



WHITE PAPER

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Introduction



Zanzalu is an annual pop-up city in Fumba Town, Zanzibar that brings together founders, technologists, artists, and more to imagine and build an abundant future in Africa and beyond. It is a multi-week gathering that combines the energy of an ideas festival and the focus of a builder hub. Each year, Fumba Town comes to life through Zanzalu's residencies, forums, and events, which are designed to spark collaboration, test new ideas, and connect people working on the continent's most exciting challenges—from technology and entrepreneurship to cities, industry, and governance.

Zanzalu's purpose is to cultivate a forum where participants walk away with new ideas, higher ambitions, and a lasting network of peers committed to building a prosperous future. In this way, Zanzalu is both an event and a long-term project which aims to catalyze high-leverage experimentation and a culture of agency among rising talent. Zanzalu exists to show that a different model of growth is possible: one rooted in creativity, ambition, and collaboration. More than anything, Zanzalu seeks to inspire participants to aim higher and to support them with the skills, tools, and network to achieve those elevated aspirations.

Our Pillars



Zanzalu is built on four pillars:

1. Talent

Gather great minds from East Africa and beyond. Talent lies at the heart of any successful community. We aim to create a collaborative environment of people who are driven to make an impact in Africa and beyond. Drawing from the ethos of the original Zuzalu experiment, "more than anything, we want you to meet your best friends, your future co-founders, and your partners here. We are pursuing serendipity, with a little more intentionality." We believe that spontaneous interactions can lead to relationships which change the world.

2. Experimentation

Create a living laboratory to test real-world applications of frontier technologies. Experimentation and iteration in real-world settings is crucial for building effective human-centered technologies. We are located in a small town within a special economic zone on a semi-autonomous island. This environment offers the flexibility necessary to test applications of frontier technologies, innovative policies, and decentralized decision-making. Together with our partners and community, Zanzalu seeks to be a living laboratory for cities of the future.

3. Access

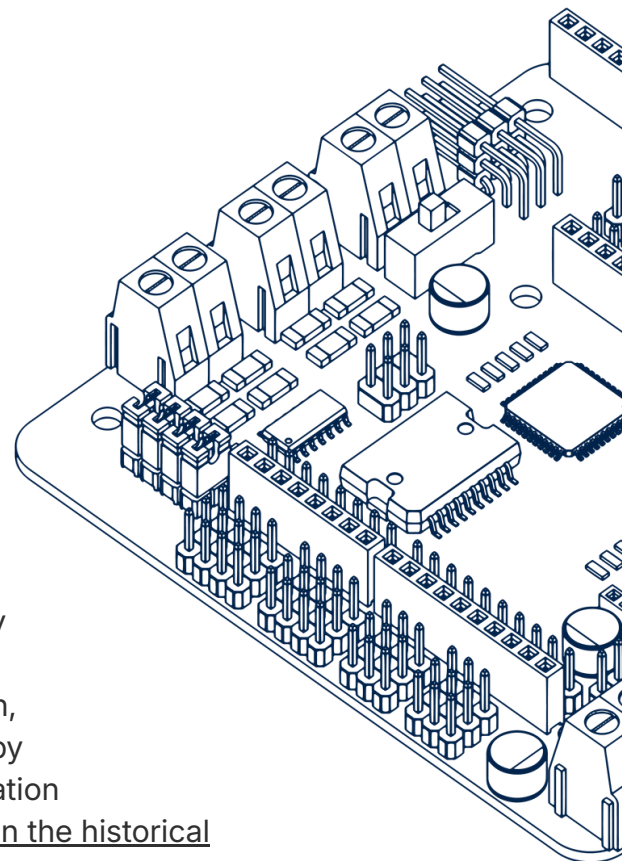
Give builders the space, connections, and resources to grow their projects. Often, African builders don't have access to the same opportunities as those from higher income countries. Recognizing these unique challenges, we aim to create an enabling environment that equips innovators with the tools, networks, and expertise needed to compete globally and thrive locally. We also seek to highlight the vibrancy and ingenuity of African innovation on a global scale. Together, we can build a future where African innovators lead in solving global challenges.

