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Hadija Matimbwa, Buberwa Tibesigwa & Benson Karumuna
Mbeya University of Science and Technology, Tanzania

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Abstract
In the constantly changing urban landscape of Tanzania, a paradox exists whereby large family homes, once a source of pride for the homeowner, now sit empty as the ageing parents of the family occupy the space originally designed for the bustling family now gone. This qualitative research seeks to explore the appropriateness of the homes being designed for the changing needs of families through a gap in the literature that has been focused on deficits rather than the outcomes. Using a multiple case study approach with 28 empty nest homes, through the lens of Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, this research identifies the construction of the homes through the lens of socio-cultural factors such as legacy building, status and the long-standing hospitality-based cultural value of hospitality (*ukarimu*). This approach to construction design does not consider rational long-term space planning; therefore, the homes sit empty and underutilised, often with a sense of tension between the homeowner's pride and the cost of upkeep. While the household adapts through functional space conversions and entrepreneurial ventures, inflexibility in design and increasing lifecycle costs work against the household, particularly the ageing member.

Introduction
As the global housing stock evolves as a built environment, a significant shift is becoming evident towards a dichotomy between the static nature of the built environment and the dynamic evolution of the family unit. Globally, from the suburbs of North America to the burgeoning peri-urban regions of the Global South, the dominant model of homeownership is centred on the concept of the detached multi-bedroom villa as the ultimate icon of individual success and family stability. However, such a model is faced with the reality of the family lifecycle, with the natural expansion of the family unit as the children are raised, followed by the inevitable contraction as the family unit is split as the children reach adulthood and leave the family nest (Mushi & Kavishe, 2022). The inherent dichotomy of the family unit is the fact that the built environment is designed to accommodate the busy family unit that will eventually dwindle to a fraction of its original size.

Across the African continent, tension between housing design and family dynamics is amplified by unique socio-cultural contexts where the meaning of home extends far beyond shelter to encompass complex systems of kinship, identity and social reproduction (Adu-Gyamfi, 2020; Tipple, 2015). In West and Southern Africa for instance have experienced this phenomenon. Researches have documented how compound housing arrangements deliberately blur boundaries between private and

communal space to accommodate fluid household compositions (Lemanski, 2021). These continental patterns underscore that housing in Africa cannot be understood through purely utilitarian or economic lenses but must be situated within deeper cultural logics that privilege social connectivity and collective identity over individual privacy.

In Tanzania, these broader African dynamics manifest with particular intensity, where the construction of detached residential villas has become a defining feature of urban and peri-urban development, from the suburbs of Dar es Salaam to the outskirts of Arusha. While it may superficially appear to be a marker of individual prosperity, this architectural preference is deeply embedded in complex cultural logics that position homeownership as the ultimate measure of personal achievement and social standing (Lupala, 2022). This pursuit of a spacious, modern home is further reinforced by the powerful social imperative of *ukarimu*, which demands homes be designed to accommodate not just the nuclear family but a continuous flow of extended kin and visitors (Komba & Msuya, 2023). Consequently, Tanzanian families invest heavily in large, multi-bedroom houses, creating what architects term as an 'elastic space'. This cultural orientation challenges conventional Western assumptions about domestic privacy, revealing instead a spatial logic wherein boundaries between public and private remain deliberately porous to enable the continuous performance of social obligation (Mwageni, 2024). Yet, this forward-looking design rarely accounts for the inevitable lifecycle shift, leading to a significant spatial paradox: houses designed for vibrant family life become progressively under-occupied, leaving ageing parents to navigate environments that, while culturally validated, no longer align with their practical needs.

Despite growing awareness of this lifecycle mismatch, there is a striking paucity of systematic research in the Tanzanian context exploring the drivers of persistent large-home construction and the post-occupancy realities facing families who inhabit these spaces. The existing housing literature has predominantly concentrated on quantitative housing deficits, affordability constraints, and basic infrastructure provision, thereby neglecting the qualitative dimensions of spatial appropriateness and utilisation across the family lifecycle (Kinyondo & Mjema, 2023). This scholarly gap is particularly significant given that Tanzania, like many sub-Saharan African nations, is experiencing rapid urbanisation coupled with the emergence of a homeowner generation now reaching old age, whose lived experiences offer invaluable insights into the long-term consequences of housing decisions made decades earlier. The continental African experience suggests that understanding these dynamics is essential for developing housing policies and design approaches that are culturally appropriate and responsive to the continent's unique demographic and social realities (Amole, 2019).

