

How to Build a Library

2025 | 103mins

Directors: Christopher King, Maia Lekow



Piles of tattered, dusty books. Turned-up floorboards and chipping paint. A room full of old-desks-turned-scrap-wood. This is McMillan Library, established 1931 in Nairobi, Kenya by British-American settlers, as seen when publisher Angela Wachuka and writer Shiro Koinage first took charge of its renovation in 2017.

Over the next eight years, Maia Lekow and Christopher King document Koinage and Wachuka's fight against county government and change-resistant librarians to transform the McMillan Library, and its two satellite libraries, into spaces that are reflective of modern Kenya.

As Nairobi-born Lekow states, *How to Build a Library* 'is not just a film about restoring a library, but about reclaiming our narrative [as Kenyans]'. The McMillan Library was a white-only space until 1958, only four years before Kenya declared independence. This colonial past haunts the present-day library, from its complete lack of African-written works, to the strong European bias in its categorization system. Moreover, the library hosts an extensive archive of colonial-era documents and artefacts, from war-time portraits of African soldiers in the British Army, to a photograph of an all-white Nairobi County Council from the 1950s.

This process of cultural decolonisation (the identification and challenging of colonial structures) stretches outside of the library's walls. Koinage and Wachuka struggle against county government bureaucracy, having to rely on international funding, such as from the British Council. Equally, the renovation has a profound impact on the two women's friendship, with there being as much humour and laughter between them as tension and strain.

Through Koinage, Wachuka and the McMillan Library, Lekow and King are able to express their love for Nairobi's thriving yet underrepresented arts scene, whilst simultaneously challenging the foundations of Kenya's decolonisation efforts.

'In pondering whether there are bolt cutters strong enough to cut colonial chains, *How To Build a Library* forces audiences to reflect on the uncomfortable ways the past and present continue to be intertwined'

-POV Magazine

What did you think of the film? Please mark or tear the number.

Please add any further comments here

Excellent

Fair

Poor



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Did You Know?

- *How to Build a Library* premiered internationally at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival under the World Documentary Strand.
- Koinage and Wachuka originally reached out to Lekow and King to film promotional material for the renovation. However, Lekow and King quickly became interested in creating a long-form documentary instead.

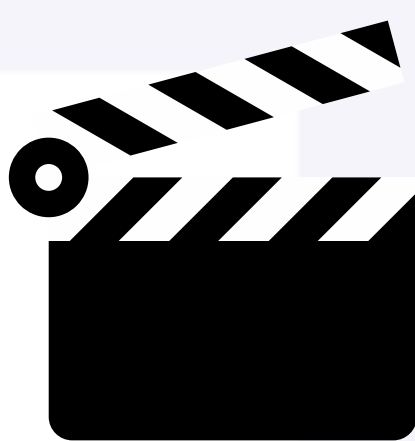
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