

A CHACUN SA MAISON

construis ou fais construire

Editions
du Bureau de l'Information
pour Indigènes (INFIND)
Service des A. I. M. O.
du Gouvernement Général - Kalina

- 1953 -

Formalising the Informal? *À chacun sa maison* (1953), a DIY Building Manual from Late Colonial Congo

Abstract

After the Second World War, Congolese labourers began migrating in large numbers to urban centres. This uncontrolled demographic growth led to the emergence of *bidonvilles*. The previously neglected housing question finally attracted the attention of the colonial administration, becoming a main concern for economic development within the framework of so-called ‘welfare colonialism’. The *Plan Décennal du Congo Belge* outlined two main approaches to housing development: (1) the construction of modernist housing estates designed by the Brussels-based *Office des Cités Africaines* (OCA); and (2) the implementation of site-and-service schemes such as the *Système Grévisse* and economic instruments such as the *Fonds d’Avance*. The tools employed by the colonisers to support the second approach included colonial DIY building manuals—among them several volumes in the *Beaux Métiers* series published by the *Bibliothèque de l’Étoile*, and, most notably, *À chacun sa maison: construis ou fais construire* (To Each His House: Build or Have It Built). This manual promoted the idea of ‘*amélioration de l’habitation traditionnelle*’ in both rural areas and urban centres. It sought to offer a compromise between houses built entirely according to European metropolitan models and those incorporating modernised local building techniques and customs. Its target audience consisted of both skilled and unskilled Congolese builders, including *évolués*—the emerging Congolese petite bourgeoisie who were expected to act as advocates of progress in housing construction among their ‘less evolved’ family members. This paper examines the textual and visual content of *À chacun sa maison* to assess whether it genuinely facilitated house construction by acknowledging traditional building practices and materials, or whether it instead sought to formalise the informal by presenting such dwellings as evidence of the prosperity allegedly accruing to Congolese under Belgian rule. It analyses the house designs presented in the manual and the *Fonds d’Avance* programme, exposing the tensions and contradictions inherent in a colonial administration intent on modernising, moralising, and controlling.

Keywords

Building Manuals, DIY, Colonial Housing Policy, Self-Build Architecture

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Situating *À chacun sa maison*: Production, Structure, and Colonial Messaging

The manual *À chacun sa maison: construis ou fais construire* (To Each His House: Build or Have It Built) was published in 1953 in Kalina (a district of Kinshasa, now Gombe) by *Éditions du Bureau de l'information pour Indigènes* (INFIND), an organ of the *Service des affaires indigènes et de la main-d'œuvre* (AIMO) of the *Gouvernement général*.¹ It provides no information about its author, but since it was issued by a government body, it can reasonably be assumed to be a collective work. It provides no information about its illustrators or layout designers, even though several of the drawings are artistically notable, particularly the cover. Beneath the large black letters of the title is a collage dominated by red, depicting six houses: three modern dwellings with sloping roofs covered in ceramic tiles, and two traditional structures — one square and one domed — with roofs made of organic materials. At the bottom of the composition, a photograph shows a Congolese family relaxing on modern furniture in front of their home (Cover). This seemingly harmonious blend of tradition and modernity is echoed—though often awkwardly—throughout the manual.

The publication was the fourth and the last in a series of manuals aimed at Congolese readers. The first manual was *Les coopératives indigènes au Congo belge* (Indigenous Cooperatives in the Belgian Congo);² the second, *Allo allo RCBI vous parle* (Hello hello, RCBI speaking);³ and the third, *Le code de la route: soyons bons chauffeurs* (The Highway Code: Let Us Be Good Drivers)⁴ (Figure 1). INFIND also published leaflets on alcoholism. All of these materials were issued in the 1950s in standard French.

Published in softcover, printed on yellowish paper in black and white with only the cover in colour, the manual comprises 104 pages and measures 19×25 cm—hardly a pocket-sized format suitable for use on a construction site, as one might expect for such a publication. No information is provided about the print run. Today, copies are preserved in university libraries in Belgium, Switzerland, and the United States.

Due to limited catalogue digitisation, it remains difficult to determine whether copies exist in university libraries in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—

something that will be verified during the upcoming research visit to Lubumbashi.⁵

The publication consists of four chapters. The first, *Améliorons l'habitation traditionnelle* (Improving Traditional Housing), introduces a theme that runs through much of the manual. The second chapter explains the production of adobe bricks, describing the process and illustrating it with photographs accompanied by corresponding drawings (Figure 2). The third chapter then turns to the construction of 'durable' houses (*'maisons en dur'* or *'maisons durables'*), explicitly discouraging the use of adobe and other traditional building materials whenever the builder can afford *'blocs de ciment'*.⁶ In the fourth chapter, the guide shifts from a construction manual to an investor's handbook, outlining the procedures for applying for a *Fonds d'Avance* credit mechanism or suggesting the employment of a professional workforce, recently identified in the archives as *artisans libres*.⁷ The final one-page item in the table of contents concerns the *Office des Cités Africaines* (OCA), which planned housing estates in the major urban centres of the Congo and Rwanda-Urundi, featuring modest yet strikingly modernist buildings (Figure 3).⁸

1. *À chacun sa maison, construis ou fait construire* (Éditions du Bureau de l'information pour indigènes (INFIND), Service des A.I.M.O. du Gouvernement général, 1953).
2. *Les coopératives indigènes au Congo belge* (INFIND, 1950).
3. *Allo allo RCBI vous parle* (INFIND, 1951?).
4. *Le code de la route, soyons bons chauffeurs: ce que doit connaître et pratiquer tout conducteur de voiture, de camion, de moto* (INFIND, 1952).

5. Both the *Système Grévisse* self-build programme and the *Fonds d'Avance* credit mechanism had a significant impact on the development of Lubumbashi's (Elisabethville) neighbourhoods—particularly Kenya and Katuba—hence the assumption that *À chacun sa maison* may have been widely distributed there.
6. *À chacun sa maison*, 65.
7. *Artisans libres* were independent craftsmen, trained often in the *ateliers d'apprentissage* and intended to work primarily within the *cités indigènes* of the colonial cities; F. Grévisse reports that only 185 *artisans libres* (also referred to as *artisans indépendants*) were registered with the *Centre extra-coutumier* (CEC) of Elisabethville, representing 1.5 per cent of the registered workforce. Fernand Grévisse, *Le centre extra-coutumier d'Elisabethville: quelques aspects de la politique indigène du Haut-Katanga industriel* (Institut Royal Colonial Belge, 1951), 98, 101, 112, 138, 149, 245.
8. Bruno De Meulder was among the first to develop an in-depth discussion of OCA housing production. Bruno De Meulder and Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kuvuande Mbote: een eeuw koloniale architectuur en stedenbouw in Kongo: veertien plannen en projecten* (Hautekiet, 2000); Bruno De Meulder, 'OCA (Office des Cités Africaines 1952–1960) and the Urban Question in Central Africa', in *ArchiAfrika Conference Proceedings: Modern Architecture in East Africa around Independence*, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, July 27 and 29, 2005.



Figure 1. Front cover of *Les coopératives indigènes au Congo belge* (1950); Front cover of *Allo allo RCBI vous parle* (1951?); Front cover of *Le code de la route, soyons bons chauffeurs* (1952). KBR, Brussels.