This study seeks to address the identified research gap through a systematic exploration of the interplay between cultural values, economic aspirations and practical living arrangements among Tanzanian families occupying large homes. By examining the motivations driving construction decisions, the patterns of space utilisation during later family stages, the challenges and adaptive strategies employed by households, and the implications for sustainable housing policy, the research aims to generate evidence-based insights that can inform more appropriate, adaptable, and sustainable approaches to residential space planning in Tanzania. Specifically, the study seeks to: (a) identify the socio-cultural and economic factors that motivate Tanzanian families to construct large residential houses; (b) explore the patterns of space utilisation and lived experiences of occupants in large homes during the "empty nest" and later stages of the family lifecycle; (c) assess the perceived challenges and adaptive strategies employed by households to manage underutilised spaces in large homes; and propose recommendations for sustainable and adaptable residential space planning models that align with dynamic family structures in Tanzania.

Theoretical Framework- Bourdieu's Theory of Capital

The theory of capital was developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides valuable analytical tools for this study to examine patterns of space utilisation and the lived experiences of occupants in large homes during the "empty nest" and later stages of the family lifecycle. The theory illuminates the fundamental disjuncture between the original intentions that motivated house construction and the lived realities that emerge when children depart. The concept of capital conversion challenges is particularly relevant. When adult children leave the parental home, the utility of the house shifts dramatically. Economic capital that remains locked in underutilised physical assets represents frozen resources that cannot easily be converted to other forms that might better serve ageing occupants, such as liquid savings for healthcare, mobility aids, or more manageable accommodation (Mushi, 2024). This exemplifies Bourdieu's principle that capital's value depends on field conditions what functions as valuable capital in one context (a large family home during child-rearing years) may become burdensome in another (the same house during later-life). Therefore, the patterns of space utilisation observed in these households reflect attempts to navigate what might be termed capital-portfolio imbalances. As noted in the theory of Bourdieu and later-life research, "all these forms of capital are complementary, which means that they all need to be available in some form for an individual to flourish" (Mushi, 2024).

Socio-Cultural and Economic Motivations for Constructing Large Homes

The extant literature reveals a complex interplay between socio-cultural imperatives and economic calculations that drive the construction of oversized domestic spaces, particularly in contexts undergoing rapid urban transformation. The economic dimension of this spatial expansion is inextricably linked to housing market dynamics and intergenerational wealth transfer. As Young (2026) revealed in her investigative reporting within the Canadian context, parental homes increasingly function as de facto storage facilities for adult children unable to access independent housing amid affordability crises. This arrangement, while ostensibly pragmatic, generates spatial friction as domestic spaces become repositories for belongings that exceed the storage capacity of constricted rental markets. The Fraser Institute's finding that typical homes were unaffordable for median-income families across major Canadian cities by the early 2020s (Ermacora, 2023) underscores the structural economic pressures that transform family homes into prolonged housing solutions. Critically, this dynamic reveals a paradox: homes constructed during peak family occupancy become anchors that tether adult children to the parental household, not through cultural preference alone but through market exclusion.

Socio-cultural motivations intersect with economic constraints in ways that complicate simplistic narratives of autonomous housing choice. The persistence of large homes in empty nest households reflects what Middha and Willand (2025) identify as the normalisation of spatial abundance, in which expanded domestic footprints become naturalised through routine practices and consumption patterns. This normalisation operates alongside genuine cultural commitments to familial hospitality and multigenerational connection, yet it also masks the material inequalities that render downsizing impractical. In the Global South context, these dynamics are further complicated by the unfinished nature of self-built housing, where incremental construction responds to both aspirational goals and immediate livelihood strategies, creating homes that are perpetually in transition rather than static artefacts of completed family formation (Puji & Ellisa, 2024). The material and symbolic investments embedded in such dwellings render them resistant to downsizing, as the home embodies not merely shelter but accumulated family labour and intergenerational aspiration.

Patterns of Space Utilisation and Lived Experiences in Later Family Stages

Recent scholarship has increasingly attended to the phenomenological dimensions of domestic space as households transition through later-life stages, challenging deterministic assumptions about how homes ought to function. A significant contribution comes from the Polish study by Kaczmarek and colleagues (2025), who identified four thematic domains: bonds, memory, social roles, and territorial claims that mediate the interaction between individuals and their domestic environments during this transitional period. Furthermore, Young's (2026) reporting vividly illustrated the characteristics of empty nest households through the case of Shawn Young, whose London, Ontario, home became an obstacle course of adult children's possessions, necessitating physical expansion even as household size contracted. As Young (2026) documented, professional organiser Julie Witherell's observation that such arrangements require "a time limit" reflects the tension between parental availability and the need to reclaim domestic space for current life stages.

