Kinshasa. Tales of the tangible city

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In 2004, anthropologist Filip De Boeck and photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart published a book entitled *Kinshasa. Tales of the Invisible City*. The book and the exhibition, that was derived from it, received immediate international acclaim being awarded among others the Golden Lion at the Venice Architectural Biennale that year.¹ This is remarkable, considering that the main argument of the book states that the urban physical fabric is not a useful point of entry if one is to understand the current urban condition of the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Indeed, as the urban infrastructure of Kinshasa is characterized “by constant breakdown, by failure and by absence,” its *urbaneity* exists “beyond the city’s architecture”. What is needed then, according to De Boeck, is to investigate the “second, invisible city” that exists in the form of “a mirroring reality lurking underneath the surface of the visible world”. While De Boeck’s perspective does have the merit of deepening our understanding of one of Africa’s main megalopolises as it highlights how Kinshasa’s urbanity is also constructed via its inhabitants’ imagination, contemporary urban life in Kinshasa is still very much played out through, and even dictated by, the physical environment and urban form. Even if its dilapidated state does seem to defy classic paradigms that architects, planners and urban historians commonly use to speak about cities, studying Kinshasa’s urban infrastructure does help to gain a more nuanced understanding of how this city functions, as has already been demonstrated by the Flemish architect Wim Cuyvers in a book-project provocatively entitled, in a direct response to De Boeck’s work, *Brakin. Brazzaville—Kinshasa. Visualizing the Visible.*²

In his voluminous 2010 book and exhibition project *Congo (belge)*, Magnum photographer Carl De Keyzer offers another perspective on the built fabric of Congo’s urban and rural landscapes, highlighting the endurance of the colonial legacy.³ Indeed, while there has been substantial building activity in Congo since independence, it cannot be denied that a large part of the urban landscapes of Congolese cities like Kinshasa are still very much defined by buildings and structures erected during the colonial era. Hence, the everyday life of the city’s inhabitants, commonly called *Kinois*, is still strongly influenced, if not by the

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architectural appearance of former colonial buildings as such, then surely by their spatial
distribution and the city’s urban layout, which was introduced by colonial architects and
planners.

Since the mid-1990s, the architecture and urbanism produced under Belgian colonial rule
have attracted the attention of architectural historians, among whom the author of this
paper. But it is only more recently that it has also been approached from the perspective
of colonial built heritage. An important step in this process was the project Kinshasa.
Patrimoine urbain, that was initiated in 2009 by Bernard Toulier, a conservateur en chef of the
département du Patrimoine of the French Ministry of Culture and a specialist on twentieth
century architectural heritage. As I had been researching Congo’s colonial architecture and
urbanism for several years, I was invited to participate in the project and became responsible
for the historical research underlying this first inventory of Kinshasa’s sites of architectural
interest, which in 2010 led to the publication of the book Kinshasa. Architecture et paysage urbains, presented as a gift by the French ambassador to the Congolese authorities on the

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5 The idea of the project, aiming at documenting 150 sites of architectural interest in the Congo’s capital city, was first formulated to potential local stakeholders in 2007 during a workshop on urban heritage organized by Bernard Toulier at the Bureau d’Études et Aménagement Urbain in Kinshasa.
In 2013, as a follow up to this project, I co-edited, together with Bernard Toulier, an architectural guide to the city of Kinshasa, which complemented the first publication.

In this paper, I want to present an auto-critical reflection regarding the “positionality” of the architectural historian involved in projects concerning colonial built heritage. I was confronted very explicitly by the tensions surrounding the notion of “built heritage” in the postcolonial Congolese context and was forced to re-assess conventional approaches of documenting and presenting the built legacy of the colonial era (fig. 1, 2) by the Kinshasa. Patrimoine urbain project, as well as an earlier exhibition I co-curated, entitled Congo.

7 Johan Lagae and Bernard Toulier (eds.), Kinshasa, Brussels: CIVA, 2013 (Villes et Architectures).
Paysages urbains. Regards croisés, which was on show in Kinshasa in 2010 after having been first presented in Brussels in 2007.9

I will argue in this paper that much is to be gained by combining a focus on both the tangible and intangible aspects related to the built infrastructure when reflecting on colonial built heritage. Informed by, but also taking a critical stance vis-à-vis both the work of De Boeck and Cuyvers, I will furthermore make a plea for an approach that takes an explicit historical perspective. I will do so by reading and analyzing the current urban landscape of Kinshasa as a territorial palimpsest that testifies to an ongoing process of layering of uses and meanings over time.10 As such, our tales of the tangible city of Kinshasa will highlight both continuities and ruptures from colonial to postcolonial times, demonstrating that the urban fabric of the city forms a powerful mediator between colonial history and postcolonial memory.

“Shared heritage” in a postcolonial context

One of the key notions that has emerged in recent institutional debates on the topic of colonial built legacy is “shared heritage.” The scientific committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (icomos) dealing with colonial built legacy, for instance, operates under the label “Shared Built Heritage.” While the official mission statement of the committee does not explicitly explain the term, discussions among several of its members indicate that it was chosen to underline that every initiative regarding this built legacy should be rooted in a dialogue in which former “colonizers” and “colonized” can engage on a basis of equality.11 Referring to the notion of “patrimoine partagé,” the aforementioned Bernard Toulier took a more outspoken position on the subject during a round table he co-organized on the theme of colonial architecture and heritage in Paris in 2003. Colonial built legacy, Toulier stated in the introduction to the event, no longer belongs to those who built it, but rather to those who inhabit it. In his opinion, the latter should be left the choice and the responsibility of deciding what should be transmitted to future generations. Arguing that the creation of a colonial heritage implies “revendiquer une filiation, se fabriquer sa propre paternité à laquelle les anciens colons et les colonisés s’identifient,” Toulier furthermore hints at the paradox that is inherent in such a process, as it forces former “colonized” to appropriate a “foreign” culture.12 His remarks offer a first complication to an all too easy

