

Aesthetic Dissent: Urban Redevelopment and Political Belonging in Luanda, Angola

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Abstract: Over the previous decade, African cities experienced a wave of frenzied construction driven by imaginations of world-city status. While these projects provoked new discussions about African urbanism, the literature on them has focused more on the paperwork of planning than actual urban experiences. This article addresses this lacuna by investigating residents' reactions to the post-conflict building boom in Luanda, Angola. I show that Luandans' held highly ambivalent orientations towards the emerging city. Their views were shaped by suspicions about pacts between Angolan elites and international capital that recapitulated longstanding tensions over national belonging. These concerns were voiced via discussions of the very aesthetics of the new city. Buildings became catalysts for expressions of dissent that put into question the very project of state-driven worlding. The paper therefore argues that the politics of aesthetics are central to grasping the contested understandings of urbanism currently emerging in various African cities.

Keywords: African cities, Luanda, aesthetics, architecture, political belonging

We want to have our own identity so people can look at Luanda in the same way as they look at Dubai—with admiration and curiosity. Our objective is that Angolans will never be surprised by what they see in Dubai, New York, or London because we will already have it here in Luanda. (André Mingas, former Presidential Advisor for City Planning, quoted in *Universo* 2008)

There is no coherence in the architecture that is being created here because they order a building from who knows where ... from the Egyptians, from the Israelis ... There is no coherence, there is no coherence, there is no dialogue, they are not in search of an African identity. (Interview with urban planner, Yvette, Luanda, April 2011)

Introduction

Following the end of Angola's civil war (1975–2002) a construction frenzy took hold of the capital, Luanda. Glass walls and bright colors began to replace the cement and peeling paint of the city center as new high-rises, roads, and beachfront leisure areas beckoned in a future premised on an aesthetics of world city modernity.¹ On the urban edges, vast rehousing zones for those dispossessed by redevelopment and a satellite city emerged, funded by oil-credit lines with China and Brazil. Gated communities sprouted to the south, cementing over the ruins of

demolished informal settlements. Foreign labor and expertise flowed in. By 2012 an estimated 259,000 Chinese nationals and 113,000 Portuguese nationals were living in Angola (*MacauHub* 2013; Schmitz 2014). A new Luanda was being born, its materiality, geography, and population a product of the transnational financial arrangements enabled by Angola's oil economy.

Angola is not unique in its urban ambitions. Over the last decade a number of African countries, including Rwanda,² the Democratic Republic of the Congo,³ Equatorial Guinea,⁴ and Nigeria,⁵ have embarked on ambitious worlding projects for their largest cities. These projects are opening new horizons about the meaning of "citiness" in Africa. They have also been portrayed in the international press's "Africa Rising"⁶ accounts of the continent's phenomenal economic growth rates, as the material proof that African countries are finally realizing their potential. Road projects, and shopping malls were evidence of this moment in the eyes of analysts, even while activists tried to suggest that new buildings did not necessarily stand in for rebirth. These critiques rightly focused on corruption and the rampant inequality that underpinned these new projects, and yet remained largely quiet on the actual aesthetic and material visions of urbanism that were emerging.

It is precisely the politics of these new urban aesthetics and what they reveal about worlding projects in Africa that this article investigates. As is the case for worlding projects in other parts of the globe, in African cities hyperbuilding is both a product of transnational capital speculation and about the capacity of the state to perform its sovereign power on an international stage (Ong 2011b). However, literature on Angola has also shown that Luanda's world-city projects were in many ways less dominated by international inter-city competition, and more inspired by a political project aimed at entrenching the ruling MPLA's (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) post-conflict power (Schubert 2015; Soares de Oliveira 2015). Constructing the new city involved the effacement of the old, eliminating mnemonic sites that indicated a history outside of MPLA narratives. Publicity also explicitly tied material improvement in Luandans' lives to national reconstruction and, by association, the MPLA. It is precisely how these politics shaped Luandans' understanding of urban projects that the paper will explore. African cities' contributions to debates on worlding will by necessity be tied to their own histories of urbanism and politics, and a better understanding of how these shape the reception, understanding and execution of these projects is needed.

At present the literature on world city ambitions in Africa suffers from two flaws. Most studies of Africa's new cities are based on plans and drawings, not on actually constructed projects. This is notable in the language scholars use to describe these ventures. De Boeck (2011:263) argues that Kinshasa's world of billboards produce a "spectral politics", Watson (2013:2) describes the projects as "fantasy plans", and Myers (2014:10) approaches the Nairobi 2030 plan as "a text and a discursive tactic". In these accounts the city becomes more fantasy than concrete, leaving the question of what grounded engagements with these projects look like unanswered. Second, although multiple writers have critiqued the exclusionary premises underpinning these projects, which appear to mostly be aimed at middle-class Africans, the actual politics of design, aesthetics, and materiality have been largely overlooked.⁷ This lacuna is problematic because it means that Africans' own urban

aesthetic orientations remain unexplored. As a result, the question of how African experimentations in city-making intersect or depart from established understandings of worlding in Europe, North America, and Asia becomes opaque, once again consigning African cities to secondary positions within urban theory. As this paper will show, it is precisely the study of urban aesthetics that provides a space for the investigation of the complexities of political orientations towards and engagements with the urban.

What little literature does exist on the urban aesthetics in the African context, suggests that akin to what Ghertner (2011) and Harms (2012) have found in India and Vietnam, African urban residents are seduced by the aesthetic promises of these plans (De Boeck 2011; Watson 2013). While I found that many Luandans expressed admiration of the designs of urban redevelopment projects and the new satellite cities, this veneration was accompanied by an equally strong criticism and at times complete rejection of the very same aesthetics. Nothing in expressing admiration for urban aesthetics at some moments precluded a trenchant critique of the very same aesthetics at others. What this indicated was a far more complex aesthetic politics than one captured by accounts that assume that designs inspired by imaginations of world-class citiness primarily index local aspirations to be included in an unmarked global, or others that read them purely in terms of their socio-economic implications. Urban aesthetics are an unstable ground for both complicity and dissent, a site for the opening of political contestation. In order to understand the political ramifications of urban redevelopment and new city building in Africa, the political instability of aesthetics needs to be better understood.

