

THE CITY OF RED SAND A SCHOOL/POLITICAL CENTRE IN THE MUSSEQUES OF LUANDA, ANGOLA

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Abstract: This paper is situated within a historical and theoretical evaluation of architecture and urbanism of colonial and post-colonial Luanda, where settlements of social and economic misery known as musseques ('red sand', the colour of the earth) dramatically contrast with the high standards of development in the city centre. The article incorporates the design of a School/Political Centre in the outskirts of Luanda. The aim is to propose an integrative complex that can respond to the community's urban conflicts, focusing on the potential of architecture to support innovative teaching and social participation. The idea is to develop an educational programme that equally promotes scientific and creative subjects, and strengthens the relation between the school and the community. The research allows for reflections on the role of NGO and other local socio-political forces that are mobilized by such a design project.

Key words: Musseques, non-planned settlements, Luanda, Angola

LA CIUDAD DE ARENA ROJA UNA ESCUELA / CENTRO POLÍTICO EN EL MUSSEQUES DE LUANDA, ANGOLA

Resumen: Este artículo centrarse en una evaluación histórica e teórica de la arquitectura y urbanismo de los periodos colonial e pos-colonial de Luanda, donde los asentamientos de miseria social y económica conocidos como musseques ('tierra roja', el color del suelo) contrastan drásticamente con los elevados padrones de desarrollo en el centro de la ciudad. Este trabajo incorpora el proyecto de una Escuela/Centro Político en la periferia de Luanda. El objetivo es proponer una respuesta a los conflictos urbanos de la comunidad, focalizándose en la arquitectura como medio de apoyar métodos innovadores de educación e participación social. La idea es desarrollar un programa educativo que promueve igualmente disciplinas científicas y creativas, para fortalecer la relación entre escuela y comunidad. La investigación permite reflexionar sobre el rollo de las ONG y otras fuerzas político-sociales que serán movilizadas por este proyecto.

Palabras-clave: Musseques; asentamientos informales; Luanda; Angola

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A CIDADE DE AREIA VERMELHA UMA ESCOLA/CENTRO POLÍTICO NOS MUSSEQUES DE LUANDA, ANGOLA

Resumo: Este artigo centra-se numa avaliação histórica e teórica da arquitectura e urbanismo dos períodos colonial e pós-colonial de Luanda, onde os assentamentos miseráveis, social e economicamente, conhecidos como musseques ('terra vermelha', a cor do solo) contrastam drasticamente com os elevados padrões de desenvolvimento no centro da cidade. O trabalho incorpora o projecto de uma Escola/ Centro Político na periferia de Luanda. O objectivo é propor um complexo que responda aos conflitos urbanos da comunidade, focando-se na arquitectura como meio para apoiar métodos inovadores de ensino e participação social. A ideia é desenvolver um programa educativo que promova igualmente disciplinas científicas e criativas, e que reforce a relação entre escola e comunidade. A investigação permite reflectir sobre o papel das ONG e outras forças político-sociais que serão mobilizadas por este projecto.

Palavras-chave: Musseques; ocupação desordenada ; Luanda; Angola

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the architecture and urbanism of the musseques or slum areas of Luanda, in Angola, looking particularly at its origins and current spatial configurations. Proposals for structuring this non-planned settlements are presented. This subject is part of a PhD investigation based in the Department of Architecture and Spatial Design, London Metropolitan University.

2. Objectives

The immediate circumstances and requirements for education, for the cultivation of political responsibility in the deprived musseques of Luanda, along with the development of local participation/commitment in the design and construction of the building itself, provide the raw materials for the research dimension of this investigation. There are, however, two areas of more general import, which deserve proper treatment as research:

a) The school is seen as a typical case, as part of a strategy of empowerment. This is embodied in the promise and nature of education to promote self-understanding and a public voice. The actual physiognomy of the school is itself seen as a type – not necessarily in its precise outlines, but rather as a way of interpreting the complex brief, and how to construct it. Lastly, the co-operative nature of the project offers insights into the transformation of a life of subjection and low-level resistance to one of empowerment through common commitment.

