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### **The Invisible Hand: Female Bureaucrats and Architecture of Foreign Aid in Post-Independence Kenya**

On a not-so-bright day in May 2023, having braved the perpetually heavy traffic and the busy crowds of Nairobi’s Moi Avenue, I settled into a two-week routine at the Kenyan National Archives. Following a series of back-and-forth negotiations with archival custodians and a deep search in the archival storage, I was kindly provided with long-displaced and dusty folios of the Kenyan Ministries of Work, Health and Economic Development and Cooperation from the 1960s and 1970s. Patiently delivering new volumes, the archivists still did not seem convinced I could discover anything of historical value there. In my research, I was primarily interested in the traces of Nordic architectural and infrastructural projects constructed in post-independence Kenya through networks and institutions of foreign aid, hoping to find the usual sources—drawings, project documents, and reports. Instead, I found myself amidst a chest of treasures: heaps of the seemingly faceless files revealed a vibrant historical snapshot of several Kenyan governmental agencies coloured by enthralling internal politics, staff shortages, international hires, global political alliances, endless negotiations of projects and responsibilities and—most importantly—an array of individual professionals engaged with various interdisciplinary ventures.

A recent project and publication of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, *Fugitive Archives: A Sourcebook for Centring African in Histories of Architecture*, questioned the role of the archives in writing architectural histories of the Global South. In an accompanying editorial, the curators explored the notion of archival “re-centring” and suggested that such a revision would require expanding the set of primary sources and including new media and documents which might not have seemed worth preserving. In a follow-up conversation on the ephemerality of archives, the researchers argued in favour of the sources that “speak of the process, the atmosphere, and the context within which material was created.”<sup>1</sup> These “ephemeral” artefacts prioritise the processes over the final product and highlight the light

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<sup>1</sup> Doreen Adengo, Warebi Gabriel Brisibe and Ramota Obagah-Stephen, Rachel Lee and Monika Motylinska, in *Fugitive Archives: A Sourcebook for Centring Africa in Histories of Architecture*, eds. Claire Lubell and Ragico Ruiz (CCA/Jap Sam Books, 2023), 157-158.

agency of actors overlooked and obscured in more “official” narratives. In my search, it was precisely the multitude of bureaucratic documents, and not architectural archives, which served as such “ephemeral” artefacts, accumulating a unique historical record of the many people, processes and negotiations long before any construction project was set in place.

A few records are as ephemeral as handwriting on the margins, a small note on a typed letter, or an abbreviated signature re-appearing across official pages. While browsing through the many folios related to Nordic aid projects in Kenya, I encountered a small, handwritten signature of “JT,” which appeared as a sign-off on an increasing number of documents. From single files scattered across different Ministries, an entire volume from 1967 was signed and archived by the mysterious “JT.”<sup>2</sup> JT seemed busy at work, negotiating a wide range of agreements from educational qualifications of overseas architects and the bureaucratic intricacies of international compensation to aspects of new regional planning, administration of cooperative construction companies and concrete details of new university buildings. As I read through more files, I grew increasingly curious about who this person was. For a researcher who spent some time in bureaucratic archives, they are far from faceless entities. Tracing back-and-forth correspondence files, one gets to know the many individual characters involved and gets drawn into the many plot twists and turns of political negotiations often worthy of a soap opera. Who was this mysterious JT? Soon, I discovered that “JT” stood for Miss Joan Tyrrell, a woman who adopted the abbreviation for time-saving purposes for the myriads of documents and draft letters she had to sign. Appointed as an under-secretary to the Treasury on March 15, 1964, less than half a year after the end of the seven decades of British rule, Joan Tyrrell occupied a curious (and largely invisible) position in Kenyan bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> More important for my research, she was the key person liaising between the Nordic officials and the political decision-makers of the Kenyan state, turning the many projects of the Nordic physical planning infrastructure into reality.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, volume AMB/17/26, “Technical Assistance from Norway,” 5/1/1967 to 7/6/1967, in Kenyan National Archives, the archive of the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development. All the files in the volume have been indexed and signed in with the initial JT.

<sup>3</sup> “Miss Joan Tyrrell,” *Kenya Government Gazette*, number 1, 1964-01-01.

## The Invisible Hand

As I read further, I discovered the invisible hand of Joan Tyrrell, which stirred Kenya’s developmental projects of the 1960s. She occupied a crucial position in the Kenyan Treasury, overseeing the government’s capital development budget and negotiations with international aid donors.<sup>4</sup> In the post-independence Kenyan government, an entire Technical Assistance Department of the Treasury was set up to channel foreign aid from the many international donors eager to establish a soft geopolitical presence in a newly independent region. Connecting the interests of the many stakeholders was a tricky position. As the Treasury’s General Secretary noted in his letter to Tyrrell, the danger for the Technical Assistance Department was to become a “glorified mailbox,” and the main task of the Treasury officials was to distinguish between the “*bona* and *mala fide* requests.”<sup>5</sup> In the “decade of development,” development was good business for local political actors and international donors, while mismanaged technical assistance often incurred substantial financial burdens in the long term. This meant that Treasury officials had to critically evaluate and assess the viability of the many often unrealistic projects. As was later remembered by the Treasury’s employee, “the main role of the Treasury official was to say no.”<sup>6</sup> To do so, Treasury decision-makers had to develop a broad knowledge of the planning needs of the respective departments and pursue a *realpolitik* approach.

