

GRADUAL EMPOWERMENT – New Methods for Bottom-Up Urban Renewal in Angola

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ABSTRACT: This work investigates ways to devise untraditional planning and design mechanisms to understand, act upon, and effectively overcome the interference of institutional corruption on the implementation of urban planning and design. This critical report on planning and design methodologies was developed side-by-side with the participation of the authors in actual commissions in Angola. The projects analyzed in this work are located in the northern Province of Cabinda (an Angolan enclave between the borders of the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly know as Zaire). Cabinda is currently ranked as the second largest oil exporters in the continent. This condition places the Province in an unusual situation as being both an important player in the global trade of energy commodities, and still a region with the one of lowest HDI index in the world.

KEYWORDS: empowerment, urban planning theory, urban development, slum regeneration

1 INTRODUCTION

This is not a regular academic paper, nor a critique of a realized project. Instead, it is part of an on-going series of self-imposed efforts to rethink the practice of urban planning and design undertaken by CAMPO. CAMPO is a young architecture and urban planning office currently based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, whose founding principles were based on its partners' commitment to push the envelope of contemporary design and planning practices, and to find ways to develop new methods of multi-disciplinary collaborations in these fields. CAMPO is interested in how architecture and urban planning can be developed as mechanisms to invigorate local populations from the bottom-up, rather than impose a steady scenario. For these matters, the project scrutinized in this work – the

redevelopment of slum in the Province of Cabinda, Angola – plays the role of a ‘laboratory’ where new engagement and negotiation methods were tested.

Today, Angola is among numerous developing countries that are passing through severe readjustments within global economy due to relatively unprecedented prosperity after long periods of continuous social and political unrest. The northern Province of Cabinda is one of the finest archetypes of this condition. If compared to its continental counterparts, it currently receives unparalleled revenues from its oil and diamond exports, while having an infant democracy after several years of civil war. Having previously been a single-party, socialist country, its mechanisms of governance still find difficulties to perform through transparent decision-making processes, especially when dealing with urban planning issues.

The combination of a prosperous economy with loose democratic institutions leads to the emergence of highly unbalanced conditions of managing such prosperity. The obscure political practices that Angola inherited from its past still influence how its cities are planned today. A few provincial government officials and private parties still exert their authority to have private gain through veiled means of control over public property and services. Nevertheless, individual corruption is unable to hinder the democratic and participative systems being implemented by governmental planning agencies. Consequently, the context for managing urban renewal is the contradictory existence of an official background of ‘good will’ locally biased by individual corruption. Cabinda is not an exception to that.

How do we operate in a context where constant institutional distrust is to be found? Do planning and design have a relevant role in supporting democratic practices in the country? How can this be done? Is it possible to tackle the Angolan and the Brazilian experiences from common social and cultural perspectives, being both former Portuguese colonies? All these questions structured the appropriate context for action that CAMPO was interested in. The invitation to work in Angola originated from two past collaborators of the office: Fábrica (the planning agency responsible for coordinating the design and engineering teams), and Geointer (the construction firm responsible for implementing the plans). Geointer was already providing services for the Provincial Government of Cabinda, and intermediated the negotiations between CAMPO and Fábrica with local governmental planning officials.

2 CABINDA, ANGOLA

Being outside the international media flashlights – even though being one of the world’s leading oil producers – the Cabindan context needs to be introduced before jumping into the specifics of our commission.

Cabinda is the smallest of the Angolan provinces and has a peculiar geopolitical setting. Its territory is an Angolan enclave between the borders of the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly known as Zaire. (Fig. 1) The province has an area of 7.300 km², and an estimated population of 220.000 inhabitants. Being an enclave, direct communication with the rest of the country is severely hindered. There are no roads connecting Cabinda to the rest of Angola, leaving aerial and naval transportation as the only available options. Naval transportation is especially difficult as the Cabindan port has obsolete infrastructures.

Since the last decades of the 20th Century, oil extraction in the province has been providing steady revenues, allowing it to plan investments in urban development. Nevertheless, this wealth is not yet fully perceivable in physical terms. Except for the numerous international oil companies based on Cabindan

territory, the province still possesses deficient industrial and commercial markets. Due to the lack of minimally self-sufficient industry and commerce, the province is still heavily relies on imports.



Figure 1 The Province and City of Cabinda (maps by the authors)

2.1 Historical Development

For centuries, during the colonial occupation of the Angolan territory, Cabinda was a commercial *entrepôt*, as the intermediary for all commercial transactions in Southwestern Africa, funneling most of the trade from Congo. However, from around 1600 until the end of the 18th Century the main object for trade were the slaves. At the end of this period, other colonies were already freeing their slaves and Portugal was pressured to gradually put an end on slave traffic.