b) The project is not understood as the top-down provision of an educational facility, invoking the standard protocols of school codes and the building industry (although there are valuable lessons to be learned from both). Instead, it takes place in the sphere of practical knowledge, which is far less dependent upon the usual technical approach to design, to materials and their supply and fabrication, to the criteria for evaluation, to the ultimate meaning of the project. This is a new area of research in architectural studies, growing in part out of dissatisfaction with the results of Angola's late capitalist procedures and in part out of simply trying to be honest about how sophisticated knowledge (e.g.: statics, economics, statistical data) communicates with political or social ideals in terms of the primordial experiences of decorum or setting that are the basis of any architectural or urban order.

3. Metodology

The school project that is the basis for the proposed article is situated in the “shadow” of an architectural conflict that is largely directed by the increasing “overdevelopment” of Luanda's city centre. This study looks particularly at the nature of this conflict by studying the history and politics of architectural and urban development in the context of colonial and post-colonial Angola.

By way of understanding this context, the paper looks first at the nature of the impoverished settlements surrounding Luanda, where three quarters of the population live. Since 2002, when peace arrived to Angola after forty years of almost continuous wars, the profile of the city has begun to change dramatically, due to the neo-liberalist policies of economic growth pursued by the city administration. Even as the central

business district acquires a familiar assembly of high-standard residential and commercial developments, the periphery expands with ever more populous slums. The indifference shown by local authorities and foreign investment toward the plight of these people requires a strategic consideration more sympathetic to social justice.

On a more specific and detailed scale, the work on the school has two objectives. Firstly, according to the World Bank, educating all children worldwide will require the construction of 10 million new classrooms in more than 100 countries by 2015. At the same time, millions of existing classrooms are in serious need of repair and refurbishment. In the musseques of Luanda, it is estimated that half of the population are under fifteen years of age, therefore the first priority is to provide a decent education as the basis for claiming a place in the late capitalist trajectory of Luanda. Secondly, the proposed investigation undertakes a study of the musseque's existing and absent resources, so that the school can also serve as a common place for personal, social and cultural development. It is proposed that, through the comparatively modest investment in a school, this nucleus can stimulate the political and social solidarity requisite for participation of these marginalized people in the creative and civic debates of Luanda.

The originality of the proposal resides in seeing the school as a vehicle by which these dispossessed urban immigrants, a largely composite people from several regions, might begin to attain a proper urban presence. As a first public institution, the school/political centre will enable the communities to acquire a proper civic voice – eventually participating in the destiny of Luanda, instead of simply being dependent upon it. Implied within this is the gradual nucleation of the musseque as a town-within-the-city as part of the larger strategy for participation.

4. The City of Red Sand. Building from the Ground.

The genesis of the musseques almost coincides with the origin of the city of Luanda itself, in the 16th century. Musseque was the term used in Angolan toponymy to refer to the reddish sandy land that surrounded the city and extended through the plateau overlooking the ocean. Musseque is a naturally tinted clay containing aluminous matters such as iron oxide, that gives it a red-ochre appearance. The word gained a

sociologic and urban meaning when it started including the quintals where slave traders accumulated their “product” and later the clusters inhabited by freed African slaves.

The expansion of the musseques is closely connected to the city’s development. In every historical political change or economic impulse, there was a growth of migration from rural areas to the city. At the same time, each phase of planned urbanization corresponded to the disappearance of large number of houses, a dynamic process that is still happening in the 21st century.

The strategy of Luanda’s musseque population is to take practical action of construction and to solve their own necessities: access to land, shelter building, illegal connection to basic sanitary and electrical infrastructures, opening of unplanned paths and streets. The observation of an extensive and highly dense unplanned periphery shows that the musseques’ population has capacities and knows how to build their own houses according to the climate, the existing resources and their necessities. The houses are continuously improved and transformed into a more qualified and consolidated urban fabric.

