Between the musseque and the Neighbourhood Unit: spotting "compagnons de route" architectures in Luanda (1961-1975)

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Abstract. Taking full advantage of Nnamdi Elleh's proposal, by seeking to "keep the focus on the modern" (2014), this article explores how during the late colonial period in the city of Luanda, Angola, conditions arose to link the future of architectures with unequal roots. On the one hand, an architecture strongly qualified and praised by the historiography of modern architecture, which would result in the Prenda Neighbourhood Unit No. 1, and on the other hand, the *musseque* (Angolan slum) of the same name, which already occupied that territory in the suburbs of the colonial city. Placed in the core of the musseque, the Neighbourhood Unit (NU) was used strategically by the colonial state to control African population. Through the embodying of "brutalist imaginaries", it would be permanently linked to a new landscape, strongly supported by self-produced architecture.

As a case study, the Prenda musseque not only preceded the new NU, but coexisted with its realisation and appropriation, surviving to this day. It thus provides multiple lenses for analysing how architecture promoted by the "underprivileged classes" can today contribute to broadening the architectural lexicon of production catalogued as modern. Drawing on multiple skills, the knowledge of the musseque communities was neglected by the late-modern colonisers who inhabited the new Prenda units. This article evokes the concept of "omnicompetence", explored by Glenn Adamson (2020) in the broader context of American crafts shaped by pre-colonial societies. Also in Luanda's musseques, a long formal and constructive genealogy has emerged as pluri-competences. Its long coexistence with modern culture during the colonial period and beyond was reinforced by its contemporary resilience reflected in the transfer of technical and formal knowledge creating a vernacular architecture with a strong modern tone. The article ends by highlighting how these architectures have mutually legitimised each other as "compagnons de route".

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

Architecture produced in Angola during the late colonial period (1961-1975) has been the subject of two different historiographical views. The first established the primacy of

exceptional buildings, which set out the theses of the "tropical modern" as an offshoot of the canonical Modern Movement that dealt with climate.[2] The second, critically enunciated by the Social Sciences, has been questioning how these enterprises reinforced racial segregation, using tools such as zoning, associated with the Athens Charter.[3]

Luanda and its 1961 Masterplan, based on Neighbourhood Units (NU), is today an example of this dual treatment.[4] The plan was launched in the beginning of the country's war of liberation,[5] by the Luanda City Council's Urbanisation Office, then headed by the architect Fernão Lopes Simões de Carvalho (Luanda, 1929). Outside the colonial history, Nnamdi Elleh proposed, in 2014, a new lens by describing the "architecture of the underprivileged classes" as an "architecture of modern affiliation".[6] Elleh's analysis allowed the focus to remain on modern culture, drawing attention to the fact that the contemporary city had emerged in parallel with the "shantytowns".

Confirming the crucial value of studying these urban structures, Elleh adds that this architecture participated in concepts "we now call sustainable design".[7] Such a hypothesis would bring these self-built buildings closer to the idea of a "vernacular architecture" – particularly when following authors such as Linda Asquith and Marcel Vellinga[8] –, and thus contributing to a debate that reinforces the links between a historically defined production (the modern) and an ongoing practice with repercussions in contemporary times (the self-built).

1.1. Modern equivalents?

Facing this challenge, this paper contents for a narrative that links the two realities. Without disqualifying the modern heritage, it aims to explain how conditions were created in colonial Luanda to link the future of architectures with unequal backgrounds, observed from the *musseque* perspective. These conditions resulted from using the NU as an urban planning strategy. Placed in the core of large musseques, mainly to neutralise their structural logic and monumental scale, these NU embodied "brutalist imageries"[9] while becoming lastingly linked to a new landscape, heavily supported by self-produced architecture.

As a case study, the Prenda musseque, not only preceded the new NU, but coexisted with their realisation and appropriation, surviving to this day (**Fig. 1**). It thus provides multiple lenses for analysing how the architecture self-promoted by the said "underprivileged classes" can today contribute to broadening the

architectural lexicon of production catalogued as modern. Even though supported by multiple skills, the knowledge of the musseque communities was mostly neglected by the late-modern colonisers who inhabited the new Prenda units.

Fig. 1. Prenda neighbourhood, a view of the musseque. Luanda, 2014. © Guerra/Milheiro; PTDC/ATP-AQI/3707/2012.