In Luanda what I refer to as “aesthetic dissent”, that is the expression of political dissent via a language of aesthetics and materiality, was rife. During my fieldwork,⁸ Luandans from various socio-economic backgrounds used the very buildings of the new Luanda to critique what they saw as the inappropriate pact between international capital, represented in their eyes primarily by Chinese investors, and their own government. My interlocutors often argued that the buildings were not designed to accommodate Angolan families, made certain informal socio-economic activities untenable, and were environmentally inappropriate for the city. Building on existing political tensions about the relations of elites to “ordinary” Angolans, in which elites were often figured as more open to foreigners than to locals, many residents perceived the buildings as threatening to undo their very claims to urban and national belonging. Discussions of urban aesthetics therefore became one of the primary means of critiquing the project of national reconstruction and by proxy the Angolan government itself.

These arguments about architecture and comments about the “suitability” and “culture” of buildings spoke to a political realm that did not lie in legal classifications and formal institutions. Instead, it was steeped in how “forms invoke and perpetuate shared experiences, emotions, and affects that are anchored in a taken-for-granted sense of self and community, indeed a *common sense* ... grounded in shared perceptions and sensations” (Meyer 2006:20). That is, a sense of belonging and estrangement based in aesthetic experience. By aesthetics, I mean two things. First, a folk notion that refers to appearance and style. Second, the more anthropologically informed definition of experience and taste shaped by the historical

cultivation of the senses. Individuals' interactions with buildings bring these two senses together as the actual aesthetics of the constructions (materials used, design, colors) became that which evoked reactions based on inculcated beliefs and sensual experiences of design.

This paper uses the example of world city making in Luanda to make two primary arguments. First, I argue that in the current African context, careful attention must be given to domestic politics to understand the stakes involved in state investments in worlding and the local perceptions of their meanings. The turn to urban redevelopment by many African states is a relatively easy way to perform capacity to their constituents while also receiving international kudos. On the other hand, critiques of the state are increasingly voiced through engagement with the results of worlding projects. Second, and more broadly, I argue that rather than the aesthetics of world-class citiness anesthetizing critique or simply being desired for supposedly beckoning a better future, these aesthetics (design, materiality, color, etc.) can become powerful materials for dissent. They not only embody the actors and processes that urban residents feel are responsible for their own dispossessions, but are themselves understood to displace residents. In contemporary Luanda, rather than erasing politics, the aesthetic field has become that through which longstanding conflicts over national and urban belonging are being contested, and the possibilities of African urbanism constituted.

National Reconstruction and the Politics of Concrete

Angola experienced a brutal civil war from its independence in 1975 until 2002. The war came to an abrupt end when the MPLA militarily defeated its rival UNITA (Union for the Total Liberation of Angola) following the killing of UNITA's leader, Jonas Savimbi. Angola would not initiate any formal reconciliation process. Instead, all parties involved controversially received a blanket amnesty as part of the negotiations that ended the war (Griffiths 2004). Representing the damages of the war as of a material rather than a political nature, in 2003, the MPLA government launched a national reconstruction program. While the program included initiatives to tackle poverty and improve education, in practice it was a political project anchored in a spectacle of construction, implying that wounds would be healed through building (Croese 2011; Schubert 2015).

Underpinning construction were Angola's petro-dollars and a system of oil-backed credit lines most notably, but not exclusively, with China. Angola had initially called for a donors' conference of Western states and the Bretton Woods Institutions. However, these donors were reluctant to lend money to Angola, voicing concerns about reports of corruption and demanding that IMF-recommended reforms be introduced (Malaquis 2012). At that stage Angola had not yet significantly increased oil production and was still servicing oil-backed loans that it had accumulated during the conflict (Soares de Oliveria 2015). Frustrated with the conditionalities insisted on by Western donors, which would delay reconstruction efforts, and seeking a means to maintain greater control over the management of external funds than most Western loans would allow, the Angolan leadership turned to a rising power: China (Corkin 2012).

The Angola–China connection soon became the economic foundation stone of the country’s reconstruction (Power 2012). This partnership took the form of a system of oil-backed credit lines negotiated between the Chinese state and Chinese private investors with the Angolan state. The two biggest players were the Chinese state itself via China’s Exim Bank, and a company known as the China International Fund (CIF). Following the 2003 signing of a framework agreement between the Angolan Ministry of Finance and the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, the first Chinese Exim Bank loan was announced in 2004, to the value of US\$2 billion (Corkin 2011). By 2009, Chinese loans were said to amount to US\$13.4 billion (Soares de Oliveira 2015). Exim Bank loans were managed through the Angolan Finance Ministry, and were aimed at public infrastructure projects. One of the conditions was that 70% of the contracts associated with the loans had to make use of Chinese companies approved by Beijing, with only 30% Angolan participation required (Corkin 2011). The result was a massive influx of Chinese companies and labor on a scale which caught many Angolans by surprise.

The post-conflict oil-backed credit system deepened the parallel systems of finance and politics that underpin power in Angola (Messiant 1992; Soares de Oliveira 2015). They funded a number of institutions that enabled the Presidency to cut through existing administrative systems to directly manage many of the key reconstruction projects in Luanda. In 2005, supposedly to facilitate the better administration of funds and execution of projects, President Dos Santos created the Office for National Reconstruction (Gabinete de Reconstrução Nacional—GRN). While Exim Bank loans would still technically be run through the Ministry of Finance,⁹ the large loans and projects associated with CIF were managed through the GRN, which was led by head of military affairs in the Presidency, General Helder Viera Días Junior “Kopelipa”, and answered directly to the Presidency. The workings of the office were opaque, even though a substantial number of important projects, such as Luanda’s new international airport and a series of prominent high rises in the Zango area of Luanda, fell underneath its auspices. It is thought that up to US\$9.8 billion of loans were negotiated via CIF (Corkin 2012).

