Living Dangerously in Petroluanda

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IN THE RUSH TO SQUAT IN AN APARTMENT in downtown Luanda, António Andrade may have run into those city dwellers, mostly white settlers, who were leaving the city for good from mid-May to mid-September, 1975. It was the end of almost 500 years of the so-called Portuguese Empire in Africa, and those settlers were rushing from a country that would very soon be ruled by former guerrilla fighters. The contents of their apartments and residences, in the description by the Polish journalist, Ryszard Kapuscinski, were transferred from the “stone city to the inside of the wooden city” – to the thousands of crates standing in the main downtown streets, or in backyards, waiting to be shipped to Portugal, Brazil or South Africa.

I can imagine my uncle Andrade wandering amid the debris of a civilisation already past, through the remnants of this phantom-like city, to lay claim to a place in the cement city that had been built for settlers. Andrade was one of the million Angolans who squatted in the houses of the settlers before and after independence. Before claiming his place in the cement city, Andrade was living in the musseque of Prenda with family members of unknown and untraceable blood relation. And then, with independence approaching, he moved to an apartment building in Coqueiros, a cozy neighbourhood, only one block from the famous Marginal. That area of Luanda was flatteringly described by the soon-to-be Nobel prize laureate in literature, Gabriel García Marquez, in a visit to the country in 1976, as a “French Riviera” because of its sidewalks planted with palm trees in front of rows of glass buildings.

Like many other Angolans, Andrade did not occupy only one apartment. He was young and unmarried, but he took four apartments. His estate in this building consisted of one apartment on the first floor, another one on the third, and two more on the fourth. Besides, he also controlled the little service rooms in the corridors, those spaces that colonial architects had designed for black janitors. Those cubicles, where a bed could hardly fit, would be in high demand decades later when the city became a hub for speculators. Andrade would later on use these rooms to accommodate family and friends.

One of the reasons Andrade could amass such property was because he was a soldier and an athlete of CODENM (the powerful military sports club), as well as a member of the ruling party, MPLA. He had represented Angola as a long-distance runner proudly at the Olympic Games and in marathons throughout the world. He was well regarded by the political elite, and a recipient and distributor of gifts in a culture of patronage instituted by the single party. When his daughter Geni got pregnant, at the age of 15, Andrade swapped his studio for the two-bedroom apartment on the fourth floor.
The Angolan state never recognised the property rights and claim to title of the squatters who occupied those buildings. Instead, through the Law of Appropriation and Nationalisation, enacted in 1976, the Angolan state became the sole proprietor of the entire urban stock. In the first years after independence, amid the significant supply of urban space, and in a context of the demonetisation of the economy, those apartments were almost deprived of monetary value: they could be acquired, and exchanged, almost for free. But things would change in the late 1980s. Luanda would become the final destination for thousands of Angolans fleeing the lack of economic prospects in the countryside and for many foreigners coming to work. Urban dwellers, or the tenants of the state could still informally acquire apartments, as long as they could navigate the bureaucratic labyrinth of the Housing Board to get their names on the payment receipts. Taking hold of those receipts so as to transfer the apartment to her name was the plan of Andrade’s subletter on the third floor. The neighbour became close to Andrade’s daughter who would invite her over. One day, when Andrade was out, she managed to sneak in, and stole the pile of receipts that Andrade kept in a drawer. A few days later, when Andrade was set to go to the Housing Board to pay the rent, he realised that the papers were not there. As he did not have any doubt about who might have stolen his papers, he went downstairs to his neighbour’s apartment, and confronted her over the missing documents. She denied stealing them, an altercation ensued and Andrade slapped her twice in the face.

Andrade decided to sell the apartment that his ambitious neighbour was occupying. A few days later, a young man came to his house, and told him that there were two potential buyers downstairs. Andrade went down to find those two men, well dressed, inside an expensive Audi, which in those years was one of the cars more likely to be driven by a minister, MP or army general. Andrade was invited to get inside the car to listen to their proposition. He acquiesced, and only after taking his place in the middle of the back seat, between the two men, did he realise that one of them was a general from Unita, who had recently been integrated into the unified national army.

