AFTER FOOD AND WATER, everybody needs shelter. At least for the last century, politicians on the left or the right, in the East or the South, have vowed to supply it. The delivery of one million homes seems to be the magic number around which governments erect elaborate promises of public housing and the financial and physical security to be had when one is finally a homeowner. Back when state retrenchment was positively heretical rather than simply hegemonic, the Thatcher government in the UK stridently asserted in 1986 that it would produce one million new homeowners from the sale of council houses to sitting tenants. Nearly a quarter of a century later, the grandly named, Minha Casa, Minha Vida (My House, My Life) program launched by the Lula administration in Brazil pledged to build a million homes for low-income families.

After three decades of conflict in which destruction rather than construction was the order of the day, the Angolan government began to devise its own ambitious housing program following the conclusion of the civil war in 2002. Eventually, the magic number appeared. Perfectly timed to coincide with the 2008 election campaign – the first election to take place following the war – President José Eduardo dos Santos promised to build one million homes in four years.¹ Angola only has 18 million inhabitants, and nearly 40 per cent of them live in and around Luanda. Owing to the war, steady rural to urban migration and natural population growth, about three quarters of the residents in the capital live in informal settlements with poor housing and sanitation.² Until a few years ago, those whose housing conditions were comparatively better off still lived in homes that had not enjoyed infrastructural repairs for 30 years.

Adopting the imagery of illusion rather than the deductive logic expressed in the Brazilian slogan, the government branded its housing policy, Meu Sonho, Minha Casa (My Dream, My House) and proceeded quickly to erect the institutional architecture to advance its goals. It reorganised government units to focus on urban planning and large-scale revitalisation projects in the capital (though without ever adopting an overarching master plan). To oversee the residential component, it anointed a prominent military general, who is a close advisor to the President, to direct the impressive sounding Cabinet of National Reconstruction (CNR). After the general was accused of being involved in a corrupt business deal involving the importation of hundreds of vehicles for use by his new office, the government changed its mind and handed over the core functions of the CNR to Sonangol Imobilária e Propriedade (SONIP), the real estate arm of Sonangol, the state oil company. The core function, it turned out, was not reconstruction but real estate. Using its vast revenue from the sale of oil, the government hired architects from Israel and South Africa and construction firms from Portugal, Brazil and China. It shipped in workers from Portugal, China and Vietnam, and imported everything from nails and cement to glass.

Especially in the capital, cranes are as ubiquitous as street traders and no journey through the city and its environs is possible without interruptions and delays owing to “obras em curso” (works in progress). This frenetic activity is financing a massive building boom not only of houses, but also of office complexes, hotels, hospitals, malls, monuments, and even entirely new cities.

Infamous among these new projects is New Kilamba City, recalling the kimbundu term of endearment for the first president of Angola, Agostinho Neto. Kilamba is a wholly conceived, planned city located roughly 20km southeast of Luanda’s downtown just off the recently repaved dual carriageway, the Via Espresso. Kilamba was financed with a US$3.5 billion credit line from the Chinese government through its Industrial and Commercial Bank. The Hong Kong-based China International Fund (CIF), which recently built two towers in Luanda’s city centre, built Kilamba using Chinese and Angolan workers. But Kilamba is no ordinary public housing project designed to put roofs over the heads of the poor and downtrodden. Rather, like many parallel city building projects elsewhere in Africa or Asia, or Latin America for that matter, its master plan calls for schools, shops, basketball courts, soccer fields, paved sidewalks, manicured gardens and even recycling bins for paper and plastic. Its 20,000 units of four, eight, and 12 storeys are expected to house 100,000 middle-class residents when operating at full capacity. Opened with much fanfare by President dos Santos in 2011, the site soon became a required stop on the itineraries of visiting dignitaries, who posed happily for photos in front of freshly painted buildings. In advance of the 2012 elections, Kilamba and the government’s other signature building projects seemed to offer visible proof that the government’s 2008 pledge to build one million homes before the next election was no hollow fantasy.
In the project to revitalise Luanda, Kilamba is almost dreamlike. It mimics China’s many pop-up cities in its configuration, size and the speed of construction. In fact, when we showed pictures of Kilamba to a colleague who works on housing in China, she exclaimed, “When were you in China?” Built in less than three years, it seems to have risen like a phoenix, almost overnight, on land previously scraped clean by bulldozers following the forced removal of an informal settlement. Organised in a fairly standard grid pattern, the configuration of Kilamba displays a quintessentially modernist aesthetic. It could just as easily be in the US or China. The city contains 27 blocks in total. Each block contains about 27 buildings and a total of 740 units. At the core of each block are several pairs of 10 or 12 story buildings ringed by buildings of eight stories that are flanked in turn by buildings of four stories. In the interior of each block, there is a school or a sports field; a park, a fitness centre or a clinic, although not all of these amenities are fully operational. The bottom floor of each building in the block is reserved for shops or the local political administration.

