

## **Rule by bookkeeping: the oiled circuitries of Luanda's New Centralities**

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On July 11, 2011 José Eduardo dos Santos, the President of Angola, led the opening celebrations for Cidade do Kilamba. The head of state was in charge of cutting the ribbon and unveiling the inaugural plaque for the largest of Luanda's "new centralities." But it was the then CEO of Sonangol, Manuel Vicente, who first spoke to the TV cameras. The National Oil Company had been officially in charge of managing the construction of the new centralities since September 2010 and its highest-ranking official took it to himself to brake down the numbers. "With today's ceremony we are formalizing the first delivery," he explained. "10 kilometers of roads, 115 buildings with a total of 3,180 apartments and 48 stores." The remainder of phase one would be finalized in the following 15 months and it would amount to a total of 710 apartment buildings and 20,002 houses. By the end of the three construction phases, the initial plans foresaw, 70 to 80 thousand housing units would have been built and about 500 thousand people would be living there — a place that dos Santos then said to match "the modern way of thinking cities."

Africa's new development and satellite cities have been subject to considerable scrutiny amongst urban scholars and students of African cities. Filip De Boeck, for example, has written on *Cultural Anthropology* about "the new Kinshasa" being conjured by urban authorities and the Congolese government for a couple of years now. More recently, Garth Meyers looked into Kenya's current "efforts to reimagine Nairobi as a 'world-class city region' by 2030." In the same issue of *American Behavioral Scientist*, Richard Grant examines the "groundswell of interest" in these new urban projects throughout the entire continent. In an even more recent issue of *City*, David Simon describes Cidade do Kilamba as representing "but one example of a widespread movement to insert generally unsustainable 'international' or 'world

class' elite enclaves into urban landscapes" across Africa. But it was Vanessa Watson who brought the issue up more emphatically thus far. In her piece on *Environment and Urbanization* she describes these emerging new schemes as "African urban fantasies."

Rendering them as mostly damaging endeavors, Watson sees these fantasies as "dreams" of an urban future that are bound to turn into "nightmares" for contemporary urban dwellers. The other analysts do not disagree. In Simon's interpretation, they represent a "partial elite resurgence" of urban planning coupled with its "popular eclipse." Or, to put it in De Boeck's terms, they are articulations of "spectral urbanism" that are predicated on a "politics of erasure."

These are very important observations. They are empirically relevant, they call attention to the disconnectedness of contemporary urban planning, and they raise crucial moral and political questions about the ways in which the future of African cities is currently being imagined. But there is a number of shortcomings in the work that has been done in the analysis of Africa's new development and satellite cities. One that seems particularly important is the general failure to account for how these "fantasy city ideas" are actually becoming realities in many of those African cities. "A key question to ask," Emma Wragg and Regina Lim have recently pointed out in a brief study of how ordinary Lusakans respond to some of the very same fantasies identified by Vanessa Watson, "is how this how these visions have come to be?" The problem with disregarding what forms and informs the creation of such urban visions, their study implies, is that it leaves us unaware of how those fantasy city ideas "are literally 'assembled' through layering of diverse influences." I would add to this that the focus on ideas of speculation and fantasy, as well as the prominent role played by aesthetics in most analyses of Africa's new development and satellite cities, might be leading us to misapprehend their specific histories, practices and toolkits as modes of city making.

In this paper I look at what underpins and constitutes the substance of Luanda's "new centralities." Focusing on the material circuitries that underpin the making of Cidade do Kilamba, I use ethnographic and archival data to trace some of the links between Angola's oil reserves, the state's developmental ambitions and the modes of expertise enacted in devising specific solutions for the future of Angolan cities. Connecting them to the first oil-backed loans given by Chinese banks to the Angolan

government soon after the end of the civil war in 2002, the urban development apparatus that led to the inauguration of Cidade do Kilamba in July 2011 is analyzed here as an intricate ensemble of oil deals, financial transactions and architectural blueprints that connects the undersea of the Angolan coastline with the periphery of Luanda via circuitry threads that extend all the way to Beijing and Hong Kong. These dense threads, I am then led to conclude, are sustained by a calculative regime in which bookkeeping emerges as a fundamental mode of governing and planning.

### **Bibliography**

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