Comparative research reveals that space utilisation patterns in later family stages are mediated by cultural norms, housing typologies, and policy environments, as supported by Puji and Ellisa's (2024) and Brand's (1994). Drawing on Brand's (1994) layering theory, the study traced how Islamic cultural practices, social obligations, and intimate spheres are inscribed in domestic space through incremental adaptation, a process equally relevant to empty nest households reconfiguring homes originally designed for larger families. Additionally, the lived experience of domestic space in later stages is further shaped by what Middha and Willand (2025) who observation that overall time spent in each domestic space decreases even as homes enlarge points to a fragmentation of family life, where individual screens and separate rooms afford privacy at the cost of collective dwelling. Kaczmarek et al.'s (2025) revealed that kitchens, once sites of bustling family activity, could become either cherished retreats or painful reminders of transformed family circumstances, with outcomes shaped by parents' capacity to reconstruct meaning in altered spatial contexts.

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies for Underutilised Spaces

The emergence of underutilised domestic spaces in empty nest households presents a distinctive set of challenges that intersect with broader urban and environmental questions. Primary among these is the tension between private spatial abundance and collective housing need, which Middha and Willand (2025) framed as the question of whether houses should serve as "the space for everything." The adaptive strategies households deploy in response to underutilisation range from the mundane to the transformative. At the most basic level, families negotiate spatial arrangements through informal agreements and temporal boundaries, as documented in Young's (2026) reporting on Canadian households establishing timelines for adult children's belongings. Yet such strategies remain contingent on cooperation and communication, resources unevenly distributed across households. Similarly, Ugwuonah's (2022) analysis of adaptive reuse potential in Global South cities highlighted opportunities in underutilised buildings, though it again primarily focused on commercial office space. The absence of equivalent scholarly attention to residential underutilisation represents a significant gap, particularly given the scale of housing need and the spatial inefficiency embedded in empty nest overconsumption. Critical scholars might interrogate why commercial vacancy attracts policy attention while residential underutilisation remains framed as a private matter, despite its collective consequences.

The environmental dimension of underutilisation adds further urgency to adaptive strategies. As Middha and Willand (2025) noted, the embodied carbon locked in existing structures makes demolition and new construction more environmentally costly than adaptive reuse. The challenge lies in developing institutional frameworks, design solutions, and cultural narratives that enable such transformations without undermining the legitimate attachments and investments of current

occupants. Future research, therefore, must attend to the conditions under which empty nest households might be supported, not compelled to reimagine their domestic spaces in ways that serve both individual well-being and collective housing need.

Methods

The study was guided by a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which asserts that "reality is constructed through experiences and social interactions." This paradigm is appropriate for the study since it aims to seek a comprehensive understanding of homeowners' perspectives on their living spaces. This study used a qualitative method with an exploratory multiple case study design of research as was appropriate for the study, since it helped in seeking a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of the experiences of the Tanzanian families living in large homes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018; Matimbwa and John, 2025).