Luanda became the showpiece of the government’s reconstruction efforts. Although the city experienced very little fighting¹⁰ during the civil war, it had buckled under the weight of poor management, shortages of basic materials, and a rapidly increasing population. Millions of internally displaced Angolans had sought refuge in the capital, leading to a housing crisis as Luanda was overwhelmed by sheer demographics (Robson and Roque 2001). By the time the war ended, large slum areas (*musseques*) had burgeoned and the officially planned urban colonial core was in a state of extreme degradation. As the credit lines came into effect, the sound of construction took hold of Luanda. Residents watched as *musseques* neighborhoods were flattened for new real estate ventures and colonial era buildings disappeared under glass towers. Real estate speculation reached new heights. Apartments in Luanda’s city center were being rented out for up to \$12,000 a month. The local media bombarded Angolans with publicity advertising the new Luanda and its wonders. Advertisements of luxury real estate developments graced newspapers and flyers, and the government sponsored billboards of construction works (see Figure 1). The press regularly reporting on the meters of roads built, and the



Figure 1: “Science in Service of Progress—Building a Prosperous and United Angola.” Government of Angola billboard advertising the construction of the new campus of the University of Agostinho Neto, Luanda, December 2014. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

implementation of infrastructure projects which were opened by top ranking MPLA officials compounded this sense of the connection between nation, reconstruction, and party. Unsurprisingly, new constructions featured prominently in the ruling MPLA’s 2012 election advertisements. These discourses portrayed new constructions as those which united the nation and indexed state care for the population.

Many important infrastructure and urban redevelopment projects were also directly tied to the Presidency. These projects include the Luanda Metropolitan Master Plan and the Technical Office for the Reconversion of Cazenga, Sambizanga, and Rangel, three of Luanda’s oldest musseque areas. In addition to the GRN, an older special office, also managed directly by the Presidency, the Office for Special Works (Gabinete de Obras Especiais—GOE) was tasked with a number of key projects, including the rehabilitation of Luanda’s colonial era fort. When the GRN was eventually disbanded in 2010 amidst rumors of maladministration, its projects were transferred to both the GOE and Sonangol, meaning that they were brought directly into the web of parallel power. The result was that Presidential power was literally exercised through the transformation of Luanda’s landscape.

Most scholarship on Luanda’s remaking has precisely emphasized how the MPLA has used it to entrench its power in the post-conflict period (Schubert 2015; Soares de Oliveira 2015). However, the process of hyper-building was causing consternation, not only for those residents who were physically removed from the city, but even for some who constituted the elite, who sent a letter to the President protesting the planned construction of artificial islands in the city’s bay. Despite the fantasy buildings, the city still experienced electricity cuts and rubbish collection problems, especially in the musseques. The MPLA’s constant advertising of itself as responsible for the visual spectacle of national reconstruction, would, it turns out,

be a dangerous move, for as Rafael Marques de Morais, an Angolan human rights and anti-corruption activist, commented, in times of economic crises and political tensions “the magic turns back on the magician” (quoted in *Deutsche Welle* 2015).

It is precisely in the bricks and mortar of the city that disquiet is emerging. Critics push back using the same objects that are meant to index the success of the post-conflict polity. Luandans often circulate images via social media of new constructions that are already exhibiting fissures or have failed in some other way.¹¹ By some accounts, the new city caused the breakdown of the existing one. A university lecturer told me that the construction of the Torres Ambiente, a high-rise close to Luanda’s promenade whose penthouse was rumored to be selling for US\$10 million, had led to fissures in the walls of the neighboring University of Agostinho Neto’s economics building. The circulation of these images and stories constituted a form of dissent from the government’s narrative of reconstruction as the panacea to Angola’s woes, by representing the broken buildings as embodying an immanent material critique of the promised post-conflict prosperity. Poor construction suggested the careless planning and corruption that many believed underlay the projects.

The above stories were obviously partially the stuff of rumor. However, as Quayson (2014:241) argues, “rumours and myths are the transactional glue that hold African urban society together”. Texts, narratives and discourses are the key to understanding shared notions of urbanism, politics, and sociality, as well as the means by which these are reproduced and taken up by residents. They create the city just as much as the built environment does. In Kinshasa, De Boeck and Plissart (2005) argue that the everyday street rumors and gossip, what he describes as *Radio Trottoir* (“Sidewalk Radio”), are not only the center of urban politics, but are often more consequential in structuring urban space and experience than the city’s crumbling material forms. It is precisely through rumor and gossip that the workings of power are explained (White 2000). In Angola, political dissent is often forcefully crushed, and the MPLA is well recognized as promoting a discourse in which any opposition to it is portrayed as attempting to stoke a return to war (Faria 2013). Given this context of political repression, these stories become a means for playing with the signs and narratives of state power so as to unsettle the political frameworks imposed from above (De Boeck and Plissart 2005:51; Mbembe 2001).