The situation became eerie when the car stopped by Quinaxixe (in the city centre) to drop off the young man who had ascended to his apartment to invite him for the ride. Outside the car, night was approaching and the city was getting darker. All of a sudden, the men began to hit him. Andrade was beaten so badly that at the moment the car arrived at its final destination, Cacuaco, a satellite city of Luanda, he had lost his senses. He felt nothing when he was dragged outside the car to a secluded place, and, laying with his belly on the ground, shot three times in his back with an AKM automatic rifle.

Almost miraculously, the bullets failed to kill Andrade. When he recovered consciousness, in the middle of a pitch-black night, he managed to drag himself to the closest village to get help. But first, he had to convince the people he found in the village that his appearance was not the outcome of an ill-done job – as it was a time when thieves were subjected to vigilante justice – but, rather, a failed murder attempt. He was then taken to the Military Hospital, in a pick up truck, where he would only be admitted after paying a gasosa (bribe). Andrade spent several months in the hospital, but as soon as he was discharged he filed charges against his third-floor neighbour and her associates. Nothing happened to her, since her material involvement in the affair was never proved. The young man who went to his apartment, however, was condemned to 15 years in prison, and died after 10. The general was never condemned, but he died a couple of years later, from natural causes. Andrade still lives in the same building and, ironically, earns a living by helping a group of Portuguese recover property they lost after independence.

Today, Luanda is a city haunted by its colonial past. To walk now through certain parts of Luanda gives a certain experience of phantasmagoria very akin to the one that Walter Benjamin found in the ruins of Naples, which he deemed a “transiency of empires”. The decay of Naples for Benjamin had something allegorical because of its irreducibility to the architectural forms that were triumphing all over Europe. The arcades of 19th century Paris, to which Benjamin dedicates his most important life’s work,
had been incorporated in the modernist design of buildings in Luanda. The decay of Luanda may also be decoded in such allegorical terms. Likewise, the city centre was conceived to have a vibrant commercial life. But here arcades have been tropicalised: they are open to the city. As in the Quinaxixe Market, buildings are supported by pilot is so as to form shades protecting passers-by from the irradiating sun with space for built-in stores. Even though a number of the stores have been refurbished and operate normally, a great many of these spaces are in ruins. Today, a number of the arcades are simply showcases of the infrastructural problems that afflict these buildings: water damage and parts of the structure on the verge of collapse.

No place offers a better case to understand imminent collapse and negotiations of liminality in Luanda than the complex formed by five buildings, with twelve apartments each, distributed in six stories, located in the Municipality of Rangel, in the neighbourhood of Nelito Soares. This housing project, built in the early 1970s, signaled a shift in Portuguese urban policy, when the housing for Africans started to also take on the form of vertical construction. And the size of these apartments does not leave any doubt that they were intended for large families: almost every apartment has three bedrooms. Those buildings were erected very quickly, because the Portuguese were applying a recently developed South African technique of pre-fabrication that consisted in erecting an iron structural grid, built elsewhere and assembled in the place, which would then receive a thin layer of cement. As for many other buildings in Luanda, those were only inhabited after independence, when the Housing Board distributed the keys for these apartments to a number of its clerks. Now, 42 families (roughly 250 people) live there. Time has eaten away the cement that covered the building. The aspect of the walls, with large holes, through which the rust iron structure is visible, is reminiscent of a putrefying animal. On the first floor, where the signs of decrepitude are most prominent, industrious tenants have tried to repair the damages. Parts of the iron structure have been welded to pieces of tire rims. As almost everywhere in Luanda, water was probably the key cause for the deterioration of this complex.

Dwellers would go long stretches of time without running water, forcing people to fetch it outside the building and then carry it over the metallic structure. However, worse than the lack of water was its sudden appearance: water would start running from the taps with such pressure that pipes would explode, creating leaks, sometimes in parts of the steelcasing. So now, with the walls eroding in most parts, some corridors have only the steel casing left. There are no more stairs, no more banisters, and, in some parts, not even a floor.

Talking once with a group of residents in front of the building, I was told the story of Dona Filomena’s accident, which took place one day when she was hanging clothes in the corridor. The floor beneath her feet collapsed, and she miraculously saved her life by hanging on the wires. In the most deteriorated part of the buildings, the outer walls, which hold the bathrooms, have collapsed. From the streets, those bathrooms – one stacked upon the other, some hidden by curtains and others not – can be seen, as if the whole building had been longitudinally cut open for an architectural demonstration, intending to simultaneously reveal the interior and the exterior.