9 The show was commissioned by CIVA, Brussels, and presented the interweaving of a historical survey of the architecture and urbanism of three Congolese cities with contemporary art work of Congolese artists. Curated by Johan Lagae and Marc Gemoets, it was first displayed in the Espace d’Architecture of the La Cambre school in Brussels and in 2010 at the French Cultural Center in Kinshasa.
10 Wim Cuyvers has argued explicitly against the use of a historical perspective when investigating the contemporary urban condition of Kinshasa, see Johan Lagae, Marc Schoonderbeek and Tomi Avermaete (eds.), “Reading Public Space in the ‘Non-Western’ City. A Dialogue between Zeynep Çelik and Wim Cuyvers,” themed issue of OASE, no. 69, 2006, p. 32–42.
11 The committee is based in the Heritage House of icomos Netherlands, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. I have been able to follow some of its internal discussions through the mailings of the committee.
usage of the notion “shared heritage.” At the same event, Mercedes Volait added another critical note by recalling that any involvement of colonial heritage inevitably “heurte de plein fouet une question sensible en Europe même, et singulièrement en France : celle du statut accordé à l’histoire coloniale – une histoire qu’on préfère au fond occultée plutôt que dévoilée.” It is very telling in this respect that the initial label of the ICOMOS scientific committee was “Colonial Built Heritage,” the word “colonial” having been dropped over the course of time. Indeed, the label “colonial” draws attention to a past that many former European powers are still struggling to come to terms with.

Ever since the publication of Adam Hochschild’s bestselling 1998 book *King Leopold II’s Ghost* and Ludo Martens’ critical inquiry into the role of the Belgian government in the murder of Congo’s first prime minister Patrice Lumumba, the tension between “shared heritage” and “dissonant history” has become extremely explicit with regard to Belgian colonialism. A curious event that occurred in Kinshasa on February 2nd, 2005 is very telling in that respect. On that day, the equestrian statue of King Leopold II that had initially been installed in the city center of the then capital city of the Belgian Congo in 1928 and had been removed in the late 1960s in the context of president Mobutu’s policy of a “Recours à l’authenticité,” was re-installed in the public realm of Kinshasa (fig. 3).

The then Minister of Culture of the RDC, Christophe Muzungu, presented the 2005 re-instalment of the statue as part of a broader effort of reminding the Congolese of their history, because, in his words “a people without history is a people without soul.” One could read this initiative as just another form of re-inscribing the colonial past in Congo’s national history, in line with what Congolese historians such as Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem or Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu had already been arguing for several decades. Yet the initiative should also be understood as a direct response to the fact that the following day, a major exhibition on Congo’s colonial past entitled *The Memory of Congo. The colonial Era*, opened...

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17 Christophe Muzungu as quoted in A.P., “Rise and Fall of a Brutal King,” *The Times*, 4 February 2005; see also De Standaard, 4 February 2005.
in the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, the “lieu de mémoire” par excellence of Belgium’s colonial past. The Congolese initiative and the opening of the Memory of Congo exhibition received international press coverage, reaching the front page of several leading newspapers in Belgium, with one leading journalist presenting them as indicators of a shared moment of “mémoire retrouvée” in the former colony and mother country.19 Ironically, the equestrian statue was removed after less than 24 hours. In the official press announcement, the removal was carried out because the monument “needed cleaning,” yet in reality its re-installment had created quite a controversy in the city, which, as some local contacts informed us, was staged by opponents to the Kabila regime. The sculpture was transferred to the site of the Institut des Musées Nationaux where, as is discussed later in this paper, it still is to be found today.

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19 Le Soir headed “Congo: la mémoire retrouvée” in an article by Colette Braeckman, a leading journalist on African affairs.
Colonial history, postcolonial memory and built heritage

This event reminds us of the fact that “artifacts are not static embodiments of culture but are, rather, a medium through which identity, power and society are produced and reproduced.” Cultural heritage is indeed always a “social construct” to which multiple values are ascribed in dynamic processes of (re-)appropriation, negotiation and even “(re-) invention.” Coming to terms with the built heritage of postcolonial Kinshasa, that I want to argue here, necessitates the acknowledgement of such processes in order to re-assess all too simplistic understandings of how “heritage” operates. In particular, it requires going beyond the dichotomy of “colonizer”/“colonized” underlying the notion of “shared heritage,” because such categories are too essentializing to grasp how colonial heritage has been appropriated and negotiated. Moreover, as Christine Deslaurier and Aurélie Roger have rightly stressed, dealing with the colonial past implies addressing the complexity of “grey memories.”

In this respect, analysis of the built colonial legacy allows for a meaningful contribution to any reflection on colonial heritage, as memory and space are intrinsically bound up with each other. Pierre Nora’s notion of “lieu de mémoire” offers a useful starting point for reflection here, in particular because such “lieux” have the capacity to take up new meanings over—a capacity that for Nora was one of the main elements that made the concept an exciting one. “Lieux de mémoire” thus become particularly helpful in charting ruptures and continuities from colonial to postcolonial contexts, as the work on Algiers by Zeynep Çelik has so convincingly illustrated. Architectural historians have also a lot to learn from scholars in African studies that have long engaged in various forms of “memory work.”

This specific field of research has been particularly well developed in the context of the Congolese city of Lubumbashi by scholars such as Johannes Fabian, Bogumil Jewsiwiecki and members of the “Mémoires de Lubumbashi”-group, such as Donatien Dibwe Mia.

Mwembu, who have studied the (post)colonial urban memory of the Lushois\textsuperscript{26} by analysing the production of popular painting, theatre, music or even fashion.\textsuperscript{27}

My encounter with this kind of “memory work” during my first field trip to Lubumbashi in the summer of 2000 was eye-opening, and has strongly influenced my thinking on colonial architecture ever since. It is in spatializing such “memory work” and in combining it with critical architectural history that focuses on the modes of production of colonial architecture, that lies, in my opinion, a fruitful path for rethinking colonial built heritage. Architectural and urban historians should thus in my opinion contribute to the discussion on colonial built heritage not so much by defining what should be preserved or not, but rather by producing knowledge that allows for a more nuanced understanding of, first, the historical complexities underlying its production and, second, its inscription over time with several, sometimes divergent, meanings by a variety of stakeholders. In line with an argument advanced by architectural historian Réjean Legault in a discussion on heritage practices concerning modern architecture,\textsuperscript{28} I would like to plea here that rather than producing a discourse of action, the architectural historian should first and foremost develop a form of critical writing that advances the discipline of architectural historiography and the way it has engaged with the topic of colonial architecture, without it necessarily being adequate, let alone adapted to be easily instrumentalized in campaigns mounted to save a particular building or site. Unpacking the intricacies of architecture, colonial history and postcolonial memory indeed requires the elaboration of narratives that are often too complex or even too messy and “grey” for heritage policies to be drawn easily from them.