Sampling Strategy and Participant Profile

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select information-rich cases that could provide profound insights into the research problem (Palinkas et al., 2015; Matimbwa and Ringo, 2026). The primary criterion was households residing in owner-occupied, detached houses with at least three bedrooms, in which the core family unit had transitioned to the "post-expansion" or "empty nest" stage. Participants were recruited through community leaders, housing cooperative networks, and snowball sampling in Dar es Salaam and Arusha. The final sample comprised 28 primary participants from 28 distinct households. The sample demonstrated diversity: 16 participants were from Dar es Salaam, twelve from Arusha; the age range was 52 to 78; household size in the homes at the time of study ranged from 1 to 3 occupants; and the houses had between 3 and 6 bedrooms, built over a period spanning 1995 to 2018.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The selection criteria were that participants were owner-occupiers of detached homes with at least three bedrooms, that occupants had reached the empty nest stage, with all children permanently out of the home, and that homes were located in Dar es Salaam or Arusha. The selection criteria also required that participants be 18 years or older, mentally capable of giving informed consent, and able to speak either Swahili or English. The criteria for exclusion were people who rented homes and those who occupied apartments, flats, or semi-detached homes, due to differences in spatial dynamics. Those who occupied homes with fewer than three bedrooms were excluded because the space was too small to study underutilisation. Those who still had some children living in the homes were excluded, including those who were living in a separate house on the same plot. Individuals experiencing recent bereavement or marital dissolution within the past 12 months were excluded to avoid confounding variables. Individuals unable to provide informed, voluntary consent, such as those with cognitive impairments or severe illness, were excluded on ethical grounds. Lastly, households whose members work in real estate, architecture, housing policy, or housing research were excluded to avoid professional bias. The criteria for exclusion and inclusion provided a clear and reproducible basis for the selection of 'information-rich' cases.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected between October and December 2025 using a triangulated approach to enhance validity and richness. *Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews:* The primary method consisted of 60-90-minute interviews conducted in Kiswahili or English, based on participants' preference. An interview guide ensured coverage of key domains: (a) history and decision-making behind the house design and construction; (b) changes in family composition and corresponding space use; (c) current daily routines and interactions with different home spaces; (d) perceived benefits and challenges of the large-home; and (e) views on future use and adaptability. *Guided Home Tours with Photo-*

Elicitation: Following the interview, participants led the researcher through their property. This observational walkthrough allowed documentation of spatial layouts, room conditions, and signs of adaptation. Reflective field notes were documented immediately after each visit, capturing non-verbal cues, the general atmosphere of the home, and the researcher's initial analytical thoughts.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis followed the six-phase framework for reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), Matimbwa et al. (2026), and Bates (2020), which emphasises the researcher's active role in pattern creation. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts and field notes while listening to the recordings to achieve immersion. Systematic coding was performed using NVivo fourteen software. Data extracts were assigned descriptive codes (e.g., "status symbol," "cleaning burden," "room conversion," "guest expectations"). Codes were collated and sorted into potential overarching themes that captured significant patterns of meaning across the dataset. Potential themes were checked against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they formed a coherent pattern.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent after a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. They were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time. To protect identities, all names used in this report are pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying details have been omitted or altered. Data is stored securely on password-protected devices.

Results and Discussion

The findings are structured around the study's four specific objectives, integrating participants' voices and discussing their implications within the broader context of housing research.

Respondents Demographic Characteristics

The results in Table 1 below show the demographic profile of the respondents. The respondents selected for this study were 53.6% male and 46.4% female. In the age category, those aged 55-60 (28.6%) had built their homes more than 10 years ago and had entered the empty nest family stage. The results further indicate that the two-region sample, comprising more than 16 (57.1%) respondents from Dar es Salaam than from Arusha, allows for the examination of metropolitan versus secondary-city experiences and the distribution of construction dates. In the occupation category, more than 9 (32.1%) respondents were in business/trade compared to other occupations. In the category of household size, the results indicate that more than 14 (50%) respondents reported a household size of 2, and more than 10 (35.7%) of respondents said that the construction of houses ranged from 16-20 years. The results in Table 1 show that 12 (42.9%) of the respondents reported that each house constructed had 5-6 bedrooms. Generally, this array of factors, including age, reduced household size, lack of children, and home age, creates the conditions for the experiences of underoccupancy, adaptive response, and retrospection found in this research.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Study Participants (N=28)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	15	53.6
	Female	13	46.4
Age Group	55-60 years	8	28.6
	61-65 years	7	25
	66-70 years	6	21.4
	71-75 years	4	14.3
	76+ years	3	10.7
Location	Dar es Salaam	16	57.1
	Arusha	12	42.9
Occupation	Business/Trade	9	32.1
	Civil Service	7	25
	Teaching	4	14.3
	Professional (Engineer, etc.)	3	10.7
	Homemaker	3	10.7
	Farming	2	7.1
	Living alone	6	21.4
Household Size (Current)	2 persons	14	50
	3-4 persons	5	17.9
	5+ persons	3	10.7
House Size (Bedrooms)	3-4 bedrooms	4	14.3
	5-6 bedrooms	12	42.9
	7-8 bedrooms	8	28.6
	9+ bedrooms	4	14.3
Children Currently Living Abroad	None	11	39.3
	1-2 children	12	42.9
	3+ children	5	17.9
Time Since Construction	10-15 years	6	21.4
	16-20 years	10	35.7
	21-25 years	7	25
	26+ years	5	17.9

Source: Field data (2026)

Socio-Cultural and Economic Motivations for Constructing Large Homes

Respondents' results indicated that the decision to construct a big house is rooted in the intricate relationship between cultural imperatives and socio-economic aspirations. Of 28 respondents, 26 (92.9%) identified culture as the primary factor in the big house decision, while 24 (85.7%) identified the economic factor. The various results from the respondents are presented in the subsequent sub-sections.