Central to the critiques of the new Luanda are quotidian understandings of the intersection of foreign investment, presidential power, and construction. Interlocutors’ frustrations with the government have become entangled with and voiced via anger at the government’s partners, more generally referred to as *estrangeiros* (“foreigners”). Thus, for example, in an article entitled “New ‘idiocy’ or preparation for Chinese colonization?” that appeared on the website *Central Angola 7311*, the mouthpiece of an emerging largely Luanda-based youth movement,¹² the authors argued that the ground was being laid for a “‘Chinese Empire’ in Angola”. In their eyes, the proof of this was what they referred to as “the case of disposable constructions”. Recounting that the government had justified the Chinese presence by claiming that their technical expertise was needed, the authors asked why, then, Chinese constructions appeared to be of such poor quality that they were effectively “disposable”. The article argued that the ongoing employment of the

Chinese, despite the constant breakage of their buildings, could only suggest one of two options. Either Angolans were “idiots” or “they [the Chinese] are preparing the grounds for a neocolonialism facilitated by our own countrymen who have taken control of power”. To emphasize their point, they posted photos of a recently completed car dealership which had partially collapsed after heavy rains (*Central Angola* 7311 2015).

The statement echoed a larger trend of identifying the post-conflict landscape as the product of collusion between neocolonial interests and local power brokers. While it would be easy to dismiss such statements as crude xenophobia, their ubiquity calls for an analysis of why the obsession with “foreignness” features so prominently in critiques of Luanda’s redevelopment, and why the materiality of the buildings is so central to these arguments. At issue here is not whether or not Chinese investors or other foreign nationals really have the influence that critics claim. Beliefs do not need to be accurate to have an impact on the social imaginary (White 2000). In this case, comments about design and materiality critique the economic pacts that underpin national reconstruction. They also slot into longer histories of the resentment of foreign presences, presences marked by the destruction of war and the humiliation of colonization. Many Luandans therefore gaze suspiciously at the new constructions, the latest manifestation of foreign presences whose lingering mark will be the buildings they leave behind.

A World City For Foreigners, By Foreigners?

Late in the afternoon, I drove along the main road of Angola’s largest state rehousing area, Zango. Next to me sat Raul, a member of an Angolan civil society organization. As we exited the area, turning onto Luanda’s freeway, we passed a cluster of new Chinese-designed high-rises. The multicolored structures rose up in stark contrast to the surrounding flat landscape. Staring out of the window, Raul, in a concerned voice, asked me if the high-rises were well built. Fearing that his question was fueled by Sinophobic assumptions about the poor quality of Chinese construction, I told him that I did not know. He paused and then confided in me that he was worried about the apartments. The Chinese, he explained, usually only had one child. The buildings, he continued, were probably designed with Chinese families in mind, but Angolan families were bigger. He shot me a concerned look and asked if I thought the buildings would collapse from the extra weight.¹³

Raul’s comments were merely one indication of a widespread anxiety among various urban residents with whom I interacted, that both the political-economic underpinnings and actual aesthetic products of national reconstruction were pushing Angolans out of the city. In Raul’s case, his concern was that the foreign origin of the high-rises’ designers might mean that the buildings themselves were not suitable for Angolans. However, the fear of displacement did not end there. Raul’s comment needs to be understood within a context in which discussions of aesthetics are laminated onto a complex host of experiences of urban displacement and anxiety about foreign presences in the city. These anxieties emphasize that local interpretations of world city projects cannot be separated from domestic politics, a politics that might become the very grounds for a rejection of the project.

The new buildings represent not only wealth and peace, but also a now more than decade long process of urban displacement. Since late 2001, even before the end of the war, mass demolitions in the name of urban redevelopment and removing people from “high risk zones” began.¹⁴ Although official statistics concerning the number of people who have been forcibly evicted under the auspices of national reconstruction do not exist, an employee of Odebrecht, the Brazilian company in charge of much of the construction in Zango, estimated that at least 200,000 people had been removed to the area.¹⁵ Zango is only one rehousing area of at least four which include Panguila, Sapú, and Projecto Morar. There are also no statistics for the numbers of people who have had their homes demolished and not been rehoused, although the archives of SOS Habitat, a Luanda-based housing and land rights organization, suggest that the numbers lie in the thousands. The experience of displacement has become one of the most common features of post-conflict life in Luanda. Forced removals were legislated into the institutional mechanisms of national reconstruction, witnessed in the 2007 creation of the Program for the Rehousing of the Population, which was tasked with rehousing people affected by reconstruction projects linked to the central government.¹⁶

Displacement not only manifests itself in its most visceral material form of demolition, but in the perceived elision of the larger population from the project of reconstruction. Projects funded by oil-credit lines often employ a significant amount of foreign labor. The result has been a growth in the presence of foreign workers in almost all sectors—from bricklayers to bank managers—leading to a sense, especially amongst poor Angolans, that they have been economically excluded from the promises of reconstruction. Tellingly, when I asked a demolition victim who was unemployed but lived near the new satellite city of Kilamba which was still under construction, if he had sought work there, he commented, “Since the Chinese arrived it’s difficult to find work. All of Kilamba belongs to the Chinese”.¹⁷ Well-paid foreigners began to occupy the new offices, houses, and public spaces that were the fruits of post-conflict prosperity. On a quotidian level, tensions became notable in instances such as skirmishes between Angolans and Chinese nationals who traded in informal construction markets after Angolans accused the Chinese of engaging in business practices that undercut the viability of the Angolans’ ventures.¹⁸

Foreign workers and investors have therefore become increasingly associated with local displacement. This association of foreigners with displacement was evident in a discussion I had with a demolition victim, Fausto. He had been living in a corrugated iron shack for seven years, waiting to be rehoused, as he watched a state housing project, in which many expatriates lived, arise on the carcass of his former neighborhood. Following the demolition, residents tried to contact Angola’s parliament, but to no avail; the government simply called them “occupants”. Fausto rejected this description, implying that it misconstrued who really belonged in the country:

So we are “occupants”. So are we foreigners, or are we Angolans? If we are Angolans then these houses that you [the government] are building are for whom? ... Those houses that they are building are for foreigners and ... people who have money. But us, we who are here, they are going to take us and dump us in the bush.¹⁹

I asked him what he meant by that, because at first I did not understand the term he used for bush, “*capim*”.²⁰ He responded:

To Zango, really far away, in the bush [*mato*], it’s a place that doesn’t have a lot of value. They are going to take us there, but here where we are, they are only going to put people who have money, that have money. Or ... they are going to put foreigners here. But the actual Angolan [*próprio angolano*] does not have the right to live in the city [*cidade*].