4. Culture

Foster a pro-growth, pro-technology community while celebrating local culture. An open, positive culture fosters trust, collaboration, and risk-taking, all of which are essential for innovation and growth. Zanzalu is a niche for the expression and cultivation of the unique skills, interests, and aspirations. Our strength comes from our community and openness to engage with new ideas. Participants are active partners and help co-create Zanzalu by hosting events, workshops, talks, or projects.

Motivation

Africa will play an increasingly important role in the 21st century. The continent's population is the fastest growing and the youngest. By 2050, roughly one in every three young people on earth will be African. Moreover, sub-Saharan Africa is undergoing a rapid urban transition, with the region's urban population expected to increase by 699 million people over the next three decades. Urbanization across the continent is occurring "substantially faster than the historical precedent" and at comparatively low levels of income.

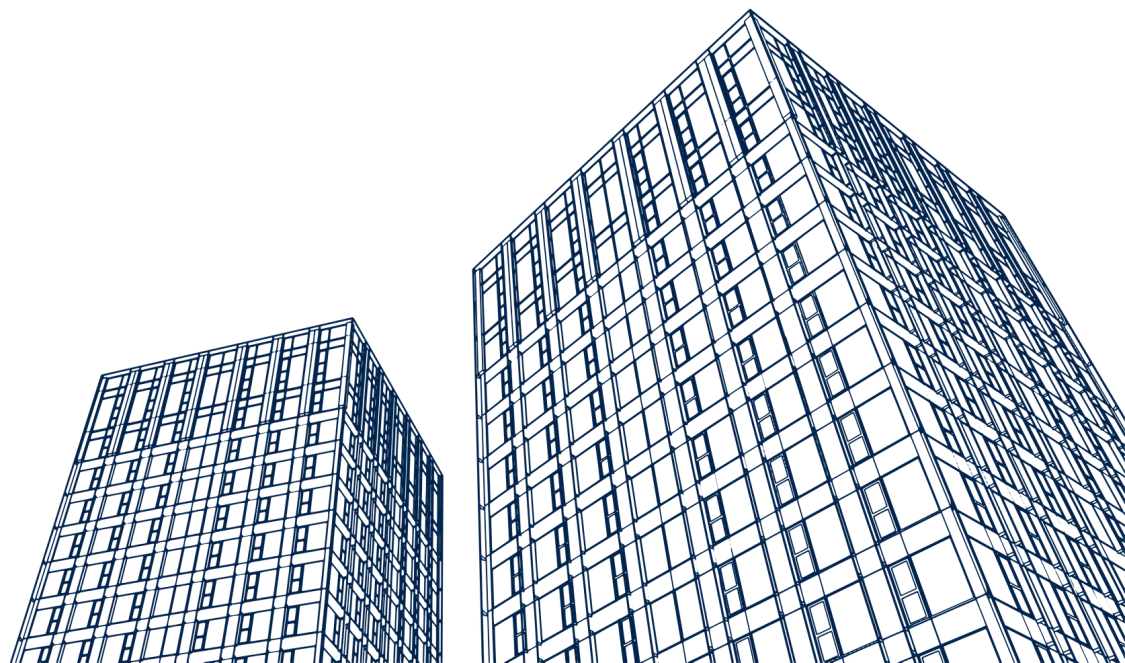


Although urbanization is often associated with increased economic growth, economists have suggested that this trend is breaking down in many African cities. For cities in East Africa, rapid urbanization has not been matched by commensurate increases in formal sector jobs, industrial output, or mid-tier firm growth. This suggests that African cities may not be functioning as employment and innovation hubs to the same degree as cities in other regions during other times.

While the continent undergoes a massive demographic transition, global political and social systems are also experiencing significant changes. America is withdrawing from their previous role as global policeman, leading to regional hegemony asserting themselves. China is expanding their supply chains, focusing on resource extraction in Africa. Europe is increasingly concerned with mass migration. The world order will look substantially different in 20 years.

As populations grow, cities expand, and the international system evolves, the systems currently being built in African countries will set patterns for decades. The people who create, test, and scale new technologies will increasingly be living in African cities, working in African firms and participating in African political systems. Choices about governance, infrastructure, education, urban form, and technology will shape how hundreds of millions of people live and work for generations to come. These choices will influence everything from migration to supply chains and capital flows. Anyone who cares about the long-term trajectory of the global economy has strong reasons to pay attention to Africa.