After the 1884 “Berlin Conference”¹, where the African territory was redesigned according to the interest of colonizers, Cabinda became the capital of the District of Congo, as a strategy of defense against the freedom movements. The discovery of petroleum in the Cabindan territory took place in 1966, and after Angola reached its independence in 1975, Cabinda became the richest of the 18 provinces of the country.

Due to its intense commercial activities, Cabinda started to grow from its port area towards the city center (Fig. 2). The city center, with institutional buildings and formal residential neighborhoods, was built by the Portuguese. After that, during the period of the independence movements, from the beginning of the 1960’s until 1975, low wage informal neighborhoods started to pop up around the center. During that period the population of Cabinda grew almost four times. After the independence, during the civil war period, there was an intense migration movement from the rural areas to the city, and as a consequence, neighborhoods started to grow chaotically. In a period of 10 years, until 1985 the population doubled in size, the same happening from 1985 to 1992, when the city had approximately 80.000 inhabitants.

¹ The “Berlin Conference” (also know as “Congo Conference”, *Kongokonferenz* in German) was organized upon a request of the Portuguese Government to introduce regulations to the European colonization of Africa. Organized by the German first Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, this conference set the agenda for the New Imperialist exploitation of Africa, eliminating most of the existing political and governing structures of the continent.

Today, most of the population, estimated in almost 200.000 inhabitants, lives in informal neighborhoods, without infrastructure or institutional support.



Figure 2 Historical evolution of the city of Cabinda (maps by the authors based on historical maps found in the Regional Archives of Cabinda)

3 SOCIAL AND ECONOMICAL CONTEXTS – UNPRECEDENTED WEALTH X UNSTEADY INSTITUTIONS

3.1 Society

Cabindan (and Agolan, in general) society is heavily characterized by rigid hierarchies, inherited from its years of civil war and military dictatorship. The government's military heritage can also be verified by the massive presence of former and current military officers in all levels of governance. Based on a patriarchal system, the figure of the father in the Cabindan familial structure is still extremely important.

Public gatherings and neighborhood meetings take place through the families, whose social role goes beyond mere domestic organization. The appropriation of public space and its structures of dominance is ruled by veiled family rules, set and regulated by the leading hand of the father. The role of the patriarch is passed on by heritage. It is not uncommon to find young men (or even boys) taking up the role of patriarchs inherited from unexpected death of the original patriarchs. Even if other more experienced adults are still part of the family, it is the inherited responsibility of the patriarch that sets its hierarchy. (Figs. 3 & 4)



Figures 3 & 4 Cabindan families and the central role of the patriarchs: spatial surveillance and social distinction. (photos by the authors)

Despite its apparent homogeneity, present Cabindan culture and society are the results of the fusion of numerous original tribes of the region, unified under the Central Government in Colonial times. Even though different ethnical groups can still be identified by specific behaviors, traditions, and spatial proximity, they live in relative peace with rare ethnical upheavals. Being united by the Portuguese language, existing Cabindan ethnic groups are often hostile to groups of Congolese origin, who speak predominantly and exclusively French.

The process of urbanization of the Cabindan territory is still under way. Years of civil war delayed the natural migration of the population from rural areas toward the urban centers. Today, with a booming oil extraction economy, the trend set by war times is being rapidly reversed.

3.2 Economy

Despite the recent end of the civil war in 2002, the political antagonism generated by it apparently affected very subtly Cabindan society. The victory of the marxist-oriented party (MPLA) put under governmental control all productive activities and land ownership. Private land ownership in Angola is virtually non-existent (except for some exceptions among governmental officials). All real-estate transactions are intermediated and controlled by government officials. Cabindan economy is walking toward a more liberal economy in a much faster pace than the other Angolan provinces, possibly due to its centuries-old heritage as a commercial *entrepôt*.

Overlooking immigration policies set by the central government, Cabinda has a loose attitude towards regional immigration from its neighbors. Used to a relatively more open economy, Congolese immigrants (despite some aversion from native Cabindans) are forming an important community of retailers. (Figs. 5 & 6)



Figures 5 & 6 Cabindan retail and local markets. (photos by the authors)

The vast majority of the Cabindans still live in subnormal conditions, whereas a small percentage of the population form its middle-class range, mostly formed by a generation of former military officials that fought in the civil war and integrated the military government for decades. This generation, which was educated in Soviet and Cuban institutions under the communist paradigm, now take up positions in the government or in foreign private companies. Private business initiatives are severely hindered (if not completely discouraged) by seemingly endless bureaucracy.