As in the case of Andrade, nobody owned these apartments, although tenants may have paid rent for more than 30 years. Such was the case of João Paulo. He was given an apartment in one of those buildings in the mid-1970s, when he was a young clerk at the Housing Board. After proving to him that I was not an undercover policeman or an envoy of the people interested in evicting him from that area, he showed me a bundle of receipts to prove that he has never defaulted on the payment of his rent (and in case I was not who I said I was, he also showed me his MPLA membership card).

But it is not only out of necessity that those dwellers are living under such conditions. Nobody in this complex wants to leave their apartments. A couple of years ago the tenants were approached by a developer – certainly one of those investors acting for people in power – to leave their apartments for a
total price of US$1 million to be divided among 42 families. In addition, they were offered a house in Zango, a social and urban development project on the outskirts of the city, where the government relocates squatters cleared from the state reserves. There is justice in the squatters’ reasoning here, for it is not fair for them to be relocated to a place that is situated 30km further from the city centre than the place where they were born, and for which they have paid the rent for many years, especially because they would have to live alongside squatters who have never paid rent. But there is also greed in this story. The houses they live in do not have any value; once they leave, the building will be bulldozed. But this patch of land, which could be the location for a factory, or a hotel, is worth a great deal, especially in Angolan prices inflated by the oil economy. But to get that money, which the squatters believe they deserve, they have first to bet with their own lives, by sticking around and living in unsafe conditions.

Prices for buying and renting space in Luanda have risen in a way that almost replicates the ups and downs of the only product that supports the Angolan economy: oil. However, the relationship between oil and real estate in Angola is more complex. It is true that in times of bonanza the demand for space in the city drives prices up. But it is not less true that Luandans in general have absorbed a kind of consciousness that derives from oil. As the “devil’s excrement”, oil has the effect of providing to the nationals of the country that live off it the impression of value production outside the realm of labour. Luanda, as we have seen, was for a great part squatted by people who came from the musseques. For many years, those houses only had use-value. Now that the space in the city has become scarce, and those houses costs many hundreds of thousands dollars, the impression a number of Angolans have is, metaphorically, that they have struck oil.

In this way, a number of Luandans have found ventures for businesses that yield them profits without the investment or labour. Or, to be more precise, living off rent has allowed a number of people to de-link labour from income. For the most part, however, this has been the only way to have access to services that are not available in Angola. Take, for instance, the case of Mr Lemos, a clerk at the Banco Nacional de Angola, who I interviewed in August 2008. He owns a residence in Bairro Azul, which has been rented, while the apartment he shares with his daughter and son was given to him through his job as a clerk at the bank. What Lemos earns as a bank clerk and teacher at a private college is enough to meet his family needs. The money he garners from the residence allowed him to pay the college fees of his sons in Portugal (where he has also purchased an apartment). Furthermore, the money from the rented house has also allowed his daughter to pay for the expensive treatment for her serious health complications, which force her to spend long stretches of time in Lisbon.

To understand the question of the value of real estate and how this informal sector works, I followed two informal real estate brokers. The first is Abrão, who could be found everyday in Quinaxixe Square, at a spot between the Cuca building and the Building of the Lagoon, in front of the new branch of Banco de Poupança e Crédito. The other one is Agostinho, who I met through a friend who was looking for an apartment to rent. The work of these agents consists primarily of visiting dwellers in a section of the cement city, from Mutamba to Quinaxixe, to offer their services. If the owners of the apartments are interested in renting their spaces, the agents seek clients for them, in exchange for a commission of 10 per cent of the contract.

Any one of the crumbling apartments, some of them simply in ruins, can be rented for $1,500 per month. The prospective tenants have to advance a year or two of the contract. Furthermore, they are responsible for repairs, either because they have to undertake them in order to make the place liveable, or because it is stipulated in the contract. At any rate, this provision ends up guaranteeing the improvement and conservation of many of these buildings. In some of these buildings, where more affluent dwellers have rented apartments, there are already functioning elevators.