When the manual is only leafed through and not analysed chapter by chapter, the reader is confronted with another recurring feature: large, bold propaganda slogans placed alongside the technical content, such as: ‘Everyone to work: Building better houses means building a better country!’⁹ or ‘Every brick you make adds to the building of Congolese civilisation!’.¹⁰ Although these slogans may appear formulaic, the issues they evoke—particularly the emphasis on self-sufficiency in improving housing conditions and the hierarchy of building materials—reappear throughout the manual and closely correspond to themes found in numerous Belgian colonial reports from the post-war period. At the same time, the use of such slogans suggests that late-colonial propaganda in the Belgian Congo did not differ significantly in from that employed in the Soviet Union and its satellite states. The civilising mission in Africa, widely promoted in both Belgian and Congolese media, was articulated through rhetoric strikingly reminiscent of that associated with the building of socialism. Nevertheless, unlike the Soviet tradition of five-year plans, the Belgian Congo adopted the *Plan décennal pour le développement économique et social du Congo belge* (1949–1959)—a flagship instrument of late ‘welfare colonialism’¹¹ and the framework from which

À chacun sa maison ultimately emerged.¹²

The authors summarise the publication’s ambitions in the following passage:

*From the use of the trowel to the mechanism of the Fonds d’Avance, from choosing the right plans and an honest contractor to mortar formulas and sanitary installations, this publication will endeavour to solve for you the countless problems faced by anyone who wants to build or have something built quickly, well, and at a reasonable price.*¹³

However, an analysis of selected excerpts reveals that the guide does not fully live up to this promise. By attempting to combine the functions of several different textbooks—and ultimately failing to fulfil any of them convincingly—it categorises its readers, assigns different roles to them, and creates confusion by formalising traditional solutions for some (rural residents) while promoting the Europeanisation of housing for others—*évolués*, a small group of Congolese educated beyond the primary level who held

9. *À chacun sa maison*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 29.

11. Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1900: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 91 ff.; Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (Yale University Press, 1994), 182 ff.

12. Ministère des Colonies, *Plan décennal pour le développement économique et social du Congo belge* (Éditions De Visscher, 1949). The Belgian Congo’s *Plan décennal* can be compared to the British Colonial Development and Welfare Acts as well as to the French *Fonds d’investissement pour le développement économique et social* (FIDES), which served similar purposes as long-term colonial development frameworks.

13. *À chacun sa maison*, 3.



Figure 2. À chacun sa maison, Chapter 2, 'Les moulage des briques adobes', 28-29.



Figure 3. Cover of Office des Cités Africaines. Huit années d'activité, 1952-1960, 24, showing the Cité du Ruashi (Lubumbashi/Elisabethville), with site plan and housing typologies. Ghent University Library.



Figure 4. Front cover of *Manual del campesino* (1936).

administrative positions in the colonial authorities and licensed companies.¹⁴

Housing Credit Mechanisms: *Loi de Taeye* and *Fonds d'Avance*

In Congo, the *Plan décennal*, a comprehensive document outlining the development of the colony for the benefit of its metropole through the improvement of living conditions for the black workforce, devoted one of its chapters to Congolese housing as a key issue to be addressed during the decade. It envisaged improving housing through two distinct approaches, which in turn generated a certain degree of competition within the colonial administration. The first approach involved the construction of housing estates by the OCA, consisting of single- and two-storey terraced houses as well as four-family dwellings—typologies that had never gained significant popularity among the Belgian Catholic circles in the metropole, who viewed them as a potential threat to the integrity of the nuclear family, and were, interestingly, reportedly met with criticism from the Congolese for their lack of privacy.

However, the plan acknowledged—albeit only implicitly—that the housing crisis could not be resolved solely by the OCA and that the involvement of Congolese residents themselves was essential.

14. Daniel Tödt, *The Lumumba Generation: African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo* (De Gruyter, 2021).

Consequently, the second approach centred on the promotion of self-build houses, supported by the *Fonds d'Avance* mechanism, implemented in Lubumbashi under the name *Système Grévisse*, which provided loans for the purchase, construction, or modernisation of houses in both urban and rural areas of the colony.¹⁵

In post-war Belgium, the housing question centred on the *Loi de Taeye* (1948–1961), which—like the *Fonds d'Avance* in the Congo—was a credit mechanism offering housing loans. In this context, the architect G. De Ceuster published *À chacun sa maison: le régime des primes et du crédit. Avec un commentaire de la loi de Taeye* in Antwerp in 1949.¹⁶ The Congolese building manual issued four years later adopted the same title. Yet the similarity between the two publications lies less in this shared title than in their common promotion of individual property ownership for nuclear Catholic families—an idea transmitted from the metropole

15. Igor Bloch and Simon De Nys-Ketels, 'Système Grévisse. The Lubumbashi post-war housing scheme, between colonial guidelines and reality', in *Construction Matters: Proceedings of the 8th International Congress on Construction History*, vdf Hochschulverlag, 2024, 1223–1230.
16. G. De Ceuster, *À chacun sa maison. Le régime des primes et du crédit* (Adauperta, 1949), with commentary by Edmond Louis De Taeye.

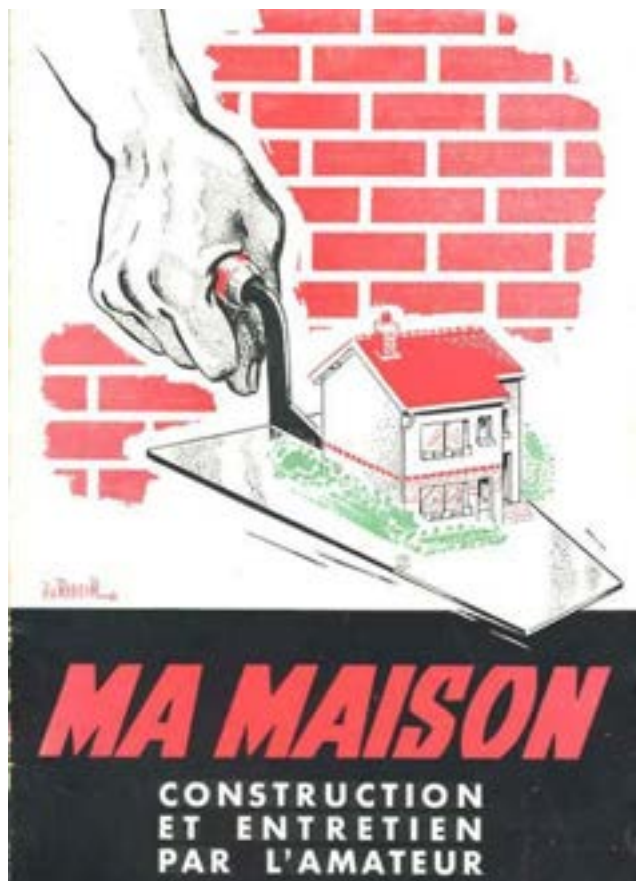


Figure 5. Front cover of *Ma maison: construction et entretien par l'amateur* (1949).

to the colony through missionaries and Christian Democrat politicians.

