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# **Crumbling Modernisms: Luanda architectonic utopias after the boom**

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# **Crumbling Modernisms: Luanda architectonic utopias after the boom**

In Luanda maybe more than elsewhere, controlling the city landscape is synonymous with controlling the polity at large. Despite tremendous political change in Angola during the twentieth century, the paper traces how the modernist plans elaborated in the late colonial period (1945-1975) have influenced the planning imagination of Luanda until today. It argues that the construction boom that reshaped Luanda at the end of the war in 2002 can be interpreted as a modernist promise to break the middle class free from a hopeless urban fabric by promoting a specific urban aesthetic rather than facilitating social transformation. These continuities are, however, complex and fragile. What happens when the utopia of a city under control starts to lose power?

Reflecting on two urban projects built around half a century apart, this paper explores how the kinetic experience of the city might constitutes an unexpected form of ideological dissent able to disrupt modernism at large. The trajectory of Kilamba City, in particular, is epitome of the oil-fed reconstruction frenzy of the late 2000s that brutally ended in 2014. Looking at how residents, planners and even state media relate to this project suggests that the unsustainability of a utopian suburban life eventually triggers new political subjectivities and directly challenges the modernist ideology that endured for so long.

Keywords: modernism, urban planning, architecture, Luanda, Angola

## **Introduction**

On 28 August 2012, the newly renovated ‘Marginal’ of Luanda, a long promenade along the bay, was inaugurated in a grand ceremony. To the promoters of the project, the avenue is ‘the most beautiful postcard’ for the New Angola, a global urban icon like the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, or, closer to its source of inspiration, the Burj Khalifa Tower in Dubai (Croese 2018). If the marketing of an aspiring global city is not specific to Angola, what is interesting about the Marginal of Luanda is that the avenue was already

a key sight on the colonial postcards printed by the Portuguese in the 1970s (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The surprising continuity of a postcard (1968-2014)

Figure 1a – A view of the Marginal in the 1970s (postcard accessed online)



Figure 1b – The Renovated Marginal, background picture of the 2015 master plan



The continuity of the symbols of modernity is all the more intriguing considering that in the meantime Angola has been through a restless decolonisation process that included a bloody anticolonial war (1961-1975), a civil war that started as a proxy for the Cold War (1975-1990) and ended as a dirty conflict fed by blood diamonds and illegal arm trade (1992-2002), and a spectacular economic boom sustained by high oil prices between 2004 and 2014. The city of Luanda itself has grown from less than 500,000 inhabitants in the late 1970s to about 6,5 million in 2014. Since the end of the war, it has become the main stage for, what Ricardo Soares de Oliveira (2015) calls, ‘the spectacle of reconstruction’; glass-and-steel high-rises now overshadow the old colonial centre. In the periphery, mushrooming housing complexes are competing with the self-built settlements erected by displaced people during the war. Luanda, once called ‘the Paris of Africa’ by Portuguese settlers, remains ‘the

pinnacle of what is “modern” and “national” in the new national project pursued by the ruling party since 2002 (Soares de Oliveira 2013, 184). How is it possible that the same stretch of land retains the power to incarnate Angolan modernity through such radical changes?

Until recently, the main answer provided by scholars highlighted the political instrumentalisation of urban space by central authorities (Tomás 2012; Gastrow 2016; Croese 2017; Buire 2018). Looking back at the inauguration ceremony of the Marginal in 2012, one cannot fail to note that it coincided with President Dos Santos’ 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and took place a couple of days before the general elections that would allow him to continue his 32 year-long mandate.<sup>1</sup> For Sylvia Croese (2018, 10), the redevelopment of the Marginal precisely illustrates the fact that ‘governments may speak the language of outward-facing entrepreneurialism in their city branding activities, but [...] in practice urban development remains strongly driven by political interests of securing legitimacy and stability’. This is as true today as it was under Portuguese rule. From colonial governors to post-independence party-state and from socialist authoritarianism to post-war petro-oligarchy, Luanda political economy has left no place for civil participation or transparent negotiations. Paraphrasing the old Marxist slogan of the ruling party that bluntly claims, ‘The MPLA is the people, the people is the MPLA’, one could say, ‘Luanda is the power, the power is Luanda’.

However, when the global oil crisis hit Angola in 2014, the political settlement that seemed so unshakable during the boom brutally revealed its flaws: total dependency on oil revenues, patrimonial appropriation of public assets by the ruling

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<sup>1</sup> José Eduardo dos Santos was nominated by the then party-state to succeed the father of Independence in 1979. He left office in August 2017, after 38 years in office and only one official electoral win (in 2012).

elite, failure to organise socio-economic redistribution, neglect of health and education infrastructures and symbolic disdain for the poor and the informal sector. The new urban landscape that had become the symbol and currency of Dos Santos' hegemonic national project became its Achilles' heel. The dropping purchase ability of the aspiring middle class and the rapid degradation of their new environment contradicted the prevailing idea that political loyalty could be purchased in the form of a brand-new house in an orderly suburb.

The goal of this paper is to explore the underbelly of Angola's spectacle of reconstruction. It contrasts the picture of an amoral development approach advocating accumulation on a blank slate with a more nuanced story of continuous aspirations for modernity met by repeated failures. What do crumbling modernist dreams tell us of political possibilities in Angola today?