If the real estate business is booming, it is partly due to the indirect investment the Angolan state is making in this sector. Major clients are oil companies, and according to the term of the negotiation
between the Angolan state and the oil companies, the former pays for the costs of maintenance of the expatriate labour force. Thus, oil companies will not look at prices when it comes to finding places to accommodate their workers. Furthermore, this system has been replicated in many other areas of the economy, serving as the template for the entrenchment of a foreign labour force in the country.

Abrāão, the informal broker, is left with those clients who do not have the means to do business directly with the rental agencies. And the terms of business are always murky, even for he who knows the labyrinthine complications of the Housing Board. He is trying to legalise the ownership of his family house, a couple of blocks south from Quinaxixe, in a street where a number of owners have already sold their houses, for prices not less than $1 million. Those houses have been demolished and in their place, high rises are springing up, such as the Hotel Skyna. Selling is always easier than renting, because sometimes tenants may refuse to leave, or may find ways to change the title of ownership of the houses they have rented (as Andrade’s tenant once attempted).

I learned these realities firsthand when I looked to Abraão to help me to find an apartment. We went to visit a couple of places, until we happened upon a studio-apartment in Mutamba. I met the owner, who was sharing the apartment with three or four other young women. We agreed on a six-months contract, set at $1,000 a month. On my way out, I met other brokers with other clients, and at least one of them was from a real estate agency. The next day I got a phone call from the owner, to undo the agreement. Later Abrão told me that people in Luanda are reluctant to rent their places to Angolans, who more likely will know how to navigate the bureaucratic system and grease the palms of the bureaucrats at the Housing Board. Or this may also be a trick of the owner so as to not have to pay for the intermediary – if the owner does not want to pay the commission, they simply talk directly to the prospective renter, which exposes the precariousness of Abrão’s work.

This was the situation in the housing system in Angola until 2008, when the country held elections for the second time since independence in 1975. In various assessments of the conditions in which people were living, the government came to the conclusion that the problem was a scarcity of housing, and, it
was agreed that speculation could be brought down if the city increased its urban stock. In fact, the city has expanded and prices have come down. However, the devaluation of Luanda’s real estate is due less to the expansion of the urban housing stock and more to the global crisis that rippled though the Angolan economy in 2009. What some economists have said is that speculation in the housing sector in Luanda has more to do with bureaucracy and corruption than the economic relationship between supply and demand. In other words, although the urban crisis is an economic problem, the solution sought has been political.

During the election campaign, President José Eduardo dos Santos, made a bold announcement: that between 2008 and 2012 his government would build one million houses. Details of the mega-operations were only given a month after the poll, when Angola hosted World Habitat day, at which, in the presence of the head of UN Habitat, Dos Santos not only reiterated his electoral promise, but also provided more specifics on his plan to restructure the city. At stake was the need to eliminate the slums by upgrading them into planned, formal and yet affordable housing for the poor. A government agency was created, the Program for Management and Projects, which would see to the construction of 115,000 houses. The private sector would be responsible for 120,000, the cooperatives (such as that of the Veterans) 80,000, whereas the lion’s share, 685,000, would fall in the murky and unspecified category of “directed auto-construction”.

It is expected that the elimination of the slums as proposed by Dos Santos will bring a profound realignment of the fabric of the city. I have already shown the consequences of war and economic crisis on the urban environment. Those who flocked to Luanda built their houses in every available space: within other houses, in buildings, in public gardens and near deactivated railroads. Concomitantly, those years were also marked by the emergence of a not negligible middle class, with very particular tastes in terms of housing and locations. But creating and controlling the desire of those groups has become a powerful technique of political control.