The Emergence of DIY Manuals

The 1940s and 1950s marked the beginning of an era in which building manuals were directed at the local populations of so-called third world countries. Earlier precedents existed in Latin America—for instance, in Mexico with its *Manual del campesino*¹⁷ (Peasant's Manual) (Figure 4)—echoing guides aimed at Europe's working and lower-middle classes, both in Western and Eastern Europe, such as *The Housing Manual*¹⁸ or the Polish *Budujemy sami* (We Build Ourselves),¹⁹ issued as part of a women's series in the magazine *Przyjaciółka* (Friend). Collectively, these manuals formed part of the emerging trend of do-it-yourself (DIY) literature, which enjoyed significant popularity in Belgium itself, exemplified by titles such as *Ma maison*²⁰ (Figure 5) or by entire series such as *Les livres pratiques*.²¹

In Africa, building manuals for indigenous populations were also produced in other colonies at the same time as *À chacun sa maison*, a development that may have run in parallel with the establishment of the

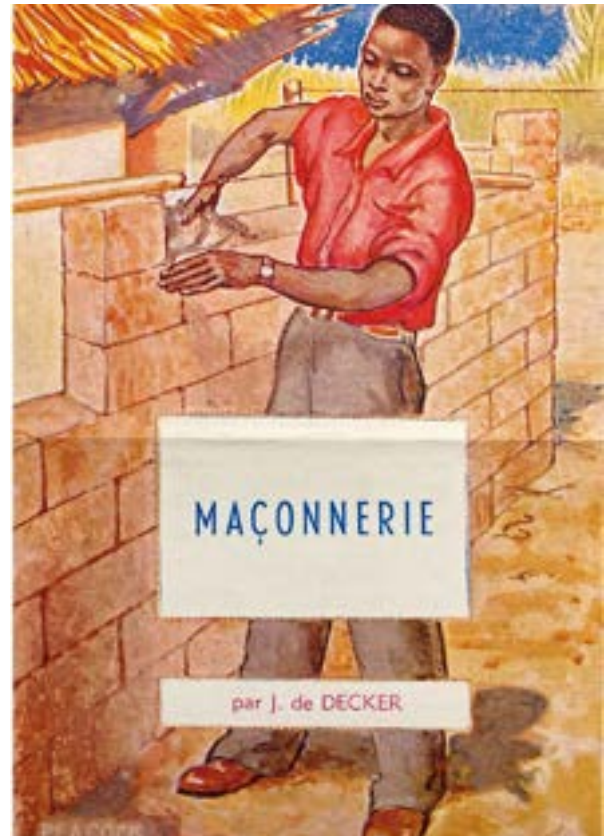


Figure 7. Front cover of *Maçonnerie* (1950). KADOC, Leuven.

17. Ramón Galaviz and Víctor José Moya, *Manual del campesino: construcciones rurales*, 2nd ed. (s.n., 1936); Rodrigo Escandón Cesarman, *How to Read the Self-building Manual: Houses, Self-builders, and Experts in Mexico* (MSc diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020).
18. Great Britain, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Public Building and Works, *Housing Manual*, 1944 (H.M. Stationery Office, 1944).
19. Leopold Lipowski, *Budujemy sami* (Biblioteka Przyjaciółki, 1957).
20. R. Gazel, *Ma maison: construction et entretien par l'amateur* (Technique et Vulgarisation, 1949).
21. C. Lambert and R. Tamine, *Bungalows et chalets de week-end*, 2nd ed. (Les Éditions du Jour—Les Livres Pratiques, 1960).

Commission for Technical Co-operation in Africa South of the Sahara (CCTA), which had existed informally since 1950.²² Among the best-known examples are the *How to Build and How to Plan* series (1953), written by A. E. S. Alcock and Helga M. Richards, an adviser and an officer, respectively, in the Town and Country Planning Office in Ghana.²³ Another example is *Build Your Own House: An Owner-Builder Guide* (1953), written by the architect and liberal political activist Betty Spence in the Union of South Africa (Figure 6).²⁴ In the following decades, with the rise of expert-led development, numerous construction manuals were produced by organisations such as UN-Habitat, the Ford Foundation, and the World Bank.²⁵ Over time, the early self-build



Figure 6. Front cover of *Build Your Own House: The Owner-Builder Guide* (1950). British Library.

22. Isebill V. Gruhn, 'The Commission for Technical Co-Operation in Africa, 1950–65', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 9, no. 3 (1971): 459–69.
23. Viviana d'Auria, 'In the Laboratory and in the Field: Hybrid Housing Design for the African City in Late-Colonial and Decolonising Ghana (1945–57)', *The Journal of Architecture* 19, no. 3 (2014): 329–56.
24. Rixt Woudstra and Hannah le Roux, "'Build Your Own House": Betty Spence's Design-Research in 1950s South Africa', *Architectural Theory Review* 26, no. 3 (2022): 427–57.
25. As a Doctoral Research Resident at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 2025, I had the pleasure of working with its remarkable collections, the catalogue of which is available online.

or sites-and-services programmes described in these manuals gave way to housing initiatives aimed at disaster victims and refugees, often centred on the provision of prefabricated housing.²⁶

À chacun sa maison remains the only known construction manual for Congolese readers published by the colonial administration in Congo.²⁷ Comparable manuals were produced by the Belgian Jesuits through the *Bibliothèque de l'Étoile* publishing house as part

26. An example is the assistance provided to the African National Congress in exile in Tanzania by the GDR in the 1980s, through the delivery of prefabricated houses for the construction of settlements in Somafco and Dakawa. Igor Bloch and Michalina Musielak, 'Baustelle WPC – "Kindergarten". Views of the Dakawa Development Centre', in *Doors of Learning: Microcosmos of a Future South Africa, Bauhaus Taschenbuch 27* (Spector Books, 2023).
27. The manual was rediscovered through the 2019 exhibition at Kanal – Centre Pompidou in Brussels, curated by Johan Lagae. *À chacun sa maison. L'habitat au Congo Belge: 1945–1960*, exhibition curated by Johan Lagae, Kanal – Centre Pompidou, Brussels, 5 May 2018–10 June 2019, organized by CIVA.



Figure 8. *À chacun sa maison*, House 6, 'House of rammed earth influenced by European architecture (Bafwasende territory)', 10.

of the *Beaux Métiers* series, which included titles such as *Maçonnerie* (Figure 7), *Arithmétique artisanale*, and *Menuiserie artisanale*, all published around 1955. In these pocket-sized brochures, available through postal pre-order across much of French-speaking Africa (and used as manuals in missionary vocational training schools²⁸), construction knowledge is presented within the framework of Catholic social teaching.²⁹

Formalising the Informal: 'Améliorons l'habitation traditionnelle'

À chacun sa maison begins with a conciliatory statement suggesting that the earliest dwellings of both Europeans and Congolese were caves. It then distinguishes several types of traditional Congolese houses according to their shape—circular or rectangular—and the materials used, ranging from earth, such as 'pisé' (rammed earth), to plant-based materials like rattan palm or banana leaves. In this section, the brochure presents six traditional house types, most of them constructed from natural materials and offering a representative cross-section of vernacular architecture. Yet only House 6 (Figure 8) is deemed by the authors to be suitable for contemporary conditions:

A few changes to the traditional indigenous home are all it takes to make it a healthier and more pleasant place to live (without significantly increasing its cost price).³⁰

However, it is worth noting that, based on the information provided and the accompanying photograph—featuring a sloping roof and a baraza, resembling a miniature version of a European colonial house—the proposed changes concern only the shape of the dwelling.

According to the authors, traditional construction can be improved in two ways: not only by adapting houses built from traditional materials to typologies known in Europe, but also—conversely—by using modern building materials for traditional forms, such as the round houses common in some parts of Congo. Although this section begins by presenting an example of an unsuccessful adaptation. The details of

28. It is worth mentioning a building manual published two decades earlier, addressed to the builders of Catholic missions, from which the missionary vocational training schools emerged. Father Alban, *Le constructeur en pays de mission: manuel pratique*, 2nd ed. (Les Presses Lavigerie, 1951).
29. Igor Bloch, 'House construction and social engineering in the *Beaux Métiers* and Formation Sociale manuals of the *Bibliothèque de l'Étoile* (1943–1966)', *ABE Journal* 23 (2024).
30. *À chacun sa maison*, 10.