The presence of carefully laid out, orderly buildings, manicured lawns, broad boulevards, clean sidewalks, covered bus stops and working street lights contrasts sharply with the “old city” of Luanda, which, despite a stately beauty dating back to the 16th century and much ongoing construction, displays the scars of conflict and neglect. Many of its old stone buildings are derelict. In some cases, only the facades remain, propped up by rusty columns anchored in overgrown weeds and grass. Beautifully crafted, wrought iron balconies and railings, now rusted and broken, serve as jarring reminders of the wealth accumulated by the small settlement of Portuguese and Brazilian slave traders who resided there during the 18th and 19th centuries. Buildings adorned with art deco logos and graphics from the 1930s sitting uncomfortably alongside 1960s hyper-rational, high rise cement monstrosities architecturally date the long, oppressive presence of the Portuguese colonial administration and metropolitan businesses. Open sewage runs on narrow, potholed streets and dumpsters, where they exist at all, overflow with trash. Modernist gems of the early 20th century, like the Kinaxixi market, have been torn down to make space in the downtown for a new shopping centre. Newly erected stoplights often blink or are ignored by throngs of drivers whose cars crowd the city streets.

The stark contrast between old Luanda and Kilamba sends two clear and powerful messages to both Angolan residents and visiting dignitaries: first, the government has a vision for the future and second, the government can deliver on that vision. Given the context in which these two messages are being articulated, their effects are potentially quite powerful. If they are successful, they bury a complicated, torturous, divisive past by delivering a future that is spatially and materially distinct from what went before. Ironically, such a radically different material future may indeed sustain one of Africa’s longest serving ruling parties – once one of the continent’s loudest, proudest, and strongest redoubts of socialism. Before discussing the messages and their reception, let’s look at the historical context.

continued on pg. 128
Transatlantic hauntings

For at least five centuries Luanda and its hinterland have been part of the world economy that fueled the expansion of capitalism. In its earliest days and until the middle of the 19th century, Luanda was a key port in the transatlantic slave trade. Like Liverpool or London, what Ian Baucom calls “specters of the Atlantic” mark its past and shape its present. These are the ghosts of Africans enslaved and lost in the middle passage but also the hauntings, and the ties that bound the diaspora and the metropole to fuel capitalist accumulation. Industry in the metropole churned with raw materials produced by slaves ripped from Angola and transported to plantations in the new world. But human bodies were not only sold and traded like sugar or cotton, but also, just as grotesquely, they greased the wheels of finance capital through insurance premiums and pay outs. Losses of these valuable “commodities” could be financially determined and monetarily compensated. And, as Baucom shockingly documents in the case of the Africans who were thrown overboard from the British slave ship, The Zong, their lives could be sacrificed in the pursuit of insurance fraud.

In a conversation with the journalist and writer, Lara Pawson, about her research on Angola’s attempted coup in May 1977, an Angolan man tied the losses incurred by the slave trade to the country’s present. He speculated that those Angolans lost to the middle passage as well as the thousands of others killed in Angola’s recent conflicts had washed out to sea. They had become the source of Angola’s underwater black gold.

“When the oil dries up, it’ll be a good sign.” The metaphorical suggestion here is that Angola’s current oil wealth is intimately bound to a centuries-old circulation of capital, trade and bodies across the Atlantic. Today the Angolan government negotiates credit lines and tenders contracts with China and the West using oil-backed loans and mortgaging future oil production for present infrastructure projects, chief among them housing projects like Kilamba.