The architectural form that predominates in many of the projects of Luanda Sul, a veritable satellite city in the south of the capital, signaled the recent transformations of forms of Angolan’s habitation. Whereas during late colonialism, and the first decade of independence, the city’s predominant architectural forms were either the housing block and the single family residence in the cement city or the shack in musseques, Luanda Sul brought about a radical innovation: the gated community, or condominium, protected by barbed wire and private security firms. Inside these walls dwellers could enjoy some urban amenities that the city could no longer offer, such as gardens, parks, and sometimes, as in the case for the most affluent ones, swimming pools and tennis courts. This urban model had been imported primarily by South African construction firms, in their first experiences of internationalisation after the end of the Apartheid era and the normalisation of economic relations with neighbouring countries.
The first clients for these firms were a number of Angolans, linked in various ways to the government, who had the opportunity to travel to South Africa, on official trips, for business or holidays. There, they contacted South African firms and purchased the houses, which were later assembled in Luanda. The first houses were assembled on the site where the Presidential Palace formerly stood, in Futungo de Belas, and, they are still there, owned by retired generals. Then, the Construction Brigade of the Presidential Casa Militar (Military Branch) started to build a number of condominiums, namely the Projecto Nova Vida (New Deal Project). Later oil companies, such as Sonangol (the state owned oil company) and Chevron, entered the business. Chevron, for instance, along with state owned banks, built condominiums for their own workers: the motivation for doing this was to secure cheaper accommodation for their personnel, particularly for the foreign labour force.

Luanda Sul, in the beginning, looked like a viable solution to the problem of speculation, since the increase of housing supply, as it was anticipated, would bring down the prices. But Luanda Sul only worked in the first years when the number of its inhabitants was relatively low. It was conceived as a residential area, with limited commercial services. Those who moved to that part of the city faced a daily commute to town for work and to take their children to school, because the business area was still located in downtown Luanda. Planners thought that expanding the network of freeways that link Luanda to Luanda Sul would solve the problem. However, the problem was not only an issue of access to the city. Even if the ride from both points is short, most of the city’s roads are narrow and congested. So Luanda Sul had to be totally re-planned, not only to accommodate roads, and freeways, but, more importantly, to accommodate a number of services so as to prevent its inhabitants from having to go to Luanda proper on a daily basis.

Recently, in a newspaper interview, a leading Angolan economist, Alves da Rocha, made the case that the expansion of Luanda southwards (Luanda Sul) has been the main device for siphoning off financial resources from the state to a handful of private entities. The modalities of those transfers have varied from simple to elaborate. Bornito de Sousa, a high-ranking member of MPLA and currently Internal Affairs Minister, explained how he became wealthy by moving to the new house given to him on account of the job he holds, and renting his old house – in Alvalade, one of the most expensive neighbourhoods of Luanda – likely to an oil company for a premium price hovering around $2 million annually.

Angolan laws concerning foreign investment are very permissive, and allow holders of public office to do business with foreigner investors. Portuguese firms investing in Angola have, among their board members, various Angolan politicians. Furthermore, Angola does not produce construction materials locally, and every item (including cement) is imported. The technique for accumulation here is to overprice construction materials and transfer the difference to private accounts in western banks.
One of the consequences of corruption and the traffic of influence in the construction sector is that it is only the state, through state owned companies, and oil companies that can invest in this sector. As such, housing in these new projects is so expensive that very few Angolans can afford it, thus reinforcing distribution as an important political tool. For instance, the market price for housing for the middle class is around $200,000 for Condomínio Nosso Lar (Our Home Condominium), and $400,000 for Condomínio Bem Morar (Good Living Condominium). Those houses are out of reach for the Angolan middle class, unless they have access to a bank loan.

But the access to loans from banks is very restricted. Besides the fact that interest rates can reach up to 25 per cent, only 0.5 per cent of the monetary mass that circulates through the Angolan bank system is in the form of loans. So, as a member of the middle class, the only way to access a house is through a working relation to one of the state companies, such as Sonangol. But this is political. MPLA forces workers of state owned oil companies to become MPLA members. Furthermore, not even the urban poor, those who apparently have nothing to trade, are out of reach of this political juggernaut. For instance, last year, after several months of indecision, the government finally announced the official price at which the social housing will be sold: $40,000. And this in a country where the beneficiaries are unemployed and underemployed, or, if they are employed likely make around $100 per month, the official minimum wage.

In a recent development, Sonangol was given control over the housing construction project, through a newly created subsidiary called Sonangol-Imobiliária (Sonangol-Real Estate). This political decision shows that the Angolan government intends to develop the housing sector along the same lines as oil production. Oil is extracted offshore, by foreign companies, and the vast majority of the population is ignorant of the legal niceties that preside over its production and the money that it brings to the country.