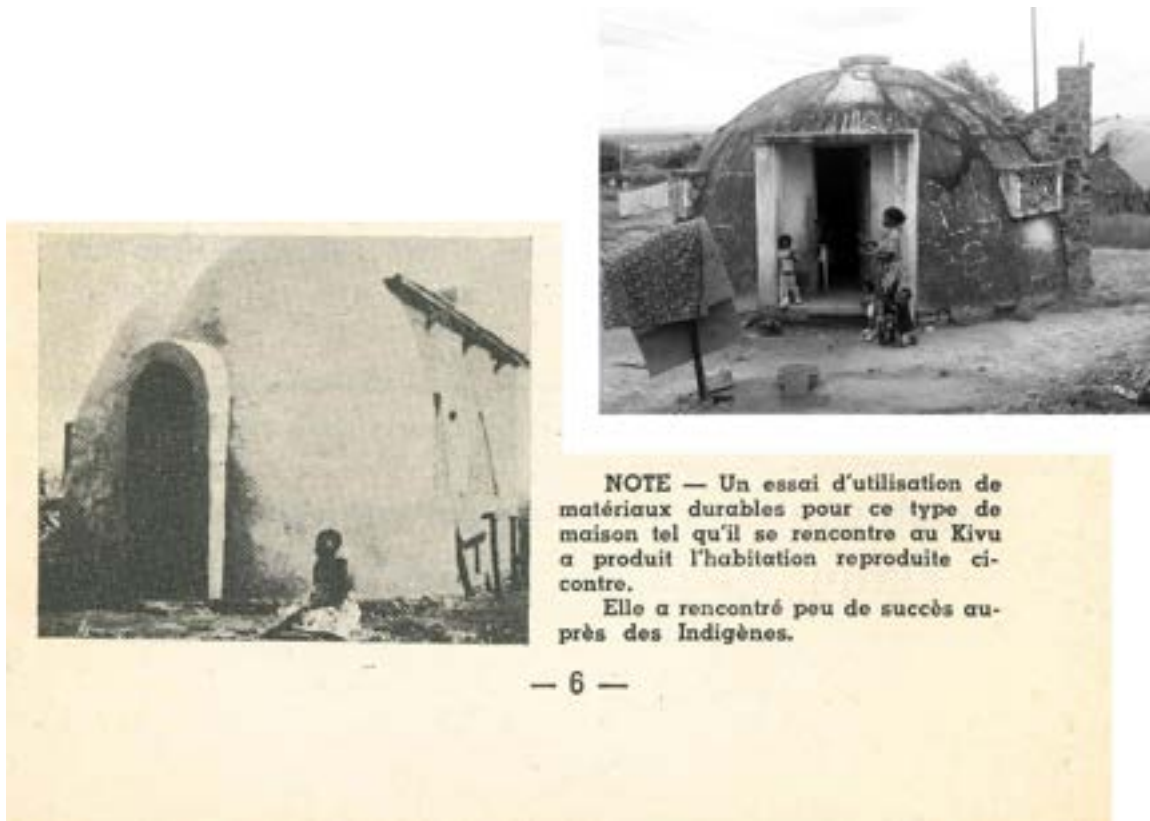


Figure 9. *À chacun sa maison*, 'A trial use of durable materials for this type of house, as found in Kivu, produced the dwelling reproduced opposite. It met with little success among the Indigenous inhabitants', 6; "Balloon House" in the quartier Tshamilemba, Lubumbashi, DR Congo. Based on an invention by the American architect Wallace Neff, this concrete housing type arrived in Lubumbashi in the early 1950s after having been applied on a massive scale in Dakar, Senegal' (right image and description: Johan Lagae, 2006).



Figure 10. *À chacun sa maison*, A selection of photographs and illustrations showing the construction of a house described as 'Un exemple d'amélioration de la maison traditionnelle: la case ronde en dur au Ruanda-Urundi', 57-67.

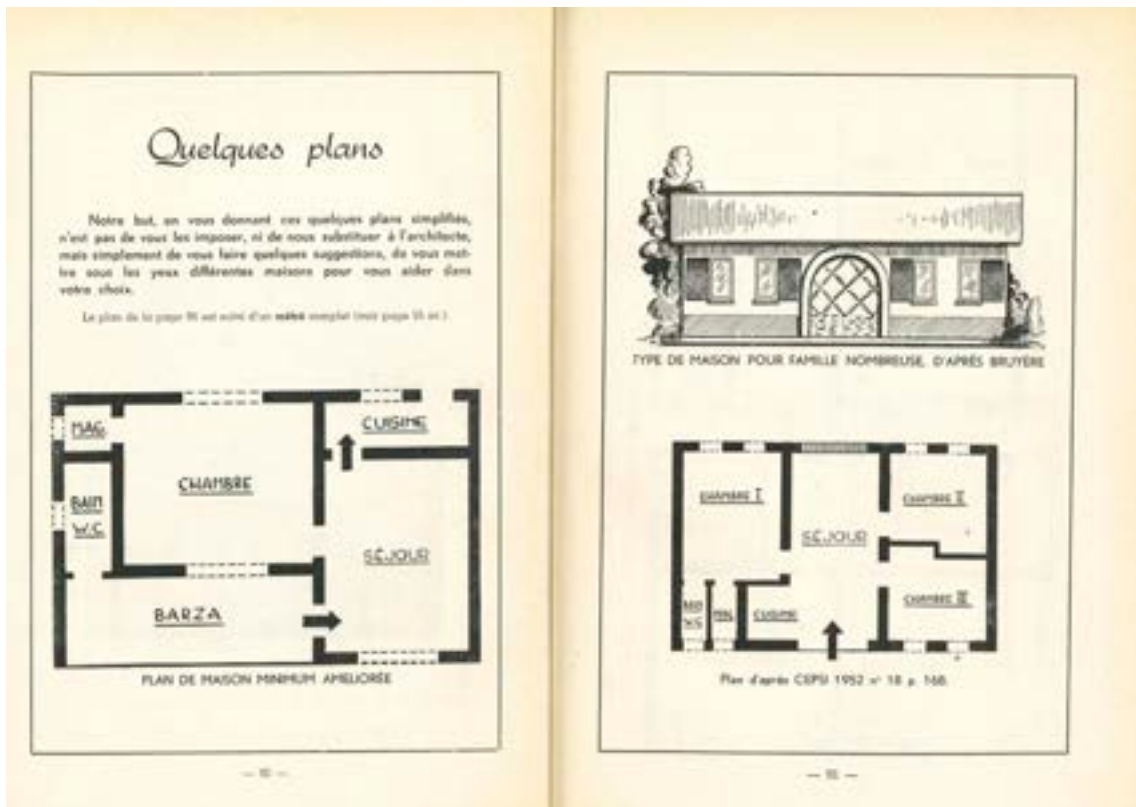


Figure 11. À chacun sa maison, 'Plan de maison minimum améliorée', does not provide a technical specification of the project. In the case of the house shown on the right, the relevant details may perhaps be found in 'CEPSI 1952, no. 18, p. 168', 90-91.