The paper starts by unravelling the planning imagination that circulates in Angola, from its beginnings in the heyday of modernism in the 1960s, to its current 'fantasist' masterplans, advocating new peripheries and high rising business districts. The first section discusses the creation of a local scene for urban planners in the late colonial years (1948 to 1975). The architectural techniques of that time are often celebrated as expressions of 'tropical modernism', a unique style that combines the theoretical ambitions of the Athens Charter<sup>2</sup> with a genuine concern for the local

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<sup>2</sup> Exposed at the fourth International Congress of Modern Architecture in 1933, but published for the first time in the French journal *Technique et Architecture* in 1944, the Athens Charter lists the key principles of modern architecture. Later republished by Le Corbusier, the Athens Charter is widely recognised as the founding text of functionalist architecture (systematic differentiation of the four key 'functions' of space: Habitation, Leisure, Work,

context. However, looking more closely at the Prenda precinct planned in the early 1960's, unfinished when the Portuguese left in 1975 and, today, largely informalised, the paper suggests that emblems of this particular version of modernism are also symbols of deceived hopes and broken futures. This ambiguous heritage needs to be acknowledged to understand contemporary urban trends.

The second section of the paper explores the continuities of these early planning endeavours in Luanda's recently released master plan. Launched in December 2015, the document, *PlanoLuanda*, develops many of the founding principles that lay behind the Prenda project of the 1960s. Regarding planning imagination, *PlanoLuanda* reproduces a technicist approach based on a compartmented vision of the urban fabric and hierarchical land uses. More fundamentally, the master plan is marked by a classist ideology whereby promoting the 'global profile' of the city justifies the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, a sore reminder of colonial practices. However, these continuities are not synonymous with stasis. On the contrary, Luanda has changed a lot since the end of the civil war, both physically and socially, making the resilience of these modernist principles even more puzzling. Echoing discussions had with the other authors in this Special Issue, I argue that modernism here is less a self-conscious set of planning principles reproduced over time but rather, a more diffused ideological structure internalised by planners and citizens alike (Leader-Maynard, forthcoming).

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and Traffic). Although the '-ism' of 'modernism' remains contested amongst architects, the Athens Charter is also unquestionably a marker of a peculiar ideology, based on a strong critique of existing urban conditions at the time and on an insisting call ('*exigence*') for strict technical solutions. The original document itself concludes that its 95 bullet-points indeed establish a 'doctrine'.

The third section turns to the contemporary urban spaces produced by this ideology. The first obvious example is that of the Marginal, presented in the opening of the paper. The perfect inscription of the ‘global city’ imperative in the existing landscape of the city, the renovated waterfront was soon appropriated by the general public. It shows the large adhesion to the aesthetic of ‘the world-class city’ and the collective effort of a young nation to build a new image of itself, for itself, and for the world. In that sense, post-war Luanda can be seen as a perfect example of what Ghertner (2011, 280-281) calls ‘rule by aesthetics’, i.e. the construction of political consensus through ‘a socially-produced aesthetic [...] inducing a form of self-government among those who identify with the desirability of world-class urban improvements’.

However, when it comes to grounding this image in the everyday reality of the citizens, the narrative shows its limits. Following Claudia Gastrow’s (2016) proposition to read urbanism in Luanda as a laboratory of ‘aesthetic dissent’, this paper develops the case of Kilamba City, whose trajectory illustrates the rapid disillusionment that surrounded the grand urban reorganisation of Luanda. Built in 2011 as a promise to free the middle class from a hopeless urban fabric, the new city of Kilamba has become the target for open protests and diffused contestation. This veritable political roller coaster eventually reveals the fragility of the aesthetic consensus and suggests new avenues for the expression of political subjectivities in contemporary Angola.

Reflecting on the disjointed literature that attributes soundness to tropical modernism on the one hand, but insists on the volatility of today’s aesthetic governmentality on the other, the concluding section of the paper eventually calls for closer examinations of both material and ideological appropriations in the city. The economic crisis that hit Angola in 2014 directly affects the ability of ordinary residents



to project themselves into the model of ‘new centralities’ without giving them the means to reinterpret the older city fabric. Hybrid forms of occupation and new political subjectivities are emerging, reminding us that urban utopias are dialectically unpredictable. Their material realisation depends on, as much as it facilitates, social creativity and political change.

## **1. Modernist heritages: The ambiguous value of tropical modernism in Luanda**

Luanda (or São Paulo de Loanda as it was then known) was founded in 1576 as a Portuguese trading post on the global routes of the time. It soon became a major core in the Atlantic slave trade. A small city flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, consisting of one-storey houses built along the bay and at the foot of the São Miguel fortress (1634), used for political offices, commercial activities and residential needs. In the nineteenth century, with the independence of Brazil and the abolition of slavery (1836), the city consolidated into a more complex urban centre with distinct spaces for residence, trade, and religious and political activities. A cosmopolitan bourgeoisie grew, benefitting from a diversified economy based on local production and international exchanges (sisal, timber, cotton, coffee, etc.). When Salazar’s ‘New State’ (*Estado Novo*, established in 1932) launched a firm colonial policy based on large-scale emigration to Angola, Luanda naturally became the capital of the ultramarine territory. It received the attention of professional planners and architects and came to be known as ‘the jewel in the crown of the Empire’. In parallel, colonial historians undertook to write a glorious urban history, emphasising the European presence in the city, overlooking the complex Afro-Atlantic migrations of the past four centuries (Agência Geral do Ultramar 1952; Agência Geral do Ultramar 1952; Amaral 1968; Antonio 1969;

Fromont 2006; Birmingham, 2019).

In this context, the first city planning interventions that developed in the late 1930s proved particularly ambitious. Portuguese architects used the city as a playground for their most audacious projects. Their work – and life – have been well documented. In the past decade, Portuguese scholars conducted a series of interviews<sup>3</sup> that portray avant-gardist thinkers seizing the opportunity of an attractive city that boomed both spatially and demographically (Magalhães 2009; Martins 2010; Milheiro 2011; Mingas and Engels 2011; Mendes 2012). Two periods are often distinguished. The early planning interventions in Luanda were dominated by the reproduction of Portuguese standards, as advocated by the Lisbon-based *Gabinete de Urbanização Colonial* (GUC, founded in 1944). A direct instrument in the hands of the colonial administration, the GUC is (in)famous for defending rigorist aesthetics, based on functionality and stern monumentality. The plans it proposed reflect the fascination of that time for ideal-types such as garden- and satellite-cities. In 1961, the creation of a local planning institute (*Gabinete de Urbanização da Câmara Municipal de Luanda*) was considered a relative emancipation from the metropolitan models of fascist architecture. As more Portuguese architects developed their practice in the colonies, many of whom studied with Le Corbusier in Europe, a new style emerged. Known as ‘Tropical Modernism’, this new architecture school was inspired by the Athens Charter of 1933, based on discourses of social inclusion and adaptation to local conditions.

