

The City can Speak for Itself: Notes on approaching architecture in Kinshasa

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ABSTRACT:

This paper deals with ways of approaching architecture within the shifting uncertainties of the giant Congolese capital. Taking a cue from Kinshasa, I will make a case for being receptive to what the current situation of built matter in urban space has to say. It is the recalcitrant aspects of Kinshasa's personality which prompted me to consider its architecture from a different perspective. During my research in the Congo, there were few archival records available and circumlocutious points of access to buildings. This forced me to consider what the sites themselves could tell. Through the example of Tour de l'échangeur de Limete (1970 - 1974), I will examine ways in which a monumental modernist structure resists being reduced to the categorizations of architectural history and theoretical modes of analysis developed in the global north because of the intervention of forces of the city.

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This paper deals with ways of approaching architecture within the shifting uncertainties of the giant Congolese capital. Taking a cue from Kinshasa, I will make a case for being receptive to what the current situation of built matter in urban space has to say. It is the recalcitrant aspects of Kinshasa's personality which prompted me to consider architecture from a different perspective. These made themselves felt during the course of my research into Congolese architecture in 2014 and 2015.

In general, the manner in which a city frames and interacts with its architecture has a large say in how the meaning of these places are made up. Surrounding urban networks have the ability to speak louder than the original intentions of a building's architects and commissioners, to the extent that it determines the structure's lifespan. In the case of Kinshasa, the city tends to have the final word over even its most monolithic historic structures.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the particular set of urban networks that set the terms of engagement with Kinshasa's Tour de l'échangeur de Limete (Echangeur). Built between 1970-1974 as a museum and monument to the nation's heroes, the edifice was never completed. The 210m high tower straddles one of Kinshasa's major intersections between the airport and the city's major centres, from which it gains its nickname.¹ This massive landmark from the post-independence era functions as a radio mast for aeroplanes. In the past used as a police station and a prison, Echangeur is now a common symbol for the city, dubbed "the Eiffel Tower of Kinshasa." As one of its most prominent characters, the building serves as an eloquent narrator to relay a sample of the multiple ways in which Kinshasa chooses to speak and be silent.

I focus on methodologies developed while researching Echangeur and other examples of post-independence era architecture in Kinshasa. My purpose here is not to present my conclusions regarding the broader topic of the architectural commissions of the early years of the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko (in power from 1965 to 1997) and what they have to tell

about how we view Congolese independence today. This is work I have done elsewhere.² Rather, I would like to think through waiting and listening.

Waiting and Listening

During the course of my investigations in Kinshasa, I found there were moments when the city intervened to render my established tools of analysis ineffectual. This occurred on both a practical and theoretical level. I will focus on the practical aspect first and close with briefly touching on the theoretical aspects.

It was in instances where evidence was withheld and attempts at access frustrated that I was forced to take a step back and consider what different kinds of assessment could offer. I am thinking in particular of long stretches of waiting and negotiating, where I had to justify my reasons for wanting access to certain sites. It was in this space that a large part of my thinking around my project was formed. There is a certain kind of speculation that takes place from being in the vicinity of a site, close enough to smell it, feel its shadow and study the movements of traffic around it but not be allowed to enter. The image formed at street level mediates the experience that follows. As the part of my Kinshasa research story that is usually relegated to anecdote became intertwined with the main event, I was forced to listen to what the city had to say about its sites before hearing the point of view of the structures themselves.

I speak of listening rather than reading. Listening is more receptive than a process of interpreting a textured ecosystem of built matter within a network of people, things and natural life as text. I think it is telling that when Michel De Certeau reads the city, he begins with a bird's eye view. In the classic text that opens from the perspective of the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, Manhattan becomes a readable text. As the city in all its enormity is frozen, its truth is revealed. "The tallest letters in the world" form sentences which the literate viewer can read as a "giant rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production."³

De Certeau privileges looking to the city itself to locate how its powers of representation work. While I take this as an important starting point, I am interested in pursuing how the

specifics of the city can block accepted modes of reading. Through being obstinate and demanding difficult negotiations, it can reroute the course of an argument and question foregone assumptions.

Being forced to wait outside Kinshasa's skyscrapers makes one contemplate less ethereal concerns than those of De Certeau. Long periods of inertia make bodily concerns more apparent and one's presence as an outsider more exposed. In a city with few tourists, to wait while various security checks are in place is to publicly perform one's position as outsider. Quite practically, one has to assess the extent to which one values entry: How much am I willing to pay? How important is this particular site in relation to the size of my research budget? Once the site has been breached and the tower scaled, the city does not feel as if it is there for my delectation, to interpret as I see fit. I am still very aware of my own tentative experience of being on the ground and having to return to it. The sprawling mass of the city seen as a blanket from above is not an object over which I have intellectual mastery, but looks quite capable of toppling the tower if it so chooses.