Developmental aid projects in post-independence Kenya were administered through close cooperation between the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development and the Ministry of Finance, the Treasury. The former primarily dealt with aspects of Technical Assistance, while the latter allocated development funds. In practice, as Vince Cable, a Treasury employee in the 1960s, remembered, this meant inevitable tensions: the Treasury controlled the “sinews of financial power” but “had a narrow, bean-counting approach to economics,” while the Planning Ministry “occupied the political and intellectual high ground but had no direct control of how money was actually spent.”<sup>7</sup> As the Treasury’s under-secretary, Tyrrell played a crucial role in the financial decisions behind development projects and negotiated stakeholders’ interests across different state departments and international

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<sup>4</sup> Vince Cable, *Free Radical* (London: Atlantic Books), 87.

<sup>5</sup> P.S. “Technical Assistance for Fisheries and in General,” a letter from J. Laulanie, August 14, 1968. In AMB/14/59, Kenyan National Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Cable, *Free Radical*, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Cable, *Free Radical*, 81.

agencies. Cable, who worked under Tyrrell, remembered she was “in charge of the government’s capital development budget and of negotiations with aid donors. Thanks to her as much as anyone, new roads, water supplies, agricultural credit, tourist lodges, and small-scale industries multiplied rapidly in post-independence Kenya.”<sup>8</sup> The projects she worked on ranged from infrastructural works and concrete buildings to establishing new educational institutions and programs to educate new Kenyan planning professionals.

However, while Tyrrell’s role could be traced in professional documentation and occasional mentions in memoirs, little information could be recovered on her educational background or even details of her early professional career. Before joining the Kenyan Treasury, Tyrrell worked in the colonial administration in Nigeria. When I first encountered Tyrrell’s name in the archives, I was immediately invested in tracing the story since it was still uncommon for a woman to occupy such a high position within a state apparatus. She was, in fact, the only woman of such calibre whose name remained in the archives. Indeed, Tyrrell belonged to a different class of actors, often overlooked in architectural history—politicians, bureaucrats, economists, engineers, technocratic decision-makers—who contribute to the many decisions behind any construction or planning project. My research was structurally limited by my initial interest in architectural and planning projects carried out under the auspices of Nordic developmental aid. Following the traces of Tyrrell’s invisible hand in archives in Nairobi and Oslo, I could piece together her role in implementing regional planning and construction projects in 1960s Kenya. However, this might be just a fraction of a much larger story, as she worked with other administrative and economic projects carried out by the Treasury. However, the many bureaucratic documents signed by or addressed to Miss Joan Tyrrell that I could access reveal a woman with a range of personal and political ties, substantial knowledge of different planning concepts and whose advice was solicited by many professional planners.

### **Setting Up Development**

Tyrrell was engaged with Norwegian development projects from the beginning of her appointment in Kenya, which also corresponded with the start of the official Norwegian

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<sup>8</sup> Cable, 80.

cooperation with Kenya. In July 1964, Nairobi hosted an international OECD conference on Technical Cooperation, during which new contacts were established between the interested donor countries and state officials within the Kenyan government.<sup>9</sup> The follow-up correspondence between Tyrrell and J. M. Keriri, a representative of the Kenya President’s office, reveals that Tyrrell was a part of the initial contact with the representatives of the Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD).<sup>10</sup> Personally familiar with the NORAD’s representative, Mr Eskild Jensen, Tyrrell sat at the juncture between Kenyan interests and the financial offers of the Norwegian donors—and this juncture was critical for turning an array of ideas into concrete projects and buildings.

The framework of the Norwegian aid was based on the premise of “empowerment,” where original funding requests had to come from the recipient country. In practice, this meant that the funding requests still had to fit into the priority frameworks established by the Nordic countries and had to provide an actionable plan. Through networks of foreign aid, Nordic politicians were working to solidify their geopolitical power in the region based on the image of “humane internationalism.” With the assumption that the Nordic welfare model could be reproduced in other contexts, Nordic assistance prioritised “social” programs related to health, population and education.<sup>11</sup> In addition, projects related to cooperatives, agriculture, fishing, and forestry were emphasised since Nordic countries could provide the necessary expertise. The archival evidence suggests a complex negotiation between the Norwegian and Kenyan interests: Norwegian donors preferred specific projects, while Kenyan officials were interested in maximising the potential financial gains. Nordic donors preferred a certain course of action, but the formal request had to come from the Kenyan side. To mediate this complex dynamic, enter Joan Tyrrell: a woman who, on the one hand, had the weight and the authority within the Kenyan state apparatus and, due to her British background, could foster close ties with the Nordic representatives.

Tyrell then played a crucial role in mediating between the Nordic and the Kenyan interests. From the original meeting in July, the Norwegian Ambassador in Nairobi, Inge

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<sup>9</sup> See a letter from J. M. Keriri to J. Logie, Forest Department, Ministry of Natural Resources, August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1964, in AMB/14/59.

<sup>10</sup> See a hand-written letter by Tyrrell addressed to Mr. Keriri, July 17, 1964, 3/A in AMB/14/59.

<sup>11</sup> Sunniva Engh, “The Nordic Model in international development aid: explanation, experience and export,” in *The Making and Circulation of Nordic Model, Ideas and Images*, eds. Haldor Byrkjeflot, Lars Mjøset, Mads Mordhorst, Klaus Petersen (London: Routledge, 2021), 125-128.

Rindal, Tyrrell informed the Kenyan side that they were prepared to offer a service of up to 10 experts in civil engineering, architecture, hydraulics, surveys and veterinary services.<sup>12</sup> However, a formal request had to be filed by the Kenyan government, and, as Tyrrell mentioned in her letter, the “Norwegians wanted some guidelines in inducement for expatriates as they are now recruiting “operational experts.”<sup>13</sup> Tyrrell then worked on revising a draft Technical Agreement and insisted on its urgent processing so that it could be concluded before the arrival of the Norwegian mission to Kenya in January 1965.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, ten operational experts were to join different fields of the Kenya Civil Service. Tyrrell then served as a point of contact, liaising with different Ministries regarding the pressing manpower needs.