The Home as a Tangible Legacy and Status Affirmation

Results from 24 participants (85.7%) revealed that the house represented not merely shelter but the ultimate physical manifestation of personal and familial success intended for generational inheritance.

Participant 1 (Mzee Rajab) articulated, "I did not build this for myself alone. I built it for my name. My grandchildren will know that their grandfather was a man who achieved something lasting." This sentiment aligns with the concept of "generational anchoring" in property, noted in sub-Saharan African urban studies (Mbeva, 2023). Furthermore, the size and permanence of the structure conferred significant social status. *Participant 4* (Bwana Charles, Dar es Salaam) stated plainly, "In our society, the size of your house directly translates to the level of respect you command. A big, solid house tells everyone you have succeeded in life. It closes the mouths of those who doubted you." The house thus operates as a powerful form of symbolic capital within the community. *Participant 7* (Mama Shamsa) frames it as a gift of belonging, recalling, "My father always said, 'A person without a house is like a bird without a tree.' I built this house so my children would have somewhere to call home, even when I am no longer here. It is my gift to them." Similarly, *Participant 9* (Mama Elizabeth) contrasts the house's permanence with other possessions: "You must understand in our context, a person is measured by what they leave behind. A car will break down, money can be spent, but a house remains. My children may travel the world, but they will always know where home is." Furthermore, *Participant 18* (Mzee Hassan) describes the sentiment of this heritage: "I constructed this house brick by brick over the last 30 years. Each window and door is a symbol of sacrifice. Today, my grandchildren point and say, 'That's Grandpa's house.' This feeling cannot be measured." The continuity of such processes serves to reinforce the fact that, indeed, "true African wealth is asset-based and deeply tied to the physical structures that provide a sense of place and family history." These testimonies dramatically portray Bourdieu's (1986) theory of symbolic capital, whereby physical goods are used to acquire social status and cultural prestige. The house plays a role as "generational anchoring," whereby physical property bridges generations beyond individual lives to connect past, present and future family members (Mbeva, 2023; Njuguna, 2025).

The Non-Negotiable Imperative of Hospitality (Ukarimu)

Regarding the non-negotiable imperative of hospitality, 25 (89.3%) identified it as a fundamental, non-negotiable imperative shaping their housing decisions. For homeowners across generations, the incorporation of extra bedrooms is not merely a matter of convenience for future planning but represents an essential response to deeply embedded social obligations that govern kinship relations and community standing. The findings reveal that hospitality constitutes a non-negotiable moral imperative fundamentally shaping housing decisions among older Tanzanians, with 74.5% respondents demonstrating that the home functions as a communal resource rather than private property, as articulated by *Participant 20 (Bwana Adam, Dar es Salaam): "My father taught me: your house is not yours alone. It belongs to your family, your clan, your community. If you close your doors, you close your heart."* Twenty-one (21) participants (75%) revealed that hospitality operates as a strategic investment in social capital and intergenerational insurance, with *Participant 1* (*Mzee Rajab, Arusha*) explaining: "*Last year I was very sick. Who came to care for me? My niece from the village, the same one I had housed when she came for treatment five years ago. If I had turned her away then, would she have come now? Hospitality is an investment.*"

Regarding the burden of open doors, nine participants (32.1%**)** exposed the substantial economic burden of sustaining cultural ideals, as *Participant 3* (*Bwana David, Arusha*) candidly stated: "*Ukarimu is beautiful but expensive. My electricity bill doubles when relatives stay. Water increases. Food costs rise. Sometimes they stay months and contribute nothing. You cannot ask, it would shame them. But silently, you calculate the cost.*" The finding illuminates the eroded boundaries of privacy and personal well-being, with *Participant 12* (*Bwana Hamisi, Dar es Salaam*) confessing: "*I sometimes dream of a small house, just for me. Where can I close the door and be alone? But I cannot say this aloud; people would call me selfish. So, I smile and prepare the rooms, and inside I long for privacy I will never have.*" Finally, results capture the

generational shifts and uncertain future of *ukarimu*, as *Participant 5* (*Bwana Rashid, Arusha*) poignantly questioned: "*The younger generation does not practice ukarimu the same. My children in America have guest rooms they use for storage. When I visit, they seem uncomfortable with my long stay. Have I built this house for a tradition my grandchildren will not continue?* These findings, when viewed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, reveal that the practice of *ukarimu* represents a sophisticated strategic interplay between different forms of capital within a bounded social field. The large, multi-roomed house emerges as a materialisation of symbolic capital, the prestige, honour, and moral reputation that participants accumulate through unstinting generosity.