Mendes (2012, 246) summarises modernist architecture in ‘Portuguese Africa’ as a ‘reaction to a practice of architecture and planning elaborated and implemented by

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<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, the collective work of architects called ‘Modernidade ignorada’:

<http://cargocollective.com/arquiteturamodernaluanda/Presentacion>.

the Portuguese dictatorship'. Mendes, like experts in Luso-African architecture, mentions the fundamental role played by the generation of architects who trained in Europe in the 1940s and later put the theory to practice in Africa:

Facing the resistance, and even negation, of these ideas by society and political authorities in Lisbon, many of these architects came (or came back) to Africa, considering that there were more opportunities there to practice architecture free from the dictatorial corsets of imperial and regionalist architecture. (Mendes 2012, 246)

There is a general consensus in the literature on the significance of the modernist movement in African architecture. Politically, it represented a conscious emancipation from European canons, which translated aesthetically in the 'tropicalization' of architectural rules and principles (Milheiro 2011). Milheiro and Fiúza (2013) develop this assertion of freedom by seeing in tropical modernism the expression a radical break from existing standards and an attempt to adapt to the characteristics of the site (climate, topography, but also social and economic profiles). They describe the Portuguese colonies as 'authentic experimentation camps' for avant-gardist architects (Milheiro and Fiúza 2013, 6).

Most of the architectural literature on tropical modernism insists on the technical innovations that appeared in the constructions of the 1950s and 1960s; recent research highlights the materials (with the emblematic use of cement in monumental projects but also bricks for low-income housing), the attention paid to natural ventilation (shielded from the sun but opened to dominant winds), the development of specific living spaces (patios and shaded corridors), etc. Beautifully published illustrated inventories both testify to the diversity of the constructions and advocate for their preservation (Martins 2010; Milheiro and Ferreira 2010; Mingas and Engels 2011).

One aspect of tropical modernism upon which the literature remains rather discreet, however, is its problematic coincidence with the worst years of colonial oppression in the ‘ultramarine territories’. In the case of Angola, the independence war begun in 1961, the heyday of tropical modernism, precisely when the local planning institute was created in Luanda. In a recent interview (Spencer, Prado, and Martí 2011), Simões de Carvalho, a major figure in the movement, declared that his main preoccupation when he left Europe to work in Luanda was: ‘to see if [he] could save Luanda, put an end to the racial segregation and social segregations that [he] felt’. Milheiro and Fiúza (2013, 13) insist that Carvalho’s largest housing project in Luanda, the Prenda precinct (Figure 2), sought to bring together populations from various socio-economic backgrounds and to promote ‘miscegenation’. A closer description of the plan nevertheless shows that this social and racial mix actually translated into a ‘differential approach’ of planning (*abordagem diferenciada*): individual houses for the wealthiest white population, collective housing for middle-income whites, and ‘self-built’ housing for the ‘Natives’ (Venâncio 2013, 2017; Milheiro and Fiúza 2013). In other words, the leading figure planning avant-gardism in Luanda promoted the co-presence of ‘Whites’ and ‘Natives’ in the abstract, but in practice did not design any buildings for the ‘Natives’. To put it more bluntly, one of the largest examples of tropical modernist planning intervention in Luanda reinforced the racist practice of lowering standards for Africans and the colonial negation of the right to the city for the poor.

Figure 2: Views of Bairro Prenda (photographs by the author, Oct. 2012)



By the time Angola obtained independence, tropical modernism had become the dominant model for the production of space in Luanda. Beyond the stylistic traces that it left in the built environment of the city, I argue that modernism imposed an urban ideology that remains largely unquestioned to this day. Behind the discourses that claim that tropical modernism resisted racial segregation, the fundamental idea was that an architect (incidentally, a white Portuguese man) could ‘save’ the city through technical solutions. The inhabitants in general, particularly the indigenous population, were excluded from any form of debate about what the city should be like, who should build it and who it should be built for. The numerous planning documents and the fascination for architectonic challenges allowed practitioners to take their distance from the daily political violence and deep anticolonial resentment experienced in the peripheries of Luanda (Moorman 2008).

Beyond construction techniques and a specific repertoire of aesthetic forms, tropical modernism can, thus, be read as the expression of a broader socio-political ideology that was internalised as a desirable project for urban development. This ideology is characterised by a model of urbanisation that responded to the symptoms of colonialism while ensuring that the underlying values of the colonial project remained uncontested. Three core principles can be identified:

- The violence of racial segregation can be eased by reserving plots for self-construction;
- struggles to access citizenship can be (literally) watered down by insuring minimal hygienist conditions in the city;
- and, finally, independence is not a necessity if the colonial authorities are able to build an orderly city.

As Simões de Carvalho explained, the core problem he perceived at the time was not colonialism but the ‘unbalances’, ‘revolts’ and ‘crimes’ that might result from the social/racial/spatial divides.