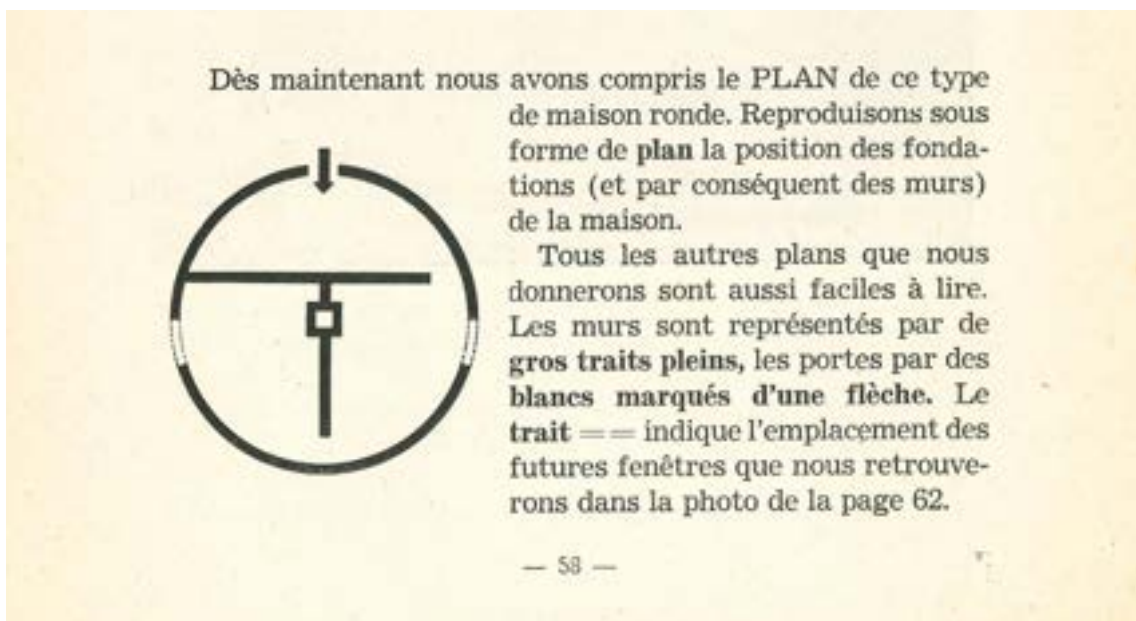


Figure 12. À chacun sa maison, plan of the round house described as 'Un exemple d'amélioration de la maison traditionnelle' (see also Figure 10), accompanied by a simple explanation of how to read it, 58.

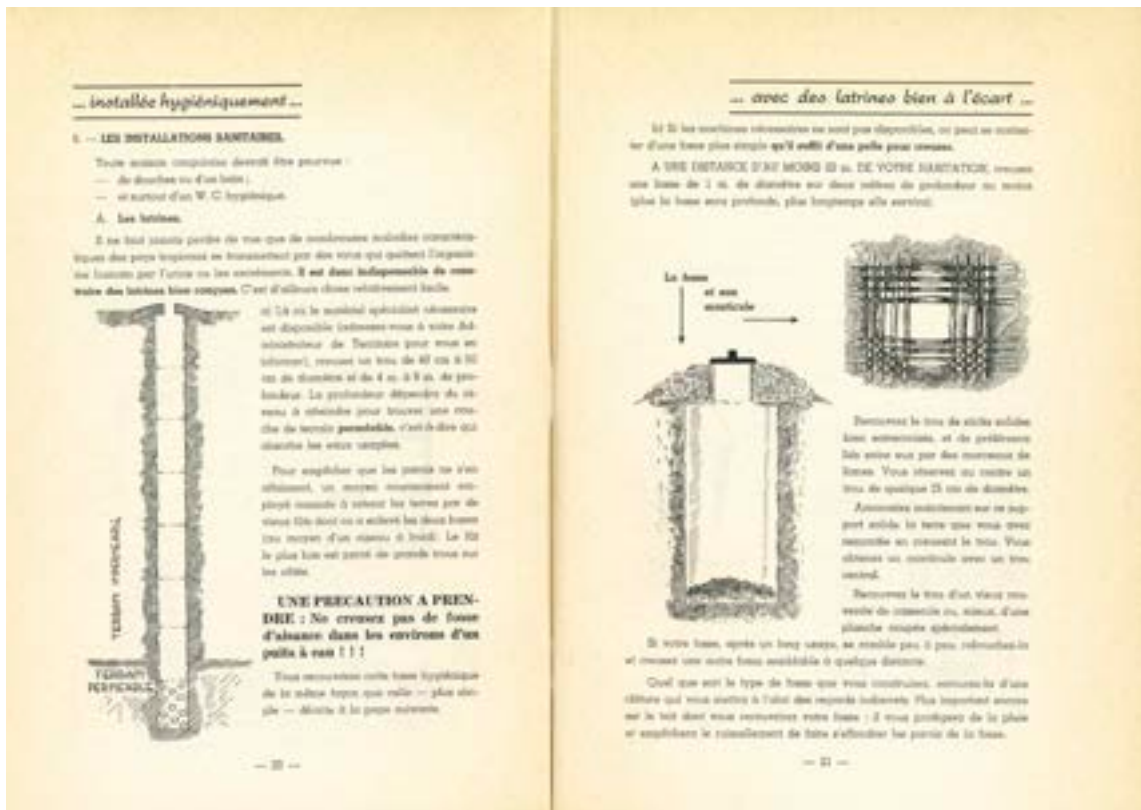


Figure 13. À chacun sa maison, description of latrine construction with the advice: 'Cover the hole with an old saucepan lid or, better still, with a board cut specifically for this purpose', 20-21.



Figure 14. À chacun sa maison, advice on home and garden aesthetics, 88-89.

... devons des murs bien droits ...

Les bords des murs qui sont trop peu élevés de largeur sont déformés par l'humidité du sol et du temps.

La bulle est à grande distance du mur. La bulle est à grande distance du mur. La bulle est à grande distance du mur.

Horizontalité. Pour vérifier si un mur est bien horizontal, on applique le niveau sur le créneau de la maçonnerie que l'on vient de poser. Le mur est bien horizontal si la bulle se place au milieu des repères.

Verticalité. Pour vérifier si un mur est bien vertical, on applique le niveau de haut en bas le long du mur. En outre, une fois, la bulle de l'espèce de haut cette fois-ci devant se placer exactement entre les repères.

MUR VERTICAL

On voit aisément sur cet exemple : si chaque l'épave supérieure de son niveau et constate que la bulle d'air se place exactement entre les repères.

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... horizontalement comme verticalement ...

La bulle de niveau de niveau est un air qui remplit le creux de son creux !

Si la bulle n'est pas exactement entre les repères, corrigez vos angles quand il en est encore temps !!!

C. Le niveau. C'est une simple règle ou feuille qui rassemble l'utilité de niveau de niveau. De plus, si l'on veut vérifier l'horizontalité de son angle le plus du temps long, le niveau s'installe plus. Avec tout ce d'un fond il l'œuvre du mur le niveau tient au milieu l'horizontalité avec le niveau qui sert ainsi de guide.

Voilà un autre exemple de mur. Le niveau à l'œuvre le niveau d'un niveau l'horizontalité avec le niveau. Il ne faut pas oublier de faire de temps en temps l'horizontalité de niveau de niveau par le niveau.

D. Le fil à plomb. C'est une simple règle ou feuille de laquelle pend un poids cylindrique, terminé par une pointe. La direction du fil est toujours verticale. Il faut donc que tout soit bien aligné. Une parallèle au fil à plomb, c'est à dire qu'il y ait entre le bord du mur et le fil le même écartement qu'entre le bord du mur et le fil.

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Figure 15. À chacun sa maison, advice on the correct use of a spirit level, 34-35.