These conditions challenge us to reconsider the crucial questions which have inspired other social experiments, such as the Bauhaus movement: "How will we live, how will we settle, what form of community do we want to aspire to?" In other words, what will we build? Zanzalu exists to start iterating on these questions, in a small, but meaningful way. We hope to generate ideas, relationships, and experiments that travel outward from Zanzibar and influence how the next generation thinks about prosperity across the continent and around the world. We believe that there is a great deal to learn from young, energetic people wrestling with the most critical questions of economic development in an African context.



Guiding Themes



Leapfrog Tech

Leapfrog technologies compress decades of development into shorter time frames. Tools like AI, blockchain, drones and solar can help bypass legacy bottlenecks. Zanzalu treats these technologies as part of a wider development agenda. The focus is on practical use cases that move real constraints. By convening engineers, policymakers, founders, and researchers in one place, Zanzalu aims to turn leapfrog technologies into working prototypes and playbooks that can be carried back to innovation-friendly places across the continent and beyond.

Cities

Cities are a primary theme of Zanzalu because they are where growth actually happens. Many hard problems in development show up as urban problems: how people find jobs, how firms find workers and how ideas circulate. Well-functioning cities create dense labour markets, thick networks of suppliers and customers, and a culture of ambition and innovation. For Africa's economic trajectory, the quality of its cities will be one of the main determinants of long-run prosperity.

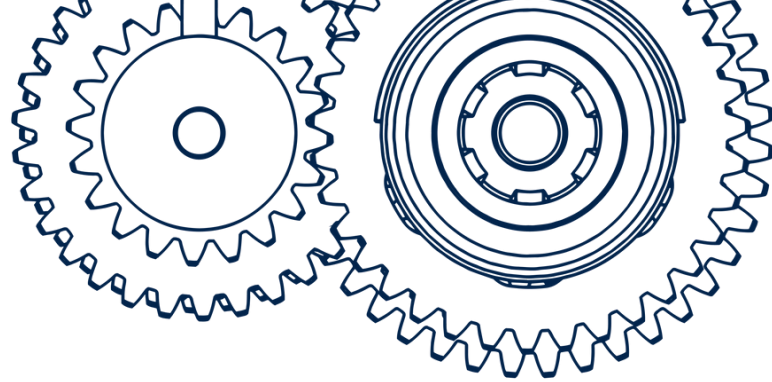
By hosting the program in Fumba Town, Zanzibar, Zanzalu can explore questions of urban form, governance, and services in a living environment rather than in theory alone. Participants experience how design choices, infrastructure, and community norms shape the way people work, meet, and collaborate. The aim is to produce lessons that are useful for existing African legacy cities and new town projects.

Industry

Societies that achieve sustained growth build productive firms that turn raw materials, skills, and technology into goods and services at scale. For African countries, this means moving toward more diversified production in manufacturing, construction, logistics, and high-value services. Industrial capabilities are also important for anchoring many of the benefits of new technologies within firms that can deploy them at scale.

At Zanzalu, industry is treated broadly. It includes factories and ports, but also energy systems, logistics networks, digital services with real world impact, and the institutional infrastructure that supports them. The goal is to bring together people who build and finance these systems with those who regulate, research, and study them. By placing industry alongside cities and leapfrog tech, Zanzalu encourages participants to think about full production ecosystems.

Our Model



Origins

Zanzalu is inspired by Zuzalu, a gathering hosted by Vitalik Buterin, founder of the cryptocurrency Ethereum, in 2023 in Montenegro. Zuzalu brought together experts from many corners of the tech space—including blockchain, AI, network states, and biotech—to connect over casual conversations and morning coffee. At its core, Zuzalu was an experiment in new ways of connecting through, with, and beyond emerging technologies.

Since the beginning of 2024, the original Zuzalu experiment has given way to a vibrant ecosystem of similar pop-up projects, including initiatives such as ZuGrama, Zuitzerland, Edge City, Crecimiento, ZuBerlin, and many more. As a part of this network, Zanzalu aspires to build upon Zuzalu's success and help catalyze collaboration between builders within the East African tech scene and beyond.