Technology and a specialised labour force are imported. It is likely the same will hold true for construction projects, which will be given (as has been the case so far) to Portuguese, Brazilian and Chinese construction firms. The best example to illustrate this is the construction of the housing project, Kilamba City. The Angolan government, through Sonangol, contracted the China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC), and together they launched the $3.5 billion construction to house 200,000 people. One of the most ambitious projects developed by the Chinese in Angola, it involved 10,000 workers, of which only 4,000 were Angolans. The first phase of the project was inaugurated in July 2010 by President dos Santos. Kilamba, located 20km south of Luanda’s centre, stretches over an area of 52km² and it is expected to add 20,000 residential apartments and 246 business units to Luanda urban’s stock. Plans also include 24 pre-schools, nine primary schools and eight high schools. It will also be equipped with two electrical substations, 77 transformer stations, water supply stations a sewage treatment plant and infrastructure for drainage.

It is not only from the point of view of infrastructure that Kilamba will be self- sufficient – and cut off from the rest of the country. The management of Kilamba will be rooted in an idea that has gained currency in the Global South, pertaining to the formation of Charter Cities. This, for instance, will be the case of Cité du Fleuve, a city under construction near Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to Filip de Boeck, “if all goes according to plan, the latter will probably be accorded the administrative status of a new “commune,” and will be subject to their own special bylaws,” for it “echoes many of the ideas behind concepts such as the “charter city,” that is, a special urban reform zone that would allow governments of developing countries to adopt new systems of rules and establish cities that can drive economic progress in the rest of the country.” Only part of this holds true for Kilamba.

If profit (by speculation) is the innermost nature of Charter Cities, Kilamba may be different in this regard. Ultimately, Sonangol is not particularly interested in making profit out of real estate. But...
the government, through Sonangol, may exploit the distribution of housing and space for economic ventures and political gain. According to Bornito de Sousa, the Minister of Territorial Administration, it will be the first rehearsal in the government’s attempt to decentralise the state administration, through the formation of autarchies. Those autarchies will have financial autonomy, elect their own management bodies and produce by-laws. When Joaquim Marques, was appointed, by Dos Santos, as “President” of the administration of Kilamba – a position that does not exist in Angolan administrative law (as cities are administered by governors) – the political contours of Kilamba became more visible.

The political party Bloco Democrático issued a communiqué denouncing the usurping, by the presidency, of legislative power over matters concerning local government. Furthermore, the Bloco Democrático also accused the executive of forcing in a “non-elected administrative commission to use housing in the new city for electoral purposes, giving access to houses to members of the ruling party who know already how to get access to them”.

The transformation of material space into political space deprives people of the possibility to make claims over any occupation of land outside politics. However, until the arrival of this ethical horizon, the political community will always have the power to deprive its members of their rights. The Luanda case at hand shows the extent to which the elimination of disposition of usufruct from the legal system erases the distinction between politics and land tenure. Political space, then, not only allows the government to conduct forced removals, but also opens up new ways through which people can make claims on land. The new class of squatters in formation is no longer comprised of those who expect to legalise their occupational rights on the basis of usufruct in the future, but people who expect to be given accommodation by virtue of occupying the land that the state has marked for various purposes, such as urban development projects, infrastructure, or business ventures developed by private interests under the umbrella of the state.

Since the end of the civil war, the Angolan government has conducted major slum clearance campaigns. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 3,000 houses were destroyed in only four years between 2002 and 2006, a crisis which affected more than 30,000 people. Although the number people evicted in the period after 2006 is not known yet, the tendency is to increase. This is partly because the Constitution has brought a new wave of removals. For instance, when in March 2010, Isaac dos Anjos, the governor of the province of Huíla, ordered the forced removal of thousands of people, he backed his action through reference to the recently approved Constitution. Furthermore, the assumption that people forcefully removed are outright squatters might be misleading.

When the Land Law was first discussed, in 2002, a window of three years was included, so as to allow squatters to legalise their occupation rights. However, because the law was poorly regulated, this provision was not implemented or reinforced. Consequently, very few people have taken advantage of it. Some people, like dwellers of the municipality of Kilamba Kiaxi, had bought title deeds from the local administrations that were nullified when orders were given for the destruction of these informal settlements. Let me now illustrate both situations with some examples.