I left [Luanda] in 1944 but would come back every year, and every year, I would see that the indigenous population would surround the European population a little bit more. And although I didn’t have the planning qualifications that I got in Paris later on, I already knew that any type of segregation is condemnable. The history of planning shows us that wherever there is any type of segregation (economic, social or racial), there are always unbalances, there are always revolts, there are always crimes. (Simões de Carvalho, in Spencer, Prado, and Martí 2011)

Simões de Carvalho’s testimony leaves no ambiguity; the role of the architect/planner was to offer spatial fixes to limit social violence but not to redress social and racial inequalities. The broader political system remained unchallenged.

To Mendes (2012, 251), the 1960s represent an ironic twist in the political positioning of modernist architects: ‘if they initially generated the resistance of the authorities in office, they eventually became allies of the colonial administration services as it called for their services’. Mendes suggests that this alliance had a further geopolitical impact, whereby the aesthetic opening demonstrated by the Portuguese dictatorship in its African ‘provinces’ helped legitimise the continuation of its colonial project in highly contested times. A place such as the Prenda precinct could contribute to ‘project[ing] an appearance of normality and modernity on the international scene’ (253) and, thus, indirectly validate the permanence of Portuguese colonialism despite the victorious fights for independence in both British and French African possessions.

## **2. Master plans (1948, 1961, 2015): Modernist continuities in the planning imagination of Luanda**

Without undermining the respectable agenda of contemporary architects who are, understandably, preoccupied with the preservation of a unique heritage, we need to acknowledge that the tropical modernist realisations of the late colonial period in Angola are tainted with racism and classism and support a wider ideology of modernism that encompasses, not only the built environment, but also broad socio-political ideals based on socio-spatial division, orderliness and internalised hierarchies. The objective of this paper is not to condemn or shame the individual actors of this urban history but rather to understand the contemporary effects of the modernist ideology in the planning imagination of Luanda.

My focus here is, thus, on the abstract principles advocated in planning documents rather than on their effective (or ineffective) implementation. In 2015,

Ricardo Cardoso described in great details the intricate instruments that perform planning on a daily basis in Luanda. He showed that planning laws do not eliminate informal regulation practices and that official bodies do not only compete against shady public-private consortiums, but they also compete against each other in a spectacularly unstable game of musical chairs. In the midst of this general ‘confusion’, Ricardo notes that Angolan planners strongly believe in the power of the master plan (*plano director*):

Without Plano Director, one also hears regularly amongst politicians and decision makers, the burgeoning city cannot escape its multiple crises. [...] The General Master Plan gains added relevance when considering the perfunctory and somewhat mythical reputation of the Plano Director as both the solution for the perceived chaotic present and the main modernizing thoroughfare in the direction of Luanda’s urban future. (Cardoso 2015, 86)

Following Cardoso’s comment on ‘the enduring dominance of the modernist developmentalist project in the Angolan context’, I will successively look at, what is known as, Luanda ‘first master plan’ released in 1948, Prenda’s emblematic ‘neighbourhood units’ plans drafted in the late 1960s and the latest planning document made public in 2015 to trace the elements of modernist ideology that are reproduced. not only in technical principles and urban designs, but more broadly in the ideas of a socially and politically desirable future for Luanda.

Arguably, the first masterplan developed for the city of Luanda came from the hands of Vasco Vieira da Costa in 1948 (Raposo et al. 2012; Venâncio 2013), in the context of the Colonial Planning Office based in Lisbon. Although the master plan is widely reproduced in literature as an indication of the advanced capacities of Portuguese planners, it was in fact just an academic exercise, submitted to complete an architecture degree. Da Costa’s master plan never translated into an actual urban project on the ground. This echoes a common critique of planning as a discipline that ‘stresses



the substance of plans rather than the method of achieving them' (Fainstein 2000, 10) but remains largely overlooked in the tropical modernism revivalist literature. Of course, the weakness of implementation capacities does not mean that planners have no impact in shaping cities. Watson (2014) notes that in the last decade, African cities have been particularly subjected to, what she calls, 'urban fantasies'. Plans for new cities and radical urban renovation programmes, even if they do not always materialise on the ground, hold a 'symbolic power' that directly threatens the urban poor and their access not only to land, urban services, and livelihoods, but also to citizenship (see also Bhan 2014).

In Luanda, the exclusionary principles of the first masterplan have proven to be a particularly resilient part of the planning imagination of the city up to today. Partly inspired by Le Corbusier's functionalism, Da Costa advocated the development of satellite cities around the European nucleus as a response to the longstanding dilemma of segregation: how to maintain a physical distance between locals and colonists without prejudicing the need for workers in the white city? Vieira da Costa's planning proposal (quoted by Tomás 2012, 71) summarises perfectly the logic of colonial capitalism, expressed as a moral and hygienist duty falling to the colonists:

It is the work of the European to induce in the indigenous needs for comfort and a more elevated life, in this way impelling him to the work that will force him to settle, and that will ease the acquisition of a more stable pool of manpower. Housing spatial orientation and the location of indigenous neighborhoods are the two major elements that should dictate the composition of a colonial city.

When Simões de Carvalho, took the lead of the *Gabinete de Urbanização da Câmara Municipal de Luanda* (1961-1967), he inherited da Costa's functionalist approach. Between 1961 and 1975, the planning office would produce about a hundred neighbourhood plans. The objective was to build an urban grid based on

‘neighbourhood units’ (*unidades de vizinhança*) which would host 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants each (demographic control), conform to racial quotas (segregationist control), and follow strict traffic and ventilation designs (hygienist control). The *Gabinete* also paternalistically dismissed the possibility of the African population to live in the new units. ‘The idea,’ explains Venâncio (2017, 33), ‘was not for the indigenous to move directly to the Neighbourhood Unit, but to first adapt to an urbanized lifestyle by passing through a “schooling-neighbourhood” (*bairro-escola*)’.<sup>4</sup>