4 INHERITED CORRUPTION – LOOSE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE CONCEPTS OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Decades of overwhelming bureaucracy and the almost exclusive presence of militarized public services left Angola – especially Cabinda in its geographic isolation – a social legacy of continuous abuse of power and unethical private appropriation of public assets. Throughout the history of Angolan bureaucracy, the reach of its officials’ power has been rarely questioned or had its boundaries well defined.

This context of socially unquestioned power created a “parallel world” which could be freely manipulated by government officials, through their own idiosyncrasies. Government official had virtually complete power over all public assets and services. This power was guaranteed by a veiled agreement among their social groups, setting up a complex system of “trading favours”.

In this “parallel world”, public services and property – which were supposed to be freely accessed by the entire population – became a sort of “currency” among government officials. It was somewhat widespread for government officials to charge a “sort of bribe” from the population to perform a task or a service that they were already supposed to. It is necessary to render relative the term “bribe” as it was not considered as so by the government officials. Their ethical mindset was completely distorted by an environment of non-existent public supervision, where any public effort to question their authority or severely repressed.

Our first contact with this “parallel world” took place during one of our first site visits in Cabinda. In the outskirts of the city (close to the project site), a brand new market hall (*Mercado São Pedro*) had been recently built to replace the precarious installations of a local market. After its completion, the

administration of the new commercial stands were carefully distributed among the government officials responsible for the implementation of the project. Thus, each one of them would be able to charge fees for the usage of their “private” stands. However, local merchants were unable to afford the fees been charged, especially when they were not expected to. Each merchant was entitled to have free access to a stand. Without means to legally reclaim their rights, the merchants set up an entirely new informal market around the new hall. Until today, the new market hall remains empty, while the informal market thrives around it.

This situation triggered our thoughts towards designing mechanisms to overcome this kind of institutional trap. We had to be able to guarantee full access to the new public amenities that we were just beginning to devise. How do we overcome a subconscious culture of illegal appropriation without generating unnecessary rallies and disputes among the design team and the government? How do we plan in order to empower local populations and provide them with spatial tool for political and social representation? The image of the empty market would haunt us until the end of the commission.

5 THE “A VITÓRIA É CERTA” COMMUNITY AND THE CITY OF CABINDA

As a consequence of its lack of urban and environment planning, Cabinda saw its territory develop chaotically. The foreigners who arrive in the city usually to work for oil companies generally settle in isolated condominiums, in the outskirts of the city, and there is practically no interaction between them and the local population. Inside the subnormal neighborhoods around the city center, with practically no institutional support, an informal net of trade and commerce was created by its own inhabitants. Organized by a neighborhood coordinator, the street markets became the main place where Cabindans can sell and buy food, hygiene goods and even fuel. It is common that traders combine their home and shop in the same space.

In the neighborhood “A Vitória É Certa” (Fig. 7) there are two main squares, shaped as a result of the local street markets: Pio Square and Kimbango Square. While Pio Square market is bigger and receives dealers from other neighborhoods, as well as from rural areas, the Kimbango Square market is mostly formed by local inhabitants. “A Vitória É Certa” neighborhood is surrounded by important roads, easily connecting it to the city center and to the airport. The houses located in the borders of the neighborhood, facing the main roads, have a clear division between public and private spaces, with walls or fences marking the limits of the plots. On the other hand, its interior has a complete different configuration. The streets are shaped by drain water or informal pedestrian paths. The spatial limit between private and public is defined by the houses themselves, all the other spaces become public.



Figure 7 “A Vitória É Certa” seen from above. (photo by the authors)

6 CONTEXTUAL TACTICS – OPERATING FROM WITHIN

Before diving into the project, we knew it was necessary to develop tactical approaches to venture within the Cabindan “parallel worlds” of corruption without causing undesirable disturbances that the plan would not benefit from. Our consciousness of their inappropriate means of profiting through public means was not to be noticed, but we should still be able to guarantee the successful implementation of the plan.

In order to overcome the almost instantaneous appropriation of the planned public services and buildings, we had to devise an implementation strategy that prioritized the gradual design and construction of the new public spaces and buildings. This gradual implementation would allow immediate access and appropriation of the community, striving to hinder illegal fees for their use. This strategy was linked to the development of the economical feasibility studies, which determined that the plan would be implemented gradually due to the scarcity of large funds.

7 CONCLUSIONS – URBAN ARCHITECTURE OR ARCHITECTURAL URBANISM?

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