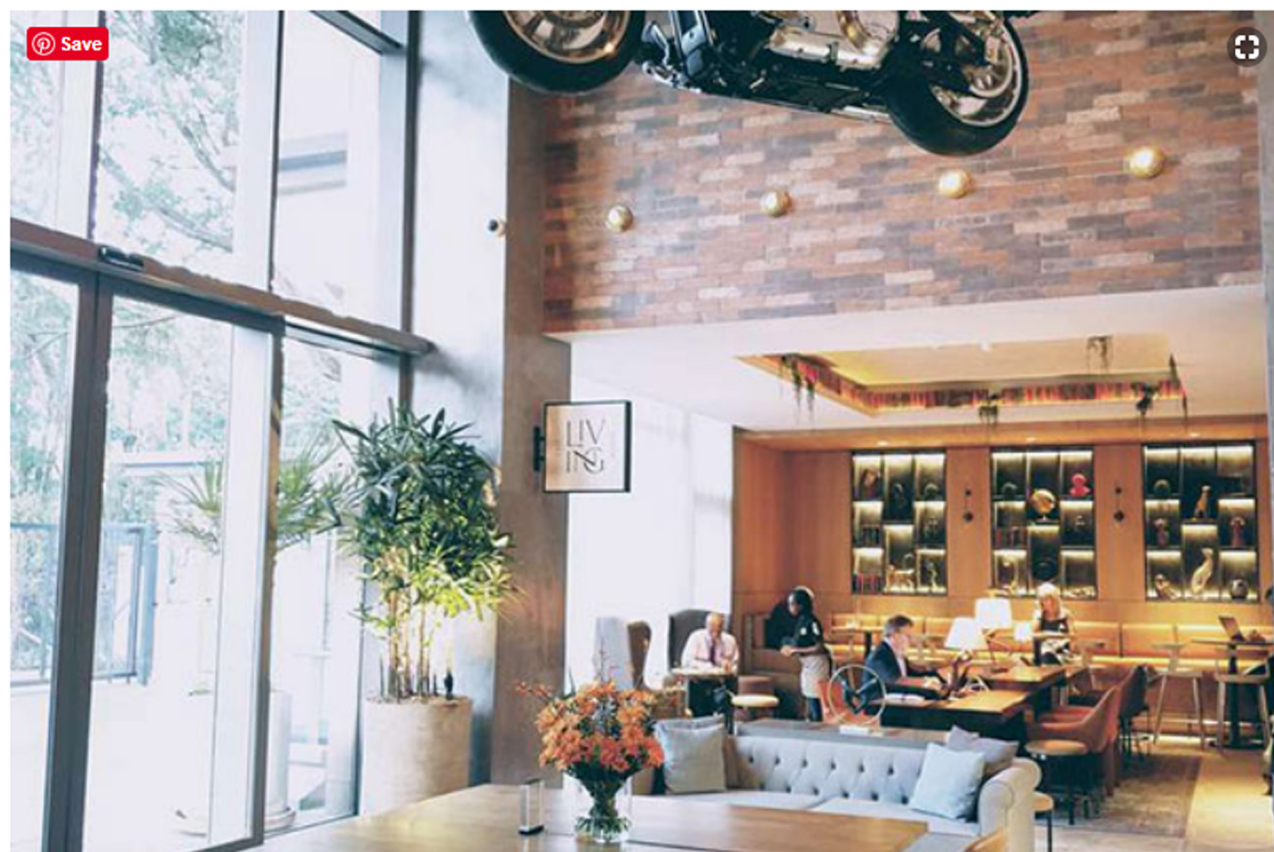


A scenic tour of city's Unique Social House

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The Social House in Lavington. When setting up The Social House, the owners and their team certainly took a road less travelled. PHOTO | JAN FOX

In Summary

- As you enter the building, you walk into a space called The Living Room, instead of a reception. Here, there are comfortable seats and a warmly lit study area.
- The views from the highest rooms and from the rooftop bar were a good reminder of how green Lavington still is despite all the developments.



By JAN FOX

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'You see that poem up there?', Paul said, motioning towards an inscription on a high wall above a lively cafe.

'If you understand the significance of that poem, you will understand the inspiration behind what

we have created here.'

Paul Kavanagh is the manager, or Head of House as he is officially known, of The Social House — the new "hotel" (I hesitate to use that word) on James Gichuru Road in Lavington, Nairobi.

The poem on the wall is Robert Frost's, "The Road Not Taken" from his 1916 Mountain Interval collection. Here are the last few lines:

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference."

When setting up The Social House, the owners and their team certainly took a road less travelled.

THE LIVING ROOM

The name gives it away; this is a place with a distinctive community spirit — a casualness that defies the formality of many high-end city hotels.

Paul was very aware that this personable approach may not be everyone's taste. A Marmite concept, he called it.

Some guests prefer to collect their key and head to the privacy of their room without speaking to a soul. But that's not what The Social House is about.

As you enter the building, you walk into a space called The Living Room, instead of a reception. Here, there are comfortable seats and a warmly lit study area.

Suspended from the ceiling, in front of the wall with the Robert Frost poem, is a shuka-cloaked Maasai warrior riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

Beneath this metal Maasai — affectionately known as Ole Rafiki — is a 24-hour cafe with a commercial coffee roaster.

HOMELY THEME

So guests can relax when they arrive with freshly brewed coffee as they are checked in.

I was joined for a tour of the rest of the House by Mourine Oloo of the marketing team. First, she took me round the three other restaurants: 'Copper' — a stylish and intimate urban grill with a glass-fronted kitchen, 'The Other Room' — a Scandinavian-styled garden dining room by the swimming pool, and 'Inca' — a rooftop restaurant and bar serving Peruvian cuisine. Final touches were being made to both Copper and Inca, which should be open soon.

Adhering to the homely theme, each of the 83 rooms are called Bedrooms. Among them are four 'Balcony Bedrooms', three 'Bigger Bedrooms' and three 'Biggest Bedrooms'.

They are all tastefully furnished with natural tones and splashes of bright colour, and their large windows frame the leafy canopies of surrounding trees.

The views from the highest rooms and from the rooftop bar were a good reminder of how green Lavington still is despite all the developments.

EVENT SPACES

Mourine then showed me around the various event spaces which are at the heart of the House's communal ethos.

They are well-suited to hosting a range of events, or 'happenings' as they are described on the website, from business meetings, art, drama, music and dance events, to yoga, fitness and culinary experiences, and even TED-style talks.

The majority of these spaces are on the fifth floor with the Inca restaurant, and they each have their own unique character.

Among the larger rooms are 'The Garages', with a high-tech but industrial feel, and 'The Shed' on the ground floor by the garden, which has a giant video wall.

The smallest space is called 'The Snug', which is compact and cosy. I'm quite impressed by this newcomer to the Lavington landscape.

For months, when it was being constructed, they didn't give much away — just a colourful hoarding with Roald Dahl style illustrations and an unusual name with a stray exclamation mark.

It's a curious place, but I now know that's exactly the impression that they had intended to create.

For more information, head to www.thesocialhouse.ke, or pass by The Living Room for a cup of coffee.

Fox is the Managing Director of iDC.