The new masterplan launched in 2015 follows-up on these founding principles (PlanoLuanda, 2015).<sup>5</sup> Self-contained neighbourhoods remain the first ‘pillar’ of the guiding document, entitled *Plano Diretor Geral Metropolitano de Luanda* (PDGML or Luanda Metropolitan Masterplan). Just like the ‘neighbourhood units’ imagined by Simões de Carvalho, the *bairros* envisioned today are defined by their technical capacity to deliver ‘reliable water, power, sanitation and communications’. The ‘vision’ defended in the PDGML is based on the concept of ‘urban regeneration’ to improve the

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<sup>4</sup> This idea of gradual urbanisation has been recently revived in Angola through the debate that surrounds the introduction of democratically elected governments (*autarquias*). An old chestnut of Angolan politics, *autarquias*, has been on the top of Lourenço’s agenda since his election in 2017. Elections were announced for 2020 but on the condition of ‘gradualism’. Given the lack of readiness of local institutions, parliament proposed either a ‘functional gradualism’ (gradually giving full autonomy) or a ‘geographical gradualism’ (gradually extending the elections to all municipalities). Pro-democracy groups strongly denounced both options but were especially worried that ‘geographical gradualism’ result in a contemporary enactment of old colonial segregationist patterns.

<sup>5</sup> A public-friendly PDF of the plan was initially made available on a dedicated website ([www.planoluanda.com](http://www.planoluanda.com)), but the site stopped working in 2020.

conditions in all areas identified as '*musseques*' (49% of the urban area following the document).<sup>6</sup>

What 'regeneration' means here is not clear, however, besides the objective to develop 'receptor zones' to relocate those living in 'non structured *musseques*', 'vulnerable to floods and landslide areas', 'areas of precarious housing', and more generally those 'obstructing any of the key proposed development corridors'. With estimates as high as 4.5 million people affected by these relocations, the plan ensures that the 'receptor zones' will 'take the Province forward (sic) into the next century, as Singapore and Curitiba have done in the past' but does not speak about the impact it might have on people's livelihoods and citizenship. This radical approach directly echoes the preoccupation of the late colonial planners who imagined the future of Luanda in the frame of new cities, modelled on Le Corbusier's utopias, and who advocated for the total 'eradication' of all the *musseques* (Santos 1973) and the cautious limitation of racial inclusion as the African population was largely seen as non-urban.

To summarise, the PDGML, as it was presented to the public in December 2015, is a 80-page richly illustrated document projecting the idea of a built environment under total control where all urban features are classified depending on their profile in a hierarchical imagination of the city: access roads are either 'main' or 'secondary'; urban hubs can be 'metropolitan', 'district', 'local' or 'rural'; residential areas are classified depending on their density and half the open spaces fall under one of seven categories of 'parks' or 'protected landscape'. As Geraldo,<sup>7</sup> a high-profile planner in Luanda, told

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<sup>6</sup> The word '*musseques*' is locally used to designate any neighbourhood built outside the limits of the old European centre (from consolidated houses integrated to the infrastructural networks of the city to precarious slums located far outside the urban core).

<sup>7</sup> Not his real name.

me during an informal chat about the latest development of planning initiatives in Luanda: ‘the plan is very good’.<sup>8</sup> To him, a teacher of urban planning at a renowned local university and a senior professional in charge of major projects across the country, Plano Luanda checks all the boxes of academic soundness, confirming Ricardo Cardoso’s (2015, 86) earlier observation about the ‘enthusiasm for master planning’ that characterises planning circles in Luanda.

Of course, Geraldo is aware that a masterplan is ‘just a tool’ and that the actual work of the planner requires much more ‘flexibility’ than what a single document can offer, but he did not seem bothered by the highly unrealistic objectives of mass displacement across the city. Looking closely at the glossy document, it is, nevertheless, obvious that the PDGML does not give much attention to the city as it exists today. The reality of dense neighbourhoods characterised by intricate multi-uses developed at the scale of the parcel is ignored. The impressive figures of new public amenities to be built (791 primary, secondary and tertiary schools, 428 clinics, health centres and hospitals, 65 fire stations, etc.) are unrelated to the capacity of the state to actually run, or at least staff, such facilities. The optimistic economic previsions that anticipate a stable economic growth of 6.5% per annum between 2015 and 2030 stand in total contradiction with the economic horizons given by the World Bank that foresaw less than a 1.5% growth per annum until 2020.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This quote and all that follow come from fieldnotes taken in Luanda in October 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Yearly economic prospects are available online:

<http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>. Of course, figures might have looked different at the time of the elaboration of the plan but even then, stable economic growth in an oil-dependent country was a highly risky bet.

Geraldo's main regret is not related to the technical content of the masterplan but to the fact that it was never entirely bequeathed to the local planning authorities. The PDGML was designed by a team of foreign consultants<sup>10</sup> under the supervision of Isabel dos Santos, daughter of then President dos Santos. The plan was publicly released in December 2015, but, as far as Geraldo knows, some collaborators have refused to deliver their entire work until outstanding payments are settled. Two years later, Isabel dos Santos was suddenly evinced from her privileged position in Angola's political economy when João Lourenço, who succeeded her father's Presidency, launched a national anti-corruption campaign that targeted the dos Santos oligarchic clan. Geraldo does not go into great details here; he, who lives and work alongside high-profile MPLA supporters, has learnt to measure his words when it comes to politics. Interestingly, however, his formal adhesion to the masterplan only goes as far as academic 'neutrality' can be defended. As soon as the PDGML cannot be seen as a mere planning instrument anymore, it becomes a political target in the opened competition that opposes dos Santos' old guard to Lourenço's new watchdogs. The local planner confesses that the plan is fundamentally just another attempt to introduce a sense of order and direction in to what Cardoso (2015, 87) describes as 'the highly unstable conditions in which state planning operates in contemporary Luanda'.

