Some Thoughts on the Portuguese Colonial City and Architecture in Post-Colonial Times

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Abstract
The research on the architecture and urbanism of the former Portuguese Africa allows us to consider and to establish the real intrinsic value, typological and morphological diversity, and the lengthy duration of the legacy of this architectural/urban heritage. Portuguese colonization in Africa produced more recently, mostly in the period 1950-1975, some vast and great material values, of which seven or eight main cities, including the vast contents of their modern architecture, are striking examples. We can evaluate the most positive aspects with future impact represented by this Portuguese architects’ practice (cultural ethics, use of modern technology, and service to society) and the architectonic work produced during that era. Although these cities and its architecture were created within a late colonial context of indisputable discrimination, they have prevailed despite wars and circumstantial abandonment. Now they represent a consistent material basis for the modernization and/or revitalization of urban life in these countries. Architects that are at present working and intervening in these countries should understand this ambivalence and complementary nature between the ex-colonial “concrete city” and the “informal city” pre- and post-colonial, so that their performance is socially and culturally informed, correct, and positive.

Keywords
Portuguese colonial, modern architecture, post-colonial

I have been told that the people who are born and live by the sea have a purer nature. I think that the sea gives the special quality of fantasy, desire, and trust. It is a mysterious trait of the spirit, and with it one learns to expect nothing, to despair for nothing. Perhaps this is innocence, perhaps only in the sea we are allowed to truly die, to die like no other man can. [Herberto Hélder 1963 (1985): 52-53]

The research that the author was able to carry out in the last decades on the architecture and urbanism of the former Portuguese Africa has entailed spaces so much larger than the five countries which comprising the present Portuguese speaking African countries. However, in its essence, as he had the opportunity to mention1: It was possible to establish the real intrinsic value, typological and morphological diversity, and the lengthy duration of the legacy of this architectural heritage.

Such legacy is not always of Portuguese origin (sometimes with a mere Lusitanian influence among others), but it is always shown in a version somewhat identifiable with our far Western Southern European culture. It is now part of a long and troubled process of 600 years of colonial history counting from 1415.

In fact, the various Portuguese buildings, sites, and places in Africa of the modern era (from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries) that have been classified by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, _______________________

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and Cultural Organization) as world heritage over the last 35 years, bear witness to the material, aesthetic and formal value, and the respective wealth of shapes/spaces and their longevity.

Following this “classic” historical phase, the Portuguese colonization in Africa produced more recently other vast and greater material values, of which seven or eight main cities, including the vast contents of their modern architecture, are striking examples: from Luanda to Lobito, from Maputo to Beira, and from Bissau to São Tomé, Praia and Mindelo, among many others.

Within the scope of the five PALOPs, the author is referring specifically to a group of cities, towns, and villages (founded throughout the contemporary times, especially between 1850 and 1975), or better, to an authentic urbanization system (territorial-ordinance), urbanistic (scientifically based and designed) and urban (producer of equipment, building experiences, and environment for collective life).

But before reaching any conclusions, he must present the general historical information about Portuguese colonial “deeds” in Portuguese speaking Africa during the mid-twentieth century, as they are mostly unknown for general public and international audiences.


In the 1950s, even without direct political affiliation (which not everyone practiced), the times were obviously tough for the freer assertion of a “new generation” of architects in Portugal, given the Iberian country’s retrograde and repressive social and cultural environment. For those then joining the profession, it was inevitable to think of an “exit” solution as a means toward achieving an opening which in Portugal was denied them. But professional moves to Europe or America were still distant possibilities during that period; on the other hand, however, there was the “land of opportunities” in some way constituted by the “Portuguese Africa” of Salazarist propaganda.

The generation educated at that time therefore took up the idea of “escape and adventure” associated with the trip to Africa, where professional standing would be facilitated by the common language and the way institutions and social life worked in the Portuguese-African communities, whose ties to the home country were very close and dependent. Note that the other smaller colonies (the India State, Macau, and Timor) were too far away and did not offer as many prospects.

It was also during the 1950s that the practices of architecture and urbanism (especially in Angola and Mozambique) were affected by a profound difference compared with the previous decades: As neo-traditionalist models were increasingly abandoned, one could now speak in social, economic, and cultural terms of a new phase, more dynamic and tuned to modernity.