To move forward in this narrative, the idea of "omnicompetence," explored by historian Glenn Adamson offers a highly useful conceptual framework.[10] In the musseques, an extensive formal and constructive genealogy arguably emerged as a complex set of pluri-competences.[11] The long coexistence of this know-how with modern culture during the colonial period and beyond was reinforced by its contemporary resilience, to be seen in the transfer of technical and formal knowledge that created a vernacular architecture with a strong modern tone. Like true "compagnons de route," the architecture of the Angolan musseque echoes how late modern architecture survives, taking advantage of resources ignored in Western societies.

2. MUSSEQUE PRENDA
The Prenda musseque endures today as an urban structure that survived the colonial period and went through the Angolan civil

3

war, which ended in 2002. The monograph published in 1968 by the geographer Ilídio do Amaral (Luanda 1926- Lisbon 2017) described the advance of the "planned" city over the self-built *musseque*.

Amaral estimated that 180 000 inhabitants were precariously housed here.[12] Accommodating this population in formal housing seemed an impossible goal.

The heterogeneity perceived by Amaral among inhabitants was manifested, in his opinion, in disruptive ways of inhabiting the urban territory, including syncretic religious practices, polygamy and marginalisation.

This anathema stemmed from the process of "detribalisation" that worried the colonial authorities.[13] Amaral lamented that there had been no "spatial organisation in communities, in which the evolution of family life [could] be respected"[14]. Meantime, a large residential experiment was underway, planned for "about 4 500 inhabitants, encompassing three economic housing areas (collective, single-family and independent single-family)".[15]

Amaral was describing one of the projects later most celebrated by the historiography: *Unidade de Vizinhança Nº 1 do Bairro Prenda*, by Carvalho with Luiz Taquelim da Cruz (1928-). The architecture was designed by Carvalho with José Pinto da Cunha (1921-1985) and Fernando Alfredo Pereira (1927-).[16] A new territory in transition simultaneously welcomed two architectures in a preview of the future: one considered qualified within the framework of the dominant culture and the other that exposed "the custom of clandestine construction, in transgression".[17]

2.1. Prenda neighbourhood

The new NU[18] stood over the Prenda musseque, which in 1964 had a population of up to 13 000 inhabitants:[19] 3 368 African families cohabited with 215 settler families.[20]

When outlining the housing strategy, the colonial services envisaged three different types of NU, combining ethnic origins with economic income.[21] Only the first type – of which there were ten – envisioned the presence of "white" population.[22] Four out of the six NU in the Prenda musseque belonged to this group.[23] The remaining two, aimed at the most disadvantaged population, were part of type III – overall the most numerous, with 17 proposals.[24]

The new plan offered a diversity of residential occupations, from two-storey flats to high-rise blocks, designed by trained

architects and placed on the property and rental market; to single-family housing under assisted self-building, partly financed by the authorities.

In order to minimise public investment, some plots within Type I Units provided for the installation of prefabricated houses for the "economically weak" population.[25] One of these models had a very simple plan with a living room, two bedrooms and a bathroom, using wooden panelling, standardised windows and doors, and a gable roof (apparently) made of zinc. The main façade consisted of a door and three windows, probably without glass, but with shutters for ventilation. The kitchen was outside. Amaral himself recorded some of these examples in 1964, probably in NU 2 of the Prenda neighbourhood (**Fig. 2**).[26] These houses were still part of an architecture designed for the underprivileged classes, incorporating "materials and tectonics that were derived from the location in response to the vernacular methods of construction".[27] The quality was technically and aesthetically inferior when compared to ancestral typologies such as the traditional *axiluanda* house on Luanda Island.[28] The fact that these prefabricated houses were open to self-produced improvements showed confidence in the local entrepreneurship.
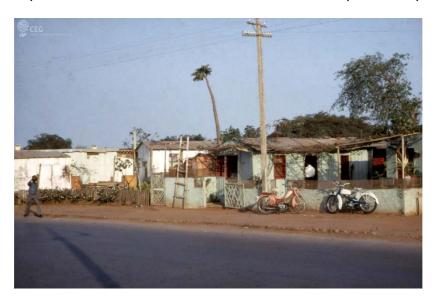

Fig. 2. Ilídio do Amaral*, Houses of an indigenous neighbourhood in Luanda,* Luanda, Angola, 1964 © Phototheque of the Centre for Geographical Studies - IGOT-ULisboa - S5581.