In art and architectural history, there is a tradition of reading crafted objects (in this case, built material) according to its stylistic history. Historical context is used as a way of explaining both the motivations of the architect, as well as the reception of the building at the time. The traditionalist art historian tends to look through the object in order to draw out the story behind it. This is, more often than not, the story of the individual architect's motivations, influences and deployment of plastic form. Sites are treated as isolated masses of constructed material to be mined for their symbolic and inventive value. All the inconsistencies and noise of their urban surrounds are blocked out in order to focus on the plans that lie beneath the actual material reality. Within this, texts are privileged. The writings of architects are sought after, from their personal correspondence to their dealings with clients. Architectural plans designed as a set of instructions are pored over.

The above methods of architectural research were developed with the European city in mind. In countries like Germany, France, England and Belgium, well known architects tend to preserve their archives and the development of cities is regulated. In Kinshasa, this is not a particularly useful approach.

Kinshasa

The third largest metropolis on the continent, Kinshasa's galloping rate of expansion corresponds to a rising estimated population of more than eleven million, seventy percent of whom are not formally employed. Expansion can only take place in a westerly direction, with city edges bordered by the Congo River and mountains to the south, causing increasing congestion in central city space. As the city grows and agitates, sites like Echangeur are bizarrely still.

Echangeur towers above other dwellings in its vicinity and is visible for kilometers from afar. Despite housing a small contemporary art museum (which features only temporary exhibitions), it is strictly securitized and accessible by pre-arranged invitation only. Although it is pointedly separated from its surrounds, the site does not easily lend itself as a study of architecture based in a text-based trail.

In general, the task of locating plans in Kinshasa is a hit and miss exercise. All existing archives were looted in a period of unrest in the 1990s. In the specific case of Echangeur, plans do exist due to the site currently being renovated to finally live up to its expectations of being a museum complex (although, contrary to original suggestions of something more public, the space is billed to be a high-end entertainment complex). However, the initial intentions and instructions of its architect, the deceased Franco-Tunisian Olivier-Clément Cacoub are not readily available. Attempts to contact the family in Paris have, as yet, been unsuccessful.⁴ My own interview with his building manager did not yield much in the way of ascertaining the architect's motivations in the design of the building or that of the Mobutu regime. News coverage from local papers is scarce and does not extend much further than announcing the official opening of new buildings, which never occurred in the case of the always unfinished Echangeur.

I was forced to proceed with what I had. And sites like Echangeur are more than capable of telling their own stories. A great deal can be gathered from the various attachments and associations that they hold within pockets of the urban landscape.

At most times of day, the major interchange surrounding the site of Echangeur is heavily congested. Traffic and nearby construction generate debris, dust and fumes that hang over the complex's denuded grounds. High above, the turret lights signal that the business of aeroplane traffic continues. The gardens and terraces of the site present deserted leisure spots. What were once intended to be restaurants and shops have not yet materialized. Once within the museum interior, space is constricted. Sharp edges and course surfaces inside the tower are rough on the skin. Unfinished surfaces speak back to the building's past and present expediencies. Basement areas that are thought to have once served as prison cells are empty and out of bounds.

Echangeur's history as a police headquarters that served a violent regime dominates a contemporary experience of it. Moreover, the choice to utilize the tower as a police base was not an arbitrary one. The hard lines of the edifice's raw concrete are more threatening than celebratory. From afar, its distinctive silhouette is suggestive of a watchtower monitoring its surrounds. Once nearer the grounds, the central column overpowers, literally overshadowing all activity. The flag-lined elevated parade area is only occasionally seen to be occupied by individual walkers (punctuated by semi-regular school visits). There is little about the site today to suggest it caters for the general populace. Its high visibility and elevated areas make a show of this.

On the eerily empty grounds of Echangeur, no aspect of the building has not been affected by its surrounds. Marks of dust and pollution are not only visible but tangible, thickening the atmosphere. The traffic circle that surrounds the site, the noisy source of many pollutants, also serves to cut it off from existing circuits. Echangeur's elevated promenade goes only to the end of its own grounds. A staircase intended as the main entrance to the street is fenced off. There are no crossings or bridges to allow for easy access for either vehicles or pedestrians. Echangeur is not delinked from Kinshasa, but it is an island within the sea of informal patterns that make up the shifting urban space that holds it in place. While different, they are also the same, with the island reliant on its sea.⁵

Tracking outwards, the landscape is flat, with few buildings reaching upwards beyond two storeys.⁶ Heavily populated residential areas have overtaken the terms of their initial planning. Crisscrossing circuits of occupants and networks of informal trade overwhelm original foundations. An aesthetic of makeshift structures creeps across areas of older brick and concrete. The semi-formal suburbs surrounding Echangeur speak of complex rhythms and textures grounded in expediencies. Here, the city speaks of circumventing, negotiating and reusing. The necessary malleability of the urban surrounds emphasize Echangeur's brittleness.