At the height of the transatlantic slave trade, Luanda was one of the most significant exit ports of enslaved Africans. Briefly dominated by the Dutch, the Portuguese crown and Brazilian commercial capital controlled Luanda. The city grew in fits and starts, its demography fluctuating with demand across the Atlantic. Luanda’s population, including Portuguese and Brazilian traders, spoke Kimbundu, one of the languages from this region. Africans recently arrived from the interior, Brazilians, some Portuguese, and residents with longer tenure in the city (both African and mixed descent) constituted the urban population, concentrated around the bay. Fishing villages of the axiluanda, the oldest populations in this area, dotted the island across the bay from the city. Traders, whether European, Brazilian or African, lived in the finest and largest stone homes in the baixa (lower city) with interior courtyards that often held those enslaved before embarkation, while Africans newly arrived to the city lived in mud and daub constructions. By the end of the 19th century the slave trade gave way to “legitimate commerce” and the General Act of the Berlin Conference came into effect. Yet in Luanda, a creole elite of mixed descent and Africans held positions of power in the civil service, military and clergy. In 1932, with the coup that brought António Salazar and his Estado Novo (New State) to power, the Portuguese presence in Luanda intensified. Racial segregation of urban space came to characterise the second half of the 20th century and the period of Luanda’s greatest growth (prior to the post-2002 boom).

12. Baucom, I., op cit
13. Pawson, L., (2014) In the Name of the People: Angola’s Forgotten Massacre, IB Tauris, p.177 (quoted with author’s permission)
Salazar, and his successor Marcelo Caetano, centralised colonial administration in the metropole, instituted a policy of white immigration to the colonies and marginalised the former elites politically, economically and spatially. A boom in coffee production in the 1950s, coupled with increased white immigration from Portugal and growing rural to urban migration, led to rapid growth in Luanda after World War II. During this period, roughly 160,000, people lived in Luanda, yet, by 1974 the number had grown to 600,000. Urban planning served the colonial administration: planners and policymakers designated the built urban core or cidade de cimento (cement city) as the commercial and white residential areas and the musseques (sandy places) on the city’s outskirts for African residents. In this process of urban development, the former creole elites lost their jobs, their property in the baixa and their cultural capital vis-à-vis the colonial state. A set of binary oppositions later differentiated the cidade de cimento from the musseques: European versus African residential spaces; formal from informal settlements; and avenues of asphalt from paths of sand.

At Independence in 1975, encouraged by egalitarian promises embedded in socialist discourse, returning exiles and refugees from the anti-colonial war (numbering in the thousands) and some musseque residents moved into homes abandoned by the Portuguese. But the civil war that followed halted urban construction even as urban migration continued and increased. By the time the war ended in 2002, an estimated 3.5 million people lived in the city; now six or seven million people reside in the capital – 75 per cent of them in the musseques.

In the late colonial period, the musseques had been home to cultural elites and new migrants, the birthplace of nationalism, of a vibrant cultural scene, of new, urban music and of a cosmopolitan sense of angolanidade (angolanness), but by 2002, all of this was under tremendous strain. The civil war that followed the anti-colonial war, the economic crisis post-independence, failed socialist planning, the isolation of Angola by the West, and tight-fisted control of oil revenues by a small oligarchy had left musque residents to fend for themselves. Informal systems of land tenure and property rights were adopted and respected; emergent informal markets thrived alongside state controlled stores until the free-market was unleashed by economic reform; and residents found innovative means to survive alongside overcrowding, poor infrastructure, unemployment and unrest. The war excused the lack of political, economic and infrastructural change; but with the signing of the Luena Memorandum between the rebel group, UNITA, and the government to end the war in 2002, popular expectations for improvements in infrastructure and the supply of housing swelled.
Building the Modernist City

With the war’s end, the government has shifted its attention to state-building. There are many elements to the strategy of securing its own political and economic future and strengthening the party and the state: city building and residential housing delivery are critical components of what Tomas calls the “regime of relationality” that the government is trying to forge between state and society. As we mentioned, the building of Kilamba conveys two messages: first, the government has a vision for the future and second, it can deliver on that vision. These messages communicate that the government is capable and modern – it has rejected Luanda’s preindustrial past with its narrow, irregular streets and its wrought iron. It has embraced icons of modernity: shopping malls, business parks and suburbs. It rejects the so-called disorder of the musseque and the mussequification of the city centre. In doing so, the Angolan government is following in the architectural footsteps not only of iconic architects such as Le Corbusier, but also of contemporary architects in Israel, South Africa and Brazil. As Holston observes in his analysis of Brasilia, “By asserting the primacy of open space, volumetric clarity, pure form, and geometric abstraction, modernism not only initiates a new vocabulary of form, more radically it inverts the entire mode of perceiving architecture”. Crass functionalism and a strict linear order replace the apparent chaos and disorder of older cities.

