



## **ART HOUSE RISING.** **CREATING A TRUE HUB FOR ARTISTS** **IN KAMPALA, UGANDA**

**BUILDING ON A RICH HISTORY OF LOCAL CREATIVITY, 32° EAST - UGANDAN ARTS TRUST ACTS AS A HUB FOR THE DYNAMIC CONTEMPORARY ARTS SCENE IN KAMPALA, UGANDA. FROM ITS MULTI-SITE PUBLIC ARTS FESTIVAL, KLA ART, TO ITS ARTIST RESIDENCY PROGRAM, THE ORGANIZATION SERVES AS A KIND OF UNOFFICIAL MINISTRY OF THE ARTS IN THE COUNTRY. NOW RISING IN THE CITY ARE THE RED WALLS OF COMPRESSED-EARTH BLOCK BUILDINGS, WHICH STARTING IN OCTOBER 2022 WILL HOUSE THE NEW HEADQUARTERS OF 32° EAST. FELLOW ARTISTS AND ART ENTHUSIASTS FROM THE UNITED STATES AND OTHER PARTS OF THE GLOBE ARE SUPPORTING THEIR EFFORTS.**

In 2011, two British nationals arrived in Kampala, witnessing the profound creativity of the city. Rocca Holly-Nambi and Nikki Elphinstone soon launched 32° East - Ugandan Arts Trust, 32° East for short, to further nurture and channel the country's artistic expressions. The two women, one bringing the experience of an artist, and the

other a background in art galleries, recognized that a gathering place providing programming and residencies for artists would allow the city's vibrant arts community to thrive. While there were arts colleges, a National Gallery and a National Museum in Uganda, they felt artistic expression in the country could be so much more.

## ART AS A CONNECTOR

Together with a consortium of other arts organizations, 32° East launched KLA ART in 2012, a public arts festival that boasts a dynamic following in Uganda and internationally. Meanwhile, Teesa Bahana was volunteering her time at another festival, and her eyes opened to the profound contribution the arts make to life in the country. As the founders of 32° East transitioned out, they planned for greater stability for the organization, and Rocca raised enough funds for the purchase of a plot of land. They handed the keys of their kingdom to Ms. Bahana who was selected as the organization's new Director and found a plot on a quiet street just off the dynamic Ggaba Road as the site of 32° East's permanent new home. With her background in non-profits, quick mind and delightful way with people, Teesa Bahana stepped in to further build the organization's programming and bring the envisioned arts center to life.

"I always thought that what the Continent needed was economic development, but then I volunteered at the music festival, and it felt like the best parts of life concentrate in one place where people get to play and be creative and connect with others on a human level," says

Teesa Bahana. She continues "artists are, in a way, the keepers of what connects us, what makes us human, and I'm honored that the founders saw that I had the capacity to bring their vision for a true arts center to life."

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**"WE'RE CREATING A TRUE HUB FOR ARTISTS - A PLACE FOR THE CREATION OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN UGANDA, WHERE ARTISTS HAVE SPACE AND TIME TO EXPERIMENT, TO FAIL, TO SATISFY THEIR CURIOSITY AND TO BE IN COMMUNITY WITH EACH OTHER."**

**TEESA BAHANA**

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## ARTISTS' LABORATORY

Ms. Bahana speaks with passion about the planned arts center. For years, 32° East has functioned out of metal cargo containers. "A clever solution, but over time, they began to leak in the rain - and at the equivalent of 100° Fahrenheit (38° Celsius), they can get very hot," she says with her broad, disarming smile.

While the containers are still positioned on the plot of land, construction of the new center is well underway.





“We’re creating a true hub for artists - a place for the creation of contemporary art in Uganda, where artists have space and time to experiment, to fail, to satisfy their curiosity and to be in community with each other,” describes Ms. Bahana.