Montant du prêt obtenu (Capital)	Total annuel des remboursements mensuels du capital	Montant de l'intérêt					2 % à payer au bout de														
		1 an	2 ans	3 ans	4 ans	5 ans	6 ans	7 ans	8 ans	9 ans	10 ans	11 ans	12 ans	13 ans	14 ans	15 ans					
5.000	224	140	130	120	110	100	90	80	70	60	50	40	30	20	10	0					
10.000	447	280	260	240	220	200	180	160	140	120	100	80	60	40	20	0					
15.000	670	420	390	360	330	300	270	240	210	180	150	120	90	60	30	0					
20.000	893	560	520	480	440	400	360	320	280	240	200	160	120	80	40	0					
25.000	1.117	700	650	600	550	500	450	400	350	300	250	200	150	100	50	0					
30.000	1.340	840	780	720	660	600	540	480	420	360	300	240	180	120	60	0					
35.000	1.564	980	910	840	770	700	630	560	490	420	350	280	210	140	70	0					
40.000	1.787	1.120	1.040	960	880	800	720	640	560	480	400	320	240	160	80	0					
45.000	2.010	1.260	1.170	1.080	990	900	810	720	630	540	450	360	270	180	90	0					
50.000	2.234	1.400	1.300	1.200	1.100	1.000	900	800	700	600	500	400	300	200	100	0					
55.000	2.457	1.540	1.430	1.330	1.230	1.130	1.030	930	830	730	630	530	430	330	230	130	0				
60.000	2.680	1.680	1.560	1.440	1.320	1.200	1.090	990	880	770	660	550	440	330	230	130	0				
65.000	2.904	1.820	1.690	1.560	1.430	1.300	1.180	1.060	950	830	710	590	470	350	240	140	0				
70.000	3.127	1.960	1.820	1.680	1.540	1.400	1.270	1.140	1.010	880	750	620	490	360	240	140	0				
75.000	3.350	2.100	1.950	1.800	1.650	1.500	1.360	1.220	1.080	940	800	660	520	380	250	150	0				
80.000	3.574	2.240	2.080	1.920	1.760	1.600	1.450	1.300	1.150	1.000	850	700	550	400	260	160	0				
85.000	3.797	2.380	2.210	2.040	1.870	1.700	1.540	1.380	1.220	1.060	900	740	580	420	270	170	0				
90.000	4.020	2.520	2.340	2.160	1.980	1.800	1.630	1.460	1.290	1.120	950	780	610	440	280	180	0				
95.000	4.244	2.660	2.470	2.280	2.090	1.900	1.720	1.540	1.360	1.180	1.000	820	650	480	310	200	0				
100.000	4.467	2.800	2.600	2.400	2.200	2.000	1.810	1.620	1.430	1.240	1.050	870	690	510	330	220	0				
105.000	4.690	2.940	2.730	2.520	2.310	2.100	1.900	1.700	1.500	1.300	1.100	900	720	530	350	240	0				
110.000	4.914	3.080	2.860	2.640	2.420	2.200	1.990	1.780	1.570	1.360	1.150	930	740	540	360	250	0				
115.000	5.137	3.220	2.990	2.760	2.530	2.300	2.080	1.860	1.640	1.420	1.200	960	760	550	370	260	0				
120.000	5.360	3.360	3.120	2.880	2.640	2.400	2.170	1.940	1.710	1.480	1.250	990	770	560	380	270	0				

Figure 16. À chacun sa maison, loan repayment schedule from Fonds d'Avance, 78-79.

the reproduced project from Kivu remain unknown, but the design shown appears somewhat reminiscent of Wallace Neff's inflatable houses, implemented in large numbers in Dakar³¹ and, in a limited scale in Lubumbashi (Figure 9).³²

The manual proposes its own design for a round house using 'appropriate' building materials, reportedly built as a prototype in Rwanda-Urundi (location details were not provided), and presents it as a compromise positioned between tradition and the modernising ambitions of the colonial administration. Its description is accompanied by a photographic reportage of the construction process (Figure 10). However, both the textual and visual material leave much to be desired for anyone wishing to reconstruct the project with any accuracy. For example, the house plan includes neither scale nor dimensions: it merely restates what the text already notes—that the chimney, ventilation, and door openings, which facilitate airflow and thermal comfort, should be considered. This project and floor plan are also not repeated in the appendix, where five other house plans are provided, most of which originate from *Centre d'étude des problèmes sociaux indigènes* (CEPSI) brochures (Figure 11). Notably, only the floor plan of the largest house is accompanied in the following appendix by a technical specification (*d'un mètre complet*). For the smaller and more budget-friendly houses, no dimensions are supplied (the manual itself refers to optimal house sizes of 52–54 m², which correspond to the *Système Grévisse*), rendering them unsuitable for actual construction and restricting their role to that of inspirational models that may be presented to a potential contractor, such as an *artisan libre*.

Interestingly, the presented round-house example is constructed from fired clay bricks (*'brique cuite'*) rather than adobe bricks, which are described first as a 'non-definitive material' yet portrayed almost as the holy grail of rural construction.³³ This confirms that the manual reflects a key leitmotif of 1950s debates on housing for Congolese populations: an emphasis

on the durability of construction materials (leading to the construction of *'maison durable'* or *'maison non durable'*) and the establishment of a hierarchy progressing from *'pisé'* to *'brique adobe'*, *'brique cuite'*, and finally *'bloc de ciment'*.³⁴ Ultimately, the manual recommends building with *'blocs de ciment'* as the closest to the European standard.

In the same section, the manual praises the 'clear progress' in housing construction during the 'transitional period' (1947–1951), without explaining what this transitionality refers to.³⁵ Progress is implicitly measured against Western European users' expectations for the appearance and comfort of a house. The manual proposes a model interior layout for the round house which, in practice, hinders the use of the rooms indicated on the floor plan (Figure 12). At the same time, it openly acknowledges that this layout is unattainable for most rural residents, yet nevertheless presents it as 'an ideal to strive for', thereby revealing a clear tendency towards the 'straightening' and Europeanisation of domestic space (*'Profitez de cette expérience européenne'*³⁶). The only recommendation that corresponds to existing local practices is the suggestion to relocate the kitchen under a separate roof—justified by the authors on hygienic grounds.

In this light, the presentation of the 'ameliorated' houses appears less a practical proposal than an attempt to legitimise a form of construction: a gesture of approval suggesting that modified traditional typologies—incorporating window openings, basic ventilation, a chimney, and an organised spatial layout—could be accommodated within the framework of late colonial developmentalism, echoing the propaganda slogan from the manual:

*A round house or a rectangular house is left to everyone's preference. The important thing is to BUILD.*³⁷

The Role of the *évolués*

Yet while the clumsily proposed round house was intended for the rural population, the manual's actual target reader is quite different—the *évolué*—portrayed as having a moral obligation to assist in improving the dwellings of their 'less evolved' relatives in the countryside. They are called upon to act as intermediaries between the old and the new—between

31. Jeffrey Head, *No Nails, No Lumber: The Bubble Houses of Wallace Neff* (Chronicle Books, 1994).

32. 'NOTE —Un essai d'utilisation de matériaux durables pour ce type de maison tel qu'il se rencontre au Kivu a produit l'habitation reproduite ci-contre. Elle a rencontré peu de succès auprès des Indigènes.', *À chacun sa maison*, 6; Houses in the style of Wallace Neff's inflatable houses were discovered by Johan Lagae in Lubumbashi, in quartier Tshamilemba, in the year 2006. *European Architecture beyond Europe: Sharing Research and Knowledge on Dissemination Processes, Historical Data and Material Legacy* (19th–20th centuries), 15 June 2012.

33. *À chacun sa maison*, 25–31.

34. English translations: rammed earth, adobe brick, fired brick, concrete block.

35. *À chacun sa maison*, 14–15.