Our Approach

Zanzalu is built around an annual pop-up city in Fumba Town, Zanzibar that brings together the people who will shape Africa's next wave of growth. Each edition convenes builders, technologists, policymakers, investors and development practitioners in one physical place, for several weeks to think and work together on concrete questions of innovation, growth and state capacity.

Zanzalu is deliberately cross-cutting and international. A software engineer from California might find themselves debating industrial policy with a civil servant from Nairobi and a logistics founder from Abidjan. Zanzalu aims to become the place where Africa's future leaders first encounter the ideas and frameworks that will quietly inspire their future initiatives. To make this possible, we provide fellowships to people who show clear agency, ambition and a track record of doing hard but important things.

Our pop-up city is designed around immersion and spontaneity rather than a traditional conference schedule. Participants live, work and socialize in close proximity, with plenty of unstructured time intentionally left in the program. We apply interdisciplinary thinking to key issues in development by mixing formal sessions with informal excursions and small group work. Fumba Town has central spaces for co-working, shared meals and evening events, creating a density of chance encounters for building familiarity and trust.

Zanzalu also functions as a long-term community. Time on the ground is long enough to build strong ties among participants and with local institutions and residents. Our aim is to create a community of people who return to Zanzalu annually, bringing new collaborators and lessons learned from their home contexts. Local engagement is built into the model through community projects, a student weekend for university students in Zanzibar, and public events that open the program to the local Zanzibari residents.

Residency Programs

Participation at Zanzalu is intentionally flexible, so people can bring their existing work with them without worrying about an overpacked schedule. The environment is designed so that meetings happen naturally. For those who prefer more structure, Zanzalu offers two themed residencies that offer programming around a variety of topics: the Vanguard Residency and the Swahili Futurism Residency.

Zanzalu is also developing residencies with partners focused on technology, business and art. Together, these programs serve as a coordinating mechanism for people with shared interests to make the most of their time at Zanzalu while also giving other participants an understanding of the core thematic offerings they can expect at sub-events within the pop-up.

Vanguard Residency

Few things matter more for Africa's future than what its most talented people choose to work on. Yet the path to finding one's life work is rarely straightforward. Many talent institutions channel people into fashionable causes and safe career tracks instead of encouraging clear thinking about what should actually exist in the world.

Some of the most important work has started in small, informal circles of people who take ideas and each other seriously. These are spaces where ambitious, half-formed plans are treated as raw material to refine rather than dismissed.

The Vanguard Residency at Zanzalu is a two-week, in-person program in Zanzibar for young professionals on track to be Africa's next generation of builders, thinkers, artists, and policymakers. It brings together people who care about Africa's long-run trajectory and about their own role in shaping it. The residency is a time to sharpen one's thinking on the most consequential questions facing the continent with a small cohort of serious, high-agency peers.



The program is aimed at young professionals from any sector or discipline who demonstrate seriousness of purpose and a track record of follow-through. Ideal candidates are motivated by the prospect of world-shaping work. They are drawn to hard problems and complex ideas, and are inclined to direct that capacity toward concrete, meaningful goals. They also hold themselves and others to high standards, and value environments where their most ambitious ideas are rigorously tested by peers who are similarly serious and driven.

Swahili Futurism Residency

Imagination is just as important as technology in shaping the future. Art residencies offer time, space, and support for creative research and innovation, something often missing in local creative ecosystems. Instead of focusing solely on new technologies, art allows us to bring together tradition and innovation, while maintaining a focus on the people, environment, memory, and future possibilities helped by technology.

The Swahili Futurism residency gives artists a central role in imagining the future of the East African coast and beyond. The region has always been connected to the world, through the ocean, trade, language and culture. For centuries, people have adapted, mixed ideas, and created new ways of living. To us, this is already a form. Amidst significant regional and global change, we believe the future of the Swahili Coast should continue to be imagined from within, not placed on from outside.

Through this residency, we want to create a space for artists to experiment, tell future stories, and imagine new possibilities that are rooted in local knowledge but open to the world. We aim to ask simple but important questions: What does the future look like when we imagine it through the ocean and its coastal life? How can we think about tomorrow while staying connected to where we come from? How can the current growth of technology be used in improving/growing the coast? There is not a single answer to these questions, but the Swahili Futurism residency aims to begin answering them.