Kinshasa’s urban territory as a palimpsest

A crucial aspect of the critical history writing I referred to above is that it develops a perspective that crosses different scales. This has direct implications of how such a practice can be linked to reflections on colonial built heritage. Conventional approaches of monuments and sites, or what the French call “patrimoine,” indeed still very much tend to focus on the individual artifact, i.e. the building as an isolated object, in order to define its heritage value on the basis of criteria of style, form or constructional innovation. When working on colonial contexts—but the argument could easily be extended to others—much is to be gained from analyzing buildings in their larger urban context as well as from investigating the interior distribution of rooms within a building. Both scales indeed can help us to understand the intrinsic relationships that exist between architecture and politics in the colonial/postcolonial realm.

\textsuperscript{26} Lushois is the common name in local parlance to designate inhabitants of the city of Lubumbashi.


On the one hand, focusing on the internal organization of colonial houses, but even of public buildings, allows us to map the norms and forms governing everyday practices of colonial life and the particular encounter between the white colonizer and the African colonized subject, be it a domestic servant, an office clerk or a laborer. On the other hand, it is precisely on the urban scale that the common colonial policy of spatial segregation along racial lines becomes extremely tangible. Like elsewhere in sub Saharan Africa, the colonial city in the Belgian Congo was divided into a “ville européenne” and one or more “cités indigènes” (or “native towns”), neatly separated from each other by a no man’s land described in maps as “neutral zone” or “cordon sanitaire,” a label echoing the hygienist discourse used to legitimize such binary lay-out. Particularly present in 1930s planning policy, racial segregation continued to govern the construction of the postwar extensions around the major urban centers in Congo. The effects of this spatial strategy are even to be felt in present-day Kinshasa, in the emergence of what urban historian Odile Georg has coined an “urbanisme sécuritaire” of which gated communities form an explicit example.  

To bring to the fore such mechanisms and processes over time, we can read, following André Corboz, the urban territory of Kinshasa as a palimpsest that allows us to see both what is being superimposed on top of prior structures, and what remains present as traces of earlier periods. One task of the architectural/urban historian involved in projects concerning colonial built heritage thus can consist of trying to unpack the palimpsest in its constituent layers, explaining the discourses and logics of implementation underlying each of them while acknowledging the discrepancies that always exist between ideas, models, theories or projects and their realization on the ground.

In the Kinshasa. Patrimoine urbain project, a lot of attention was already given to the urban dimension, in the text as well as in the extensive cartography that was produced specifically for the final publication. The idea of reading Kinshasa as a palimpsest was elaborated more explicitly in a subsequent project, developed in 2010 at the request of the organizers of the Afropolis. Stadt, Medien, Kunst exhibition to be shown in the renovated Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum – Kulturen der Welt museum in Cologne (fig. 4).

Based on 15 years of research on the city’s spatial development and its architectural landscape, the project, which was conducted with two colleagues and a number of students of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of Ghent University, was built up around six spatial entities that, in our opinion, have structured the urban landscape of the city over time. The first consists of the monumental axes that structure the former “ville

“Europeenne” (the current neighborhood of Ngombe) and can be understood as the sites of political and economic power of colonial/postcolonial Kinshasa. The second focuses on the crucial structuring role of the railroad that linked the various economic nodes within the city to a regional transportation network that connected Congo to the outside world. The third, entitled “zone neuter,” brings to the fore the discourses and sites linked to the colonial urban planning policy of spatial segregation along racial lines. The fourth presents the Avenue Kasa Vubu that forms a major backbone of the urban territory as it runs from the “ville européenne” right down south and then curving to the west, cutting through a series of “natives’ towns.” The “new towns” for Africans that initially were constructed as autonomous satellite cities in the 1950s but have become encapsulated by the expanding
urban tissue in recent decades, constitute the fifth structuring element. The sixth and final element is formed by the particular site of the *Rond Point Victoire*, a major crossroads that remains a mythical site of the city’s legendary nightlife but, more importantly also embodies Kinshasa’s nature of “ville flux” both in local and global terms.

Taken together, these six elements are a means to unravel the spatial logics underlying Kinshasa’s urban tissue that at first sight presents itself as a complex patchwork not governed by any underlying spatial rationale (fig. 5).

Precisely by linking specific buildings and urban sites to these structuring elements, a narrative can be constructed that highlights the politics of architecture and urban design in colonial and postcolonial Kinshasa, without, however, necessarily reducing architecture to politics. This is precisely why we opted to organize the 2013 architectural guide to Kinshasa on the basis of a similar principle of structuring elements. Each of the chapters opens with a text discussing the urban rationale of the structuring element followed by a presentation of a series of buildings that all, in one way or another, are linked to this element. While sticking to the format of the architectural guide, our presentation of buildings thus aimed to construct first and foremost broader tales of a city governed by specific spatial ideas, discourses and practices in both the colonial and postcolonial era. In what follows, we will illustrate how such tales can be informative to re-assess colonial built heritage in a city like Kinshasa, by discussing in some detail three particular sites: a street, a building complex and a neighborhood.