One of the severely understaffed agencies was the Ministry of Works. W. J. S. Symes, the Ministry’s Engineer-in-chief, pleaded with Tyrrell for more staff, underlining that the Ministry was “desperately short of architects, and this shortage is likely to be a long-term one.” At the risk of “appearing greedy,” the Ministry wanted to ask for at least four architects to be seconded to the Kenya government, with 2-year contracts.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, following Kenyan independence, there were only six architects at the Ministry of Works, and it was thought that foreign assistance was necessary to fill in “the many vacancies in the professional cadres.”<sup>16</sup> As Symes underlined in another letter to Tyrrell, an architect with “experience of low-cost housing or of schooling or hospitals” would be very much needed.<sup>17</sup> If the Norwegians were to furnish an engineer, an engineer with experience in the design of the roads would be particularly useful. The letter pleaded: “If you can inform the Norwegians that we have got a very real need for an Architect and an engineer, you will be doing us a service.”<sup>18</sup>

Concurrently with the process of expert allocation, Tyrrell was responsible for formalising the terms of service of Norwegian experts. Through close correspondence with “dear” Norwegian Ambassador Rindal in December 1964, she suggested that Norwegian

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<sup>12</sup> See a letter from J. M. Keriri, to the Directorate of Personnel, September 22, 1964, in AMB/17/19.

<sup>13</sup> See a note from JT, December 18, 1964, in AMB/14/11.

<sup>14</sup> See a note from JT, marked December 21, 1964, on the margins of the letter “Norwegian Technical Assistance” from the Ministry of External Affairs, December 19, 1964, in AMB/14/11.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from W. J. S. Symes to the Directorate of Personnel, September 30, 1964, A.13.04 in AMB/17/19.

<sup>16</sup> D. M. Mutiso, head of the Kenyan Ministry of Works, interview in *Byggekunst* 56, no. 3 (1974): 63.

<sup>17</sup> “Norwegian Technical Assistance,” a letter from Engineer-in-Chief W. J. Symes, Ministry of Works, to Miss Joan Tyrrell. December 7, 1964, in AMB/17/19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

contracts would be modelled after the British payment schemes and forwarded documents describing the British terms.<sup>19</sup> With her background in British colonial administration, Tyrrell indirectly framed Norwegian technical agreements after the familiar British framework, testifying to the complex, behind-the-scenes hybridisation of developmental models via individual connections. Subsequently, dozens of Norwegian engineers and architects were hired for the different departments of the Ministry of Works and Development, while the details of terms of service proposed by Tyrrell shaped the lives of many Norwegian experts and their family members who moved to Kenya.<sup>20</sup>

Among the first wave of invited Norwegian experts were Mr E. Irgens, a civil engineer from Arendal who took a position in road administration, architect Mr Karl Nøstvik from the Directorate of Public Construction and Property in Oslo and architect Mr Finn Bø, the head of a private firm in Hamar for the Ministry of Works.<sup>21</sup> The two would embark on a stellar career in Kenya, delivering commissions of a scale unimaginable at home. A municipal architect with virtually no practice, Karl Nøstvik would become a Kenyan star architect, completing the landmark Kenyatta Conference Centre in 1973 and setting up a successful office after his career was kickstarted at the Ministry of Works. Finn Bø would go on to complete a large NORAD-funded project of the Thika School for Community Nursing and designed a series of standardised hospital buildings for rural Kenya.<sup>22</sup> Indirectly, Tyrrell played a key role in bringing these projects into reality. Mediating between the interests of Kenyan ministries and Norwegian donors, she pursued a *realpolitik* approach. Official Technical Cooperation agreements finalised by Tyrrell paved the way for new concrete planning and development projects.<sup>23</sup>

## Regional Planning

One of the first large projects financed by NORAD was the regional development plan of the Taita and Busia districts, located in the Coast Province. In 1965, the Kenyan government assembled a working party to investigate the development problems and prospects of Taita

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<sup>19</sup> Letter from J. Tyrrell to Mr. Inge Rindal, December 22, 1964, DV 148/78/01 in AMB/17/19.

<sup>20</sup> A letter from Norval Hagen, Councillor, NORAD to the ministry of Economic Planning and Development, 22 April 1965, AMB/17/19.

<sup>21</sup> See a letter from NORAD to the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, April 22, 1965, in AMB/17/19.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed description of the projects, see *Byggekunst* 56, no. 3 (1974).

<sup>23</sup> “Technical Cooperation with Norway,” J. G. Shamalla, March 16, 1965, in AMB/17/26.

and Busia, but due to the lack of funds, recommended actions were not carried out.<sup>24</sup> The project envisioned land consolidation and modernisation of agriculture. In addition, the concentration of farmers in selected regions led to overpopulation. As farmers were persuaded to move into lower areas, they had to be provided with new agricultural methods and farming systems. Thus, new residential Farmer Training Centres in Taita and Busia were to offer short courses for farmers and their wives.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the regional plan envisioned new roads connecting the district centres to the railway lines, water and forest development projects, and strengthening cooperative societies.

