

# **“Off radar”: private companies and company towns in Africa**

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## **Abstracts**

The process of European colonization in Africa highlighted the crucial role of private companies as important builders of the Empires. Often at borders, enterprises were eager to build “workingman’s paradises”. The presentation looks into a few industrial sites in Angola and former Belgian Congo to further explore: How was the model of “company town” approached and adapted? What is its afterlife? Can the transboundary nature of these places trigger new approaches to still-dominant Western discourses of heritage? Exploring their spatial aspects sheds light on wider rhizomes of knowledge circulation that thicken the history of urban and architectural production.

The process of European colonization in Africa highlighted the crucial role of architecture and urbanism as tools of territorial occupation. It was not only about the plans for bigger cities in the cost lines but also about the smaller villages in the interior that aimed to explore and exploit the territory. To achieve such goals, private companies stood out as a valuable resource and became important agents of the creation of Empires (Coquéry-Vidrovitch and Forest, 1983). These were expected to create not only extractive sites but also settlements to accommodate European and African workers. With an extensive “infrastructural power” (Mann, 1984), companies were able to control several aspects of everyday life, namely through the construction of model company towns and workers’ villages.

Their remote position, often at borders – where they would become “bastions of modernity” (Ferguson, 1999; Cooper, 2004) – required the use of new techniques and urban solutions, fostering a rich and diverse microcosm. The environment should be pleasant so that a “cooperative community” would be compelled to settle in such isolated places. Moreover, it was a “kind of social gardening” to make margins readable to the centre (Scott, 1998). The control over smaller areas meant a centralized approach, plenty of architectural studies and projects, higher speed of construction and constant repairing of building and roads.

Under this scope, industrial settlements became sites of development, modernization and welfare (Cooper, 2004). Several urban and architectural models were transferred and adapted to the African landscape, while the “company town” was set as the main idea to build a “workingman’s paradise” (Crawford, 1995). It worked as a

symbol of a modern way-of-life that could be achieved through work. Along orthogonal grids, large areas of single-family houses, with its own green lawn, were lapped to several social facilities: clubs, sports grounds, gardens, parks, hospitals, museums. It was the “absence of Africa in Africa” through wide boulevards, with lined trees – just like California, some would say (Freyre, 1954). This heterogeneous and international scene created a unique landscape with multiple layers.

Despite this background, private companies remain as “global experts off the radar” (Lagae and Raedt, 2014) and industrial towns in Africa are still under-researched. This presentation will look into the creation and expansion of a few company sites in Angola, in former Belgian Congo and the Copperbelt as the main case studies to further explore some questions: (1) How was the model of “company town” approached and adapted to a colonial scenario? Can we speak about sites filled with “urbanity”?; (2) How can we discuss the afterlife of these towns – including machinery, warehouses, social facilities, housing – that is often related to “dark times”, when working communities were left with dashed expectations of modernity? How is this heritage being used and adapted? Can the transboundary nature of these sites trigger new approaches to still-dominant Western discourses and practices of heritage?

Studying the spatial aspects of these towns’ interplay can highlight wide and novel rhizomes of knowledge circulation that will thicken the history of urban and architectural production. The idea of Africa as a “living laboratory” (Tilley, 2011) was boldly deployed: every building was temporary, tentative and experimental. Though their towns, companies’ eagerness to rise as role models ended up as a way to think the potentialities of spatial design while linking the local and the global (Roux, 2003).