32 Johan Lagae and Bernard Toulier (eds.), *Kinshasa*, op. cit. (note 7).
33 The elements differ somewhat from those of the *Afropolis*-project. In the guide, the structuring elements are defined as follows: (1) Le Mont Ngaliema; (2) The railroad; (3) The river and the harbor; (4) Monumental Axes, (5) l’Avenue Kasa-Vubu; (6) the New Towns; (7) Other sites of interest.
Shaping Kinshasa’s skyline: the boulevard du 30-Juin

The vast and polycentric city of present-day Kinshasa, formerly known as Léopoldville, actually developed during the late nineteenth century out of two separate colonial posts, Léo-Ouest and Léo-Est. Coinciding with two pre-colonial villages (Kintambo and Kinshasa), these new settlements were interconnected by a railway, reaching the various trading posts installed along the edge of the Congo river and linking them via a quickly established railway connection all the way to the harbor city of Matadi, from where ships could navigate all the way to the métropole. Until the early 1920s, Kinshasa was not a city but rather an indispensable node in a colonial infrastructural network geared towards economic exploitation. This was to change when in 1923 the colonial government decided to move the colonial administration from Boma, a settlement closer to the Atlantic Ocean, to Kinshasa. Ambitious urban and architectural projects were soon to be developed to give an adequate shape to the new capital city of the Belgian Congo, yet their realization would prove troublesome. In fact, it was not until the immediate postwar years that some urban projects were proposed explicitly reflecting these ambitions of the colonial establishment. Of these, the master plan of architect Georges Ricquier for “le Grand Léo,” drawn in 1948–1949, is the most telling example.34

What is remarkable in hindsight, however, is that these large scale symbolic urban projects were actually quite unsuccessful. Ricquier’s proposal to build a monumental axis lined with large scale public buildings representing colonial power, which was designed to surpass the Champs Elysées in Paris in grandeur, remained a largely unfinished project on the eve of independence. The importance of Kinshasa as a colonial capital city was thus not represented so much by this intended axis of political power, but rather by the Avenue Albert I, today the boulevard du 30-Juin, a major circulation axis of the “ville européenne” established in the mid-1930s on the tracks of a former railway connection between Léo-Est and Léo-Ouest (fig. 6).

Everyone driving along the long stretch of this boulevard today cannot but be impressed by its sheer size—a motorway in the middle of the city—and its skyline defined by large scale apartment buildings and office blocks (fig. 7).

From an architectural history point of view, this is an interesting site as it provides a sample of the different architectures that were introduced in Kinshasa during the twentieth century. They range from partly prefabricated colonial bungalows and so-called “regionalist” villas of later periods to unique sites like the missionary complex of Saint-Anne, with its neo-gothic cathedral, or the modest central railway station, designed in the late 1930s in an elegant modernist style. The skyline of the boulevard, however, is constituted primarily by buildings of the 1950s, designed in a “tropical modernist” style, an architectural idiom introduced in the colony by architects such as Claude Laurens, whose 60 meter high Sabena residential towers remain one of the landmarks along the boulevard du 30-Juin.35 As

35 For information on the different architects discussed here, see various contributions by Johan Lagae in Anne
such, the boulevard du 30-Juin testifies to the importance of economic power and private initiative during the 1950s building boom that shaped Kinshasa’s skyline.

Along this important axis, we can also find several “corporate modernist” buildings of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as the Banque commerciale du Congo or the seat of the Institut national de la sécurité sociale, with their particular use of prefabricated façade elements that create appealing effects of light and shadow under Kinshasa’s tropical sun. One of the most remarkable buildings of this era, however, is the Sozacom Tower designed by Claude Strebele and André Jacqmain and built between 1969 and 1977. Its choice of materials and sculptural form demonstrate the architects’ emphatic ambition to design a “genuine African skyscraper” in response to the encroachment of the more generic office towers erected along the boulevard du 30-Juin under Mobutu’s rule.

that it was the buildings of Claude Laurens, most of which are situated along this axis, that shaped the capital city of Congo.\textsuperscript{36} This is perhaps not a coincidence, as this urban axis was one of the most mediated urban sites during the colonial era. Indeed, colonial propaganda of the 1950s presents the boulevard du 30-Juin as the icon of a modernized Kinshasa that represented “le nouveau Congo” of the postwar era (\textbf{fig. 8}).

Similarly, the visual propaganda of the Mobutu regime also explicitly played out in the architecture of this boulevard. In one of the regime’s most seminal publications, the 1975 book entitled \textit{500 visages du Zaïre}, the boulevard is defined as “the Wall Street of Kinshasa.”\textsuperscript{37} The latter description is significant, as it unveils the economic logic that in fact has underscored the shaping of this particular urban environment since the colonial era, as this urban axis formed the backbone of what was from the 1910s the commercial heart of the city. Moreover, one cannot understand the emergence of the 1950s modernist skyline of the boulevard du 30-Juin without taking into account that this was the prime site of interest of Belgian real estate agents and building contractors in search of new markets for their activities.\textsuperscript{38} Economic, rather than political power has thus always been at work here,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[37] \textit{500 visages du Zaïre}, Kinshasa: Bureau du Président de la République du Zaïre, 1975, 213.
\item[38] Johan Lagae, “Léopoldville-Bruxelles, villes miroirs ?,” op. cit. (note 16).
\end{footnotes}
although the distinction between the two has often been ambiguous, especially during the Mobutu regime.

In this respect, there is a remarkable continuity in the ambition to shape Kinshasa’s skyline along this axis, which blurs the idea that a strict rupture existed between the colonial and postcolonial era. The colonial structures along the boulevard du 30-Juin do not seem to be burdened by the “dissonant history” of Belgian colonial rule, as they are not viewed as being directly linked with an oppressive power as other more public buildings, such as the Palace of Justice or the building housing the colonial administration, might be. Instead, to a large extent these modernist edifices have helped shape the memory of Kin-la-Belle (Kin the beautiful), a romanticized if not nostalgic view of Kinshasa’s past when it was still considered one of Africa’s “urban jewels,” an image standing in direct opposition to the discourse on the contemporary condition of Congo’s capital city, tellingly summarized in the popular expression Kin-la-poubelle (Kin the dustbin).

I want to claim here that pointing out the economic logic of the skyline from a historical perspective is useful for reassessing the built legacy along this particular axis, especially since present-day Kinshasa is still witnessing the crucial impact of economically driven urban operations precisely on these sites. Foreign investors such as the Rakeen group, for instance, are currently building impressive new projects with a mixed program (housing, hotels, commerce) along the boulevard du 30-Juin that aim to constitute the new landmarks of twenty first century Congo (fig. 9).