Tyrrell was at the centre of project negotiations for Norwegian funding. Preparing a draft application, planner Ole David Koht Norbye from the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development consulted "Dear Miss Tyrrell" on various aspects of the project. Attaching his project description, he suggested she would "undoubtedly have a number of changes to suggest, particularly on points which are squarely your field of responsibility."<sup>26</sup> In the closing parts of the letter, he maintained: "I would like to discuss land consolidation in the Taita Hills with you."<sup>27</sup> While it is impossible to trace Tyrrell's opinions on the land consolidation, from another letter sent by the Treasury, we learn that there was a certain sense of urgency in implementing the planned developments of Taita District, where several aspects, including road construction, had to be tackled simultaneously.<sup>28</sup>

The project envisioned the construction of new Farmer Training Centres, as they were believed to represent "excellent methods of implementing the agricultural revolution that ultimately must change the outlook and methods of about one million small-holders in Kenya."<sup>29</sup> Several applications were filed to NORAD detailing the construction costs for three centres in Busia, Taita and Barino. A new thirty-bed Centre was proposed for Taita District and a sixty-bed Centre for Busia District, and the projects included the construction of several teaching buildings, office and administrative blocs, housing for students and staff, a store, dining halls, and a common room, with an overall cost of 42,000 pounds.<sup>30</sup> Eventually,

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<sup>24</sup> "Development of Taita District," a working document in AMB/17/26.

<sup>25</sup> "Proposals for the establishment of a Farmers Training Centre at Wundanyi in the Taita District of Coast Province," a working document in AMB/17/16.

<sup>26</sup> A note from O. D.K. Norbye, to Miss J. Tyrrell, February 8, 1967, in AMB/17/26.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Letter to the Ambassador of Norway, prepared by the Treasury, February 20, 1967, DV148/78/02 in AMB/17/26.

<sup>29</sup> "Draft Letter to NORAD," O.D.K. Norbye, February 8, 1967, in AMB/17/26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

the Training Centres were constructed with Norwegian financial support, and while it is impossible to establish the role Tyrrell played in this project, scant archival evidence suggests that she was consulted on several crucial decisions. A successful project implementation was assured by the financial application undoubtedly filed with her invisible hand.

This regional development project revealed more systematic issues of understaffed Kenyan planning ministries and the lack of professional spatial planners. Up until then, Kenyan planning was largely academic, formulated on the national level and with little communication between the provinces and the central government.<sup>31</sup> Following on earlier conversations, Norway suggested supporting a team of planners in the Eastern Province and hiring two or three technical professionals for a period of five years. Consulted by Norbye, Tyrrell once again contributed advice on different planning stages, helped secure Nordic financing and facilitated hiring “a Norwegian consultant firm with substantial experience in the field of regional planning” to ensure its completion.<sup>32</sup> Eventually, a Norwegian consultancy firm of Andersson and Skjånes from the Institute for Planning and Development undertook a large-scale survey of the Eastern Province and set up a project group of five Norwegian planners to work on different aspects of the province’s economic and spatial development.<sup>33</sup> Among others, the group dealt with questions of rural housing and designed measures around self-help housing.<sup>34</sup> These interventions resulted in a pilot project in Mbere province, which included cooperative and educational institutions, Farmer Training Centres and housing.<sup>35</sup> With first-hand experience of planning shortages, Tyrrell played a crucial role in the project’s realisation, advising on its early stages.

In her largely invisible position, Tyrrell contributed to the early-stage project negotiations and helped secure Norwegian funding. The project description written by the treasury, which promoted ideas of agricultural “modernisation” and “revolution,” betrays her as an undoubtedly modernising agent. Through personal connections with Norwegian representatives, she encouraged the hiring of a Norwegian technical consultancy, facilitating

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<sup>31</sup> Working document of provincial development, in AMB/17/26.

<sup>32</sup> Draft Letter to NORAD, drafted by Norbye for revisions by Tyrrell, 8 February, 1967, in AMB/17/26.

<sup>33</sup> The trip took place between March 3-22, 1967, and the delegation consisted of the financial specialist Bjørn Larsen, architect Tor Skjånes, and economics Arne Finstad from Andersson & Skjånes A/S.

<sup>34</sup> See “Kenya. Regional utviklingsplan for Eastern Province,” in E/Ea/Eaa/L0170 in Riksarkivet.

<sup>35</sup> For more material on the Mbere District Development, see NORAD’s project 115, in E/Ea/Eaa/L0169-L0173, in Riksarkivet, Oslo, Norway.

the importation of a Nordic techno-scientific paradigm based on “modern” techniques of surveying, land management and computer processing. Embedded deep within the state decision-making system, Tyrrell’s involvement exemplified the process of “modernisation by invitation,” in which political elites in countries receiving aid ascribed to and internalised Western ideas of progress and modernity.<sup>36</sup>

### **Institutional Planning**

Tyrrell’s impact did not end with singular developmental projects but also encompassed large-scale structural interventions that impacted the Kenyan planning profession. In 1964, the United Nations planners Lawrence N. Bloomberg and Charles Abrams produced a report investigating the main challenges of the Kenyan construction industry and put forward several proposals.<sup>37</sup> Among them was the establishment of a new educational institution that would address building problems specific to Kenya and the East African region. The Housing Research and Development Unit was conceived as a joint venture of the new Central Housing Board of Kenya and the University College in Nairobi. It was to serve as a pilot program before establishing new departments of Physical Planning Studies and Environment Design Studies at the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Development.<sup>38</sup> Over an initial 3-year programme, the unit was to build up a body of knowledge “with an emphasis on urgent problems of housing in urban and rural areas in East Africa.” It was expected to serve the Government of Kenya in “exploring the social and economic problems of housing and community planning.” It was to produce prototype designs, test building systems and, in collaboration with the Central Housing Board, construct experimental housing projects and community facilities.<sup>39</sup>

However, as with all projects, its realisation was contingent on successful fundraising. Once again, Tyrrell was involved, investigating various financial opportunities. Building on the original report produced by UN planners, it was thought that the Unit could be financed

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<sup>36</sup> Luce Beeckmans, “The Architecture of Nation-building in Africa as a Development Aid Project: Designing the capital cities of Kinshasa (Congo) and Dodoma (Tanzania) in the post-independence years,” *Progress in Planning* 122 (2018): 1-28.