The references to neocolonial economic intrigues, physical displacement, and socio-economic marginalization repeat the themes found in many studies of contemporary xenophobia and autochthony. As various scholars have shown, the uncertainties engendered by neoliberal economic policies have a strong correlation with increased outbursts of xenophobia (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Geshiere 2009). However, as Hickel (2014:104) emphasized, while xenophobia is often catalyzed by a struggle over resources, the ways in which “otherness” is constituted is “experienced in a specific cultural idiom” which must be equally explained to comprehend the expressions that xenophobia takes. McGovern (2011:88) makes a similar point when he argues that resentment is “not a sentiment”, but rather a “social idiom” that mobilizes shared local tropes, narratives and understandings of behavior to explain the past, present, and hopes for the future via a hostility to those classified as foreign.

In Luanda, the anxiety about foreign presences builds upon long running political discourses which identify the MPLA elite as “foreign”. Early Angolan elites, referred to by scholars as “creoles”, were prominent black and mixed-race Angolan families who had risen to their status in the early years of colonialism and had long severed their relations with marked forms of African “tradition” (Messiant 1992; Soares de Oliveira 2015). In the 20th century, this group joined other *assimilados* (black and *mestiço* Angolans legally classified as having adopted “Western” ways and therefore qualifying for special legal status as Portuguese citizens) to dominate the independence elite of the MPLA. At moments of disillusionment, critics of the MPLA have mobilized this history to suggest that the party’s leadership is antagonistic to “autochthonous” Africans, in the process implying that the leadership is itself of questionable origin. The narrative of a Lusophone coastal elite at odds with an autochthonous interior African population, particularly characterized the discourses of UNITA’s civil war leader, Jonas Savimbi. This included framing the MPLA as the puppet of foreign powers due to its affiliations with Cuba and the USSR, as “unAfrican” because of its socialist ideologies, and sometimes as anti-Black (de Grassi 2015; Pearce 2015). He mobilized these points to suggest that the MPLA facilitated foreign interests at the expense of Angolans, and that he and UNITA were there to champion the cause of “real” Angolans.

In contemporary Luanda, these currents of thought continue to resonate politically, and often focus on President José Eduardo dos Santos who critics conspiratorially accuse of being from São Tomé. Copies of the President’s birth certificate of highly questionable authenticity are regularly circulated online, and were even held up by UNITA supporters in their 2012 protest against electoral fraud. But it is in discussions of the city that these suspicions are most strongly expressed. The oft-cited supposed “proof” of Dos Santos’s foreign origins is rooted in urban space. Urban

rumor claims that Dos Santos's childhood home remains unknown, despite his official biography stating that he was born in Sambizanga, one of Luanda's most historic musseque areas. In a city where few people can claim to be descended from the area's original inhabitants, the AxiLuanda, neighborhood identity is the primary means of claiming an urban autochthony. In being unable to establish a concrete urban location of origin, the President becomes an object onto which can be plastered fears of foreigners and anger at the failures of national reconstruction.

The suspicion levied against the President was evident in the account of Oswaldo, an army veteran and resident of Bairro 2 whose house was demolished in 2004. In 2012, he was still waiting to be rehoused. When I asked him why he thought the government was treating the *povo* ("people") poorly, he responded that he believed it was due to the government's ambivalence as to whether the poor counted as citizens: "It has forgotten about us, it doesn't know if we are Angolans or if we are from somewhere else ... When the foreigner arrives here he finds everything prepared. He has water, electricity, a house, everything. But the Angolan lives like a slave." When I asked him to clarify if he really meant that in Angola, foreigners lived better than Angolans he raised his voice: "The foreigner lives much better, he is in command! We should speak with shame about what we are seeing!" When I inquired why he thought the government was giving preference to foreigners he commented:

If I am a foreigner, I have to put another foreigner there to rule. The boss [the President], if he is the boss, he knows that the Angolan people deserve better, the Angolan people can't be left to be sacrificed like this. No. So, because he is a foreigner, to my mind he is a foreigner, so he gives more opportunities to foreigners, the Angolan is left to suffer.²¹

The question therefore no longer becomes whether or not the elites are in alliance with foreigners, but whether or not the elite are themselves foreign. In many ways then, anxieties about foreigners have more to do with Luandans' relations to their own elites than to foreigners per se. The critique of the foreign becomes a critique of Angola's leaders.

The making of a new Luanda is taking shape within this domestic crucible of anxieties about foreigners, which is by proxy an anxiety about the general population's relationship to its rulers. While comments about the President's nationality show how xenophobic sentiments have at times come to stand in for political critique, the discussion of urban aesthetics is, I argue, not only a more subtle, but more pervasive way in which people are both affronted by and push back against the current political and economic system. In their rejection of "foreign" buildings, they reject the current political regime. The city's buildings have become the terrain through which "everyday" autochthony has taken root (McGovern 2011:69), expressed, as I show in the following section, in moments of what I call "aesthetic dissent".

Aesthetic Dissent

In August 2011, I listened to José Maria, a young Angolan architect who had been educated in Portugal, passionately critique the fact that Luanda's redevelopment had created relatively few job opportunities for Angolan architects. Although I

had heard similar complaints from poorer Angolans, I was surprised to hear them from someone with highly sought after expertise, especially as companies always claimed that they were desperate to hire well-educated Angolans. When I asked him why he thought Angolan architects were not benefiting from the construction boom, he at first suggested that they were perhaps not pushy enough in trying to get contracts. However, he then paused and told me:

lots of people come from Brazil, Portugal, China, and they [the client] want something fast ... They want something *chave na mão*,²² something fast that already has financing. This is another aspect that works against Angolan architects because these foreign firms arrive with financing, and often with the project, financing, and construction capacity. It's a package, a unmatched package.²³

The result of foreigners being in charge of design, José Maria and many others argued, was that the newly emerging structures were unsuitable for Angolans and Angola.