36. Another recommended improvement includes the introduction of large windows, promoted with the slogan 'Take advantage of this European experience: equip your homes with large windows', *À chacun sa maison*, 16.

37. *À chacun sa maison*, 64.

what the colonisers regarded as primitive, dirty, and unhealthy habitation, and the modern dwelling, defined in terms of comfort and hygiene, that the Belgians claimed to introduce:

*We know that many of those who will read this brochure have families who have not reached the same level of development as themselves: these readers have a duty to help their families improve their homes by following the rules and advice below. [...] Often, just a few minor changes to traditional types of housing are enough to achieve significant improvements in comfort and hygiene. We trust that the Congolese évolués will ensure that this brochure contributes to improving the living conditions of millions of their compatriots.*³⁸

The book reinforces the notion that, according to the colonial administration, it was the Congolese themselves who were expected to resolve the housing crisis affecting them. Nevertheless, the *évolué* reader would search in vain for scholarly references, especially since the proposed solutions often lack clear logic: the manual contains no footnotes apart from citations of two CEPSE brochures and a single book—E. Hannouille, *Pour le maçon et le plâtrier*.³⁹ How, then, is the *évolué* supposed to help his family—family from whom he is simultaneously expected to distance himself as backward and insufficiently aligned with Europeanisation?⁴⁰ In practice, all he can do is echoed in the manual's formulaic injunction:

*Contact your local authority for more information.*⁴¹

Moreover, some of the recommendations—although they might in principle contribute to improving the well-being of rural residents—appear strikingly improvised. Several suggestions are also framed in rhetoric uncomfortably close to that of interwar authoritarian regimes in Europe. For example, in

38. *À chacun sa maison*, 4.

39. *Ibid.*, 56.

40. Colonial Belgian and Catholic propaganda promoted the nuclear family model of 2 + 2, presenting the traditional African family structure as a burden for the modern, 'Europeanised' Congolese. More on policies toward the *évolués* can be found in Daniel Tödt's *The Lumumba Generation: African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo* (De Gruyter, 2021).

41. The appeal to establish contact with the '*autorité locale*' appears in many sections of the manual. Although it makes it more difficult to understand how the promoted solutions or mechanisms actually functioned, it can also be read as an attempt not to mislead the reader in view of regional differences.

advising on how to build a shower, the manual proposes using an old, worn-out tyre or perforating a bucket, which is accompanied by the slogan '*DOUCHE QUOTIDIENNE = RACE SAIN ET FORTE*.'⁴² Perhaps the most incongruous instruction concerns the latrine: alongside the sensible advice to construct it at least 20 metres from the house and at a safe distance from the well, the reader is encouraged to repurpose an old saucepan lid as a suitable cover (Figure 13). This passage, although it may appear absurd today, would have been nothing short of offensive to a Congolese *évolué* of 'Lumumba's generation'.⁴³

The manual also introduces proposals for using various types of brickwork or painted decoration to evoke Congolese architectural traditions, following in the footsteps of missionaries and *Union des Femmes Coloniales* who likewise saw themselves as defenders of local cultural heritage.⁴⁴ A parallel strand appears elsewhere in the manual, for instance in the encouragement to whitewash houses or to maintain neat surroundings.

*A beautiful house? Yes, indeed, [...] but it would be even more beautiful if the exterior were whitewashed and decorated. Never be afraid to put a little effort into decorating the house where you live. Your character and optimism will be positively affected!*⁴⁵

The brochure goes further, suggesting that a 'civilised' Congolese person is expected to mow the grass—a symbolic gesture intended to discipline not only the inhabitants and their house, but also the natural environment (Figure 14). This notion resonates with

42. 'Daily shower = healthy and strong race.' *À chacun sa maison*, 23.

43. Tödt, *The Lumumba Generation*.

44. *À chacun sa maison*, 85–88; Johan Lagae, 'Educating the Colonial Spouse or Pushing the Agenda of Tropical Modernism in the Belgian Congo? Architecture and the Coloniser's House in the Pages of the Bulletin de l'Union des Femmes Coloniales,' in *The Built Environment through the Prism of the Colonial Periodical Press*, ed. Alice Santiago Faria, Anne Shelley, and Sandra Losada-Sablone (Routledge, 2022); Johan Lagae, "Les mains de Dieu". À propos de la représentation d'une figure missionnaire: le Frère-bâtitteur de la congrégation des Pères Blancs (1935–1960)', in *Approches du roman et du théâtre missionnaires*, edited by Pierre Halen (Peter Lang, 2006), 103–139; Patricia van Schuylenbergh and Françoise Morimont, *Rencontres artistiques Belgique – Congo, 1920–1950, Enquêtes et documents d'histoire africaine* no. 12 (Centre d'histoire de l'Afrique, 1995).

45. *À chacun sa maison*, 62.

the competitions organised in the new housing estates, especially those of the OCA, for the most beautiful house and garden.⁴⁶

The *Fonds d'Avance* and the 'Europeanised' *Maison modèle*

The guide becomes noticeably clearer in the section addressed to Congolese investors, shifting from a somewhat naïve construction manual to an informative brochure outlining the operation of the *Fonds d'Avance* credit mechanism. Here it speaks once again to the *évolués*, but now in relation to their own prospective houses—not the ameliorated rural huts discussed earlier, but the fully 'Europeanised' dwellings associated with the emerging petite bourgeoisie of the Belgian Congo. This shift is evident both in the language employed and in the illustrations of the houses that could be built through the credit mechanism. However, even in this section, what is presented as specialised guidance remains largely conceptual: an idealised vision of a model house ('*maison modèle*') rather than a detailed technical specification.⁴⁷

The rules of the *Fonds d'Avance* are explained through a dialogue between two men—one who has already received a loan and another who hopes to apply for one. Excerpts from the credit regulations are woven together with explanatory commentary. The didactic and moralising tone that pervades the manual resurfaces here as well, for instance when the experienced borrower reassures his interlocutor:

*You know, Victor, that our government encourages the Congolese to ensure their own progress and social stability.*⁴⁸

46. *À chacun sa maison*, 89; Archives africaines (Bruxelles), OCA, dossier 3046, 'Direction Elisabethville. Concours de la plus belle maison, 1956–1957.'

47. 'The *maison modèle*, a term often used by secular and Catholic sources, refers to both the built reality of an appropriate house for a Congolese nuclear family as well as the imaginary vision of an ideal way of homemaking. This ideological construct contains different building typologies, but moreover, testifies to how state and church housing solutions were in the overlapping spheres of construction, education, and social engineering.' Igor Bloch and Laurence Heindryckx, *The maison modèle: Colonial imaginaries of model houses and model households in the Belgian Congo (1949–1959)*, unpublished conference paper presented at the European Architecture History Network 2024 Conference, Athens, 19 June 2024.

48. *À chacun sa maison*, 72.

The narrative of achieving home ownership presented in this dialogue draws directly on the earlier self-build programme, the *Système Grévisse* (1949–1960?), first introduced in Lubumbashi and later adopted in other cities across the colony. Under this system, Congolese applicants were encouraged to take out a mortgage from the *Fonds d'Avance* to purchase a small plot equipped with pre-prepared 7 × 7 metre foundations and a basic supply of building materials, upon which they were expected to construct their own 'durable' brick houses. This initiative—also known as the *méthode Katanga*—did not take into account the limited construction knowledge of many self-builders.⁴⁹ In practice, this section of the manual makes clear that its intended reader is the independent Congolese investor, who is instructed not in how to build, but in how to supervise: how to verify measurements, assess workmanship, or use a spirit level correctly (Figure 15). The accompanying illustration—showing a man in a spotless white shirt checking whether the bricks have been laid straight—underscores this shift from builder to overseer.