<sup>37</sup> Lawrence N. Bloomberg and Charles Abrams, *United Nations Mission to Kenya on Housing* (Nairobi: United Nations, Commissioner for Technical Assistance, Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, 1964).

<sup>38</sup> “University of East Africa. Housing Research and Development Unit,” working document 1/1, in KY/17/8.

<sup>39</sup> “University of East Africa,” working document.

through the UN special fund. Tyrrell worked closely with the British professor, David Oakley, in adapting the proposal to the strategic objectives of the UN office.<sup>40</sup> In May 1966, in discussion with Tyrrell, Oakley prepared two white papers expanding on the Unit’s educational program and related them to the work undertaken by the UN.<sup>41</sup> Tyrrell then mobilised her internal contacts with the UN representatives to proceed with the application, writing to “Dear Miss Davis,” an assistant Resident Representative of the UN Development Program in Nairobi.<sup>42</sup> From the correspondence, Tyrrell’s enthusiasm for the project shines through. She seemed knowledgeable about current Kenyan planning problems and earlier evaluations produced by the UN’s Ernest Weissmann to S. M. Orlic, Chief of Section for Africa. Entrusted by the Treasury to negotiate the project with international aid organisations, Tyrrell wrote: “I am now in a position to provide you with the Government’s answers to the questions in the memorandum [regarding the Housing Research Unit].”

And while there was “certain scepticism” in Ministerial circles regarding the operations of the Unit, based on her previous experience with Kenyan planning, Tyrrell was convinced that new professionals were “needed very badly throughout Kenya to execute the housing program and other building work envisaged in the Development Plan.”<sup>43</sup> The correspondence around the Unit’s establishment reveals that she had intimate knowledge of the educational tracks of different professionals—architects, engineers and geographers, and was well-versed in practical details of how different degrees and qualifications could be integrated. She advocated a close connection between teaching and research and believed that planning education had to be tied to knowledge of specific East African conditions.<sup>44</sup> In another letter, she maintained: “The theory is that the teaching of architecture in East Africa must be based on research of local conditions, materials and needs. Otherwise, the teaching will not be related to local needs. We also expect the unit to produce results of use to our

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<sup>40</sup> “University College, Nairobi. Housing and Planning Research Unit,” a letter from J. Tyrrell to C. Davis, Resident Representative, UN Development Programme, 16 June, 1966. In KY/17/8. For a brief recap of Oakley’s career, see Robert K. Home, “Knowledge networks and postcolonial careering: David Oakley (1927-2003),” *ABE Journal*, no. 4 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.3388>.

<sup>41</sup> “Note of Meeting in the Ministry of Housing on Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 1966,” file MH/67 in KY/17/8.

<sup>42</sup> “University College, Nairobi. Housing and Planning Research Unit,” 16 June, 1966. A letter from Tyrrell to Miss. Davis, Resident Representative of the U.N. Development Programme, in KY/17/8.

<sup>43</sup> “Housing Research,” Ministerial Letter, MH/67 in KY/17/8. “Housing Research & Development Unit,” letter to Mr. Gathiuni, File Hou. 381, February 8, 1967, in KY/17/8.

<sup>44</sup> “University College, Nairobi. Housing and Planning Research Unit,” June 16, 1966, in KY/17/8.

housing program.”<sup>45</sup> She seemed set on the course of the program: “There is little doubt in our minds about the professional and technical requirements of our programme, but we would welcome advice on organisation and method.”<sup>46</sup> Seemingly convinced by Tyrrell’s arguments, the UN had reviewed the project proposal and suggested that an evaluation mission composed of Mr. Ernest Weissman and Mr. Kenneth Watts would come to Kenya to examine the proposal on the spot.<sup>47</sup>

Tyrrell then played an essential role in developing the unit’s overall educational strategy and positioning it within the broader developmental discourse. Her enthusiastic support brought concrete results: while the UN processed the project’s application, the Ministry of Development was persuaded to allocate 10,000£ to match the same contribution from the Treasury to support the interim functions of the Unit.<sup>48</sup> By 1967, the Housing Research and Development Unit (HRDU) at the University College of Nairobi was fully operational. It became a unique international research institution, which engaged with questions of development from a first-hand perspective and attracted a pool of researchers from the Global South. Its research focused specifically on local conditions and produced a wealth of unique reports on building research in Kenya, many of which were incorporated into reports and developmental strategies of the regional office of the United Nations and laid the ground for future Habitat programs.<sup>49</sup> It also served as a training ground and a point of contact between the researchers from the global North and the South. Tyrrell’s ardent support was instrumental in bringing the lofty project visions into reality as she mobilised her international donor contacts and secured initial project funding through internal contacts within the Ministries.

### **Buildings for Development**

Beyond institutional building, Tyrrell was also involved in concrete construction projects. For example, she played a mediating role in the building committee for Thika School for Nurses Training. As a representative of the Treasury, she sat in the preliminary Committee meetings,

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<sup>45</sup> “University College, Nairobi. Housing and Planning Research Unit,” June 16, 1966, in KY/17/8.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “University College, Nairobi”, K. 5-1-3, From Cecile I.G. Davis to Miss J. Tyrrell, 5 December 1966, in KY/17/8.