With their fancy formal appearance and up-to-date comfort, they are in fact completely disconnected from Kinshasa’s current urban reality and project another image for the city which takes its models from abroad.39 By continuing the “teleological narratives of progress” characteristic of the Modernist city, these real estate operations offer, as Dominique

39 The most extreme real estate development in this respect is the so-called Cité du fleuve, a project that brings Dubai-inspired urbanism to Kinshasa, see http://www.lacitedufleuve.com/ and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9Kl3X5AyZg. Accessed 30 July, 2012.
Malaquais has recently argued, no adequate way of thinking and constructing the African city of the future.\textsuperscript{40}

The “longue durée” of colonial infrastructure: the \emph{Hôpital Mama Yemo}

Along with education, medicine formed one of the spearheads of Belgian colonization.\textsuperscript{41} In the “pioneering” era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, medicine was primarily oriented towards the well-being of the white explorer/colonizer. From the 1920s onwards the colonial state, using missionary congregations, also developed an explicit policy of guaranteeing the health of the African population, combining philanthropic ideas with considerations on how to stabilize the labor force needed for the economic exploitation of the colony. In the decades to come, a fine-grained network of hospitals and dispensaries was installed, covering almost all of the Congolese territory by the mid-1930s. Within the context of the \emph{Ten Year plan for the Social and Economic Development of the Congo} (1949), a second, large scale building campaign in the medical field was started in order to replace the often poorly constructed facilities of the preceding decades. It created, mainly in the urban centers, a number of imposing hospital complexes in modernist style that embodied the introduction of a colonial welfare state during the postwar years.

Kinshasa forms a particular case to investigate the specific importance of the colonial health infrastructure. Indeed, the city counts several impressive facilities, often situated on prime sites and testifying to an explicit ambition to create landmark buildings. Following the logic of colonial urban planning, the infrastructure of health built during the interwar years highlights the spatial segregation along racial lines. The hospital for Europeans, the \emph{Hôpital Reine Elisabeth} sits on a site overlooking the Congo river and benefitting from a welcome breeze, while the main hospital for Africans, known today as the \emph{Hôpital Mama Yemo}, the first parts of which were constructed in 1924, is located in the city center, in close proximity to the buffer zones that were introduced in the urban fabric to separate the European area from the native residential neighborhoods (\textbf{fig. 10}).\textsuperscript{42}

Contemporary sources evoke the up-to-date character of the medical infrastructures of the time. Both hospitals are based on the model of \emph{l’hôpital pavillonnaire}, a typology \textit{en vogue} at the time in the \textit{métropole}. But architects of the Public Works Department of the colonial administration designing these facilities also sought to adjust western building types to a


\textsuperscript{42} Recent research has demonstrated that the hospital for Africans, the construction of which started in 1924, was in fact located on the “wrong” side of the “cordon sanitaire,” resulting in a continuous flux of Africans into the “ville européenne,” a situation strongly lamented during the interwar years but never amended. See Johan Lagae, “Cracks in the ‘cordon sanitaire’. Hospital architecture, urban planning and colonial policy in the Belgian Congo, 1920–1960,” paper presented at the “Colonial and postcolonial urban planning in Africa,” conference organized by the IPHS in Lisbon, September 2013.
tropical climate. The architecture of the *Hôpital Mama Yemo*, for instance, is characterized by covered outdoor verandahs and a specific roof shape that allows the interior spaces to be naturally ventilated (fig. 11).

As such, the complex forms a particularly interesting example of the more mundane buildings erected all over the colony during that era, in order to provide the infrastructure necessary for the success of colonial governmentality. In the mid-1930s, some edifices in
an art deco style were also erected on the site of the *Hôpital Mama Yemo*, among which a medical laboratory and a school to train “assistants médicaux indigènes,” indicating the importance given by the colonial authorities to medical care for the colonized population (fig. 12).

As elsewhere, Kinshasa witnessed a second building boom in the area of medical infrastructure in the aftermath of the launching of the Ten Year Plan. An important, modernist extension was made to the *Hôpital Reine Elisabeth*. Also the *Hôpital Mama Yemo* saw the addition of some new buildings in the 1950s. But a major project to construct a completely new and up-to-date facility for which architect Georges Ricquier made a design, which never got beyond the stage of the drawing board. During the Mobutu regime, the colonial complex remained a prime site for health care, its name underlining its important status. Today, the *Hôpital Mama Yemo* still functions as a major site of health care in Congo’s capital city, notwithstanding the fact that its infrastructure is rather run down, due to a lack of maintenance. As with many other hospitals, the financial means for substantial renovation are lacking or come mainly from development aid programs.

Such hospitals, just as school buildings for that matter, testify to the endurance of the colonial built legacy. In today’s Congo, they still provide a crucial part of the infrastructure required to respond to the immense needs in terms of health care and education. The often dilapidated colonial edifices can easily be used to construct a discourse of “before/after.”

43 *Mama Yemo* refers to the name of president Mobutu’s mother.
44 While Kinshasa has witnessed the construction of a number of new medical facilities in recent years, a large number of them financed and built with Chinese aid, such alternatives are often not accessible to most of the *Kinois* for financial reasons. For lack of any form of social security, access to health care remains a most problematic aspect of everyday life in Kinshasa, as elsewhere in DR Congo.
after independence” that serves what some have called the “politics of nostalgia.” Indeed, hospitals and schools were visual markers par excellence of the benefits that were brought to the “Heart of Darkness” by colonization, and have been portrayed as such in colonial propaganda time and again (fig. 13).

Juxtaposing 1950s photographs of fully equipped ward rooms with contemporary shots of rundown medical infrastructure lacking even the most elementary facilities has proven to be a particularly efficient strategy to present Congo, and Africa in general, as a region in perpetual crisis ever since the (Belgian) colonial project has ended.

The photo-exhibition entitled Moeders in Congo (= Mothers in Congo) that was presented in the Zuiderpershuis, a multicultural center in Antwerp in 2011, forms a telling case of the slippages that can occur in such a context. The exhibition was constructed around a series of photographs taken by Lieve Blancquaert, a very popular Flemish photographer, of women in Congolese hospitals during pregnancy or giving birth. The curators decided to complement this series with a number of historical photographs depicting similar scenes during the colonial era, selected from the collection of the Antwerp Tropical Institute. The “before/after” effect this juxtaposition inevitably created—an effect that surprisingly enough had not been anticipated by the exhibition’s curators—led to a huge controversy even among the staff of the Zuiderpershuis, and resulted in the closing down of the show shortly after it opened.