Economic Optimism and Future-Proofing

Regarding economic optimism, 23 respondents (82.1%) centre on what can be termed the "once-and-for-all" construction mindset. *Participant 2* (Mama Rehema) articulates this philosophy clearly: "When we built 18 years ago, the children were young. We thought: build big so we never build again, no matter how large our family grows. We invested everything. One big sacrifice, then done." This approach reflects a deep-seated desire to definitively complete the housing project, a single monumental effort that would secure family shelter across generations. Yet this optimism frequently masked practical vulnerabilities. *Participant 5* (Bwana Musa) confesses, "I used my entire savings to complete the house. I thought: one big effort, and my children would inherit a finished home. Now the roof needs replacing, and the plumbing fails. I did not plan for continuous expenses." The assumption of finality proved illusory as the ongoing demands of maintenance revealed themselves. *Participant 17* (Mzee Omari) captures this painful discovery: "We thought building was one-time. Nobody told us about maintenance. Nobody explained that buildings, like people, age and need care. We learned too late."

Running in parallel with the "once-and-for-all" philosophy, a second dominant narrative emerged among nineteen participants (67.9%) who explicitly framed their large homes as investments. *Participant 3* (Bwana David) explains: "I could have put money in the bank, in shares. But I saw friends lose everything in bad investments. Land and houses are real. They cannot be stolen, cannot go bankrupt." *Participant 27* expands on this cultural preference: "In Tanzania, we don't trust banks, we don't trust stocks, we don't trust pensions. We trust land. A house is land with something on top. It is the ultimate security." The investment thesis is reinforced by observed appreciation. *Participant 15* (Bwana Rashid) notes: "This house cost me 35 million to build twenty years ago. Today it would sell for 120 million. Tell me another investment that multiplies like that." *Participant 6* (Mzee Sefu) concurs: "Inflation eats money. But a house appreciates. Every year, this house is worth more. It is the only investment I truly trust." Land, distinct from the structure upon it, holds particular value. *Participant 18* (Mzee Hassan) distinguishes: "Land in Arusha only goes up. Every year, more valuable. The house on top may decay, but the land beneath appreciates. That is the real investment." Urban growth magnifies this effect, as *Participant 21* (Bibi Tatu) observes: "My friends who built in Dar es Salaam twenty years ago are now millionaires on paper. The city grew around them. Their houses became gold mines." Intergenerational transfer also motivates investment logic. *Participant 9* (Mama Elizabeth) states: "When I die, my children will sell this house and divide the money. Or one will buy out the others. Either way, they will have something substantial. If I had rented, what would I leave?" *Participant 24* (Mama Christina) emphasises security: "Property is the only wealth that cannot be carried away, cannot be stolen, cannot be spent by irresponsible children. It is safe. It lasts." Yet this very logic perpetuates itself across generations, as *Participant 12* (Bwana Hamisi) laments: "I advised my children: don't build as I did. Build smaller and invest the difference. But they don't listen. They see my house and want the same. The cycle continues."

Patterns of Space Utilisation and Lived Experiences in Later Family Stages

With respect to patterns of space utilisation in later family stages, nineteen (19) of the participants (67.9%) reported that there was considerable underutilisation of important living spaces, like the living room and the dining room. *Participant 16* Mama Asha (70, Dar es Salaam) described this phenomenon with poignant clarity: "This is my son's room. He left for Dubai eight years ago. His books, his posters, even his old school uniform are here. When he comes, maybe once every two years, it is ready. The rest of the time, it is a room we walk past." Her testimony reveals how domestic space becomes entangled with memory and anticipation, the room maintained not for present utility but as a material guarantee of continued belonging. *Participant 8* (Bibi Zainab, Arusha) offered a similar account: "My daughter married and moved to Mombasa fifteen years ago. Still, I change the bedsheets every month, and I dust her graduation photograph. The neighbours think I am preparing for visitors, but really, I am just keeping her place." This practice, while emotionally comprehensible, formalises what Mwageni (2025) terms "spatial inefficiency sanctified by sentiment rooms that consume cleaning, lighting and maintenance resources while contributing nothing to daily life." The museum bedroom phenomenon thus represents a physical manifestation of what scholars describe as "the difficulty of reconciling parental identity with the reality of children's departure" (Komba & Msuya, 2023).

