

# MUNGUFENI IS REDEFINING DISABILITY IN ARCHITECTURE

BY RICHARD ATEGEKA

Sabiri Mungufeni, born without arms, recalls walking into a computer repair shop to buy a battery.

“The gentleman didn’t ask why I had come. He just gave me money,” he says. “He thought I was begging. That moment stayed with me. That’s how many perceive persons with disabilities.”

Mungufeni notes that even when people say disability is not inability, their actions often suggest otherwise. He responds by letting his work speak for itself.

Reflecting on the rarity of architects with disabilities, he cites Chris Downey, a visually impaired architect behind major projects, as proof it can be done.

Mungufeni says in Uganda, such professionals are very few and many tutors have little experience supporting physically impaired students.

“I hope this will change through improved accessibility, assistive technologies and shifts in attitude,” he says.

Mungufeni grew up at the Missionaries of the Poor orphanage in Mengo-Kisenyi, Kampala. His parents placed him there, not because he was orphaned, but because they believed he would access better opportunities. He later attended Namilyango High School, Gulama for O’level and Aringa Secondary School in Yumbe.

As a child, he was drawn to construction sites, watching workers carry bricks, mix mortar and climb scaffolding.

“I liked seeing them pass bricks from one hand to another. It fascinated me,” Mungufeni says.

Walking through Kampala city, he studied buildings and imagined how people moved inside them. That curiosity shaped his decision to pursue architecture.

The architecture course, however, is physically demanding — site work involves concrete mixing, slab casting and climbing unfinished structures.

“The first time I visited a site, I couldn’t climb to upper



Mungufeni doing a collage artwork at the university studio

## MUNGUFENI’S ADVICE TO YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Sabiri Mungufeni urges young people with disabilities to define their purpose.

“You shouldn’t remain where people just look at you with pity,” he says. “Be someone people look up to. Let them wonder how you do things.”

To Mungufeni, success is about impact, not physical ability.

“Through education, people with disabilities can work in offices that fund projects, approve plans or lead teams. Leadership is about guiding others.”

Mungufeni’s support system includes family, friends and

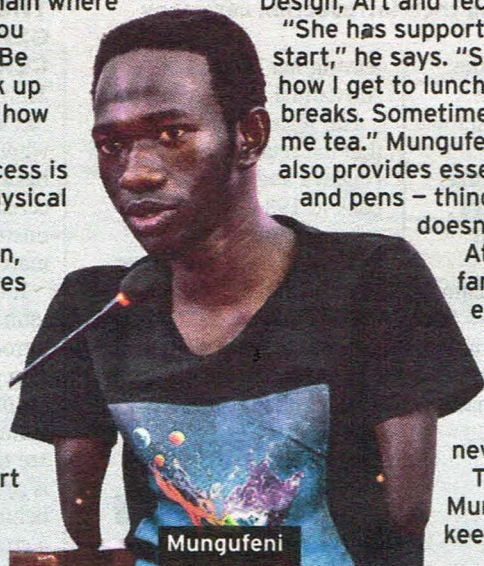
unexpected allies. One of them is madam Eva, a secretary at Makerere University’s College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology.

“She has supported me from the start,” he says. “She worries about how I get to lunch, how I manage breaks. Sometimes she even buys me tea.” Mungufeni adds: “She also provides essentials like paper and pens — things the university doesn’t offer.”

At home, his family continues to encourage him.

“They tell me not to worry, that I can reach heights they never did,” he says.

That belief, Mungufeni adds, keeps him going.



Mungufeni

floors because the stairs were just reinforcement bars. As others went up, I stayed below, recording what I could,” Mungufeni says.

## CAMPUS LIFE

“On my first day, administrative staff were surprised to see me, in a wheelchair, studying architecture,” he says.

“But the secretary later encouraged me. She told me I would make it and should not worry. That quiet support meant



Kabumbuli

Rwabu

## STATISTICS

According to the World Health Organisation, about 1.3 billion people globally live with disabilities.

In Uganda, the 2024 census indicates that about 5.5 million people — 13.2% of the population — live with various disabilities.

In developing countries, environmental, economic and infrastructural barriers continue to deepen exclusion.

everything.”

Mungufeni credits friends and classmates for helping with physical modelling tasks like bending metal and lifting materials. He uses assistive tools where possible and experiments with alternative materials. While he prefers computer-based design, much of the course remains manual, especially in the early years.

## UNIVERSITY’S TAKE

Makerere University dean of students Winifred Kabumbuli emphasises the university’s commitment to building an inclusive and accessible environment for students with disabilities.

Kabumbuli says policies are in place to support both academic and social life, including the provision of assistive devices such as wheelchairs, hearing aids and specialised tools for visually-impaired students.

“Accommodation is also tailored, with-accessible rooms, bathrooms, ramps and elevators in newer buildings. We also promote academic inclusion through extra exam time, affirmative action in admissions and specialised support through the Disability Support Centre,” she says.

Students with disabilities are represented in leadership structures and have an association to voice their concerns.

However,

challenges remain, particularly funding constraints and limited infrastructure. Kabumbuli notes that modern assistive devices are still inadequate and some older buildings remain inaccessible.

“In response, the university plans to train faculties on disability awareness, expand the budget for support services and admit more students with disabilities, especially in science, math, engineering and technology programmes,” she adds.

Kabumbuli also calls on the Government to increase quotas for students with disabilities in higher education and provide targeted funding to improve support and infrastructure.

Elizabeth Rwabu, the inclusion and support services officer at the Disability Support Centre, says the university continues to expand efforts to ensure an inclusive learning environment.

The centre has become a critical lifeline, serving as a one-stop hub where students seek help, navigating academic and structural barriers. “When a lecture room is inaccessible, students come to us and we advocate on their behalf,” Rwabu says. “We engage class co-ordinators and if needed, escalate to timetable officers until a suitable room is allocated.”

The centre offers a range of assistive services, including braille embossing, large-print materials, refreshable braille devices such as the Focus Blue40 and a PAL scanner that converts printed text into audio. Computers equipped with screen-reading software like JAWS and Fusion are also available, alongside workspaces designed for wheelchair users.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist.

“Many students need advanced assistive devices, such as electronic wheelchairs, but these are expensive,” Rwabu says. “With more resources, students would live more independently and perform even better academically.”