On the one hand, there was a cultural transfer of the “modern-traditional” dispute from Europe to Africa through the new generation of Portuguese architects working in Portugal, with their more informed and up-to-date training, who were practising and producing within the framework of actions undertaken by public authorities. On the other hand, active private initiative had now emerged, generating renewed economic and social dynamics, and was seeking affirmation in new spaces, structures, and symbols.

The conservative path expressed by the “Estado Novo (New State) architecture” of the 1930s and 1940s thus came into direct conflict with modern architecture’s search for affirmation. As a consequence, architects with more traditional practices clearly opposed the so-called “modern architects”. In this regard, the greater freedom of initiative and grandiose scale of intervention in such vast virgin territories then implied, in Africa, a challenge which was a direct appeal to
modernity—and dictated a quick victory for the more innovative practices’ defenders.

As an example, even programs with a deep-rooted conservative tradition such as religious architecture gave off signs of more radical change. The early 1960s church of the Holy Family in Luanda, with its tower of abstract design and structurally expressed volumes, introduced an imaginative “vision” of modern sacred space in the city—a renewal which also occurred in Lisbon.

This transition phase from the 1950s to 1960s reflected a relative political opening in Portugal at the time, marked by the MUD (Democratic Unity Movement) sequels and the “hangover” resulting from the euphoric period of Humberto Delgado’s candidacy. Indeed, and also internationally, the second half of the 1950s saw a clearing of the air, possible especially after 1957-1958 following the end of the Korean War and the McCarthy era witch hunts. The clouds would only come back when the page turned in that fatal year of 1961. It was also a period of major cultural debate in Angola, especially in Luanda, where a “culture of the left” came forward (obviously within the strong limits set by the Portuguese colonial regime), with some involvement by various architects such as Francisco Silva Dias (controversial texts in newspapers) and José Pinto da Cunha.

The participation of architects living in Angola and Mozambique in African international conferences and meetings with clearly modern and social concerns were effective, albeit irregular and occasional. The themes were above all housing and urbanism, in the context of the region’s Black communities in countries that were colonized or undergoing decolonization.

An example mentioned by Bernardino Ramalhete was the second session of the “Inter-African Conference on Housing and Urbanization” held in Nairobi in January 1959 and attended by 16 architects from Mozambique, two from Angola, and two from Portugal.

In Mozambique, mention must also be made of the gradual emergence of autonomous cultural discussion, naturally centered above all in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) through local associations such as the Núcleo de Arte or Cineclube. This was helped by the closeness of English-speaking Africa, with its isolation-breaking capacity for current news and factual information, and by the tradition of an “educated elite” which the city cultivated. Architects with a mature political and social awareness such as João José Tinoco and his group of family and friends were important here.

Other architects among them, Pancho Miranda Guedes also helped strengthen this process of cultural debate, due not so much to politics but to their open culture and participative approach. An example, in the context of a time when people were gradually becoming aware of the problem of bad housing and living conditions among the Black African population on the outskirts of Lourenço Marques, is an article by that architect published in the progressive newspaper A Tribuna, titled “The Sick City—Several Recipes for Curing Cane Disease and the Manual of the Member Without Master”. In it, the author uses an ironic and humorous style to propose a number of measures for the urban renewal and classification of those areas.

At the turn of the 1960s-1970s and parallel to and deriving from the colonial war (already a decade old), the late attempt to forge the idea of a “multi-racial nation” was accentuated, accompanied by a new surge of public investment in the production of energy sources and creation of industrial bases on a more comprehensive scale (with large hydroelectric dams and irrigated agriculture settlements).

The “urban explosion” and expansion of cities accelerated, with a broad-ranging renewal of facilities and services, as well as the private construction of larger-sized buildings.

The high point of the nascent urban networks’ consolidation was reached during this phase, especially in Angola and Mozambique, through a widespread process of “city-building” on several
parallel and simultaneous fronts: enhancing the development of existing urban areas; raising to city status of various smaller towns and settlements with clear strategic, location-related, and/or administrative importance; and establishing new settlements, even in the embryonic stage.