### **MENTORING ARTISTS**

While the center is being built, most programs are still up and running. There are Members Meetups, enabling artists to meet each other and share resources. The organization also runs a talk series called Artachat, covering key professional development topics for artists, such as discussions of the art market, and tips for creating a portfolio.

On a brief hiatus, its residency program will be relaunched at the completion of phase I of the new arts center. “Each year, ten to twelve artists stay with us for one to three months. We provide them with studio space, materials, lunch, access to our library and to other artists. We also provide a small per diem,” explains Teesa Bahana.

### **INSPIRING THE COMMUNITY**

KLA ART enlivens Kampala with its arts festival, which is still thriving and is now fully organized by 32° East. “Each edition of KLA ART is unique. The 2020 edition was rescheduled to October 2021 because of the shut-downs, requiring over two years of commitment on the

part of artists,” Teesa Bahana recounts. Some years KLA ART is international. “When we do calls for applications that don’t require so much on-site commitment from the artists, KLA ART becomes very much an international festival, bringing artists from around the Continent,” Ms. Bahana notes.

KLA ART 2021 included 11 installations around the city of Kampala. “One tucked-away area of the city became the unexpected heart of the festival,” she says. “There was this amazing structure with the roof of a warehouse but no sides. It was a grand, epic space with performances and screenings - even kids in the community spontaneously brought their art to show,” Bahana shares.

### **NATURALLY BEAUTIFUL**

32° East has its new buildings on track for the October 2022 dedication. Construction for the buildings themselves uses earth from the site with two environmentally friendly, if time consuming techniques - rammed-earth and compressed-earth block.

As Teesa Bahana tells it “32° East will have the only rammed-earth block architecture in the city. It will be wonderful - the earth absorbs the heat, keeping the work and living spaces cool.” She adds, “construction is a little loud as the blocks and walls are formed, but the center will have a natural beauty from the rich red of the local soil.”

The layout of phase I includes office and library space, plus three studios. The 32° East team is currently raising funds for phase II - which will add three bedrooms, a gallery, and four additional studios, including one for large scale artworks. The entire building will form a U-shape around a walled garden for the display of outdoor artworks.

“We are also focused on creating income streams to sustain our new center. There will be a café and a shop that sells high quality, hand-made Ugandan products. We’ll also have rental income from leasing some studio space and renting bedrooms to Kampala’s many visitors,” says Ms. Bahana.

### OPENING DOORS

As a Colgate University graduate, Teesa Bahana has roots in the United States, too. Through her American friends, she learned of KBFUS and describes the benefits of working with them. “As an African organization, fundraising in the U.S. would be difficult without the fiscal sponsorship of KBFUS. Not only do we receive donations through our fund at KBFUS, but because of our affiliation with them, we can open doors not possible for a foreign non-profit, such as creating affordable crowd-funding campaigns.”

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SUSAN ROSENBERG

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One such campaign resulted in an anonymous donation of \$10,000 for the building of the new arts center. So far, 32° East received close to \$82,000 in contributions through its Friends of 32° East - Ugandan Arts Trust, hosted at KBFUS.

### A GAME CHANGER

Enthusiasm for 32° East comes not only from the United States. After a visit to Kampala, British artist Susan Rosenberg says of her donation to the organization: “Despite the long tradition of making in Kampala, there is no contemporary arts center that brings a focus and direction to the creative arts in Uganda. The arts center that 32° East has committed to building will be a game changer, not only for local artists, crafts people and makers, but for the broader community, as both a creative and economic hub.”

### ABOVE AND BEYOND

KBFUS has provided assistance and support to 32° East since the start of their relationship in 2018. Says Teesa Bahana “Not only does KBFUS give us affordable access to fundraising platforms, but their non-profit status allows us to receive donations that are deductible for U.S. tax purposes. I would say that KBFUS goes above and beyond!” she exclaims.

**32° East - Ugandan Arts Trust**  
**Friends of 32° East - Ugandan Arts Trust**

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