Figure 13: Typical 1950s photograph presenting up-to-date medical facilities in a hospital in Kinshasa, with a caption reading “Le Congolais a le sens inné du diagnostic. Habile de ses mains, il a un don réel pour dispenser les soins les plus délicats.”

45  See in this respect a forthcoming issue of the journal Politique Africaine, entitled “The politics of nostalgia: remains of development and traces of modernity in Africa,” which will be edited by Guillaume LACHENAL and Aïssatou MBOJE-POUYE.
46  This became particularly evident in the comments on and reviews of Carl De Keyzer’s photo book and exhibition Congo (belge), see also note 3.
47  On the controversy this initiative raised, see Bart VAN PEEL, “Liever choqueren dan censureren,” De Standaard, 29 November 2011.
How to think then of such colonial medical infrastructure in terms of heritage? How to mediate between the real urgency of ameliorating and bringing up-to-date these rundown medical facilities without falling into the trap of the “politics of nostalgia” that is so strongly linked to this particular form of what Ann Laura Stoler has so evocatively called “imperial debris.”

In line with what I have argued above, what we need are new forms of historical investigations that can provide us with a more nuanced understanding of these landscapes of colonial health that testify to both their philanthropic and disciplining agenda, but that also provides insights on how these infrastructures actually functioned, were perceived and accommodated particular local practices in dealing with sickness and death during colonial and postcolonial times. For, as some scholars have already demonstrated, health care formed a particular site of encounter between modernity and tradition, creating opportunities for the particular group of the African medical staff to climb the social ladder. In other words, to assess the heritage value of such sites as the Hôpital Mama Yemo in Kinshasa, what we need is in depth archival research combined with an anthropological inquiry of its spaces and an engagement with memory work, interviewing former and current stakeholders.

The afterlife of colonial monuments: the Mont Ngaliema

The third and last case-study I want to present here is the Mont Ngaliema, a highly symbolic site in Kinshasa. In colonial propaganda, the site was linked to the “founding father” of Kinshasa, Henri Morton Stanley, as it was here that the famous explorer created the colonial outpost of what would become Congo’s capital city. In 1956, actually quite late in the colonial era, a monumental statue of Stanley was erected on the hilltop overlooking the panorama of the Congo River. But the memory of the founding of the city was also embedded in the nearby “cimetière des pionniers,” a site containing tombs of the first colonials having resided in what was then called Léopoldville. Even today, one can find structures on Mont Ngaliema that bear witness to this first colonial outpost. Partly prefabricated metallic structures for the colonial administration, a small railway station, the first medical facilities, traces of the missionary post of Scheut, and the chapel of Mr. Sims, testify to the early protestant presence in Kinshasa. The Mont Ngaliema was soon to lose its importance in favor of Léo-Est, which developed rapidly as the commercial center of the city from the 1910s onwards. Yet, because of its milder climate, it also remained a preferred site of the colonial elite, some of whom built impressive private residences there.

Under Mobutu’s rule, the Mont Ngaliema again became a site invested with symbolic meaning. In 1966, in the context of his policy of a “Recours à l’authenticité,” Mobutu

50 A rare example of such study is Aimé Kakuji Kyungu, “Sendwe Mining,” Socio-Anthropologie du monde social de l’hôpital à Lubumbashi (D R Congo), unpublished doctoral dissertation, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2011.
51 On this policy, which aimed at erasing all remaining traces of colonialism, see Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, Histoire générale du Congo, op. cit. (note 18).
dismantled the Stanley monument, having the impressive sculpture transferred to a warehouse at the outskirts of the city. Mobutu also introduced the name *Mont Ngaliema* to replace the earlier colonial name *Mont Stanley*. The change is significant as it refers to pre-colonial power structures, the name *Mont Ngaliema* being a direct reference to the local chief with whom Stanley had negotiated land property rights in 1881. Mobutu, who presented himself as the “chief” of the new independent Congo, thus skillfully drew on Congo’s pre-colonial history to inscribe himself in a local lineage of power, while also making a critical statement vis-à-vis the former colonial powers. Moreover, the new political and economic elite still regarded the *Mont Ngaliema* as a prestigious site to build their residences, also stimulating the development of the nearby neighborhoods of *Joliparc* or *Macampagne*, which today serve as gated communities for the wealthy, including some of Kinshasa’s leading musicians.

The political significance of the site was further strengthened when Mobutu decided to build the *Cité de l’Organisation de l’Unité Africaine* (*OUA*) on the *Mont Ngaliema* in order to hold the fourth meeting of this international union of African leaders in 1967. Also receiving the seat of the nation’s military and secret services, the *Mont Ngaliema* turned into a presidential enclave, where Mobutu even planned to have an impressive palace.

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52 Initially the site was even called *Mont Léopold*.

built. However, at least until the early 1970s, the Mont Ngaliema remained a public site where the Kinois were allowed to walk in the presidential park which included an open air theater, a 1971 project by French architects Anabel Bado and Daniel Visart, as well as many artworks by leading Congolese artists such as Alfred Liyolo, Mokengo, Alexis Lemda and Kinsengwa. Official sources of the time stress how the park became a popular venue on Sunday afternoons.\textsuperscript{54} Mobutu’s plan to turn the Mont Ngaliema into a cultural site was also embodied by his initiative to locate the Institut des Musées Nationaux on the hill. Still holding an important collection of Congolese artifacts and craft, the museum only consists of storage spaces and offices, having no display rooms to showcase the national legacy to the citoyens. The visibility of its collection was thus being secured through lavishly illustrated publications of its then director, Joseph Cornet, most often prefaced by the president himself.\textsuperscript{55}

Today, one can still find the Institut des Musées Nationaux on the Mont Ngaliema, but it has become an even less inviting site than under the late Mobutu rule\textsuperscript{56}. Whoever wants to visit the collections first needs to negotiate his/her entry to the site with the presidential guards. Once inside, entry to the storage rooms of the museum can only be obtained at an official entry rate that by far surpasses the financial means of the average Kinois. It is thus all the more surprising that in 2010, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) decided to invest in the site of the Institut

\textsuperscript{54} Kalongo Molei, Kinshasa. Ce village d’hier, Kinshasa: s.e., 1979, p. 250 and 286–287.