While encircling suburbs are saturated with the clamour of teeming streetlife and gridlocked traffic, Echangeur's empty terraces are still. In a city beset with the material challenges of everyday life, it is the extent of uninhabited space and underused land within sites like Echangeur that renders them extraordinary.

In its unrefined, semi-occupied state, Echangeur speaks of a separation rooted in aesthetic estrangement from the dense horizontal logics of the city. The architecture's strongly individualistic aesthetic personality (classified as brutalism or neo-art deco) is a modernism that relies on self-sufficiency. Its overall design presumes the presence of a supporting infrastructure to power and maintain it. This never fully materialized. While the radio tower continues to do a job it was not intended for, there is insufficient power to take a lift to its summit. The terraces and fountains are not maintained. Dirt and moss stick between concrete tiles and still pools are overgrown. The kind of infrastructure that supports Echangeur contradicts the original plans.

Echangeur's origins speak of the projection of power, but it is one of Ozymandian decline. The site is neither a ruin nor the public place it was intended to be (and unlikely to become). The city is disobedient towards its architectural language. The dense threading of the Kinshasa that surrounds Echangeur, not easily legible to the outsider, exposes Echangeur's empty promises. As underused space ages, the city constantly threatens to encroach. This continued tension questions not only the original message of its architectural language but the mode of approach. Echangeur is less a privileged reminder of power than it is an extravagant prisoner.



View of Echangeur from Foire Internationale de Kinshasa (FIKIN) grounds, 2015



Echangeur, 2014

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After postcoloniality:

I did not go to Kinshasa to treat sites as fact-generating subjects. That is, I do not know how to interpret flows of people within urban structures into usable data that could then be applied to future planning and development schemes. My intention was to apply my knowledge of postcolonial theory, combined with years of immersion in visual analysis and making objects, to peel away the layers of meaning laid down by the makers of the building to expose its underlying power relations. What I found in Kinshasa was that those relations were hardly a secret and fully available for all to see.

Echangeur is threatening. For all the rhetoric of nation-building that came with the building the ambitions of its commissioner are clear. Its sheer size is an obvious show of might and the ability to command resources. The manner in which Echangeur proclaims the message of a military state easing into outright totalitarianism may be mapped through comparison with Mobutu's other architectural commissions, when they are seen in isolation. If all of the skyscrapers built by the regime during this period are removed from the city and laid out as specimens on the researcher's desk, a particular pattern of spatial practice is seen to emerge. Combined with those forms of archival material that could be gleaned, an argument can be made concerning an aesthetics of surveillance and domination. However, because of the kinds of vulnerabilities these sites display today, this work is insufficient.

Mobutu's independence building projects entrench culturally specific and colonial notions of material form. Mobilizing postcolonial critique did a lot of work in helping me to access how the material culture produced in the early Mobutu era represented power. However, following this form of approach necessitates looking through layers of growth, dust, decay and growth to see the original architectural plans beneath. If one ignores these sedimentations, or inserts them as an afterthought to visual analysis, one runs the risk of not taking full cognisance of the inappropriateness of post-independence design solutions to the current realities of Kinshasa.

Reading these sites purely in terms of what they reveal about lingering colonial discourse in the Mobutu era not only keeps the conversation centered on that colonialism but also projects a passivity on the city. In reality, it is extremely difficult to look through the clamour

of Kinshasa to get to the historical moment in which its postcolonial architecture was birthed. The city intervened to insist that it narrate the story of its buildings. While Echangeur continues to shout in a singular voice, Kinshasa speaks back with a multitude of different cadences. The thickening timbres of the city enforce the point that dialogues with both the colonial and Mobutu eras do not have one direction. The city can speak for itself. It does not need its monuments or researchers to speak on its behalf. It will continue to do so long after they have gone.



Street view of Echangeur, 2014

¹ Marc Gemoets, “Monument Patrice-Emery Lumumba”, in *Kinshasa*, Paris: Collection Villes et Architecture Éditions CIVA/ Faculté d’architecture La Cambre Horta, ULB, 178.

² See: Ruth Sacks, “Congo Style: From Belgian Art Nouveau to Zaïre’s Authenticité”, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Wits University, Johannesburg, 2017.

³ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, California: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 91.

⁴ I am indebted to Johan Lagae for our conversations on this matter.

⁵ I am indebted to Simon Gush for our conversations on this topic.

⁶ So uncommon are towering forms in Limete that Sammy Baloji and Filip de Boeck have made a video installation, photographic series and text around one individual’s personal tower project. See: Filip de Boeck and Sammy Baloji, *Suturing the City*, London: Autograph ABP, 2016.