The continuities between the planning imagination of the late colonial era with the current dispensation in Angola are striking. Just as Portuguese planners believed that they could provide an abstract technical response to deep-rooted social divides without questioning colonialism, the team of consultants hired for Plano Luanda reproduced

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<sup>10</sup> Following Geraldo, only two Angolan planners participated in elaborating the plan. They are not mentioned in the public release.

classical modernist worldviews that not only ignored the nuances of real social life but also remained blind to the high flammability of the late dos Santos era.

Critical framings on planning theory, such as those developed by Fainstein (2000) around the idea of a ‘just city’ or by Miraftab (2009) about ‘insurgent planning’, are totally absent. The PDGML demonstrates a ‘persistent habit of privileging spatial form over social processes’ (Harvey, quoted in Fainstein 2000, 13). It is, of course, not specific to Angola,<sup>11</sup> but notably, even when local planners are convinced of the need to inject more flexibility in the planning process, they still depend on institutions and instruments largely unable to reflect alternative ideas and practices. As a result of these weak structural capacities, planning and the masterplan, in particular, are as disconnected from the economic and political constraints today as they were from the context of colonial war in the 60s-70s.

Regarding the underlying power games, the narrow connection between the planners and the political elites observed by Mendes in the 1960s remains very much present today. Far from nurturing a utopian imagination that could challenge Luanda’s deep social inequalities and undisputed political domination, the plan became a tool for the neo-patrimonial reproduction of the dos Santos’ interests.<sup>12</sup> Today, as much as sixty years ago, leadership and expertise are sought from among international players who

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the critiques made by Giddings and Hopwood (2006) towards British masterplans or by Watson (2014) towards new city planning practices in Africa.

<sup>12</sup> This blurring of the boundaries between governmental communication and planning imperatives leads to some interesting developments in the PDGML: a full-page portrait of president Dos Santos appears on page 4, the section on environmental preservation describes an agenda that ‘has always been our priority’, leaving the reader confused about who is behind the discourse.

choose to ignore the political interests of their clients rather than engage with endogenous critiques.<sup>13</sup>

A close look at the planning documents developed for Luanda since the late 1940s shows that despite tremendous geopolitical changes, abstract positivist planning remains the norm. The elitist urban ideology that characterised the colonial project has been reproduced until today. The fundamental ideas and practices of development defended in Plano Luanda overtly seek to serve the interests of the dominant and unapologetically ignore the needs of the majority. The new city of Kilamba, built in the Southern periphery of Luanda is an emblem of what such modernist urban ideology concretely produces when it is implemented by an authoritarian regime tapping into seemingly unlimited economic resources.

### **3. Aesthetic power, aesthetic dissent:<sup>14</sup> The rise and fall of Kilamba City (2008-2018)**

Built at impressive speed by Chinese constructors between 2009 and 2011, Kilamba City is probably one of Africa's most commented contemporary urban developments. The new city was used as an example for the oil-for-infrastructure deals that structure

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<sup>13</sup> 'Luanda, a world city for foreigners, by foreigners?', asks anthropologist Claudia Gastrow (2016) after she collected testimonies of local residents denouncing 'neocolonialism' in the intervention of foreign investors, planners and builders in Luanda.

<sup>14</sup> The idea of 'aesthetic dissent' discussed in this section comes from Claudia Gastrow's work, specifically, her PhD thesis (2014) and her paper published in *Antipode* in 2016 entitled 'Aesthetic Dissent: Urban Redevelopment and Political. Belonging in Luanda, Angola'. As I explain below, I prolong her analysis of 'the expression of political dissent via a language of aesthetics and materiality' (Gastrow 2016, 3) by reflecting not only on 'language' but also on the kinetic experience of the city.

the relationship between Angola and China after the war (Power and Alves 2012; Corkin 2013; Benazeraf and Alves 2014). It is cited in various studies of Angola's political economy, described as an example of 'neopatrimonialism', 'statist capitalism', and/or 'developmentalism' (Soares de Oliveira 2015; Pitcher 2017; Croese 2017). Kilamba City also provides qualitative accounts of the changes that have affected urban life in Luanda since 2002 (Pitcher and Moorman 2015; Gastrow 2016; Buire 2014 and 2017) as well as more technical considerations on the workings of land markets in African metropolises (Buckley, Kallergis, and Wainer 2016; Cain 2017).

All these works, regardless of ideological/epistemological differences, are based on the same initial analysis: Kilamba City constitutes the most complete example of the urban fantasies developed during the oil boom in post-war Angola. For MPLA supporters, it is 'the pearl in the crown of Angola's reconstruction', as dos Santos himself put it when he cut the ribbon of the new city (quoted in da Rosa 2011). Such a reproduction of the metaphor of 'the jewel of the crown' that was used by the Portuguese to speak of Luanda during the colonial era is another illustration of the continuation of the modernist ideology across the colonial versus independent historical rupture. Unsurprisingly, Kilamba City is also the target of vivid critique from all those who denounce blind MPLA loyalty, starting with renowned journalist Rafael Marques de Morais (2011, n/a) who did not hesitate to call the new city 'a veritable model for African corruption'.

Beyond these general discussions, relevant to present inquiry, is that Kilamba City is one of few occurrences where the ideal of urban orderliness attainable through *tabula rasa* intervention turned into a concrete housing complex, made not only of tarred roads, high buildings and landscaped open spaces, but also filled with individual stories and unexpected social and political practices.



In February 2018, the Angolan national television reported on the new city, six years after the first inhabitants moved in<sup>15</sup> (TPA 2018, see Figure 3). The feature report begins with pictures of a busy street in Kilamba, edited over dramatic background music. The journalist, probably misreading figures published in 2016, announces that the city now counts 950,000 inhabitants (instead of 95,000). The lapsus adds to the music full of suspense and reveals the general perception of the city: a project dramatically out of scale, a challenge to the common imagination of the city.