\textsuperscript{56} Plans for building a new museum to house the rich collections have been formulated for several years and a site in the middle of the city has been indicated for the purpose. The new museum is to be built and financed with Korean aid.
des Musées Nationaux. It financed the lay-out of an open air museum-like setting to present the former colonial monuments that had been transferred there in 2005: the equestrian statue of Leopold II, the statue of king Albert I, two busts of Queen Elisabeth,… Given the surrealistic scenery of the statues, placed on clumsy pedestals in a garden like setting which partly opens up to the panoramic backdrop of the majestic Congo river and the skyline of Kinshasa, yet remains a privatized enclosure, one can question the agenda underlying what was presented as a “gift” to the city and the country (fig. 15).

“À voir absolument”?

The last case confronts us heads on with the complexities linked to the issue of colonial built heritage in postcolonial Kinshasa. It raises questions concerning who is in charge of this particular heritage, what kind of messages it is supposed to convey and who constitutes its target audience. In short, it brings to the fore the crucial question of “whose heritage” that Stuart Hall raised when he discussed heritage as a discursive practice in the context of 1990s multicultural Britain. Having been involved in several projects documenting the colonial built legacy of Kinshasa, but also of other cities in Congo, I remain ambivalent about how to define my own position in these matters. Conducting historical research for the Kinshasa. Patrimoine urbain project allowed me to operate as an academic scholar producing knowledge, in the terms described in the introduction of this paper. However it also forced me to step outside of this role, as I was involved in defining the selection of the 150 sites that would be presented in the final publication.

First proposals for this selection were based both on preliminary historical research as well as on what had been documented during two fieldwork missions in 2009. But discussing these proposals with a number of Congolese colleagues from the city’s urban planning office (beau), the National Archives, the Institut des Musées Nationaux as well as with some local historians such as Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu or Léon de Saint-Moulin made us explicitly aware of our own, often implicit, biases. Of course, some of the divergences on what to present and what not were related to our different professional profiles (architect, city planner, art or architectural historian, historian,…), but they were at least as much influenced by the very different understanding of the city of those embedded in its everyday life and we who, as initiators of the project, inevitably had an outsider’s perspective.

If we in the end did take up several suggestions of local stakeholders, among whom a number of mayors of the various neighborhoods in Kinshasa who had signaled sites they believed of importance, we decided to stand largely with the initial decision to focus on sites with an architectural and urban interest, thus excluding suggested sites that did have

57 “La Monusco rénove trois sites culturels congolais,” Échos de la MONUSCO, vol. 1, no. 2, 11 August 2010. The other two cultural sites in Kinshasa the upgrading of which was financed by Monusco for a total amount of 50,000$ are the botanical garden and the exhibition hall of the Academy of Fine Arts.

a “lieux de mémoire” quality yet lacked an expressive physical infrastructure to represent it. But what we did decide upon after intense dialogues with local partners was that the title of the project had to change. It is not a coincidence that the term “patrimoine”/“heritage” does not appear in the title of the final publication, which ultimately became the more neutral Kinshasa. Architecture et paysage urbain. We came to see the project as a way of providing documentation, not as a proposal of what should be defined as the highlights of the city’s colonial built legacy. In the following publication, the 2013 architectural guide on Kinshasa, I have articulated such decisions more explicitly, in an introduction that explains why this architectural guide does not necessarily aim at what is “à voir absolument.”59

Thinking through this experience as well as a collaboration I have had over recent years with a collective of young artists in Lubumbashi,60 I have come to believe that one of the real challenges for architectural historians working on the built environment in a postcolonial context lies in developing new strategies and ways of writing history that can produce forms of knowledge which will enable and stimulate a variety of local stakeholders, from policy makers to urban dwellers, to construct their own narratives and define in a more nuanced way their own positions vis-à-vis this particular legacy, a legacy they have appropriated and even domesticated long before we started to rediscover it.

Abstract

In response to Filip De Boeck’s 2004 thesis that Kinshasa’s urbanity exists “beyond the city’s architecture,” this paper argues that in order to grasp its contemporary urban condition it does make sense to take into account the built environment and urban form, in particular those produced during colonial times, as these still to a large extent define the urban landscape of what is today the capital city of the Dem. Congo. Questioning conventional approaches to (colonial) built heritage, the author argues here that any reflection on this particular legacy has much to gain from a critical form of history writing that brings to the fore the particular context and the actors that produced it, as well as from engaging in memory work that can unveil how the urban infrastructure has been inscribed over time with new meanings. Using the example of Kinshasa and unraveling its urban fabric as a palimpsest, this paper does not seek to provide historical knowledge on what should be preserved or not, but rather intends to illustrate that the real challenge for architectural historians working in this domain lies in developing complex and layered narratives on which other stakeholders can draw to articulate their position vis-à-vis this colonial built heritage in a more nuanced way.


60  Since 2005 I have been in contact with a group of young artists in Lubumbashi that now operate under the label Picha, the Swahili word for image. One of the forms of collaborations has been my role as scientific advisor for the two most recent editions of the event Picha Rencontres, a biennale for contemporary African photography and video art. Organized in 2010 and again in 2013, these events have been constructed around artistic interventions in the public realm of the city of Lubumbashi. In that respect, my role has consisted in providing the organizers of the Biennale, Patrick Mudekereza and Sammy Baloji, as well as the curators of the two editions, Simon Njami and Elvira Dyangani Ose respectively, with a critical mapping of the built environment of the city. See Johan Lagae and Sofie Boonen, “Des pierres qui (nous) parlent,” in Simon Njami (ed.), Rencontres Picha. Biennale de Lubumbashi du 13 au 17 octobre 2010, Paris: Filigranes, 2012.
Zusammenfassung

