proud of the finished building. With a 'green' aesthetic, their emphasis is on local materials, natural light, open courtyards, private gardens, wind and solar power, and recycled water – ancient traditions meeting contemporary advances. “I like to create innovative projects that transform plots and properties into vibrant residential or commercial communities; projects that inspire, excite and serve a purpose; high quality, diverse and aesthetically pleasing” says Urko. Their varied assignments cover a large part of Africa, from Somali to northern Mozambique.

“The Swahili culture is extremely rich, it has developed over centuries” says Urko. “I believe buildings should be rooted in the place where they are built, and we aim to



Architect Urko Sanchez



understand the needs of the client and incorporate those with our aesthetics.

“Implementation is a complex process” he continues. “Makuti roofs, for example, are not really in the Swahili culture, they are more a coastal development, but with our aim to use local materials where possible, they are an attractive feature of many of our buildings”.

How does Urko see the rules pertaining to building in Kenya? “Regulations are completely outdated,” he states. “A complete review is needed, from licencing, regulations to controls – and many other things. But he adds, “I think Kenya is advanced compared to many African countries; developments are taking place, and there are always risks in building, it is not easy. But we should not allow development just for its own sake, we need clear directions

on where the country is heading, what it can or what it should have.”

“An example of something that needs attention is the drainage system in Lamu. Years ago, the island was home to only about 700 people. Then they had dry latrines and wells sited near them did not become contaminated. Now flush toilets create ‘black water’ (a term used for toilet waste) which contaminates the water table so there is no drinking water in Lamu town. As well, the open drains in the streets are no longer a healthy option. A complete review is needed, bearing in mind the number of people now living on the island, and their needs. Filters, biodigesters are required – this is the sort of thing we include in our designs for our factories, schools, clinics designs”.

Among many other awards, Urko Sanchez recently won the International Young Architects in Africa Competition, by CA’ASI Association (France). This year the office was awarded Best Hospitality and Best Residential Honorable mention by the Architectural Association of Kenya Awards of Excellence.

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