Colonial Resonances

Jon Schubert

In this essay I chart the resonance of colonial urbanism in contemporary urban renewal projects in the Angolan port city of Lobito. I trace how the city's aesthetics and design reflect and produce its social, material, and economic connections throughout the cyclical ups and downs of its fortunes. Riffing off Christina Schwenkel, we can study the "lingering affectations and sentimentalities" of past economic and political regimes through a city's bricks and their affective resonances (2013: 254–55). While Angola has undergone profound political, ideological, social, and economic change since the beginning of the twentieth century, Lobito's architecture still echoes with the logics and needs of extractive capitalism. I begin with a brief history of the port and railway in the city, then work through the affects of former railway and port workers to consider the transformation of the built environment following Angolan independence in 1975.

At the entrance to the neighbourhood of Compão and across from the workshops of the Benguela Railway, stand three slightly crumbling, off-white buildings with distinctive exterior staircases. The Três Pisos (Portuguese for 'three floors'), as they are known in Lobito, were built in the late 1950s as company housing for railway workers. Emblematic of the way the city was planned and built, the Três Pisos reflect a colonial aesthetic

and the spatial engineering of the Portuguese colonial regime, where companies such as the Benguela Railway (Caminho de Ferro de Benguela, CFB) or the Port of Lobito sought to mould worker subjectivities.

While neighbouring Benguela, the provincial capital, had been a centre of the Portuguese Atlantic (slave) trade since the 1600s, Lobito is very much the product of twentieth-century colonial extractive capitalism. The city was built around the port, taking advantage of a natural deepwater bay sheltered from the open ocean by its Restinga (sandspit); this orientation still marks the spatial layout of the city today. The port served as terminus of the Benguela Railway, which by 1931 linked the Zambian Copperbelt and the mines of Katanga with the Atlantic coast and further to the European industrial heartlands. So from the outset, the city was geared towards the needs of the port and the railway.

The iconic Três Pisos buildings of the CFB in Compão.
Photo: Jon Schubert, May 2019.

New flats for port workers near the Military Academy.
Photo: Jon Schubert, May 2019.

Portuguese colonialism shifted into high gear after the Second World War, cloaking the intensified settlement and economic exploitation of its Overseas Provinces (colonies, in effect) in the mantle of a civilizing mission. This translated into a flurry of modernist urban construction, in Angola mainly in the capital Luanda (Gastrow 2020: 101; see also Buire, forthcoming) but also in provincial towns. In Lobito, colonial power needed to cultivate a readily available Indigenous workforce while upholding racial segregation. Combined with the paternalistic impulses typical of company towns, this induced "spatial engineering" (Herod 2011): the establishment of designated neighbourhoods to promote specific social formations and to mould Africans to new forms of industriousness, individual advancement, and urban sociality (Byerley 2011: 492).

In Três Pisos, *papá* Mpanzu, a retired machinist of 71 years, told me how, when he joined the CFB, he had received a flat there: "These were mainly for the drivers and the men of the station. The company did this because when the company was working at its fullest, the *chamador* [the caller, who went around the houses to rouse the workers] could come at any hour to call you. And the flats here are good. In Bairro da Praia, the houses are much smaller. Here it was always higher-up people (*gente superior*). And on the Restinga, that was for the directors" (Fieldwork interview, May 2019). This is still the case, with the higher cadres of parastatals, public administration, and international companies enjoying the airy villas that line the peninsula.