The surge in urbanization during these decades was naturally accompanied by the increased use of a new architectonic language, more aggressive and dynamic than during the previous modern architecture phase, and born there from: that of the International Modern Movement, with a larger scale of achievement and sophistication, based on the new construction technologies which access to concrete (with locally produced cement and imported steel and glass) made ever more common in Afro-Portuguese areas. New constructions (above all with a new dimension) in cities and towns, though also in the territories’ energy-producing and industrial centers, enabled belief in an “accelerated progress” which was then cut short by the sudden politico-military outcome of the independence processes.

LESSONS AND PROFESSIONAL, COLLECTIVE AND HUMAN VALUES TO LEARN FROM ARCHITECTONIC PRACTICE IN THE MODERN PHASE OF PORTUGUESE COLONIAL AFRICA, 1950-1975

Looking back today from the standpoint of history nearly half a century after the aforementioned period, which was followed by so many restructuring events (independences, civil wars, democratization, and new economic phases), it is naturally possible to evaluate the most positive aspects with future impact represented by the architects’ practice and the tangible architectonic work produced during that era. In sum, four of those aspects stand out, derived overall from one common, solid, contemporary professional, cultural, and political background which we label the “modern generation”—informed and up-to-date, despite the aforementioned political and social limits. This is of course a generalization, there were architects more consistently in line with these aspects and others whose performance was more irregular, or identified less with them as follows.

(1) A functional ethic was evident in the programs, spaces, and conceptions of the far majority of architectural interventions. In other words, the projects generally showed an understanding of the crucial importance of aspects regarding the respective works’ usefulness (thus emphasizing their social aspect for the respective communities), which was meant to guide or orient the other factors, classically primary concerns in the conception of architectural spaces (technology and aesthetic aspect);

(2) An opening to technology, or in any case, a technical aspect, which was also considered (perhaps at a level immediately after the functional). The architects-designers always tried to introduce new materials and innovative technological concepts. While perhaps not giving them a lead role, they did not deny them an important place in their projects. Vieira da Costa said that in a world without air conditioning and in the tropics, only a good architect (a “real/true architect”) would know how to build effectively, as deficient work would quite simply not be inhabitable (breathable) in such a climate;

(3) A comprehensive view, which knew how to integrate the areas or disciplines of planning and urbanism with those of architecture and design. That is, the architects practicing in these territories during this historical period fully perceived in their action, the need to order space from the standpoint of the whole, relating the various necessarily interdependent levels and scales (of territory, cities and settlements, buildings and architectonic spaces). They therefore worked with equal openness on urban studies and plans, on urban design and landscape projects, beyond the themes of the architecture project properly speaking—an approach always justifiable and even more understandable during a period marked by the
“first urban structuring” of many regions;

(4) The idea of service to society—a very common theme among practitioners from that generation: As they considered themselves part of a professional body, trained and prepared to intervene at the various levels demanded by society, in both public and private programs, their “orientation” and reference for action (here also from the ethical or more properly the ontological standpoint) was always to give primacy or emphasis to the work produced and much less or nothing to the question of individual authorship of same. There was therefore a clear process whereby designers accepted the practice of “self-erasure” as such; they held themselves to be agents and promoters at the service of a cause (preferably public) and so did not lay claim to their condition, also real in the end, as aesthetic creators.

Taken as a whole and regarding architecture, this was after all an era and generation marked by clear directions—materializing utilitarian, collective socializing, and functional technical interrelated with an overall view of modernity.

SOME HISTORY AND EXAMPLES—PROJECTS, ARCHITECTS AND COMPLETED WORK MARKING THE THIRD QUARTER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, TERRITORY BY TERRITORY (OR TERRAIN BY TERRAIN)

Cape Verde

During this phase, the island chain witnessed the moderate growth of its two biggest cities, Praia and Mindelo, with some renewal or construction of public facilities, the building of new infrastructures, and application of urban master plans.

While in Praia, most projects followed the “official language” of the Estado Novo regime (the 1960 Adriano Moreira Lyceum and nearby Prince Henry monument; the old Gago Coutinho airport terminal, on sober modernist lines), in Mindelo, the relatively few new public and private constructions skillfully asserted the forms and spaces of modernity [Naval Command building on the bay (by Lucínio Cruz, 1914-1999); Porto Novo Hotel on the central Praça Nova].