After this first moment of unusual stylisation, the report takes a more journalistic turn and presents various interviews with residents and administrators concerned by the cracks in the walls of the buildings all across the project.

Resident 1: The flat was already like this [showing infiltration on the walls and ceiling] when I moved in so I went and talked with the Chinese [workers] about my concern. They came and arranged the walls but four or five months later, the cracks appeared again. I do not understand anymore. I will go on Tuesday to ask them to come again and attend to my problem.

Resident 2: I've already called the worker on Saturday to give me an idea of the price: 150 to 200000 Kwanzas [about 750-1000 USD at the time] to paint the walls. I've already painted five times. And that is only labour costs, it doesn't even include the paint.

Administrator 1: This problem of cracks and infiltrations does afflict the residents. Here we receive more than a 100 claims per day.

These testimonies are unprecedented on public television: inhabitants open their door and speak overtly to a journalist about their unsuccessful attempts to cover the damage with new painting and false walls, public officers confess they are still looking at a solution to address the widespread issue. Only the spokesperson for Imogestin, the private company in charge of managing the city, tries to hide the existence of structural

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<sup>15</sup> See Buire 2017 for a general timeline of the project.

flaws by blaming most damages on ‘bad uses’ made by the residents themselves.

Figure 3: National television report: ‘Residents concerned with cracks in the apartments’



The 8-minute-long report is damning. The long lines of people waiting to submit their application to access a flat in 2013 became lines of dissatisfied residents lodging complaints over the maintenance of their buildings. What happened to the enthusiastic response of the ‘afro-optimist’ observers who celebrated the emergence of Angola new middle-class?

The trajectory of Kilamba City in public discourses over the last decade offers key insights into the changes and continuities of the planning imagination of Luanda before and after the oil crisis that put an end to Angola’s economic honeymoon in 2014. The television report broadcasted in early 2018 clearly indicates that the new city has lost its appeal. Moreover, I argue that fundamentally it is the modernist ideology behind

the new city that is crumbling. What is at stake in the re-evaluation of Kilamba is not simply the quality of the walls or the adaptation of this specific urban product to the needs and uses of Angolans, but rather the ‘aesthetic power’ that the new city holds and projects onto the planning imagination of Luanda.

Analysing current planning discourses and practices in Delhi, Ghertner (2015, 4) reveals how the local authorities of India’s second megacity developed ‘a mode of governing space on the basis of codes of appearance rather than through the calculative instruments of map, census, and survey’. This ‘rule by aesthetic’ relies on ‘sensory’ experiences to impose norms of social order and planning desirability:

It is precisely this vague sense of an improved, more beautiful urban future, without planning benchmarks or even mutually agreeable definitional criteria, that gives the world-class city its efficacy: the excitement of stepping into an air-conditioned, stainless steel carriage on the Delhi Metro, or the pride of living near a shopping mall with more marble than the Taj Mahal, give world-classness a sensory self-evidence. (Ghertner 2015, 9)

If the ‘sensory self-evidence’ that gives to the world-class city narrative its strength is palpable on Luanda’s Marginal (see introduction), in Kilamba, the cracks that zigzag on the walls constitute a powerful counter-narrative to Luanda’s world-classness.

Resident 3: It started with a stain like this but after came the infiltrations and then the dripping. The information that we were given is that the people who clean, the domestic workers, put too much water on the floor. And that is what causes the infiltration. It left me quite dismayed. Now my concern is that I might not be able to enjoy my house when the twenty years [of the rent-to-buy scheme] come to an end.

Resident 1: This house is only five years old, not even six or seven. How will it be in twenty years?

The significance of Kilamba’s accelerated story of appeal and disillusionment lies

precisely in the brutal demystification of the ‘self-evidence’ that surrounded the housing complex when it was opened for public sales in 2013. At the time, planners and Luandans alike largely adhered to the official discourse promising to transform Luanda into a ‘world-class city’ competing with Dubai and Singapore (Soares de Oliveira 2015; Croese 2018). Ethnographic work conducted in the heyday of Luanda’s symbolical ascension, however, revealed that this adhesion was not uniform or without critiques. Captured as a ‘suburbia dream’ (Buire 2014), ‘futuristic longings’ (Pitcher and Moorman 2015, 135), or ‘spectral urbanism’ (Cardoso 2017), the consensus already appeared fragile and ambiguous.

For Claudia Gastrow (2016, 3), ‘discussions of urban aesthetics [...] became one of the primary means of critiquing the project of national reconstruction and by proxy the Angolan government itself’. She offers the concept of ‘aesthetic dissent’ to describe how the actual design of the new buildings mushrooming in Luanda spark discussions about belonging and (dis)possession that *in fine* question the legitimacy of the reconstruction agenda promoted by President dos Santos. Jon Schubert (2017) strengthens this argument by unravelling how consumerism at large (in terms of housing preferences but also cars, clothing, food or outings options) feeds ambiguous aesthetics of power. To him, what characterises Luanda is the fact that ‘all elements of society are tangled up in this spirit of turbo-capitalism’ (157), but because most of these aspirations are directed towards an ‘immediatist lifestyle’ that proves unattainable for the majority, ‘ideas of better life’ become ‘a terrain of political contestation’ on which people express their ‘desires *for* the state, its services and a normal life’ (157).

Following these analyses by Gastrow and Schubert, I argue that Kilamba, which initially was an expression of the ‘aesthetic power’ of modernist planning, promising spatial solutions to all social ills, has become a terrain of ‘aesthetic dissent’. However,

whereas Gastrow locates ‘aesthetic dissent’ mostly at the level of verbal discontent, I argue that Kilamba is at the centre of a lived experience where the limits of modernism are experienced concretely daily, as exemplified in the matter of the cracking walls exposed by the TPA report in February 2018.