The designs of the new constructions, especially high-rises, were described as either eviscerating the city's history or as being ill-suited for Angola. The former views were especially common among those who might be considered a cultural elite of middle-class and wealthy artists, academics, musicians, architects and writers, who had usually grown up in the city center rather than the city's slum areas. They tended to focus their concerns on the need to preserve Luanda's historic core, defined by Portuguese colonial-era buildings, which was gradually being demolished to make way for what they argued were bland and inappropriate high-rises. This group claimed that the new structures, in as much as the destruction of the city's historic buildings was the condition for their emergence, were key players in the city's "Dubaization", that is, the obliteration of its identity. They also mobilized arguments about climate and design to emphasize the inappropriateness of these designs to Luanda. One Angolan architect was adamant about this:

a tropical modernism was created here in the sixties and seventies, with concrete, but with the circulation of air. It worked far better than filling high-rises with glass and afterwards you have to think of air-conditioning, and the air-conditioning doesn't work, and then there are energy problems ... very often the projects are designed out there and afterwards, here, they don't work.²⁴

The new glass city, in her view, was a recipe for infrastructural disaster. In a similar vein, an Angolan urban planner, flicking through images of state-funded middle-class housing, commented to me that the designs were totally inappropriate for Luanda's climate: "These are not suited for the tropics", she said; "See those roofs? The house will just get hot". "But why would someone design them like this then?", I asked. She responded: "People look at China and South Africa and want to be like them, so they build houses that you find there. But these rich people here don't even know how to live in these types of houses".²⁵

A "cultural" critique of urban aesthetics embedded in problematic assumptions about slum life and "Angolanness" could be found among various strata of Luandans. José Maria specifically identified the Chinese-designed satellite city of Kilamba as the symbol of all that was wrong with the new Luanda. The *Nova Cidade*

de Kilamba (“New City of Kilamba”) is the flagship of the Angolan state’s housing program. Aimed at lower-middle to middle-income earners, it is a massive complex of color-coded apartment blocks (see Figure 2). José Maria, despite himself living in an apartment, felt that the construction of Kilamba had been a mistake. Drawing on a longstanding discourse in Angola that musseque inhabitants are ill-equipped for apartment living, Kilamba’s apartments, he claimed, were not for the “normal citizen” because “the Angolan likes spaces ... he likes to be in the shade in big open spaces, to lunch with the family ... He prefers a yard [*quintal*], or a large verandah that is similar to a yard, rather than closed spaces like this living room, like this. This space,” he motioned at his own apartment’s living room, “is not typical for an Angolan”.

José Maria’s discussion of architecture was premised upon and constructed an idealized traditional Angolan, wedded to large open spaces and extended family, and antithetical to apartment blocks. He was not the only person to claim this. In an interview with a group of real estate agents, one of them reiterated José Maria’s stance. He argued that the residents of the urban periphery who were mostly poor:

have five, six, ten children and we are preparing apartments that only have enough room for two. It doesn’t make sense. Who ever came up with the project thought of Eastern Europe, thought of Brazil, thought of South America, but didn’t think about Angola.²⁶

In both José Maria and the real estate agent’s perceptions, the new constructions were promoting small nuclear families and apartment living, something which contrasted with their imaginations of Angolaness,²⁷ a notion of authenticity that



Figure 2: The satellite city of Kilamba, September 2012. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

was clearly located with “the poor”, i.e. the musseque dwellers, as there was no question in their minds that either of them could not live in high-rises.

While it might be easy to write these sentiments off as the prejudiced utterances of middle-class Angolans, the very same ideas sometimes circulated among some musseque residents. Dona Christina, a resident of Cazenga, one of Luanda’s most notorious slum areas, told me that she did not want to be removed to a high-rise because she could “never get used to the height”. She argued that if the government wanted to put her in a high-rise, she would need training (*formação*) about how to live in one. When I insisted that she could easily adapt to high-rise life, a friend of hers intervened:

Look Claudia, it’s like this. You learnt to write in a book with lines. Now, imagine that one day someone suddenly hands you a book without lines and tells you to write in it. Sure, eventually you’ll adapt and learn to write straight and correctly without the lines, but until then you are going to write all over the place: up, down, backwards. This is what it is like for people who move from the *musseque* to a high-rise.²⁸

Design, it appeared, threatened to disorientate.

It was not only the claimed discrepancy between “culture” and design, but between practice and design that led many musseque residents to believe that the architectures of the new buildings would make their current lives impossible, and were therefore indicative of their removal. This was evident from the words of Sr Kuntuala, an elderly man who had only recently moved back to Luanda after spending much of the post-war period in the north of the country, as he studied a glossy state-sponsored leaflet advertising the redevelopment of his neighborhood. The cover of the leaflet showed a grouping of glass-covered high-rises with lush green lawns stretching out to a sparkling body of water. These were a stark contrast to the mostly single story cement block homes and dirt roads of the existing neighborhood. Referencing the leaflet, Sr Kuntuala commented:

The image that it shows is of a luxury villa. Will we continue to live there once they build those? What are the conditions according to which we will get those houses? If I live in an apartment block, how will I cultivate land?²⁹

In a similar vein, a colleague of his argued that if put into a high-rise he would lose his financial security as he made an income from running a school and shop from his yard. In high-rises, there were no yards.