These built endeavours were one step ahead of an even more "marginalised" population, who, according to the geographer, built "poor housing on the urban periphery, without the minimum of sanitary conditions and amenities, scattered chaotically over the terrain and forming relatively dense agglomerations".[29]

3. SUBURBAN VERNACULAR HOUSE

The ethnographer José Redinha (1905-1983) also considered "suburban housing" to be one of the "biggest problems on the fringes of Angola's large cities".[30] In 1964, he summarized the *traditional housing in Angola* by describing the musseque as the place of the "last cycle of the native house," both detribalised and suburban.[31] In Luanda, such dwellings were generally a "plastered wattle and daub (*pau-a-pique*) house, with galvanised iron sheeting on the roof".[32]

The publication also covered the so-called "modern phase," presented as an alternative to the decline of "ethnic building types". The rectangular and slightly raised floor plan, the increased number of openings and the defined courtyard emerged as the result of new modes of "acculturation".[33]

The sense of permanence and the presence of the backyard figured as an introduction to urban life that broke with tribal tradition, both in terms of nomadic experiences and the sense of ownership.

His study established a standard form of housing for the musseque, which he called a "backyard house (casa-quintal)", functional and in a single-storey, without being completely closed off from the outside.

Finally, the "associated use of definitive materials and still valid native resources would mark…the limit of the evolution of the suburban house".[34] The process was thought to naturally lead to the assimilation of the traditional house by the modern one.

Meantime, the building skills of African populations had to be harnessed to lighten the housing shortage. The building capacity revealed by the musseque populations was interpreted as a transitory resource and an economic measure, since the "future evolution of the 'habitat' to higher levels" was believed in.[35]

3.1. Mrs E. and Mr B.'s wooden house

The introduction of prefabricated wooden units during the late colonial period has yet to be studied. These houses spread to different areas of Luanda (Ilha de Luanda, Praça da Madeira and Bairro Operário[36]). On 17 November 2014, a couple living in one

of these houses was interviewed to trace the history of the transformation of the accommodation.[37] Their testimony confirmed much of the information contained in Amaral's monograph.

E., aged 58 at the time, and B. came from the Gabela region, about 400 kilometres from Luanda, having met in the capital, where they arrived in the 1960s. They belonged to the 60% of the city's non-native population living in the musseques mapped by Amaral.[38] Before settling in Prenda, they had independent life paths, having lived in different areas of the city, depending on their professional situation.[39] Settling in the latter neighbourhood was due to family ties. The accommodation that E. lived in between 1967 and 1970, in the context of an extended family, was part of the group of "houses made of wattle and daub" that were rented out. In 1971, after marrying B., they rented a wooden house. Three years later they moved into their (then) current home.

The original house, referred as the "motherhouse (casa-mãe)," was built in a rectangle measuring around 10,50 x 3,00 metres, with an interior ceiling height of 2,56 metres and a gable roof. The doors were 1,86 metres high, and the original windows measured 0,62 x 0,82 metres.

At the time of the interview, the household gathered 16 people linked by various kinship ties. The family growth had required successive extensions to the configuration of the house, totalling nine bedrooms and six bathrooms, in addition to the living room and kitchen. Two thirds of the wooden house survived and only one of the bedrooms was extended. The original building material was replaced with cement blocks. The "new" house was given an L-shaped layout. The initial backyard-house was gradually replaced by a courtyard-house. This transformation boosted a feeling of "greater security" according to the testimony collected. The biggest problems were still sanitary, namely difficulties in accessing piped water and interruptions to the electricity supply. Photographs reinforced these shortcomings while underlining the presence of a very strong outdoor experience (**Fig. 3**).

Fig. 3. Mrs E. and Mr B.'s wooden house and interior courtyard. Luanda, 2014. © Issac & Júlio, UTANGA; Guerra/Milheiro; PTDC/ATP-AQI/3707/2012.