Of course, the hegemonic power of the MPLA has been disputed before, and in various ways. Juliana Lima (2013) discussed the first waves of youth protests that tentatively rose in Luanda in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. I have discussed elsewhere the ways popular music has been used to contest Dos Santos’ regime (Buire 2015). In the case of Kilamba more specifically, Allan Cain (2016, n/a) described how the opposition raised by a consumer rights organisation to Imogestin’s attempt to recover its arrears in 2016 ‘demonstrates the emergence of an Angolan housing market’ that weakens usual state-dominated planning practices and empowers ordinary citizens who ‘are increasingly aware of their rights as citizens and the power of their voices when organized as residents associations’. These examples suggest that the ‘political awakening of a growing minority of Angolans’ (Schubert 2017, 194) is now largely documented. Its impact on social production is, nonetheless, incredibly limited. As Pearce, Péclard and Soares de Oliveira (2018, 157) note in their briefing paper following the 2017 elections that saw President dos Santos stepping down, ‘the MPLA’s social and political hegemony remains largely *untouched*’ (my emphasis).

In this context, highlighting the kinetic experience of failure in Kilamba is not a romantic conclusion predicting the general breakdown of the system but rather a theoretical proposal to better understand how the hegemony is actually being ‘*touched*’. The cracked walls of Kilamba are *literally* the places where the power of the entrenched regime can be *felt* and where its limits are *visible*.

It is finally the *sensory* experience of planning ideologies, rather than their abstract principles or architectonic translations, that might help us understand how modernism can not only be appropriated, but also negotiated and possibly contested on a daily basis. Because Kilamba City rested so obviously on an attempt to ‘rule by aesthetics’, its power fell as soon as its walls began to crack. Naturally, the brutality of the economic crisis accelerated and amplified this sudden reversal of values, but at the end, it was not only the attractiveness of a new city that was lost but, more fundamentally, the ability of modernist planning to capture the imagination of Luandans.

To conclude it should be noted that the opening of new sales in Kilamba in July 2017 gave rise to lots of anxiety and rumours in Luanda (Club-K 2017; Angop 2017), but *Plano Luanda* did not live past its launch in 2015. New guidelines now dominate the planning scene in Luanda. From senior planners working for the government to young architects teaching in local universities, everyone seems to have mobilised around the implementation of the *New Urban Agenda* and the Sustainable Development Objectives proposed by UN-Habitat since 2016.<sup>16</sup> Colourful maps and fantasist statistics have been replaced by ‘principles’ and ‘commitments’, suggesting that new ideas – and ideologies? – of planning might be taking off in a city that had been dominated by classic modernism for so long.

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<sup>16</sup> Further work is necessary to elaborate on what planning is going to be like in Luanda as the post-boom low becomes the new norm of Angola’s economic pace but the current work led by Angolan urbanists, such as Sylvia Croese (University of Cape Town) or Pedro Cidade Vemba (Methodist University of Angola), show the growing influence of United Nations ideas and principles.

## **Conclusion: Urbanism after the boom**

From early planning documents drawn up in the late 1940's to one of the most recent housing projects built in Luanda, this paper highlighted the persistence of a modernist ideology marked by a top-down approach to city-making, a strong belief in spatial fixes and a blindness towards the complexities of the social, political and economic dimensions of entrenched inequalities. However, the disillusionment that surrounds Kilamba City nowadays indicates that this ideology might well have reached a point of no return. The fantasist figures used in *Plano Luanda* and the weak structural 'solutions' implemented in Kilamba suggest that the postwar regime is now increasingly 'ruling by aesthetic.' Each failure in the sensory experience of the self-proclaimed world-class city is then likely to trigger some sort of dissent. In less than three years, Kilamba has seen consumer rights associations taking the city's managing company to court, concerned residents using social media to voice their anger (see also Buire 2017) and more recently journalists of the public broadcaster staged the catastrophe through damning reports.

This political rollercoaster reveals the limits of the dominant literature that examines planning ideologies in Luanda. As the first section of the paper retraced, the common discourse about architectural modernism in Angola is usually one of celebration that focuses on the audacious techniques and unique aesthetics developed in the 1960s, of which the Prenda precinct is an emblem. Kilamba City on the contrary reminds us that producing urban space is never about mere aesthetics. While Kilamba City was initially criticised for being a soulless gesture embedding the ambitions of an oil-thirsty regime, Luandans vividly appropriated the new city in just a couple of years. In 2014, the success-story turned sour when the symbol of the New Angola became an epitome of its broken promises.

The trajectory of Prenda might teach us a few things here. In Prenda, just as much as in Kilamba today, the relationships between political projections, technical implementation and social afterlife of/in the project are complex and multifold. When Simões de Carvalho sought to ‘save’ Luanda through planning, he probably did not expect his signature project to become a symbol of spontaneous urbanism, just as president Dos Santos certainly did not imagine that future Kilamba residents would become champions of urban citizenship when he inaugurated the city in 2011.

Reading the stories of Prenda and Kilamba against each other – the uncritical celebration of tropical modernism on the one hand, and the now consensual dismissal of the new centralities project on the other hand, I have argued that planning imaginations need to be interrogated more rigorously if we want to understand how the dialectics between urban development and socio-political change play out. Planning is never a dual game between mixing concrete and taming political ambitions, nor is it a terrain for only the expertise of professional city-makers. Ordinary citizens also have the ability to shape their daily environment; what they say, what they do and what they desire directly influence the future of their city.

Hopefully, the new phase that opening in Angola with the official endorsement of the UN-Habitat New Urban Agenda will not translate into the simplistic replacement of old modernist ideals with a new set of planning principles. Seventy years after the publication of Luanda’s first masterplan, there is still time to experiment with emancipatory practices of co-production of urban knowledge and still space to embrace unforeseen aesthetic orders and disorders.



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