Sr Kuntuala’s comment and that of his colleague were not simply about the way the state materialized in the city, but about where they fitted in with the state. The supposed “problem” of the architecture was precisely that it derived its aesthetic impetus from a foreign culture to which the majority of Angolans, many of my informants argued, could either not acculturate or felt alienated from. The new structures threatened to not just potentially physically displace them, but actually aesthetically displace them as the design, they were arguing, made their current ways of life impossible.

Despite fears generated by these aesthetic displacements, these statements did not suggest an outright rejection of the new buildings. Although many people expressed reluctance to move to new buildings, once there, they often expressed

satisfaction with their homes (Buire 2014). People were simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the city's new architecture. Thus, for example, a man who was living in a centrally located slum neighborhood who faced eviction, explained that if the area's residents were promised apartments in Kilamba, I would arrive the following morning to find the area abandoned as they would willingly move.³⁰ Concomitantly, for the poor, anxieties about aesthetics were often concretized by the knowledge that they were rarely rehoused into new projects, even while they were often physically displaced by them. These ambiguous desires echo similar findings by de Boeck (2011) amongst residents of Kinshasa when faced with luxury urban developments to which they would never have access. However, while he ascribes their contradictory reactions as rooted in their desire for the future that the buildings indicate, even if they are to be excluded from them, I would argue that in the case of Luanda the ambiguity is founded in a wariness of the nature of the transformations and exclusions that the buildings imply.

The buildings' aesthetics suggest not only that the majority of Luandans cannot access them, but that they must transform themselves into something other than themselves, or there will not be a space for them in the new city. They would have to abandon kinship practices, economic activities, and historical attachments to the city's built environment. The design itself, not simply the actual process of construction, displaces them. When I asked an Angolan NGO worker in 2009 who he thought the new city was for, his response was to shrug and suggest: "They are building a city for no one."³¹ Yet, "they" (*eles*), the constantly used term to refer to an amorphous group on the top of the Angolan political and economic hierarchy, were clearly building a city for someone and for some reason. In the eyes of many of my interlocutors, who tied the aesthetics of the buildings to circulating beliefs about the foreign origins of national reconstruction and the Angolan elite, the elites were building a city for foreigners. As one former FAPLA³² soldier, whose house was demolished by the provincial government to make way for a state-sponsored housing project near the south of Luanda, commented: "They [the foreigners] get a house here, but me, a real Angolan, I get nothing".³³ Aesthetic and literal displacement are identified as the product of the alliances between elites and foreigners which underpin new constructions' designs and the larger implementation of national reconstruction. In the political context of Angola then, aesthetic dissent becomes a means of critiquing the government itself. The aesthetics of world-class city-making can be just as much the grounds for the rejection of the process as for the acceptance of it.

Conclusion

Despite their pretensions to annul the past and project the future, architecture and urban redevelopment are always haunted by history and politics (Holston 1989; Schwenkel 2013). The idea that national reconstruction could escape from longstanding tensions about citizenship and autochthony was naïve of the Angolan government. If nothing else, it has become the focus of these conflicts. As Luandans interact with the city's new buildings, they are not only physically but aesthetically unsettled. They worry that the foundations of their lives, like those of demolished

buildings, might not only be undone by actual physical displacement, but by the materials and designs that new buildings have introduced. Architectural design and materials not only provide the idioms for the expressions of political dissent and at times xenophobia, but equally are the very substances that generate these anxieties. They mobilize wartime discourses about the supposed foreign origins of the MPLA leadership. They press the case of the autochthonous citizen against a political elite who urban residents believe are selling them out to foreigners to make a profit off the urban landscape. Urban inhabitants' angry sentiments then, reflect a political sensibility embedded in a notion of shared aesthetic judgments of "culture" and lifestyle. When the elite and foreigners are seen to be rejecting these through the design of the new Luanda, they are seen to be rejecting the autochthonous Angolan.

In the politically repressive context of contemporary Angola, critique does not always take the form of canonical protest practices, but this does not mean that it does not exist. This paper has shown that Luandans mobilized the very urban aesthetics that the MPLA-state promoted as indications of nation-building and prosperity, to critique the very political and economic pacts that they believed underpinned the buildings. This aesthetic dissent was ensconced in a longer political history of tensions over belonging in the country which national reconstruction failed to resolve. What these dissenting views over Luanda's worlding project reveal is that urban aesthetics open a space for the discussion of politics. As the swing between praise and criticism of aesthetics revealed, it is one of the crucibles in which African perspectives on the stakes of worlding are being constituted. Tracking aesthetic dissent gives insight into residents' imaginations of what a desirable African urban might be that departs from externally imposed notions of African cities being stuck between slums, breakdown and mega-projects. Certain aspects of the design and implementation of the world city are rejected because they are entwined with repressive politics. Others are admired for promising prosperity. The relationship to new urban worlds is not one of complete embrace or rejection, just as politics is not defined by total collaboration or total resistance. The horizons produced by the multiple new world city projects sweeping across Africa can only be grasped if their complex political connotations are better understood. If this is done, then the urban world opened up by these projects and their aesthetics can be better understood and their role in shaping visions of African urbanism grasped.

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Endnotes

¹ The world city approach studies cities according to a political economic perspective which frames them as key sites of territorial articulation with the global capitalist economic system. Within the approaches' purview, cities that hold central roles in the command of global capitalism are considered "world cities". Cities that do not hold this position are considered to either play a secondary role, or in the worst instance, essentially be irrelevant to understanding the imbrications of urbanism and global capital. Several urban theorists have challenged the world city paradigm. They argue that the narrow political economy approach misleadingly privileges certain economic processes as central to the global economy, presumes a universal process of capitalist integration with homogenized outcomes, problematically locates the norm of urbanism within a select few cities in the global North, and results in a misunderstanding of citiness in the global South (Mbembe 2001; Robinson 2002). My use of "world city" draws on scholarship by Ong that investigates "worlding practices", that is, how urban actors initiate projects that "attempt to establish or break established horizons of urban standards in and beyond a particular city" (Ong 2011a:4). In the case of many cities, the norm to which they aspire is a bricolage aesthetic imagination of what constitutes the normative "world city" ideas which are drawn from a variety of examples and media (Ghertner 2015). As such, when I speak of Luanda aiming to be a "world city", this implies both the economic domination that some policy makers might aspire for, but also the aesthetic image which many actors believe will attract the recognition and investment to realize their dreams as well as reflect sovereign strength.

