High Class Shanty Town
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*translated by Karen Press

IN OUAKAM, ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF DAKAR, I spend a month in 2012 photographing the district, an immense stretch of land around the African Renaissance statue. A process of gentrification is devouring the area between the airport, the sea and a traditional fishing village, Lébous, built in what was once a baobab forest at the water’s edge, a labyrinth of alleys and buildings, the oldest of which are small wooden fishermen’s cottages. The new districts surround the village; the Leopold Sedar Senghor International Airport has been relocated elsewhere and a large access road furrows the hills that are still half-bare.

continued on pg. 26
High Class Shanty Town
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I walk around this site, where development has largely come to a standstill. People are living here: they don’t get lost in the streets; their steps are regular and everyday; their gait businesslike; they have a purpose; they’re active and in a hurry; the cars drive fast, hooting; the market functions and the shops are open in the midst of the bare brick structures with empty window frames; people are playing football on the big patch of ground that is vacant in anticipation.

The new structures have the precarious feel of shacks – rough grey stacks of cement and bricks, visibly fragile. They seem to have just been dumped on the ground, supported by planks and struts that are themselves propped on bricks until the concrete has set and the workers return. Sometimes a structure collapses and kills – too much sand in the concrete, the pillars and walls too thin or not properly squared off. The buildings are skeletons open to the sky, the vegetation invades them and the bricks crumble. They’re waiting for the plaster, paint, tiles. I pass along the streets between big featureless blocks, their walls black, grey or white. Interior or exterior, there’s little difference, I walk through the big post office – the biggest in the country, I am told. It has no roof. Yet, every place is earmarked and has a name.

“High-class shanty town,” is how theorist Abdoumaliq Simone describes it.

The incomplete villas are cheaply decorated in a modern style that comes from everywhere and nowhere. Near the airport, villas with Roman-style façades; cream and ochre are lined up identically in their hundreds behind high walls; elsewhere, there are rows of chicken-coop-type structures, red or yellow, filled with functional apartments and king-size beds. In one street, a slab of paving is covered with tiles, a palm tree is set in a small square of earth and a single lamp post adorns the spot. The car is parked in front, someone is on the upstairs balcony. I frame it tightly – image of a “town”.

It’s not so much the collage of styles that is strange – the imaginaries of other places and people are what create towns – it’s the repetitive character: mechanical, industrial, planned, commonplace. Tabula rasa. In the old quarter, the newer buildings often have a singular quality, an organic feel. These are the same bricks, but not the same town.

The streets of dust and sand into which the taxis and horse-drawn carts sink, wind among the piles of bricks and the uprooted remains, which rise up again. Large stones and tree branches become scaffolding. The low-level vegetation is bushy, a grid emerges from it, the electricity boxes await. A few baobab trees, perhaps one thousand years old, survive. Out of guilt? Their massive presence in the middle of the site makes one think of a skeleton struggling to stay upright.

In the fog, the martial statue, built by the Koreans, floats, a silhouette without scale, clearly gigantic, yet minuscule. It tells the story of a man and a woman, a child in their arms, their bodies leaning in an invisible direction, which is in fact the Statue of Liberty. The phantom town at their feet may dream of a bourgeois middle class family life, cobbled together out of multiple imaginaries; this rival one dreams of the other side of the ocean, but also of African imaginary, of which I struggle to find in this spectral town.

Every day I walk through the “street” that winds between ancient village and new quarter. The old village, centred on its labyrinth of lanes and its will to continue to exist, turns its back on the new town. Facing it, the new quarter is a vast empty terrain, a parade ground you cross, a big public square where you play football, where you loiter. Men, horses and goats seem to get lost here. The silhouetted statue is visible everywhere. The square is an immense stretch of refuse and bushes. Only the stadium grandstands, bordered with stones, are spotless. I pass back and forth, sit on a large round stone. In the midst of the refuse is a dead goat. People tell me that in earlier times the square was a baobab forest, “dense and dark”.

continued from pg. 22

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