Guinea-Bissau

The cities of the then Portuguese Guinea had grown somewhat during the mid-twentieth century. In 1940, the colony counted 350,000 inhabitants, in 1960, the colony counted 544,000 inhabitants. As with Praia in Cape Verde, the architectural models from the modern traditional shift prevailed during a transitional phase in public urban architecture (CTT—Correios, Telégrafos e Telefones building on the Avenida da República, with tiled roof and symmetric composition axis and portico with modernistic facade; Bissau Hospital, with tiled roof and colonnade). The Customs House in central Bissau capped its long horizontal body with a modern cylindrical tower of concrete and glass. An example of modern and pragmatic architecture with Portuguese roots is the Bissau Port Administration, a light construction seeking adjustment to the tropical climate, by architects Carlos Tojal, Manuel Moreira, and Carlos Roxo (1967-1968).

São Tomé and Principe

The architecture of these two small territorial spaces (two islands in Guinea Gulf) was at the time generally more discreet and simpler than in the vast Afro-Portuguese territories south of the equator. Ana Chaves Bay in the city of Sao Tome, though dominated by successively renovated and modernized traditional buildings such as the Cathedral and the Government Palace, is lined with a number of public buildings that exemplify modern architecture from the 1950s and 1960s. The most notable is doubtless the current São Tomé Telecommunications building, whose facade faces the equatorial waters protected by a long reinforced concrete screen.
Angola—Modern Architecture in Luanda and Lobito

The transition to the 1950s and 1960s finally saw the arrival of “modern” examples whose architecture was becoming more geometric and closer to industrial and modulated forms—a change otherwise also under way back in the Metrópole.

This aesthetic register in Luanda includes: the early 1950s General Craveiro Lopes air terminal by Keil do Amaral (1910-1975), with low horizontal embedded volumes and interior with staircase and wall fresco by Neves e Sousa; the voluminous Glass Palace, a block with boxed verandas and gallery next to the customs house (by Luis Amaral, João Américo, and António Campino); and, resulting from private initiative and the coffee boom, the 1958 Cirilo and Irmão headquarters by the architect Pereira da Costa (1923-1976), with solid volumes and design reminiscent of Le Corbusier.

A number of architects stand out during this period, along with their main projects, showing the result of the action of the new generation of practitioners and their individual ability to contribute toward “modern affirmation” of architecture:

- João Garcia de Castilho (1915-2007) and his brother Luis Garcia de Castilho, designers of the Restauração cinema (1946-1951, now Angola’s National Assembly house), and the Miramar cinema terrace (1964);
- Vasco Vieira da Costa (1911-1982), one of the best architects working in Angola in his time, author of the Kinaxixe market (1950-1953, demolished in 2008), the Civil Servants housing ensemble (1965) and the central Mutamba double tower (1968, now the head of Public Works Ministry);
- José Pinto da Cunha (1921-2007), author of the Luanda National Radio building (1963-1967) and several luxurious and beautiful private houses;
- Simões de Carvalho (born in Luanda in 1929), co-author with Cunha of the National Radio building, and of the urban design of the corbusian Prenda District (1963-1965);

In the city of Lobito, the second largest urban center of Angola in the 1960s, we must mention the active figure of Francisco Castro Rodrigues (born in Lisbon, 1920). He worked in the city from 1954 to 1988 (when he retired), with decisive participation in the municipal, urban, and infrastructural architectonic areas. Notice the Prédio do Sol (1953-1954), the universal housing and commercial block, the Flamingo cinema terrace (1963), the air terminal (1964), and the high school building (1966), both with extensive sheets of ventilation grills.

Mozambique—Modern Architecture in Lourenço Marques (Now Maputo) and Beira

As in Angola, the phase of modern architecture projects was gradually affirmed during the 1950s and 1960s. The Banco Nacional Ultramarino (current Banco de Moçambique), from the years 1956-1965 on current Avenida 25 de Setembro is a hallmark work asserting the “modern” image in the city center, due to its size, quality, and function (by José Gomes Bastos, 1914-1991). The TAP (Transportes Aéreos Portugueses) building or Montepio building, on current Avenida Samora Machel is a very straightforward work with its lively “duplex” architecture and “loose” volumes (by Alberto Soeiro, from 1960). Note also the new air terminal from 1963 to 1965, a notable work along modern lines by Cândido Palma de Melo (1922-2003); and the Polana church by Nuno Craveiro Lopes (1921-1972, dated 1962 and with a characteristic circular form expressing the structure).