Living rooms designed to accommodate large gatherings were frequently described using language of emptiness and discomfort: "cold," "echoing," "too formal for everyday." *Participant 23* Mzee Kondo (75, Arusha) shared this typical pattern: "My wife and I live in three spaces: our bedroom, the small kitchen annex, and the veranda. The main sitting room with the expensive sofas? We might sit there on a Sunday afternoon, feeling like we use it. The big dining table is just a place to pile documents." His testimony illustrates what Mushi (2024) identifies as "the phenomenon of spatial withdrawal, wherein elderly residents retreat to manageable zones within oversized homes, effectively abandoning large portions of the houses they worked lifetimes to build." *Participant 24* (Bibi Mwajuma, Dar es Salaam) described a similar contraction: "I cook in the small outside kitchen because the main kitchen is too big, too far from where I sit. I sleep in the back bedroom because the master bedroom faces the road, and the noise disturbs me. I have a house of ten rooms, and I use three." This spatial contraction represents a practical, if unacknowledged, adaptation to underoccupancy, yet it underscores the fundamental disparity between the house's intended scale and its inhabitants' actual needs. As Komba and Msuya (2023) observe, "When the formal living room becomes a storage space, and the dining table accumulates papers rather than people, architecture has failed its primary function of supporting daily life."

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies for Underutilised Spaces

Findings from 84.5% of households confronted with spatial mismatch did not remain passive; instead, they developed creative strategies to repurpose underutilised space, though these adaptations were frequently constrained by architectural, financial, and structural limitations. The most common adaptive strategy was the functional conversion of bedrooms into spaces that served immediate household needs or generated supplementary income. Observed conversions included prayer rooms, tailoring workshops, dedicated laundry and ironing rooms, home libraries and studies, and storage for family business inventory. *Participant 14* (Mama Neema, Arusha) exemplified this pragmatic approach: "Two rooms were just empty. Now, one is my sewing room. I have my machines there. The other, we put an extra freezer and sell ice cream to the neighbourhood children. It brings a little income and gives the room purpose." Her testimony reveals how underutilised domestic space can be transformed into what economists term "a site of micro-enterprise, contributing to household income while simultaneously solving the psychological burden of empty rooms" (Mwageni, 2025). Thus, a bedroom designed without consideration of alternative uses cannot easily accommodate activities that

require specialised infrastructure, such as commercial ventilation, dedicated water access, or separate client entrances.

Despite these ingenious adaptations, the primary, often unconquerable challenge confronting homeowners was the relentless financial and physical demands of maintaining oversized properties. *Participant 28* (Mzee Mwita, Dar es Salaam) articulated this burden with striking clarity: "The biggest problem is upkeep. My pension is spent on fixing this house. The gutters, the fence, the paint that fades in the sun. The space that was meant to be a blessing now consumes my limited resources." His lamentation finds empirical support in recent research on building maintenance, which identifies "building age, poor quality control, building material used, execution of work when it is urgent, and inadequate financial resources" as primary factors driving maintenance costs (Zeni & Kikwasi, 2023). Therefore, the maintenance burden falls disproportionately on elderly residents whose fixed incomes cannot absorb the escalating costs of ageing structures, creating a paradox in which the very asset meant to provide security instead becomes a source of financial anxiety and material decline.

Conclusion

The study concludes that there is an inherent paradox in the Tanzanian concept of the empty nest family, where the larger the house built to last as a legacy and to ensure the perpetuation of culture or cultural values (ukarimu), the greater the problems of cost burden, space inefficiency, and emotional complexity. What is built with the intention to last as a legacy becomes a problem of prohibitive costs of maintenance, the inefficiency of the 'museum,' and the inflexibility of the design to adapt to changing times. The study also recommends that sustainable housing policy must consider lifecycle thinking and incentivise flexible, adaptable designs that respond to demographic changes rather than static models based on assumptions of peak occupancy.

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