In April 2009, violent tides once more swept across the Island of Luanda. Such tides are not uncommon; in fact, they occur with such seasonal regularity that they have been integrated into the popular culture not only of the communities of Island of Luanda, but of the city of Luanda itself. Those tides, called calemas, have to be appeased by gift-giving celebrations, in which fishermen, in canoes, throw food onto the surface of the sea, to feed the Kianda (or spirit of the waters). This celebration, apparently pre-Christian, is so important that it has entered into the Catholic cosmogony. A church called Nossa Senhora do Cabo (Our Lady of Cape) was built in homage to Kianda on the Island of the Luanda. In the first years of independence, these ceremonies were abolished on the grounds that they were promoting obscurantism and devil worship. But when calemas started taking a heavy toll
on fishermen, the celebration was re instituted. So the tides that swept the Island that day in 2009 were part of fishermen’s everyday lives. But this time, the provincial government acted swiftly to clear the area. As such, the entire Avenue Mortala Mohamed – the main paved artery on the island – was evacuated. According to Sebastião Vemba, a reporter for Novo Jornal, in less than 24 hours the provincial government had organised a convoy of several trucks provided by the Casa Militar. A woman, who had just lost her baby, was forced to board one of the trucks with its corpse. Alongside her were thousands more people (roughly 700 families) with their wares, clothes, furniture, appliances, and other things they could salvage from the tides, first, and then from the destruction by the brigades sent by the Casa Militar. After a trip of more than two hours, people were left in Zango, in a sort of refugee camp. Like many others displaced by the destruction of their houses, they were relocated more than two hours from their workplaces, left to live in tents, under the rains and their children without schools.

Only recently were a number of these people given accommodations – the vast majority are still living in tents, a provisional situation that has become permanent. Thus, a temporary response to a natural disaster has become the alibi for forced relocation.

Later on, the governor of Luanda, Francisca do Espírito Santo, announced that the cleared area in the Island of Luanda would be part of the extension of a recreational project to offer space in the city for a number of leisure activities. A vast sidewalk has been built to accommodate restaurants, bars and other ventures for Luanda’s nightlife. If the logic of these removals has been to displace the urban poor so as to build urban equipment for the middle class and the bourgeoning national bourgeoisie, such is also the logic for many other removal operations. For instance, informal settlements in Iraq and Bagdad (named after their Middle Eastern counterparts, probably for being places that received many people fleeing from war in the countryside) were cleared so that the housing project Nova Vida, a middle class neighborhood for government officials, could be expanded. The destruction of these settlements in July 2009 was even more merciless than that of the Island of Luanda. With no notice, bulldozers (30 vehicles again from Casa Militar) did the job, leaving no one time to save furniture or clothes. This time, the police also encountered a woman giving birth, and waited for her to finish before taking her out and destroying her house. Those displaced staged a protest whose destination was Cidade Alta, the Presidential palace. But, on their way, a heavy contingent of the National Police, with armoured cars and dogs, dissuaded them from this purpose. Later on, one of those dwellers would tell a journalist that he “had never seen so many armed men in [his] entire life”.

In Roque Santeiro I met a number of people who had moved to the Boavista neighbourhood for the purpose of receiving houses as soon as their shacks are destroyed. During colonialism and in the first years of independence, the area of Boavista was the city’s refuse dump. By the 1980s, squatters took it over. Boavista, the house for thousands of people, is an informal settlement strategically located between Port of Luanda and Roque Santeiro, and it would not expand without the market that provided for squatters the means to eke out a living: by stealing commodities in the Port to be sold in the market; by supplying the market with a variety of services, such as loading and unloading and carrying goods; and whatever people can keep at their houses to rent to sellers, such as chairs, shades and generators.

As the shacks of Boavista have been literally built over garbage and sand, landslides have constantly struck the area. Every year, during the rainy season, a few people die when the ground over which their houses are built collapses. However, unlike other places, the removal of the Boavista settlers has not been treated as a priority by the government. According to informal conversations I had with a number of residents, the distribution of houses for them is a matter of time. Moreover, local government officials have worked in that settlement, registering the households and attributing numbers to the shacks. Counting and recognising these houses have given them value, turning them into commodities or assets to be bought and sold. But to be given a house requires more than proof of registration: squatters
have to live there. So now, in Boavista, there is no longer a distinction between those who moved to that part of the city because they had nowhere to go and those who have purchased houses so as to get accommodation in Zango. What they share is the experience of living in danger.