4. CONCLUSIONS: COMPAGNONS DE ROUTE

The article shows that the Prenda NU No. 1, the prefabricated wooden houses, and the self-built houses of the musseque Prenda, in Luanda, are part of different lineages within the architectural culture of the 1960s, with repercussions in the present. It can be argued that the first derives from a modern erudite effort; the second crosses local functionalities with industrial systems, and finally the third stems directly from vernacular culture.

Some experts within the colonial apparatus, such as José

Redinha, mentioned in the article, suggested that the vernacular settings were condemned to being replaced by more "qualified" buildings through the Western lens. However, their resistance to the different typological, constructive and aesthetic solutions introduced at the time, and even further promoted after the independence of Angola, showed how hasty the verdict of its disappearance had been. The buildings' ability to adapt through climate-proofing and construction techniques from modern architecture demonstrated how the boundaries between erudite and vernacular principles had been blurred over decades of architectural appropriation.

The wooden house inhabited by Mrs E. and Mr B., pictured as a case study, was built at the end of Portuguese colonialism as an economic solution for the underprivileged classes. Its growing appropriation has since revealed an openness to transformations using local technical know-how, which means that it persists today in the Luandan landscape as a self-production work.

It is due to the consolidation of these different architectural models throughout the history of the Prenda musseque that they can be approached as "compagnons de route". The current musseque is thus a collection of housing experiences that evoke the history of recent architecture while also displaying work-in-progress examples.

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6. BIOGRAPHY

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7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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[2] See, among others, Portuguese and Angolan authors: Fernandes, 2002; Tostões, 2014; Correia, 2018.

[3] See, among others, Domingos and Peralta, 2013; Cruz, 2022.

[4] Cf. Milheiro and Rodrigues, 2024.

[5] The Colonial/Liberation War in Angola lasted until the so-called April Revolution (25 April 1974), which put an end to the dictatorial regime in Portugal and began the process of independence.

[6] Elleh, 2014: 4.

[7] Idem.

[8] Asquith and Vellinga, 2006: 18.

[9] Milheiro, 2020: 407.

[10] Cf. Adamson, 2020.

[11] Redinha, 1964: 7-50.

[12] Data for 1962. Amaral, 1968: 117.

[13] Cf. Curto and Cruz, 2013: 133 et seq.

[14] Amaral, 1968: 120-121.

[15] Amaral, 1968: 121.

[16] Milheiro et al., 2015.

[17] Amaral, 1968: 118.

[18] Miheiro, 2020: 401-404.

[19] Amaral, 1983, Fig. 4: 308.

[20] Amaral, 1983, tables X and IX (settlers and Africans, respectively): 309-310.

[21] The categories comprised the following levels: "average economy"; "weak economy";

"very weak economy". See LEA, 1962, Bol. no. 3459, 27-30.

[22] Milheiro and Rodrigues, 2024.

[23] It was the type I Neighbourhood Units that attracted the attention of architectural historians because they had buildings that were later described as typical of "Tropical Modern".

[24] Cf. LEA, 1962, Bol. no. 3459, 37-39.

[25] There was also a lower income bracket without access to Type I units.

[26] The plan for Neighbourhood Unit No. 2 has not been located, but its design is reported by the Preliminary Study commission (1962) as "under study". LEA, 1962, Bol. nº 3459: 37.

[27] Elleh, 2014: 8.

[28] Redinha, 1964: 23. Simões de Carvalho surveyed these houses as part of the preparation of the project for the fishermen's neighbourhood on the island of Luanda, which he presented as a thesis to the Institute of Urbanism, in Paris [1965].

[29] Amaral, 1983: 318.

[30] Redinha, 1964: 42.

[31] Redinha, 1964: 36.

[32] Redinha, 1964: 21.

[33] Redinha, 1964: 47.

[34] Redinha, 1964: 43.

[35] Gama, 1961: 218.

[36] Testimony of researcher Maria Alice Correia, March 2024, IPGUL, Luanda.

[37] Interviewed by Isabel Guerra as part of the research project "Luanda, Lisbon, Macao: Homes for the biggest number...", funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology, [Musseque Prenda, Luanda, 17/11/2014], 2013-2015, ATP-AQI/3707/2012 (PI: Milheiro; Guerra, head of the sociology team).

[38] Cf. Amaral, 1968: 74.

[39] In 1970, it had 150 195 inhabitants and was one of the preferred neighbourhoods for European immigration. See Amaral, 1983: 312-314.