The promoter of community empowerment John F.C.Turner states that the houses’ deficiencies and imperfections are infinitely more tolerable if they are the owner’s responsibility and not anyone else’s. He argues that when inhabitants control the major decisions and are free to give their contribution to the design, building process and management of their houses, the social and personal welfare is stimulated. On the other hand, “when people don’t have control or responsibility in key-decisions of the housing process, the communities can become socially and economically instable”.¹ This is what is happening in Luanda.

5. Self-built Urbanism

The musseques cyclic development can be merged with the history of the country in many ways. These settlements have been more and more pushed into the natural plateau of Luanda’s region, where less “obstacles” can be found, particularly the demonstrations of political power and economic progress. Its physiognomy is renewed or altered year after year, moving far and far away from the city center. The older

musseques show a more consolidated structure when compared to the most recent ones. Public areas include a hierarchical network of streets and semi-public squares used by the local inhabitants. The main streets are transitional areas concentrated with people realizing commercial activities under wooden shelters displayed disorderly, while the secondary streets connect to the inner core of the dense urban pattern. With the crescent increase of population, the structures were suffering transformations. Public areas were filled with more houses and common spaces became adulterated, in many cases reducing the notion of community spaces to tortuous “alleys”, stinking labyrinths with open-air sewage systems. It is believed that a politics of intervention in the musseques should reformulate the existing spatial hierarchy, defining clear public, private, semi-public and semi-private areas. The musseques are organized as a city, in which the sense of self-sufficient community shapes the spatial arrangement. Private houses are mixed with public facilities such as the schools, nurseries and medical centres. This makes local involvement essential in an intervention like the building of the proposed school. The German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) wanted the school to be an institution for the “cultivation of family life, and the forming of national life and even of all humanity”.² This will for interaction between school and the close and distant environment justifies deepening the reasoning of the musseque’s spatial configuration. The importance of social interaction and education is mentioned by the American educational reformer John Dewey (1859-1952): “True education comes through the stimulation of the children’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which they find themselves”. His opinions on the value and culture of family and community should be reflected in the life of the school. The school should grow gradually out of the home, it should “deep and extend the child’s sense of values bound up in his home”. The convictions arising from the interrelationship between education and urban context call for a closer understanding of the site’s spatial logic, a complex task as the land’s occupation is completely obstreperous. The situation varies according to the plot’s owner, which is largely the State. Laws of nationalization transformed most of Luanda’s urban plots as State’s property, increasing the possibilities of control.

In suburbia areas the Government doesn’t have such a strong capacity of intervening as in the city centre. In “no man’s land” the first occupants become the

“owners” and start to explore the site and building their houses until the vicious cycle of development forces the withdrawal. Besides establishing themselves and their families, the pioneer inhabitants usually divide the adjacent land and rent it. “Most of the times the occupants are not the owners. Usually the owners provide the materials necessary for construction but impose the compromise of staying their patrons.”³

The houses of the musseque start from the most basic shape of a shelter, known as cubata, built slowly and in phases. Some are made of cardboard and plastic, while the more fortunate use adobe or cement blocks on the walls and straw or corrugated metal on the roofs. Usually, the typology consists in a two-room core which can be expanded if the inhabitants obtain further resources. The notion of precariousness and temporariness is substituted for that of believing that the intervention can go beyond structural constraints. Families can take up to ten years to complete their houses. Most are constantly upgrading and expanding them as families grow and eventually sub-dividing when children become adults.

The sanitary and infrastructural conditions of the musseques are extremely poor. A large part of the population lack access to running water, as well as other essential services that have to be taken from communal sources at high prices. Transaction of water can become an extremely lucrative business. The most wealthy families and groups of families store it in underground tanks and sell it to their tenants. Other mobile agents include cistern-trucks and children who transport and sell ten-liter cans of non-treated water. However, this exchange is done at much higher prices than the conventional public water provision: “it is expensive to be poor”.⁴

Regarding electricity, the public network serves only selected central areas and peripheral industrial sites. The distribution suffers from bad maintenance and irregular charges, mostly because of the number of illegal connections, the puxadas. In the garbage sector, the musseques are not supplied with containers. It is usually deposited in open-air housing areas and negligently collected by institutional services. Dumping in streets is a common scenario, originating major congestion problems, flooding in the rainy periods and the spreading of diseases. Even in areas where garbage collection is made by official services, the constant delays make the population to burn it or bury it. It is important to find ways to solve these problems. An efficient garbage collection

system, raising the population's awareness and forming collection brigades within the local population, would bring positive changes to the musseques environment and reduce dramatically the number of infectious diseases.