The organization of work and investment in a large territory such as Mozambique led to the establishment and affirmation of two main groups of architects, respectively in the capital Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) and in Beira, the second most important city. The most significant is mentioned, although others are equally noteworthy.

Working in Lourenço Marques:
Pancho Guedes (born in 1925), creator of an extensive work with influences mixing Le Corbusier, Art Nouveau, and African-inspired themes, as in the Leão Que Ri residential building, on pilotis (1956-1958), the Saipal bakery (1952-1954), and the Nauticus Building/Hotel Portugal in Nampula (1960’s);

João José Tinoco (1924-1983), fluent and creative designer, author of the Palácio das Repartições at Northern Lichinga city (current Niassa Government, 1962-1968), the Machava Tuberculosis Hospital, near Maputo (with Alberto Soeiro, 1960’s) and the Reguladora clock factory (1970);

Working in Beira:

Francisco de Castro (born in 1923), resident in the city until 1961, designed the Hotel Embaixador (1956-1957) and the Banco Nacional Ultramarino for the city of Quelimane (1961-1973);

Bernardino Ramalhete (born in 1921) designed the elegant and original Macúti Church, with the light and curving metal roof (1961) and the Lopes Duarte residential building, in a neo-liberty expression (1968);

Paulo Sampaio (1926-1968), the author of the Beira Commercial Association (1956-1957) and the Motel Estoril (1959), both in clear modern lines;

João Garizo do Carmo (1917-1974), the designer of the luxurious São Jorge cinema, with a long curved facade and vertical sunscreens (1953-1954), and of the Manga church, whose concrete parabolic “shell” and geometric tower recall Niemeyer (1957);

Castro, Carmo, and Sampaio, as a team, also designed and built the splendid Beira railway station, one of the most qualified of its time (1961-1966).

We have seen/described the imaginative capacity, internationalist aspect, and current relevance of the architectural proposals from the period examined, in the Portuguese Africa between 1950 and 1975 (when the five new PALOP countries got its independence).

Freed from the modesty, parsimony, and multiple conditions set by the Iberian dictatorship, the “African generation” of Portuguese modern architects realized a consistent multi-territorial and collective body of work meant to be socially useful (albeit in the colonial context, limited to certain social fringes), robust, and apt for the future, using an approach integrating various levels of space, from macro to micro territory.

**SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE THEME**

The Europeans like Luanda very much, because it does not threaten us. It is much more complicated to be in a city like Lagos, for instance, or in a country like Senegal. In Luanda, there is something that does not make us feel guilty about our (colonial) past.

Lara Pawson, “When the good people turned on their own”. [interview in Público/Ípsilon (June 20, 2014, p. 24, adapted)]

Although these cities and its architecture were created within a late colonial context of indisputable political, social, and economic discrimination, they have prevailed despite wars and circumstantial abandonment. Now they represent a real and consistent material basis for the relaunching, modernization, or revitalization of urban life in these countries.

The phenomenon can be explained in part because, as historian Rui Ramos states, following the case of South Africa, it was Angola and Mozambique that experienced the strongest colonization settlement process in the whole of Southern Africa. This has left systemic, vernacular, and disseminated roots that still endure.

Considering all the controversy involved nowadays, the author believes it would be a large mistake to ignore or underestimate the meaning, value, and role of this urban and architectural building heritage collection of the five PALOPs (and other Lusophone regions, in Asia), namely its great utility and active role in the reappearance of the contemporary and post-colonial urban growth phenomenon in those countries.

It would be a mistake to follow the idea of replacing or lessening the strategic role of ex-colonial mid-twentieth century urbanism and architecture, by the possible valorization of the vast areas of the so-called “informal city” or “informal suburb” (because they are dominant in terms of space, or have a more specific African origin).
A similar absurdity, even in an ideologically more nationalist eye, would be to pretend, for instance, to erase or ignore the official Portuguese language in these countries in its capacity as the sole element of a unifying and modern culture—in favor of any other local traditional African languages, no matter how much this would cost from a more ideologically nationalist point of view.