Central Lobito.
Map: Jon Schubert.
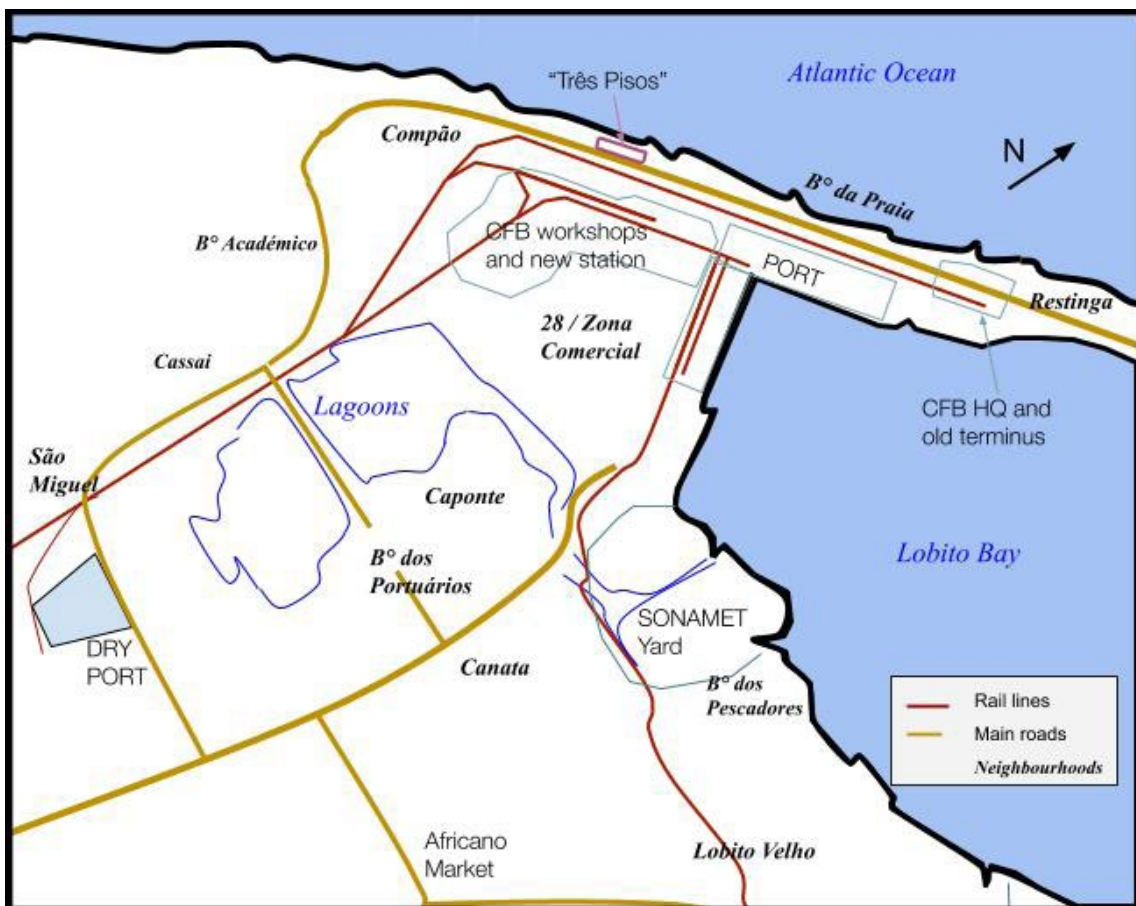
By contrast, basic workers – welders, carpenters, mechanics – were given smaller, red-painted houses in São Miguel. This neighbourhood was a bit farther away, without tarred roads, but the living was good here back in colonial times, as former workers reminisced fondly: "The streets were all landscaped. And irrigated, with a lot of water. There was a fountain, and the streets were illuminated. This was a beautiful *vila* (hamlet)" – so *papá* Milreis, a retired waggon technician in his seventies, told me as we sat in the now slightly run-down but still carefully swept small public garden in the heart of São Miguel.

Like most of his contemporaries, Milreis had come down from the central highlands in the late 1960s, to be apprenticed into a technical profession with the Benguela Railway or the port: "Coming here was a great pampering [in the beginning]. With those who came in after the plague that was the war [1975-2002], the *bairro* (neighbourhood) was choked; they started using things anarchically, throwing rubbish down the drains and toilets, breaking the water pumps." Even in its current state of relative neglect, to its residents São Miguel feels like a privileged location compared to the dusty, beige *musseques* (shantytowns) that mushroomed, largely unplanned, on the hillsides and plateau during the civil war.

Diana Bocarejo suggests that, in Colombia, banana plantation workers "have learned to understand the spatial order embedded in railroads […] and the layout of their houses and neighbourhoods. Seeing and hearing these infrastructures is akin to reliving the loud history of the peasants' struggles […] – their endurance, dreams, expectations, joys and resentments" (2018: 3). In Lobito, too, citizens have learnt to read the urban landscape as an expression of a specific kind of social order. Following the divisions of labour, class, and race imposed by Portuguese colonialism, in independent Angola this has been an order and vision of development shaped by one ruling party, the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola). A former liberation movement turned Marxist vanguard party turned capitalist dominant party, the MPLA in many cases ended up mimicking modes of domination, exploitation, control, and social stratification inherited from the coloniser (Schubert 2017: 84–90).