The spatial problems need to be solved or alleviated, so that life conditions in the musseques can be improved. The provision of decent infrastructures implies road repositioning or planning. Drainage, sewerage systems, water sanitation and electricity should be included in the political program for the betterment of the musseques. The inhabitants shouldn't have the responsibility to improvise solutions only by themselves. However they can be active characters in this process, official technical and administrative assistance can be reconciled with communal and individual efforts. "Assisted self-construction" can be an alternative solution for infrastructural improvement.

6. A Tactic of Resistance

General opinions report that Luanda's slum areas display crudely the dark colours of war-displacement and Western colonization. But Angolan writer Pepetela has a rather positive view on the contribute of the musseques to the Nation's progress. He believes that the heterogeneous and apparently disordered pattern has a rather logical explanation, as a strategy of "resistance", carefully thought to make colonial authorities' control more difficult. Pepetela explains that by the end of the 1950's, in the red sand settlements, groups of active young inhabitants started teaching others to write and read, because they believed people "had to be cult in order to be free". According to this author, social organizations started to appear in absentia of the authorities, "protected by the shadows of the alleys", serving as the starting point of unauthorized political movements. The silent work of those groups would be in the origin of the events of the 4th of February 1961, when 250 pro-independence militants stormed a police station and Luanda's São Paulo prison, killing seven policemen.

In the riot, forty of the attackers died, and none of the prisoners was freed. The government held a funeral for the deceased police officers on the 5th February, and during the funeral Portuguese citizens became enraged and massacred Africans in Luanda, initiating the Guerra do Ultramar or Colonial War that would last until 1974.

“The 4th of February is undoubtedly the work of the musseques of Luanda, where the idea was born and being nurtured, where the operations were prepared. Here, in the red sand, a shout was heard. A shout that echoed unstoppably through all the country.”⁵

7. Participating versus “Bulldozing”

The oil-fuelled boom that followed the peace process after the civil war was over, in 2002, brought billions of foreign investments and hope to the wounded nation. In the structure of Angola’s current economy, natural resources, especially petrol and diamonds, represent 80% of the exports, particularly to China, India and the USA. The national GDP has been raising 14% each year since peaceful democracy has been established (2002-2009).

The Government embraced pro-business policies and offered major land concessions to commercial developers, mostly to international companies willing to create a new Luanda for the 21st century. An increasing demand for residential and business facilities in the city centre results in the raise of land value which is forcing the urban poor to sell their plots and migrate to the periphery where land is cheaper. There is a controversy about what all the new glazed high-rise buildings stand for. Tony Hodges proposes that the “political ideological shift” occurred after Peace arrived to the wounded nation was the reason for the current’s social and economic paradoxes - and urban, too.⁶

The process hasn’t been always clear - mass expropriation of land occupied by poor urban families with inadequate financial compensation is becoming a new feature of post-conflict city development in Angola. As Caroline Kihato explains in a sharp approach to African urbanism, the majority of the population doesn’t see effective results with “progress”. She argues that the policy of “bulldozing the slum areas” and re-locating the urban dwellers in low-cost housing blocks is a superficial decision, as it doesn’t help the people who live with the equivalent of only 2 US dollars per day to pay for basic facilities such as electricity and running water.⁷

It is believed that these “paradoxes” can’t be solved with traditional ways of urban intervention. History shows that conventional large scale “master plans” can’t

be applied to the musseques, otherwise the problem seems to be insoluble. “It is necessary to concentrate in doable projects”, says the Portuguese urban planner Manuel Fernandes de Sá. “It is the capacity of realization that should determine the Plan, contrarily to the traditional urban thinking where plan anticipates the project.

