

One group is redefining Nairobi's public space. Urban Mirror Loves You

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Maybe you've seen him out and about cruising the streets of Nairobi. You can't miss him. He wears a blue jump suit and a big red heart. He leaps frowns and frustrations in a single bound. He shakes off mambo, maneno and prying police with a belly laugh. He is the city's unsung superhero. He is: Upendo Hero.

Like all superheroes he has one special power and mission. It is Upendo's mission to waylay and forever kill the demon known as 'Nai-robbery' – the evil incarnation born from the view of Nairobi as a disastrous, crime filled, urban quagmire.

How do you suppose he plans to conquer his wicked, ethereal foe? Well, love, of course. What else? And as you read this, he is out there somewhere spreading his unique message of affection for Nairobi through performance art, poetic postcards and 'I (Heart) NRB' graffiti. "What?" you say. "Is that all?" "No lightning bolts, no super strength?"

It all depends on your belief in the power of super hero love; ultimately, in how you view the use of public space to change attitudes towards one's community. Urban Mirror's main trickery as an art troupe is in presenting new ways to look at how we define the use of public space. They say it can save our city.

Upendo Hero is just one of the recent incarnations from Urban Mirror's secret laboratories, the CBO behind Nairobi's guerilla, public-art movement. Through their on-going project, 'I (Heart) NRB', Upendo Hero was born.

"We are killing Nai-robbery [a term coined during the 1990's when the rate of crime across the city was at an all time high]," says Urban Mirror co-conspirator and the locally based Cultural Video Foundation (CVF) co-founder, Vincenzo Cavallo. "We don't want Nai-robbery anymore, we love Nairobi. So, Upendo is painting the

message of love throughout the city. Sometimes we are allowed to paint at public spaces; if not, we use guerilla tactics.”

“At the beginning, the concept of ‘I (Heart) Nairobi’ was just a logo,” says another Urban Mirror compatriot and CVF counterpart, Silvia Gioiello. “Then a local artist came along and turned it into a project that gave life to the character, Upendo. Then we really started to think about the power of love and how we could use it to spread new concept of public spaces around Nairobi”.

This ‘love-thinking’ lead to an event late last year designed to designate Westlands as a ‘love zone’. This saw Upendo walking around in his big red ‘love’ hat giving out t-shirts, painting walls with ‘I (Heart) NRB’ and generally spreading the message of love in pubs around Westlands.

But there is more to Urban Mirror than a hippy love fest and superheroes. The real ethos behind the artist’s collective is to drive a new perception of public space, or maskani.



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“Maskanis are defined as something between ‘community’ and ‘public space’... a place where the community decides: ‘okay, this is our public space’,” says Urban Mirror partner and Ukoo Flani member, Richard Mukenji (Richie). You can think of it as a committee of people living in a certain neighborhood coming together in a specific spot.

"This concept and the current momentum behind Urban Mirror started at the Kuona Trust sponsored and Mombasa-based Urban Wasanii workshop in June 2008.



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