After independence in 1975, the country was plunged into civil war, when, exacerbated by the Cold War, the MPLA was pitted against another anticolonial liberation movement, UNITA (the National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola). The Benguela Railway fell into disrepair and disuse due to UNITA's repeated attacks on the railway line. The port thus became a crucial lifeline for the southern part of the country, allowing for the import of essential foodstuffs when the cities were cut off from the agricultural hinterland. After the end of the war in 2002, the MPLA government, uncontested and flush with oil money, embarked on a massive national reconstruction drive (Schubert 2015). The rehabilitation of the CFB and modernisation of the port were at the heart of these ambitions.

The port of Lobito now boasts several kilometres of rehabilitated quays and new cranes for the container terminal, a new dry port (inland rail container terminal), and a state-of-the-art minerals terminal for the export of bulk minerals. However, in late 2014 the price of a barrel of crude oil fell from about 110 USD to 62 USD. With oil production making up 75 percent of government revenue, Angola plunged into a deep recession.

View from the middle of the Restinga towards the Port.
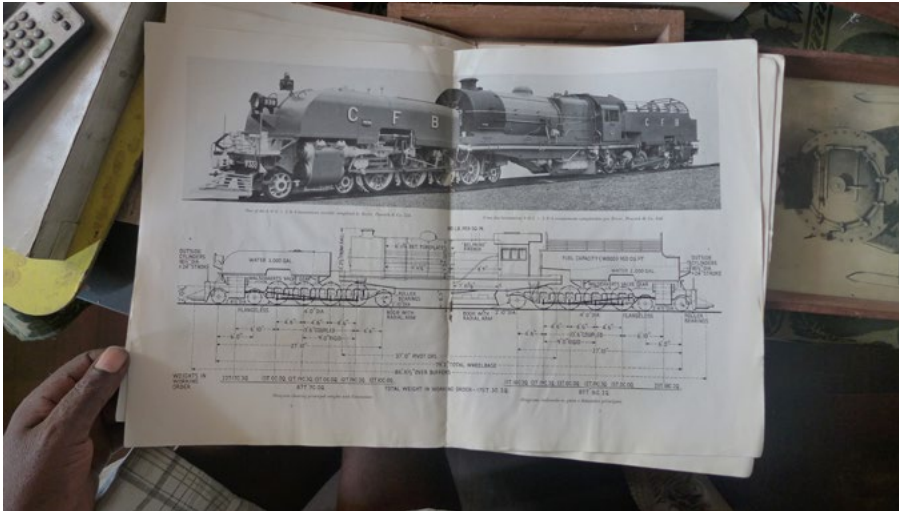Photo: Jon Schubert, April 2019.

The main quay of the container terminal, Lobito.
Photo: Jon Schubert, June 2019.

Now there is almost no cargo coming in, much less going out. The dry port is empty, the minerals terminal unused, and most of the new cranes are standing still. For the former workers of São Miguel, the empty dry port, hulking over the walls that separate it from their residences, is a stark reminder of the broken promises of postwar reconstruction.

Reminiscing about the CFB's glorious past in Bairro da Praia.
Photo: Jon Schubert, June 2019.

Even for the seemingly more secure middle-class, life after the reconstruction boom is precarious. Shiny new residential areas have been built, nominally for the workers and functionaries of the CFB, the port, the state oil company Sonangol, or for compliant state functionaries. These echo the aesthetics and spatial engineering ambitions of developmental colonial capitalism. However, they largely stand empty, awaiting final completion, having served chiefly as vehicles for speculation and the enrichment of certain MPLA-connected elites. In order to keep their rights to the properties, the nominal tenants have been paying rent, sometimes for years, without having ever lived there – powerlessly watching as the structures and fixtures slowly break down from dust and disuse.

The architecture of Lobito resonates with colonial paternalism that finds an unlikely echo in contemporary, oil-dependent crony capitalism. The port and railway still loom large over the cityscape, both physical and imagined, determining the fortunes of the town. Ideas of beauty, civilizedness, and the urban good life propagated by Portuguese high colonialism's civilizing mission reverberate uncannily in the Angolan government's reconstruction projects designed, ostensibly, to reorder an urban space degraded by years of war and neglect. Shaped by this experience of conflict and destruction, Lobitans by and large do not contest company paternalism and segregation on an infrastructural terrain (cf. von Schnitzler 2018 for South African townships). Rather, they project onto the city's architecture a desire for the ordering hand of the state, not against it. As such, colonial race and class divisions that were inscribed into the city's layout persist despite the promises of reconstruction and renewal, revealing the fundamental inequalities and unsustainability of extractive capitalism, then and now.

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