<sup>48</sup> “Housing Research Unit—University College,” a letter from J. M. Tusker to Miss Tyrrell, in KY/17/8.

<sup>49</sup> Currently, a substantial archive of the HRDU is held at the University of Nairobi and offers a wealth of potential material for future research.

which brought together representatives of the donor agencies and the WHO, medical and nursing professionals, and the Ministry of Health and Economic Planning and Development.<sup>50</sup> Project correspondence shows that Tyrrell was working on drafting an application for Norwegian assistance and closely worked with the Norwegian ambassador, Inge Rindal.<sup>51</sup> The proposed Norwegian School for Community Nurses was a pilot scheme to provide basic 3-year training for community nurses in clinical practice, midwifery and health visiting. The new training Centre was to be built near a hospital and consist of school buildings, boarding schools housing for the staff and buildings for the health centre. The nurses were to play an essential part in implementing the Ministry’s policy of curative and preventive care.<sup>52</sup> In the discussions leading to the project, the project required at least 50,000£ of financial support, but, as Tyrrell indicated in correspondence, it would be hard to finalise the details “until the Norwegians have decided whether they will construct the buildings for us or give us the money to do the job.”<sup>53</sup> Eventually, Norwegian architect Finn Bø—hired earlier for the Ministry of Works via Tyrrell—completed the project in the late 1960s. With an overall cost of 5 million Norwegian kroner, it was a significant project expected to serve as a blueprint for similar centres across the country.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, Tyrrell was a part of the building committee for new facilities at the University College of Nairobi. The University needed new buildings for education and student housing, and the earliest proposals for Norwegian aid included bids for new facilities.<sup>55</sup> While the original proposal listed a range of buildings—from a second science and art building to alterations and extensions to the Library—one of the first projects constructed with Norwegian assistance was the Nutritional Laboratory at the Department of Animal Production at the Faculty of Veterinary Science.<sup>56</sup> Once again, Miss Joan Tyrrell appears in the documentation, signing off on the letter to NORAD as the “College Planning

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<sup>50</sup> “Record for the file,” August 10, 1965, in BY/24/42.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Tyrrell to the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health and Housing, August 21, 1965, in BY/24/42.

<sup>52</sup> “Memorandum by the Minister for Health and Housing,” Norwegian Aid for Proposed School for Community Nurses, in BY/24/42.

<sup>53</sup> “Norwegian Assistance for Community Nurses Training Center,” a letter from O. S. Knowles to the Ministry of Health and Housing, copy to Miss J. Tyrrell, Ministry of Finance, March 20, 1965. In BY/24/42. Letter from Tyrrell to the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health and Housing, August 21, 1965, in BY/24/42.

<sup>54</sup> “Kenya—helsesentret i Thika,” June 20, 1967, in E/Ea/Eaa/L0109.

<sup>55</sup> See a letter from the Treasury, J. M. Michuki to the Ambassador of Norway, February 20, 1967, in AMB/17/26.

<sup>56</sup> Helge Bergh, “Kvartalsrapport i for 1969,” in E/Ea/Eaa/L0145.

Officer” as she worked to resolve the payment issues to the project architect.<sup>57</sup> Tyrrell actively participated in the architectural and financial discussions between resident and project architects and negotiated Norwegian payments. In adapting the pronoun “we,” she acted on behalf of the University College and revealed—once again—her continued close relationship with Norwegians. In one of the letters, she noted, “it seems to us that this sum may not be adequate and that we may have to ask NORAD to switch a small sum from building costs to fees.” From other project documentation, it becomes clear that Tyrrell was a part of the University administration, which dealt with all new construction plans. For example, she also participated in discussing the plans for a new Physical Science building, which was funded by and completed by a Norwegian engineering consultancy firm, Norconsult, in 1973.<sup>58</sup>

### The Historical Lens

From the limited evidence in bureaucratic archives related to the Nordic aid projects, it is possible to trace the impact of Joan Tyrrell as she worked to realise a range of administrative, planning and construction projects. Her story offers a unique lens into the daily realities of post-independence Kenyan bureaucracy and suggests a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the donor and recipient countries than the usually implied top-down hierarchies within the developmental framework. Indeed, as many scholars like Nasr and Volait have argued, decolonisation processes can hardly be characterised by an abrupt end to the export or import of developmental models and perspectives.<sup>59</sup> Local elites in newly independent states often ascribed to the same ideas of socio-economic progress and modernisation, which differed little from the previous paradigm. The many bureaucratic files of the Kenyan Ministries reveal that the Kenyan decolonisation processes were neither linear nor abrupt. Elaborate negotiations between Departments and risky bids for more financing reveal a new level of agency within the “recipient” country and a more nuanced power matrix. In rebuilding the nation and its

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<sup>57</sup> “Norad Assistance for Department of Animal Production,” July 11, 1969, a letter from Joan Tyrrell to Mr. S. Hammer, NORAD Resident Representative, in E/Ea/Eaa/L0145.

<sup>58</sup> O. Lønseth, “Uttalelse vedrørende forslag om reising av bygg for de fysiske fag ved University of Nairobi,” undated, 1972, in E/Ea/Eaa/L0168.

<sup>59</sup> Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait, *Urbanism: Imported or Exported?* (Chichester; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Academy, 2003).

statehood, Kenyan politicians reached out for technical and financial support to various international donors, casting their net far and wide in ambitious and challenging proposals. While the Nordic aid emphasised the recipient’s agency, the projects were often first discussed informally, put on the table by the Nordic representatives, and then retroactively matched with local interests.