Like Brasilia, Kilamba seems out of context, official engineering plopped down in the middle of nowhere. The style is imported, more associated with Guangzhou or Shenzhen than the environs of Luanda. The horizontal and vertical enclosure of space in repetitious blocks of glass and concrete expressed in Kilamba, along with the succession of towers, complexes, centralidades, and condos link Luanda figuratively and architecturally to these other new urban spaces in other places in the world. In his inauguration of Kilamba, President dos Santos emphatically stressed points of connection with other similar constructions around the globe and declared that urban renewal would make Luanda one of the largest and most beautiful cities in the world. The rhetoric used to market Kilamba to outsiders announces that Luanda is a cosmopolitan city; it is a global city, a world city.

Yet, Kilamba is not entirely foreign or global in its orientation. It turns on a modernist aesthetic – the desire for order and clarity – expressed in pockets of Luanda’s urban centre built by architects of Portuguese and Angolan birth in the 1960s. For more local consumption, the construction of Kilamba is an essential element of a re-packaged discourse that yokes the government’s previous socialist inclinations to a new capitalist logic. Consider, for example, a promotional video for Kilamba that boldly asserts “a model of modernity and social responsibility – Kilamba City: a reason for all of us to be proud!”

Luandans – whether they live in the musseques or in apartments in the downtown – desire modernity, with which they equate consistent electricity and water, functioning elevators, and access to shopping and transport. These conditions exist only for the wealthy few, who can provide a private supply system of generators, cisterns, and trucked in water for themselves in the downtown. Private infrastructures strain urban life. They physically and materially endanger the buildings and spaces they make livable (the fire

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19. Even projects to maintain the old city use joint private/state reconstruction instead of historic preservation, as was the case with the Palácio de Dona Ana Joaquina, rebuilt from the ground up by Banco Africano de Investimentos (The African Investment Bank), whose board is full of high-powered business and political figures.
22. On the President’s speech for the opening of Kilamba and associated media hype, see “Kilamba City” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma8e4NQNMig. Accessed 20 July, 2013. As Jennifer Robinson (2006) maintains, global and world city aspirations are mostly “regulating fictions” more imagined than real, but governments and urban planners continue to articulate the vision nonetheless
department declared the back courtyard of the building where one of us lived in Luanda a fire hazard due to the excessive number of water pumps, cisterns, and gas storage tanks there). And the noise of the neighbour’s generator and the gas fumes it produces as others sit, sweat, or toss and turn the night swatting at mosquitos, breed social stress and fisticuffs.

By linking modernity and social responsibility, the video implies that a modern space is also a socially responsible place, free from chaos and disorder, free from war, free from social protests (something which Luanda has not been in recent years). By tying these two concepts together in a modernist project, Angolan elites are joining their counterparts in other countries and other eras. City governments and urban planners in 19th century Europe and 21st century South Africa have also tried to control “unplanned growth” and “unruly development” by reconfiguring urban space.25 In a country that was a socialist republic for 20 years, social responsibility inflects in particular ways. The ruling party must refashion its former incarnation as a worker’s party into something fresh. It must harness old values to new, moneymaking projects, to satisfy not only Angola’s growing business class, but also its foreign investors from Brazil and China. Titles of address obey a similar rationale. In the socialist period the president was addressed simply as Comrade President. Today, in the new era of state and city building, he is Comrade President, the Architect of Peace, the builder-in-chief – as publicity for the 2012 elections boldly proclaimed.

Kilamba as Phantasmagoria

Kilamba might demonstrate that the government can fulfil its promises of modernity but, unfortunately, the vision of constructing one million houses in communities such as Kilamba began to vanish almost as soon as politicians and planners conceived it. Before the “Meu Sono, Minha Casa” policy was even fully formed, it had already changed into something else – as dreams tend to, they evanesc. After a university professor calculated that over the four-year period (not counting weekends) the government would have to build 1,127 houses per day in order to reach the goal of one million houses,26 the government subsequently stated that actually it would be responsible for only 115,000 houses (part of which would be social housing and the other part would be “affordable housing” in novas centralidades), with 120,000 additional homes provided by the private sector, and 80,000 built by cooperatives. The rest, or rather the majority of homes, would be “self-constructed”.27