² The Rwandan government has approved a comprehensive plan for the redevelopment of the capital, Kigali (see City of Kigali 2013).

³ De Boeck (2011) has written on the Cité de Fleuve project in Kinshasa. The project is described in more detail on its homepage (see La Cité du Fleuve 2014).

⁴ President Teodoro Obiang has embarked on supporting the construction of an entirely new capital city named Oyala (Sackur 2012).

⁵ Lagos is the site of one of the most publicized "new city" projects in Africa, Eko Atlantic—a privately administered city aimed at high income earners (see Eko Atlantic 2016).

⁶ The term "Africa Rising" and the primary constituents of the arguments underpinning the narrative drew from an *Economist* (2011) article.

⁷ For an academic critique, see Myers (2014). Important work by Watson (2013) does investigate and critique the seeming exclusionary aesthetics of these projects, but as mentioned, is based on plans and images, not investigations of people's actual interactions with these designs. The majority of critiques have come from human rights organisations and media sources. For example see Croese (2010), Lefort (2016) and Lukacs (2014).

⁸ The bulk of research for this article was conducted during a fieldwork period in Luanda from March 2011 to September 2012. This was followed by shorter periods of research conducted in 2013, 2014 and 2015. Research included semi-structured interviews with demolition victims, residents of Luanda's slum areas, NGO and CBO workers, architects, urban planners, and state representatives. It also involved extensive participant observation conducted alongside organizations that worked with demolition victims, and during meetings of NGOs and slum dwellers regarding urban poverty and politics. This was enriched by the everyday observations about quotidian events and experiences that shaped my understanding of Luanda. Finally this was supplemented by an extensive review of Angolan urban and land legislation, media analyses and archival work about the history of urban planning in Luanda.

⁹ There is uncertainty regarding whether Exim Bank money was funneled into the GRN as the Ministry of Finance remains Exim Bank's official partner. Accounts for the Exim Bank loans have not been released since 2008 and so it is difficult to track where the money was eventually sent and to what projects it was allocated.

¹⁰ Luanda only experienced fighting during the run up to independence in 1975, and then for a few days in October/November 1992 following the announcement of the results of Angola's first national election.

¹¹ A prime example of this was when a video showing children swimming in the flooded streets of the new satellite city of Kilamba went viral. Its critique is implicit, namely that the

promises of a new city free of the problems that plagued the old Luanda are null and void: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iHdirpn7zU> (last accessed 18 October 2015).

¹² This movement is not a formalized group. I use it to refer to urban residents, anywhere from their teens to their early thirties who, since 2011, have been involved in non-party aligned protests calling for greater political freedoms in the country.

¹³ Discussion with Raul, 13 May 2012.

¹⁴ For accounts of early demolitions, see Amnesty International (2003, 2007) and Human Rights Watch (2007).

¹⁵ Interview with Odebrecht Representative, Zango, 23 July 2012.

¹⁶ Despacho 8/07 de 13 de Abril, *Diário da República*, Série I, No. 45.

¹⁷ Discussion with Bento, Kilamba Kiaxi, 15 September 2011.

¹⁸ Discussion with Carlos, Benfica, 12 April 2012. Schmitz (2014) finds similar relations of suspicion and antagonism in her study of quotidian Chinese–Angolan relations.

¹⁹ Discussion with Fausto, Kilamba Kiaxi, 1 July 2011.

²⁰ *Capim* translates as “grass” but in the context of the conversation it made more sense to translate it as “bush”. People described an area as being full of *capim* when they arrived there and removing it was one of the signs of creating a neighborhood. The word therefore did not simply connote “grass” but was associated with a wildness, or “bush”.

²¹ Interview with Oswaldo, Bairro 2, 5 March 2012.

²² Lit. “key in hand”, but meaning a project that is all inclusive in terms of the planning and construction.

²³ Interview with architect Jose Maria, Maianga, 9 August 2011.

²⁴ Interview with urban planner Yvette, Luanda, 12 April 2011.

²⁵ Observation of Urban Planning Office, Ingombota, 13 June 2011.

²⁶ Interview with Real Estate Agents, Ingombota, 15 April 2011.

²⁷ When using terms such as “the Angolan” or “Angolaness” I am not suggesting that there exists a single or stable vision of these, rather I am voicing my interlocutors’ words. Their statements often expressed deeply problematic notions of citizenship and nation that reinforced discriminatory understandings of slum dwellers as ill-equipped to cope with the demands of the world city. These accounts would, no doubt, be challenged by other Angolans, but were nevertheless ubiquitous in the interviews I conducted.

²⁸ Discussion with Dona Christina, Cazenga, 24 May 2011.

²⁹ Observation of Community Meeting, Cazenga, 13 June 2012. Although the inability to protect land rights lies at the heart of why displacement is ubiquitous in Luanda, most interlocutors focused on their desire to have a house rather than land per se. Land was raised in discussions of how rebuilding was impossible because land had become so expensive. However, given that having a house is enabled by being able to claim a plot of land, the discussion of the two are inevitably linked.

³⁰ Discussion with community members, Samba, 13 August 2013.

³¹ Discussion with Angolan NGO employee, Maculusso, July 2009.

³² Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola—these were the MPLA-government armed forces during the civil war.

³³ Observation at Kilamba Kiaxi, 1 December 2011.

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