Among those who came to Boavista for the allure of a new house in Zango is my own cousin Kito. Kito was born not very far from Boavista, on the other side of the road that divides the Sambizanga municipality from Barrocas (waste dump). When he became a taxi driver, he moved to Kwanza, a neighbourhood where a significant number of people work directly or indirectly in the taxi business by fixing cars, selling parts, driving, and so on. When he heard of an imminent relocation of Boavista’s dwellers, he purchased a very derelict shack, for $2,000. When I reconnected with him during my return to Luanda in 2008, he was in the process of fixing the house.

One Saturday morning, Kito gathered his friends, his business associate, Bari, a native of Guinea-Conakry, his helper, Rei Leão, and many other youth in the neighbourhood to help him fix his house. They climbed the hill up to the market, to get a wooden door, half a dozen sheets of corrugated tin, nails and so on. It is harder to climb down with all these wares, but somehow, they managed to do so. They passed through infested alleys that smelled of rotten food and urine, where the most dangerous burglars of the market gazed at them (men who would kill a stranger on the spot for a cheap cell phone). They then passed through a clearing, where they could see children and adults defecating. And then, they had to go down the hill, through the zigzag passageway that people have opened through the heaps of garbage.

Kito’s house is half way down the hill. It is literally built on garbage. This became apparent when his friends start to dig a big hole, to serve as a WC: an archaeological cut through layers of Angolan practices of consumption over time. Hundreds of cans of imported soft drinks, along with many plastic bags were extracted from the hole. After that, a gasoline barrel was placed about a meter deep in the hole, and its surface covered by a piece of wood pierced with a little hole. “You can do your thing and it never smells, since the heat dries everything,” one of Kito’s neighbours told me.

But, he continued: “make sure to protect [the hole] from water, which acts on this [the latrine] like a fermenting agent.” The latrine functions because the bright sun dries up human waste in a matter of seconds, and gets pressed by more human waste. And so, they warned: “do not pour water into the latrine.” But what about the rains, I asked, if this place is famous for landslides and every year dozens of people die. According to Kito, it is just as dangerous to live in that part of Boavista: “houses on this part of the hill don’t fall, since there is more garbage here than sand”. Accumulated garbage, formed by a density of cans and plastic bags, coalesces into a thick material that gives consistency and stability to the ground.

Kito did not have money to invest in the construction of the house, so I decided to help him. My plan was to move in with him as soon as the house was ready. As I also wanted to observe the process of building a house in such circumstances, I gave him money to buy sacks of cement. I went to the market with him and he bought four sacks ($150). We then paid two men to haul the cement down the hill. It was a Monday, the market’s cleaning day, and the place was almost empty. The path from the road to where the hills begin to slope down is easy, even though one of the haulers, carrying two sacks on a hand truck scratched his arm on the corrugated tin of a market stall and bled all the way down to Kito’s place. A couple of days later, Kito hired two experienced neighbours as masons in order to make the floor. For the door and the walls of corrugated tin, Kito did not have to pay for labour, only providing his friends with marijuana and whisky – an imported Indian brand, which comes in little plastic packs). But when it came to the floor, things were different. His neighbours were professionals who had held formal jobs as masons. They finished the floor on a Sunday morning, after paying a group of children and women to fetch sand from nearby, further weakening the ground. Only with the floor done could Kito move in, for a cemented floor brings more stability to a house, lowering the risk of a collapse.
Kito moved to this house a while after I left Luanda in November 2008. He lived there with his wife for almost two years. When I went back to Luanda in December 2010, he had split with his wife and moved to Viana, another neighbourhood. He had someone taking care of the house, and he expects to be given a house if the government decides to relocate Boavista’s dwellers.

Boavista is quintessentially a political space. More specifically, it is a space of exception. The transformation of the waste dump into an informal settlement is only possible in the context of a particular understanding of rights and law. Boavista is not a place over which property rights can be claimed. And yet its occupancy allows settlers to make demands for a relocation to decent accommodations. But for this to happen, they must first to live in danger.