Kilamba alone meets 15 per cent of the government’s revised quota, but if no one lives there it makes a mockery of the target. Priced at $125,000 for the smallest unit, Kilamba received little interest after the inauguration. Buyers failed to materialise. Very quickly, the government’s showcase for new urbanism took on a dystopian status not as a housing El Dorado, but a “ghost town”. After construction finished in July 2012, Louise Redvers, then the BBC correspondent, dropped in and filmed it with her phone. The wind howled and whipped between empty buildings as Chinese construction workers walked by the product of their labour.28 Bloated prices and non-existent financing kept the rainbow coloured units beyond the reach of Angola’s supposed growing middle class. Redvers ridiculed it as a “ghost town”, reminiscent of those in China and Spain. The phrase spread like wildfire on social media, no doubt greatly embarrassing the Angolan government.29

But a ghost town is a bounded space, haunted by the spirits of those who once resided in its homes or walked its streets. It is a space left abandoned by people who have moved or been moved. A place of half-empty glasses, cobwebbed chairs and stories left mid-arc. Kilamba and projects like it are not quite that. Often, they are sites where inhabitants have been forcibly displaced, but also the products of conscious strategies by market actors and state elites to construct a spatial dreamscape that is highly desired by buyers. They are the urban spectacles, the chimeras, the phantasmagorias that are integral components of Angola’s quest for the spatial fix. Kaluandas (Luandan residents) do not view the image of Kilamba with disdain, they are entranced by it: they want consistent electricity and water, schools for their children, parks for them to play in, and health care centres where they do not have to wait for hours to be attended to. They want quiet. Unlike a ghost town, Kilamba is thick with dreams, hopes and promises of the future.

Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the Arcades project laid bare the use of fantasy and illusion by capitalists to seduce buyers into associating consumption with pleasure. As Marc Berdet observes, with the creation of Disneyland, Las Vegas, the mall of America and other grandiose projects, the coupling of consumption with fantasy reached new heights in the 20th century. These “phantasmagorias of capital”, as Berdet labels them, rely on architectural storytelling, powerful historical, religious or aesthetic symbols and tricks of design to market an imaginary world for the purpose of profit. To do this work, they may reconfigure powerful tropes of the past or market future fantasies. In Angola, socialist promises are repackaged into dreams of homeownership in spite of the fact that the state did not and cannot now deliver a sufficient number of homes for Angola’s population.

As Berdet remarks: “Phantasmagoria is a collective dream generated by a specific social class (for instance, the phantasmagoria of the Orleanist bourgeoisie or of liberal bourgeoisie), which picks up and neutralises socialist utopias. It is a distraction from social reality in a better world, a world without classes, but it has always the ideological function to hide, protect and reproduce the social order.” A phantasmagoria like Kilamba deludes its audience into thinking that everyone will have shelter in postsocialist, postconflict Angola. By referencing the former President’s nickname, it also cultivates a nostalgia for the past, for a time when independence held the promise of a better life. As Gastrow argues “an independence that was symbolized by the bringing to a halt of construction was symbolically re-enacted twenty-seven years later through the embrace of construction as the preeminent symbol of the post-conflict state.” Civil war put the hopes of independence that Neto represented on hold. New construction reignites that dream. Trading on the heroic status of the first president, Dos Santos rekindles ideals of social justice and belonging associated with the early days of independence. Using the nickname, Kilamba, dos Santos invokes that utopic moment when relationships seemed more horizontal than hierarchical without actually promising anything. A capitalist ethos now structures and drives the ruling oligarchy and the Angolan economy. So we see the pastel shades of the building pull against the strident tones of the country’s flag and anthem, which still resonate with internationalism. The new centrality of Kilamba is more like Ché Guevara in an Absolut advertisement than the Internationale.

30. Chloe Buire describes Kilamba and Panguila, another planned settlement, as places where “the expectations of the state and the dreams of inhabitants” meet. See Buire, C. (2014) op cit, p. 242
31. A point António Tomás makes with reference to the construction projects and imaginaries enfolding Luanda as a whole. See Tomás, A. (2012) op cit, Chapter 2. See also Buire, C. (2014) op cit, on the appeal of these spaces.
33. Berdet, M. ibid, p.6
In an ideal market economy, prices ultimately serve to distinguish fantasy from reality. If dreams cannot be bought, then those who wish to profit from their sale must lower the price or alternatively, potential buyers go away disappointed, their dreams discarded. Since the “market” is far from ideal in Angola, the government simply solved that problem in Kilamba by slashing the price of the least expensive unit, by 44 per cent from $125,000 to $70,000 and offering to subsidise the cost of borrowing for eligible buyers.\(^3^5\) Despite its considerable distance from the city, there was an immediate and overwhelming response. In February 2013, thousands stood in line to submit the requisite forms to acquire a property there to Delta Properties and SONIP, the two property management companies that administer New Kilamba City.\(^3^6\)