In fact, the author thinks that the African city of the present day—the twenty-first century (and the author is talking specifically of many cities he knows in the five PALOPs), has gradually developed from the logical result of the historical process of previous centuries.

Surely, this city results from articulating between the colonial material structures (based on models of the contemporary and modern European and American cities) and the local traditional and modernized African cultures, which have lighter and more agile rules, systems, and structures, and are nowadays established in a much wider urban geographic extension.

However, this mixture does not erase the importance and significance of building, infrastructure, road, housing, and equipment basis of the cities left by the pre-independence stage. This is now (and increasingly so, as the present growth strengthens) an indisputable factor of functional, aesthetic, and cultural definition for the main centers of these cities, and its evolution capacities. It would be pure populism to forget such aspects.

The author thinks that, once all the intervening people, authorities, decision-makers, actors, agents, architects, urban planners, creators, and the public in general assume and absorb this “merger factor”, the city of today and tomorrow will necessarily happen and grow, in Angola as well as in Mozambique and in any other nations where Portuguese is the official language—in a healthy and wise manner.

Architects that are at present working and intervening in these countries—African, European, or Asian have to understand, know, and give priority to the historical and cultural phenomena of the past 150 years within the architectural and urban scope, associated with the PALOPs and today’s Africa in general.

They should understand namely this ambivalence and necessary complementary nature between the so-called ex-colonial “concrete city” and the “informal city” pre- and post-colonial so that their performance is socially and culturally informed, correct and, as a consequence, a positive one.

In fact, the cultural, ethical, and aesthetical values involved are essential to rule the new, growing, and intense subjects of wealth, development, urban expansion, and modernization—otherwise, at the risk of “killing the city” and its culture at each geo-cultural context, thus stopping the vital and experiential connection among past, present, and future.

CONCLUSIONS

I meander through the city for a last time on the day my death begins. I recognize these places despite the change, and its dodging familiarity brushes the crippled wings of memory. Here I have written. (Rui Knopfli 1978)

There is no point in arguing the city that the Europeans have built up to the 1975 political independences in Africa is inadequate for the present dweller, or it is degraded and must therefore be replaced. It is there. It exists and lives, whether or not we want this to be true.

Similarly, except for the differences in time and place, the (defeated) Lusitanians of the Iberia Peninsula in the first century A.D. accepted the new urbanization rules of the colonial Roman Empire over earlier settlement forms of their cultural space. This resulted for a long period of time in a new, “modern” type of city, mixed, mestiça (neither “Roman” nor “Lusitanian”).

We should know the cities in PALOPs as the best we can without fears, complexes, or prejudice in order
to appropriately manipulate, modernize, and transform it in a way that addresses the needs and desires of the present urban and territorial (complex) communities in general.

When produced by informed and enlightened architects (especially dedicated ones) who are orientated by and for what makes up their working space and material (existing and planned city and buildings), architecture and urbanism play the role of providing, creating new material, building and equipment, infrastructure and housing reality, well-adjusted to the wide diversity of social, cultural, and economic groups that constitute the African city.

This process should happen in conjunction with the present institutional, pedagogical, and formative contexts of the relevant countries.

The greater or smaller ephemeras, dynamics, informality, and the capacity to transform and change (identifiable in today’s African city as well as in many other places) do not prevent, but rather informs, the more and the better we know reality, this desirably enlightening and just attitude…

A full and deep knowledge and use of all the colonial documentation gathered in heritage, architectural and urban surveys of the city and territorial plans, etc., are therefore essential, and have already been carried out in these countries, and/or Portugal and Spain among others.

Let the contemporary African city grow healthily and well informed without renouncing its modern origin and development.

Notes


3. Luanda and Lobito (cities in Angola), Maputo and Beira (cities in Mozambique), Bissau (city in Guinea-Bissau), São Tomé (city in São Tomé and Principe islands), Praia and Mindelo (cities in Cape Verde islands).

4. PALOPs means that the group of the five “Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa”, or African countries where Portuguese is the official language.

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