Tyrrell’s place in post-independence Kenyan bureaucracy was particularly interesting. Working as the Treasury’s under-secretary, she occupied a key position within the internal structure of the Kenyan government. She served as the main point of encounter between the interests of different Ministries and the many often-competing political interests and agendas within the state system. At the same time, she also served as a liaison between Kenyan and Nordic interests, mediating a complex political dynamic through personal contacts with Nordic donors and representatives of global organisations like the United Nations and the WHO. These contacts were often mobilised less formally before the final agreements were concluded. Her position as a former British colonial staff member, negotiating on behalf of Kenyan interests with international aid donors, was undoubtedly mediated both by her gender and race. As a bureaucrat descending from the former colonial power, she certainly occupied an ambiguous power position.

Being a white woman in the Kenyan government in the 1960s could not have been easy. Tyrrell’s former subordinate, Vince Cable, later described her as a “formidable woman [...] with a fearsome reputation for rigorous standards, workaholism, and not suffering fools gladly.”<sup>60</sup> Cable expanded on their relationship: “After initially regarding me as a particularly hopeless case, useful only for feeding parking meters and carrying files, she discovered, during a long absence, that I could cope, and we developed some rapport.”<sup>61</sup> In a more contemporary note Cable noted that “she was highly competent and effective but somewhat irascible though basically very nice.”<sup>62</sup> Other colleagues remembered Tyrrell’s “strong, robust character” and “formidable work ethics.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, as a woman, her power was

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<sup>60</sup> Cable, 80.

<sup>61</sup> Cable, 80.

<sup>62</sup> In this line of inquiry, I have to thank Karen Triggs, former Chief Press Officer of the British Overseas Development Institute (ODI), who, following on my request, collected brief testimonies from Tyrrell’s former colleagues from her time as an administrative director of ODI between 1974 and 1985. Here, the ODI source was identified by the initials of VC, but it is easy to figure out that it refers to Vince Cable, who had worked with Tyrrell in several institutions.

<sup>63</sup> ODI Source, identified as PG.

double-faced. On the one hand, she developed a personal rapport with a wide range of stakeholders, facilitating agreements and streamlining procedures with her invisible “female” hand. On the other hand, as a woman, she had to develop a robust, strict character to maintain power within an entirely male-dominated Kenyan bureaucracy and a changing sentiment towards British officials.

The case of Joan Tyrrell also serves as a historical lens, tracing the evolving place of expatriate experts in post-independence Kenya. According to the memoirs of Vince Cable about his time at the Kenyan Treasury, towards the end of the 1960s, “the administrative centre of gravity shifted decisively from white to black. [...] The era of white expatriate civil servants in the Treasury was over.”<sup>64</sup> The new Kenyan elites “regarded white faces a symbol of the past from which they were trying to escape,” and Tyrrell was asked “to retire early,” a decision reinforced by what Cable described as a “habit of bawling out dimmer colleagues, with a splendid indifference to colour or rank.”<sup>65</sup> Without direct evidence, it is hard to ascertain, but it is likely that through her earlier involvement with the Faculty of Architecture at the University College of Nairobi after Treasury, Tyrrell transitioned to a new position as the College Planning Officer. She dealt with the financial decisions behind the construction of university buildings, effectively mobilising her networks within the state and Nordic donors.

While not an architect and without any formal education in planning or design, Tyrrell contributed to bringing buildings and regional plans to fruition. Without intending to promote a specifically modernist architecture, she was, based on her position, a modernising agent, and her rationale most likely aligned with the modernist form language—that of efficiency, rationality and economy of means. Responsible for incoming financing, she was directly involved in negotiating early technical frameworks, constructing individual buildings, and setting up large-scale regional planning projects and new educational institutions. Through her experience with the bottlenecks of regional planning, she obtained a first-hand understanding of the importance of planning education and advocated for establishing the Housing Research and Development Unit, which developed into an internationally important educational institution. Over time, Tyrrell developed

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<sup>64</sup> Cable, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Cable, 80.

personal contact with professional planners based in Kenya—Norbye or Oakley, and international UN experts such as Weissmann or Abrams. During her earlier stint at the British colonial administration in Nigeria, Tyrrell may have come in contact with Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, who worked there before Nigerian independence.<sup>66</sup> There is undoubtedly more to be discovered about her career and contacts in both Nigeria and Kenya.

### Searching for Tyrrell

Searching for Tyrrell was not an easy task. When I first encountered her name in the Ministerial files, I expected to find a story of a woman living in the former colonial country following a husband stationed in some political office. However, as I reached out to over fifty people and institutions in Kenya and abroad, I learned that Joan's case was different: that of a woman of an uncompromising character who built a robust career but whose story could be pieced together only as told by other men. For example, Joan makes several appearances in Cable's memoirs. However, it was almost impossible to trace her whereabouts precisely. After the Kenyan Treasury, Tyrrell served as Financial Secretary to the British Virgin Islands, joining the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) first as a secretary in 1973 and then as an administrative director in 1974.<sup>67</sup> Between 1974 and 1985, she played an important role in keeping the tight ODI budget in the post-Thatcher years in check and overseeing the ODI fellowship placements.<sup>68</sup>

However, when I reached out to the ODI's press office, my numerous requests submitted to the press office, publication managers, secretaries and archival custodians were not returned. Despite my arguments about the unique importance of the project, highlighting the role of female political actors and Tyrrell's role as the administrative director of ODI for more than ten years, the think-tank did not even seem to have her picture on file—or was unwilling to cooperate. After multiple attempts, Karen Triggs, a former Chief Press Office who has since left ODI, was kind enough to follow up on the request and reach out to Tyrrell's former colleague for short testimonies. However, many seemed convinced

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<sup>66</sup> On projects of Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry in Nigeria, see Hannah le Roux, "The networks of tropical architecture", *The Journal of Architecture*, 8:3 (2003): 337-354, DOI: 10.1080/1360236032000134835

<sup>67</sup> See ODI online archives, particularly yearly reports from 1974 to 1985, which mention Tyrrell as administrative director. She is listed as a Secretary in ODI Annual Report from 1973.