According to the regulations cited in the manual, the *Fonds d'Avance* granted loans for the purchase, construction, or modernisation of houses built with durable or semi-durable materials. These loans ranged from 60,000 to 120,000 Congolese francs, with repayment periods of 15 to 20 years.⁵⁰ The exact amount and repayment duration were determined by the relevant territorial authority and depended on the applicant's status—higher income or possession of a *carte du mérite civique*.⁵¹ The interest rate was fixed at 3 %, and the required personal contribution varied according to provincial regulations, but had to be at least 10 %. Belgian financial experts concluded that a Congolese borrower could, without incurring undue risk, allocate between one-fifth and one-quarter of their net salary to housing expenses, and recommended a loan duration of fifteen years.⁵²

The subchapter contains tables clearly setting out the amounts of credit obligations over various periods.

49. Bloch and De Nys-Ketels, 'Système Grévisse', 1223–1230.

50. The Congolese franc in the 1950s was directly tied to the Belgian franc. Throughout that decade, 1 Congolese franc was equal to 1 Belgian franc, as both currencies operated within the same Belgian colonial monetary system. There was no independent exchange rate between them until after Congo's independence in 1960.

51. The Civic Merit Card was awarded only to a small number of Congolese *évolués* who had to meet strict requirements, including monogamy and 'proper conduct'. N.D., 'Carte du Mérite Civique', *Aequatoria* 11, no. 3 (1948): 103–5.

52. *À chacun sa maison*, 73–75.

Calculations are provided for single individuals, households with one or two children, and those with larger families—the latter being the most common in practice. The tables list net salaries, housing costs, maximum loan amounts, monthly instalments, and annual interest rates. In terms of clarity and structure, these tables could serve as a model of transparency for many banks today, yet they also exemplify the Belgian colonial ‘paper regime’,⁵³ in which citizens and employees were required to study countless charts and tables (Figure 16).⁵⁴

As the manual explains, loan repayments were deducted directly from the borrower’s salary at the employer’s premises before the employee received payment. As is the case today, the house remained the lender’s property until the debt was fully repaid; however, the manual emphasises that the authority designated by the lender retained the right to enter the property at any time. Moreover, because the loans were issued by the local colonial administration (CEC)⁵⁵ rather than directly by the fund, the system created a form of collective responsibility in the event of default—a point explicitly underscored as a warning.⁵⁶

The manual advises those with sufficient means to hire a contractor, while cautioning them to proceed with care, as, according to the Ferdinand Grévisse, in Lubumbashi, many unskilled contractors were active on the market. This warning likely refers to the *artisans libres*, who occupied an ambiguous position: indispensable to the construction sector yet often operating under administrative pressure and regulatory constraints. For example, the brochure notes that a local contractor was required to accept the price set by the authority managing the fund—presumably a fixed



Figure 17. Two frames from the film *Si j'avais été Ève*. KADOC, Leuven.

rate per square metre for finishing works, although this is not specified.

The brochure offers only a brief reference to the *Office des Cités Africaines* (OCA) housing, seemingly to signal that such an option existed alongside self-building. This may be related to the possibility—still requiring archival confirmation—that OCA houses could also be purchased through the *Fonds d'Avance*,⁵⁷ but also to the fact that two factions existed within the colonial administration: one supporting the construction of OCA settlements, and the other—presumably closer to the authors of the manual—favouring self-build programmes.

Conclusion

À chacun sa maison occupies an ambiguous position between construction manual, investment guide, and promotional propaganda brochure. It touches on a remarkably wide range of topics—brickmaking, house plans, sanitation, credit mechanisms, and even moral instruction—yet ultimately addresses none of them in any real depth. Practical and meaningful information is

53. Johan Lagae and Jens van de Maele, ‘Mimic Men in the Office Spaces of a “Nervous State”: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Late Colonial Congo,’ in *Behind Office Doors* (Leuven University Press, 2026), 275–314.

54. *À chacun sa maison*, 76–79; In Mwana Shaba: *Journal d'Entreprise U.M.H.K.* (I, II, III, 1963), one can find a series of articles devoted to the question of how to read the ‘*bulletin de paie*’ correctly.

55. Most black residents’ urban settlements were subject to the Centres extra-coutumiers. In rural colonial Congo, Africans were judged according to customary law. In contrast, within the C.E.C. — a ‘centre outside customary law’ with its own court system — special regulations applied that governed many aspects of Congolese life, including housing and construction. Lewono Lufungula, ‘Participation des Congolais à la gestion du Centre Extra-Coutumier de Coquilhatville: 1952–1958’, *Annales Aequatoria* 16 (1995), 307–38.

56. *À chacun sa maison*, 81.

57. For example, through the mechanisms of the *Fonds d'Avance*, it was possible to purchase houses built by the company *Recomaco*.



Figure 18. A collage of three ‘proper’ / ‘model’ houses for the Congolese population according to *À chacun sa maison*.

continually interwoven with hollow rhetorical slogans, and what initially appears to be a technical guide soon reveals itself as a hybrid instrument of social engineering which, alongside promoting self-build or DIY, cultivates specific aspirations: namely, that a Congolese person, especially an *évolué*, should aspire to build a small, cheerful, almost gingerbread-like house with a little yet always well-kept garden. In this way, the manual appears to focus not on technical education but on the production of aspirations and dreams—a notion repeatedly reinforced across different forms of colonial media intended for Congolese audiences (Figures 17 and 18).⁵⁸

Promoting the ‘improvement of traditional housing’ and presenting it as a putative compromise between European colonial typologies and local construction customs ultimately appears to have been little more than a temporary bluff. The manual does not offer a single recipe for either an urban or a rural ‘*maison modèle*’; instead, it establishes a hierarchy of desirable dwellings. Throughout its pages, traditional houses are not merely modified but reinterpreted as defective, requiring transformation in line with European standards of comfort, hygiene, civilising necessities, and spatial order—understood through the use of ‘durable’ building materials, large window frames, straight walls, and simple installations. What initially

seems to constitute practical advice thus becomes an instructional programme aimed at reshaping everyday life at the most intimate domestic scale.

The contradictions of the manual—its uncertain authorship, uneven technical content, paternalistic tone, oscillation between detailed guidance and vague exhortations, and its simultaneous appeal to the *évolué* as both model citizen and rural intermediary—are revealing. Taken together, these features expose the disordered and often incoherent character of late Belgian rule in Congo: a ‘nervous state’⁵⁹ that aspired to rational planning while operating within a ‘paper regime’⁶⁰ marked by conceptual confusion, moralising urgency, and an underlying anxiety about control. In this sense, *À chacun sa maison* does not simply document the housing and economic programmes associated with developmentalist initiatives such as the *Système Grévisse* or the *Fonds d’Avance*; rather, it illuminates the limits of the colonial administration itself, revealing a system whose everyday prescriptions increasingly approached the administrative equivalent of a madhouse.

58. *Eva’s Bekoring / Si j’avais été Eve* (1956), directed by Piet Verstegen, produced by Afrika Films, cooperation by A. Van Overschelde and Piet Verstegen, 16 mm film, 26:30 min, BE/942855/1829/69, KADOC–KU Leuven (Religieuze Instituten – Vrouwen, Beeldcollectie FMM).

59. Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (Duke University Press, 2016).

60. Lagae and van de Maele, ‘Mimic Men in the Office Spaces’, in *Behind Office Doors*, 275–314.