This doesn’t mean that there shouldn’t be a general strategy of urban planning, based in clear social and political aims. In summary, it is needed to elaborate and materialize projects that could be achieved in short-term, that allow for a future qualification of the urban fabric.”⁸

The observation of Luanda’s extended non-planned periphery allows for some conclusions: the inhabitants of the musseque have the capability and know how to build their houses in accordance to the climate, the existing resources and their necessities. Self-construction has been massively practiced, its non-consideration and the decision to follow other types of construction would be a serious mistake. It is important to learn from the existing, to consider the non-designed buildings as a way to solve the housing problems. The acceptance and implementation of these practices is the basis of a politics of dignity and rehabilitation of the modus vivendi of these impoverished peoples.

Self-construction should be encouraged and supported from technical and financial perspectives. This would mobilize the communities because it involves local investments. It reinforces the community’s identification with the environment. It allows for immediate recognition of the population’s necessities because participation is absolutely directed for the resolution of their own problems.

Participation is essential in the sense that people have shown they have an enormous energy and capacity of realization. Following this idea, a positive change should involve a complete survey on the communities’ social structures, their particular problems and capacities, which leaderships exist, which interests are involved,...

Another condition for a convenient structuring of the musseques would be the realization of a well defined registry. Legal normatives are necessary, defining private and collective parcels of the territory, a cadastre that defends the rights and limits of

the owners. Access to land is the first step for a series of operations that allow the proprietary to build a house or a civic centre. “The cadastre is kept and will contribute decisively to the definition of a future urban pattern.”⁹

“Any solution to distress migration will necessarily be complex, and will include several facets”.¹⁰ The implementation of the school in Capalanca can play an important role in the process of institutionalizing the musseque. It is an architectural response to a complex network of local, national and international implications. It is a proactive attempt to translate a crucial statement into a spatial dimension.

8. Conclusion

The objective of this paper is to use the design of a primary school in the musseques of Luanda as a vehicle to learn about social behaviours, architectural design and histories, post-colonial sensitivities, under the rubric of practical knowledge. The school is intended to serve as a nucleus for the development of the cultural and political self-empowerment of the people for and with whom it is designed.

In my current PhD research, I’m undertaking a theoretical and practice-led research about the recent urban transformation of Angola’s capital and the dramatic contrast between the high standards of development in the city centre and the deprivation of the musseques or slum areas in the city’s suburbs.

The understanding of the spatial logic of the slum areas is being analyzed in terms of the strategy of resistance by unauthorized political movements that started appearing in the late 1950’s, which believed that the irregular urban pattern of the musseques could make authority’s control more difficult during the Estado Novo regime. The musseques made a vital contribution to the nation, serving as the starting point of the colonial war, which started in Angola in 1961 and spread to other former Portuguese colonies, leading to their independence in 1975. The musseques suffered a dramatic expansion during the civil war years that followed independence and lasted until 2002, mainly due to migration from internally displaced people who had been attracted by the capital because it promised stability and economic security. This paper tries to understand these processes of space-making as a political act bearing social and cultural implications.

In my investigation I realised the complexity of what humanitarian or western aid means in contemporary Angola if the proposed project for the school should provide a long-lasting support for a deprived community. The intention to moderate a social injustice for which governments or political regimes have avoided taking responsibility could be compromised by an architect – and a Portuguese architect – simply providing a design which the inhabitants are required to accept. The necessity of embodying the ideals of local empowerment in the design and construction of the school became evident in the course of this research.

The topics covered in this investigation lead up to the more philosophical treatment of ‘practical knowledge’. Documentation of the project is therefore set into a background established by conventional research into archival material illuminating the history and current life of the musseques of Luanda. This background material has two layers – a more general history/geography of colonial and post-colonial issues pertaining to Luanda, and a more detailed treatment of the current circumstances of the musseques. The practicalities for producing my research will involve a recurring involvement with the school design (and its recording), requiring several periods in Angola. I hope that the intense work with the community and literally the builders of the school will help me to understand the social relationships between people, as well as to learn from their skills and design practices. I am convinced that such collaboration in which both sides profit from a “practiced” cultural exchange would provide argument of further debates.

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