Our Home

Zanzibar, Tanzania

Zanzibar is a semi-autonomous archipelago located off the East Coast of Tanzania in the Indian Ocean. Approximately the size of Manhattan, New York, Zanzibar sits within the Indian Ocean trading system that has linked East Africa to Arabia, India, and Asia for over a thousand years. The Swahili coast city-states grew up as nodes in these routes, connecting African producers to global circuits of goods, people and ideas.

In the nineteenth century, Zanzibar City became the seat of a commercial empire under the Omani sultanate, anchoring trade along the East African coast. Its long history is still evident in Stone Town, a UNESCO-listed district where African, Arab, Indian and European architectural influences sit side by side. Today, Zanzibar City is growing rapidly. By 2050, it is expected to double in size, from 800,000 residents to 1.6 million.

Zanzibar is actively working to reestablish itself as a vibrant economic and cultural center by leveraging its rich history, unique cultural heritage, and strategic location to promote tourism, sustainable development, regional trade integration, and technological innovation. This mix of cosmopolitan history, everyday livability, and future-oriented ambition makes Zanzibar a natural setting for people who want to think about the future of cities, technology and growth while immersed in a place shaped by centuries of global exchange.





Fumba Town

As part of their efforts to promote organized urban expansion, the Zanzibari government approved the development of Fumba Town, a new town located 30 minutes to the south of Zanzibar City in the path of urban expansion. The entire Fumba Peninsula has also been designated as a free economic zone---one of five Special Economic Zones currently listed by the Zanzibar Investment Promotion Authority (ZIPA). ZIPA uses these zones as instruments to attract investment and experiment with more growth-oriented policies. For Zanzalu, this provides a platform that can interface with SEZ regulators, investors and policymakers who are actively thinking about new legal and economic frameworks on the island.

CPS, a Tanzania-based developer, received land in the Fumba Zone to build Fumba Town. Fumba Town is an intimate neighborhood with an urban layout that encourages serendipity and togetherness. The entire project covers about 149 acres with 1.5 km of seafront and is being developed as a mixed-use, walkable community. As of December 2025, 700 units have been built and more than 500 units are under construction, out of 5,000 including in the master. The town also boasts four restaurants, a coffee shop, a grocery store, a gym, a public pool, a small community library, a co-working space, an urban care clinic, and a couple small shops.

Fumba's urban plan is designed with neighborhood-scale amenities rather than scattered resort enclaves, making it easy to move between apartments, coworking spaces and public venues. The entire town is also designed around permaculture principles, with ample public green spaces. Fumba Town's layout is designed to foster "symbiotic togetherness, create economic and social benefits, and therefore enable a better future." Because Fumba Town is still under development, the growing city invites residents and Zanzalu participants alike to not only imagine the future of living, but also to participate in its construction.

The Zone is on its way to becoming a vibrant knowledge hub, with Fumba Town as its center, starting with two world-class universities. The first East Africa campus of the African School of Economics (ASE) with the establishment of the Africa Urban Lab (AUL) in December 2024. The Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IITM) also opened their first overseas campus five minutes outside of Fumba Town in September 2023. Organizations like the Zanzibar Startup Association (ZSA) and Bahari Network are diligently nurturing a local startup ecosystem. Both organizations are collaborating with the MCITI to develop a Startup Policy. Bahari Network is also developing a training program in collaboration with IITM Zanzibar to train local talent pool in preparation for jobs to service and maintain upcoming green energy projects.

Conclusion

Africa's development trajectory will be shaped by a group of leaders who take growth seriously and are willing to do things off-script. Zanzalu gives those future leaders and builders a place to swap notes and turn half-formed ideas into work they can stand behind. By putting founders, technologists, artists, policymakers and investors in the same neighborhood for a few weeks, Zanzalu gives participants a chance to develop clearer mental models of technological, urban, industrial and institutional trends shaping Africa's future. They will leave knowing who they can call when they need a cofounder, a policy ally, or a tough critic. Over time, those relationships and shared frameworks should show up in the background of tangible initiatives: a new investment thesis, a startup or a policy reform package. Over the next few years, Zanzalu will become the premier festival of ideas in Africa as we build our community and learn from the lessons they bring from their own experience.