<sup>68</sup> ODI source, identified as PG.

that her work could not have possibly *anything* to do with “much architecture.”<sup>69</sup> Another of ODI’s sources maintained that “while JT’s name might appear as the Finance Office on aid-assisted building projects, the real story of urban design choices would be better explored [elsewhere].” Instead, they pointed me to other men, “people such as Percy Johnson-Marshall.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, what role could a woman who did not even have “an economics degree” could have played in architecture or urban design?<sup>71</sup>

In the following decades, Tyrrell’s name appears in prefaces to several books including *State and Market* by Barbara Harriss-White, *The Marketing of Leisure* by Edwin Ornstein and Austin Nunn, and *Multilateral Mediation* by Swiss diplomat Victor Umbricht. Eventually, my search for Joan, which started in Nairobi, led me to the most unexpected place: an archive at the ETH Zürich located 250 meters from my office, which contains correspondence related to Umbricht’s book on mediation. And while “Miss Joan Tyrrell of Leatherhead, England” is acknowledged in the book’s introduction, the letters show that she not only furnished her expertise on the dissolution of the East African Community but also edited multiple chapter drafts, as well as prepared papers and notes for the many Umbricht’s lectures on the subject. So much so that when the book project was completed, as Tyrrell wrote to her newly acquired friend, Umbricht’s secretary, she would bring “a large old suitcase” with all the files to Switzerland to “abandon at the town dump” in Basel.<sup>72</sup>

The story of Joan Tyrrell is the story of the thousands of women overlooked in official decision-making roles who have operated—and continue to operate—mostly behind the scenes, on the fringes of history. They negotiate, type in and reiterate countless documents, which keep bureaucracies running worldwide, but their hands remain invisible. Not only was it impossible to locate more biographical information on Joan, but it was also impossible to track her image. While many documents—virtually any official document that left the Kenyan Treasury—were researched, negotiated, typed and finalised by her, they were signed by her boss, John Michuki. Michuki, not Tyrrell, was featured in the photographs of official

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<sup>69</sup> ODI source, identified as AH.

<sup>70</sup> ODI source, identified as JH.

<sup>71</sup> ODI source, identified as AH. The entire sentence as follows: “No, Joan Tyrell was never an ODI Fellow herself. Wrong generation and arguably without the economics (though Bloomsbury Economics got you far in those days, at least in UK).”

<sup>72</sup> See a letter from Tyrrell to Umbricht on 2 November 1985. In Umbricht, Victor H./9. Mission and Mediation: East African Community/9.6. History of the East African Community Mediation /9.6.3. Correspondence, 1984-1986, Tyrrell, Joan, research assistant, correspondence and notes. Archiv für Zeitgeschichte ETH Zürich, Switzerland.

document signing sessions, representing the Treasury. The image of Joan was impossible to track both during her time in the Treasury and her later administrative role at ODI. Even the latest iterations of OpenAI can provide some details about Tyrrell’s male colleagues at the Treasury—Libby, Michuki, Keriri—while providing no information on Tyrrell’s political role or biographic details. It is important to remember that Joan was still not an ordinary woman—she worked in high political offices, authored multiple documents and books, and was an administrative director of one of the largest British overseas organisations. Hers is the fate of many women in bureaucracies worldwide who spent countless hours behind desks but whose work remains invisible, uncredited, and unidentified. When I presented this research at the University College Dublin, many women—particularly those working in administrative positions who heard the story—came to talk to me afterwards, emphasising how much they could relate to this story even today.<sup>73</sup>

Philosopher Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Can the subaltern speak?” questioned whether the subaltern—women—could find a voice within the existing structures of power.<sup>74</sup> The bureaucratic archives of the Kenyan ministries became the only source where the actual voice of Joan Tyrrell could be found. The many official documents authored and signed off by Joan, with seemingly ephemeral notes on the margins reaching out for her advice, constitute a parallel archive of the woman busy at work, building the many technical frameworks behind the architecture of foreign aid. While Tyrrell was not a powerless woman—that of a British colonial power descent—Joan’s story is the story of many women in state bureaucracies around the world. As another of the ODI sources (most likely a woman) pointed out: “I think there’s probably a story to be told about a strong woman working in a difficult environment, which was perhaps not as appreciated as she should have been.”<sup>75</sup> Gender, along with race, played an important modifying role in Tyrrell’s career. Ben Kafka, in his book *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, explored the history of bureaucracy and the role of paperwork, its tools and techniques in producing politics, history and myths.<sup>76</sup> In the case of Joan Tyrrell, her story and her power

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<sup>73</sup> See the conference “Minding her Business: Women, Architecture, and Design,” University College Dublin, 13-15 June 2024. <https://expanding-agency.com/conference/>.

<sup>74</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” *Die Philosophin* 14 (27): 42-58 (1988).

<sup>75</sup> ODI source, identified as PG.

<sup>76</sup> Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, First Edition (New York: Zone Books, 2012).

were recorded and can be told through the bureaucratic documents scattered across archives of different ministries across several continents. These documents testify not only to the complex place of women in power but also to the transformation from colonial to postcolonial political imagery, the role of the state institutions and the reach of former colonial British agents within the state. With this contribution, I hope to encourage other scholars to discover more untold stories in the seemingly faceless documents of bureaucracy.