Als Antwort auf Filip De Boecks These aus dem Jahr 2004, dass Kinshasas Urbanität „über die Architektur der Stadt hinaus“ existiert, führt dieser Artikel an, dass man, um die gegenwärtige urbane Situation zu begreifen, den Blick sinnvollerweise auf die gebaute Umwelt und die Stadtform und speziell die Bauten der Kolonialzeit richten muss, weil diese immer noch in weiten Teilen die Stadtlandschaft dessen bestimmen, was heute die Hauptstadt der Demokratischen Republik Kongo ist. Ich stelle die konventionellen Herangehensweisen an (koloniales) Bauwesen mit dem Argument in Frage, dass jede Auseinandersetzung mit diesem speziellen Erbe von einer kritischen Form der Historiographie nur profitieren kann, die zum einen den besonderen Kontext und die ihn prägenden Akteure in den Vordergrund rückt und die darüber hinaus eine Erinnerungsarbeit aufnimmt, die es ermöglicht, die mit der Zeit von neuen Sinnschichten überlagerte städtische Infrastruktur freizulegen. Ausgehend vom Beispiel Kinshasas, dessen urbane Palimpsest-Struktur entschlüsselt wird, will dieser Artikel kein historisches Wissen darüber vermitteln, was erhalten werden sollte und was nicht, sondern möchte eher die tatsächlichen Herausforderungen für in diesem Bereich arbeitende Architekturhistoriker darstellen, nämlich die Entwicklung komplexer und vielschichtiger Erzählungen, auf die andere Beteiligte zurückgreifen können, um ihre Haltung gegenüber dem kolonialen Bauwerke in nuancierterer Weise zu formulieren.

Schlagwortindex : Kolonialarchitektur, Koloniale Stadtplanung, Kolonialerbe, Koloniales Gedächtnis
Geographie : Afrika, Zentralafrika, Demokratische Republik Kongo, Kinshasa
Chronologischer Index : 20. Jahrhundert

Resumen

En respuesta a la tesis de Filip De Boeck de 2004, según la cual la urbanidad de Kinshasa existe «más allá de la arquitectura de la ciudad», este artículo sostiene que para comprender su naturaleza urbana contemporánea, conviene tener en cuenta el entorno arquitectónico y la estructura urbana, en especial los edificios erigidos durante las épocas coloniales, ya que siguen definiendo en gran medida el entorno urbano de la actual capital de la República Democrática del Congo. Cuestionando enfoques convencionales sobre el patrimonio arquitectónico (colonial), se sostenie que la reflexión sobre este legado singular exige una narración crítica de la historia que saque a la palestra el contexto específico y los actores que lo hicieron posible, así como un trabajo sobre la memoria capaz de revelar cómo con el paso del tiempo, la infraestructura urbana se ha ido cargando de nuevos significados. Este artículo utiliza el ejemplo de Kinshasa y muestra su tejido urbano a modo de palimpsesto, pero no con el objeto de proporcionar un conocimiento histórico de lo que se debería conservar o no, sino con el fin de ilustrar que el verdadero desafío de los historiadores de la arquitectura radica en el desarrollo de narrativas complejas, en varias capas, a las que puedan recurrir otros grupos de interés para articular de forma más matizada su posición respecto a este patrimonio arquitectónico colonial.
Résumé

En réponse à la thèse avancée par Filip de Boeck en 2004 selon laquelle l’urbanité du Kinshasa existe « au-delà de l’architecture de la ville », cet article affirme que pour saisir la condition urbaine actuelle il est judicieux de prendre en compte l’environnement bâti ainsi que la forme urbaine, et plus particulièrement les constructions de l’époque coloniale qui, de nos jours encore, définissent dans une large mesure la capitale actuelle de la République démocratique du Congo. En questionnant les approches conventionnelles du patrimoine (colonial) bâti, l’auteur soutient la thèse que toute réflexion sur cet héritage particulier a beaucoup à gagner d’une forme d’historiographie critique mettant l’accent sur le contexte singulier et les acteurs y ayant contribué, tout en s’engageant dans un travail de mémoire susceptible de dévoiler la façon dont l’infrastructure urbaine a été inscrite dans le temps par de nouvelles significations. En prenant l’exemple de Kinshasa et en démêlant le tissu urbain en tant que palimpseste, cet article ne vise pas à fournir des connaissances historiques sur ce qui devrait être ou ne pas être conservé. Il s’applique plutôt à démontrer que le vrai défi pour les historiens de l’architecture travaillant dans ce domaine se situe dans le développement de récits riches et complexes sur lesquelles les parties intéressées peuvent s’appuyer pour exprimer de façon plus nuancée leur position à l’égard de ce patrimoine bâti colonial.

Index de mots-clés : architecture coloniale, mémoire coloniale, patrimoine colonial, urbanisme colonial
Index géographique : Afrique, Afrique centrale, République démocratique du Congo, Kinshasa
Index chronologique : xxe siècle

Riassunto

In risposta alla tesi del 2004 di Filip De Boeck secondo la quale l’urbanità di Kinshasa esiste « al di là dell’architettura stessa della città », l’autore di questo articolo sostiene che, per poterne cogliere la condizione di città contemporanea, ha senso prendere in considerazione l’ambiente edilizio e le forme urbane, in particolare quelle create durante il periodo coloniale, in quanto esse definiscono ancora in gran parte il paesaggio urbano di quella che oggi è la capitale della Repubblica Democratica del Congo. Mettendo in discussione gli approcci tradizionali nei confronti del patrimonio architettonico (coloniale), l’autore asserisce che la riflessione su questo particolare lascito sarebbe favorita da una forma critica di storiografia capace di portare alla luce il contesto specifico e gli attori che lo hanno creato, come anche dall’avvio di un lavoro sulla memoria che possa rivelare le interpretazioni sempre nuove dell’infrastruttura urbana nel corso del tempo. Usando l’esempio di Kinshasa e srotolandone il tessuto urbano come una palinsesto, questo articolo non aspira ad offrire conoscenze storiche in merito a cosa debba o meno essere preservato, ma intende piuttosto illustrare che la vera sfida per gli storici dell’architettura che lavorano in quest’ambito sta nello sviluppare una narrativa complessa e su più livelli dalla quale poi altri possano prendere lo spunto per esprimere in modo più sfumato il loro punto di vista su
questo patrimonio architettonico coloniale.

Parole chiave: architettura coloniale, urbanismo coloniale, patrimonio coloniale, memoria coloniale

Indice geografico: Africa, Africa centrale, Repubblica Democratica del Congo, Kinshasa
Indice cronologico: xx secolo