

# 2 Property



## Cutting corners?

**Choosing inferior materials or inexperienced contractors may reduce costs initially, but such decisions often result in higher maintenance expenses, safety risks, and shortened building lifespans. What seems affordable today can become a financial burden tomorrow**

BY WINNIE ONYANDO

If walls could talk, many buildings across the country would tell stories of rushed decisions, skipped expertise, and costly regret.

Following last week's discussion on common mistakes made by aspiring homeowners, this feature looks at the professionals who are too often left out of the construction process and how their absence has contributed to stalled projects, unsafe homes, and tragic building failures.

"When people admire a skyline or walk into a new building, they rarely think about what could go wrong," says

Mutinda Mutuku, President of the Institute of Quantity Surveyors of Kenya (IQSK).

"But buildings do not fail suddenly. They failed because risks were ignored, costs were unchecked, and professional oversight was missing." When developers think of construction professionals, architects and contractors usually come to mind, yet one of the most critical figures in any successful project often works quietly in the background; the Quantity Surveyor. "Quantity Surveyors are the financial and contractual custodians of the built environment," Mutuku explains.

"Ignoring their role is not just an oversight, but a risk that can

cost developers, investors, and even the public dearly."

A Quantity Surveyor (QS) is trained in cost planning, procurement, contract administration, and financial control throughout a project's lifecycle.

From the first idea on paper to the final handover, the QS ensures that money is spent wisely, contracts are fair, and costs remain under control. "In simple terms," says Mutuku, "while others focus on what is built, the Quantity Surveyor safeguards how much it costs and how well resources are used."

**Starting right: cost certainty from day one**

One of the most damaging mistakes developers make is beginning construction without a realistic budget. Before ground is broken, Quantity Surveyors prepare feasibility studies and cost estimates that help clients understand whether a project is financially viable. These early decisions shape everything that follows.

"When this stage is skipped, projects often start strong and collapse midway, that's how we end up with abandoned buildings and stalled sites across the country."

He says that many developers underestimate how quickly costs escalate through material price fluctuations, design

changes, or poor planning.

Without professional cost guidance, he notes that small miscalculations snowball into major financial crises.

One common misconception Mutuku notes is that Quantity Surveyors exist to make projects cheaper. In reality, their focus is on value, not just price.

"A QS does not aim to cut corners, we aim to balance quality, durability, sustainability, and cost," Mutuku says.

Choosing inferior materials or inexperienced contractors may reduce costs initially, but such decisions often result in higher maintenance expenses, safety risks, and shortened building lifespans.

"What looks affordable today can become a financial burden tomorrow," he warns.

**Where many projects collapse**

Construction contracts are complex, technical, and high-risk, yet many developers sign them without fully understanding their implications.

Quantity Surveyors manage procurement processes, prepare tender documents, evaluate bids, and administer contracts to ensure fair risk allocation among all parties.

"Where QS input is missing, disputes become common," says Mutuku. "Claims escalate, Continued on Page 26



One of the most persistent myths in construction is that skipping experts reduces costs

# Never ignore these experts when building your house

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projects stall, and relationships break down."

In Kenya's construction sector, disputes are among the leading causes of project delays and cost overruns, many of which he says could be avoided through proper contract management.

While financial mismanagement can cripple a project, missing engineering expertise can turn a building into a ticking time bomb.

"Many people believe a building only needs an architect and a contractor," says Florah Kamanja, an engineer and council member of the Institution of Engineers of Kenya (IEK).

"That misconception continues to expose the public to unnecessary danger."

Engineer Kamanja explains that every safe building relies on a coordinated team of engineers, at a minimum, geotechnical, structural, electrical, and mechanical engineers.

"These professionals work as a system," she explains.

"Decisions made by one directly affect the others."

Every building rests on the ground, yet many developers begin construction without understanding the soil beneath them.

"This is the responsibility of the geotechnical engineer," says Eng. Kamanja.

"Soil investigations determine bearing capacity, settlement behaviour, groundwater conditions, and risks such as expansive or weak soils."

These findings, she says, directly inform foundation design. When soil studies are skipped or ignored, foundations are designed based on assumptions, rather than facts.

"And assumptions eventually fail," she warns.

"Sometimes not immediately, but years later, when cracks begin to appear or the building starts to sink."

Using geotechnical data, the structural engineer designs the building to safely resist all loads throughout its lifespan.

"Structural elements must act as a single system," Eng. Kamanja explains.

"Columns, beams, slabs, and foundations are not independent pieces, structural drawings specify more than dimensions, they define reinforcement detailing, concrete grades, material standards, sequencing, and tolerances."

"When these requirements are ignored or altered on site, the structure no longer behaves as



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Mutinda Mutuku, President, Institute of Quantity Surveyors of Kenya



designed," she says.

Many structural failures in Kenya, she points out, are traced back to unapproved drawings, sub-standard materials, or changes



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Brendah Gitonga, Vice Chair, Architects Chapter (AAK)



made without engineering review such as adding extra floors or reducing reinforcement.

**Services that keep buildings alive**

Modern buildings rely heavily



**Soil investigations determine bearing capacity, settlement behaviour, groundwater conditions, and risks such as expansive or weak soils**

Engineer Florah Kamanja, council member, Institute of Engineers of Kenya



on mechanical and electrical systems, yet these are often treated as afterthoughts.

Electrical engineers assess loads, design safe power distribu-

tion, and specify protection systems to prevent overheating and fires. Mechanical engineers design plumbing, drainage, ventilation, fire suppression, and vertical transport systems.

"When these professionals are excluded, installations rely on guesswork," says Eng. Kamanja, adding that the building may look complete, but it becomes a latent risk.

She adds that poorly coordinated services often lead to dangerous practices such as cutting or drilling structural members to pass ducts and pipes, thereby compromising structural integrity in the process. From an engineering perspective, the earliest stages of a project carry the highest risk and the greatest opportunity to reduce it.

"When engineers are involved early, risks are addressed cheaply and effectively," Eng. Kamanja explains.

"But when involvement is delayed, corrections become disruptive, expensive, or impossible."

"Engineers are trained to prevent failure, not explain it after it happens," she says.

## The myth of saving money

One of the most persistent myths in construction is that skipping professionals reduces costs.

"This is a false economy," Eng. Kamanja says firmly.

"Engineering costs are predictable. Failure costs are not."

Defects eventually surface, as cracks, leaks, electrical faults, fire hazards, or structural instability.

At that point, costs multiply, covering repairs, legal claims, loss of rental income, reputational damage, and in some cases, loss of life.

Mutuku echoes this, maintaining that, "Professional fees are small compared to the cost of failure. Skipping experts does not eliminate costs, it postpones them and magnifies them."

However, beyond cost and safety, professionals bring accountability.

"When qualified professionals are engaged, someone takes responsibility for decisions made and when quacks are used, responsibility disappears," says Eng. Kamanja.

To strengthen oversight, the IEK, in collaboration with the National Construction Authority (NCA) and the Council of Governors, developed a Site Inspection Handbook to guide multidisciplinary inspections across the construction lifecycle. The handbook provides structured checklists for structural, electrical, mechanical,

environmental, health, and safety compliance therefore helping inspectors and developers ensure standards are met.

Brendah Gitonga, Vice Chair, Architects Chapter (AAK), says engaging a qualified architect is not a luxury but a safeguard against costly and irreversible mistakes.

"A good architect helps you maximise your land's full potential; functionally, financially, legally and aesthetically while minimising expensive errors that often arise from poor planning and rushed decisions," she explains.

She explains that many developers focus only on drawings and approvals, forgetting that architecture goes far beyond paperwork.

"Architecture is not just about putting up walls. It is about designing spaces that respond to human needs, climate, and the environment. When you involve an architect early, you are not just building a house; you are shaping how people will live, work and feel in that space for decades," she says.

She adds that thoughtful design directly impacts health and long-term building performance.

"Natural lighting, proper ventilation, correct orientation of the building, and the use of safe, sustainable materials are not aesthetic luxuries but they are health considerations. A well-designed building reduces energy costs, improves comfort and enhances overall wellbeing."

Gitonga warns that ignoring these principles can turn buildings into silent health hazards.

"When ventilation is poor and materials are poorly selected, occupants may experience headaches, respiratory problems, fatigue and allergies, what we call sick building syndrome. Unfortunately, many developers only realise these risks when it is too late and costly to rectify," she says, adding that an architect protects one's vision, budget and health.

Cutting corners at the design stage, she says, often leads to cutting into your pocket and sometimes your quality of life later. Apart from surveyors, engineers and architects, one also needs a physical planner who will check zoning laws, land-use regulations, and help with county approvals.

The Physical Planners will ensure that what you want to build is allowed on that piece of land, whether residential, commercial, or mixed-use, while a qualified contractor will help in coordinating workmanship, materials, timelines, and safety.

It needs no saying that using unqualified fundis without supervision often leads to poor finishing, delays, and wasted materials.

Finally, you also need a Clerk of Works or Project Manager who will act as your eyes on site, ensuring work is done according to drawings, specifications, and quality standards. This will protect you from shortcuts and shoddy work.

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wonyando@ke.nationmedia.com