By their very nature, however, fantasies are fleeting. After deposits were paid, Delta and SONIP failed to contact some Luandans to conclude sales; others received units that were larger than what they requested and were asked to pay the difference. In May of 2013, rumours circulated that despite the drop in prices and continued vacancies, an additional $3,000 was required to get one’s name on a list for one of the apartments. Complaints in the comments section of online news services, such as Angonotícias and Club-k, offer evidence of the frustration by those who submitted paperwork and transferred funds (typically thousands of dollars) to Delta and SONIP, yet months later still had not received keys or seen their names on the official lists of residents.\(^3^7\) More recently, allegations of false contracts and favouritism of personnel connected to SONIP, have circulated.\(^3^8\) As of June 2014, the government suspended SONIP from distributing houses and launched an investigation into the allegations.\(^3^9\)

Moreover, for those who now occupy selected units in Kilamba, their housing is hardly a dream. Facebook groups maintained by residents show flooded streets and public gardens, overflowing rubbish bins and vandalised storage lockers. Messages implore fellow residents to pay the condominium fee, install air conditioners according to the regulations, and park in designated parking spots instead of on sidewalks. Some irate residents are posting photographs to shame neighbours into good behaviour. There are frequent complaints about shortages of water and electricity, ATMs without money and the distance to the city’s only supermarket, which is actually located outside Kilamba.\(^4^0\) These flaws expose the false promises of this supposed infrastructural wonderland.

\(^4^0\) Redvers described Kilamba city as “eerily quiet” in the July 2012 BBC report. Both online news sources and the Facebook groups of Kilamba residents are full of commentaries by Kilamba residents expressing their discontent about poor management in apartment delivery, the lack of services, the additional costs this causes, and security concerns; see also Brandão, R. (2012) op cit
Luxury in Misery

A Luandan contemplating the prospects of living in Kilamba employed the ironic term, luxo na miséria (luxury in misery), to capture two contrasting states, like a beautiful house with no running water or owning a piece of land in the city without a house on it. The Angolan government’s postwar modernising ambitions also have these contrasting elements. As Manuel Ennes Ferreira argues, the Angolan case further unsettles the increasingly challenged, conventional wisdom regarding the supposed peace dividend that should follow from the end of war, whereby military spending is shifted to spending on social services, economic development and other sectors that benefit overall well-being. Instead, Ennes Ferreira finds that Angola exhibits what he calls the “peace dividend insecurity paradox”, in which the majority of the population are largely excluded from any dividends that accrue from peace (including physical as well as economic security), while a small, rent-seeking minority consisting of political elites, the top military brass and powerful businesses benefit from the distribution of selective goods, such as housing, the allocation of mining rights, positions on company boards, for example, as well as the private security required to protect such goods. In the case of the numerous city building projects that are underway, many of the more negative socio-economic effects of Luanda’s latest encounter with modernity have been replicated alongside the efforts to impose legibility on Luanda’s urban residents. In the quest to revitalise the city, neighbourhoods are consciously stratified geographically and visually as they might be in Detroit or Cleveland in the 1950s. Resettlement is preferred over slum upgrading. Like the intention behind Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin, which Kilamba uncannily resembles, poorer residents are pushed farther and farther into the suburbs, out of the way, out of sight. In the words of Odonato, a character in Os Transparentes (The Transparent Ones), Ondjaki’s 2013 novel about urban space in Luanda, “We’re not transparent because we don’t eat. We are transparent because we are poor.”

Several analysts have observed that the post-independent government has not been innovative in addressing housing needs or respecting existing settlements. Instead, according to Gastrow, “the general attitude taken by planners and government officials toward the musseques has imitated colonial patterns, namely slum elimination and forced removal.” The current phase of forced removals began in 2001 and has continued to the present day, despite violent protests by residents slated for removal and local NGOs like SOS Habitat. Human Rights Watch and SOS Habitat estimate that 20,000 residents were displaced between 2002 and 2006.
As massive urban resettlement followed by redevelopment continues (aided by the government’s heavy-handed constitutional assertion of eminent domain), old or inner city Luanda is being revalorised. Consistent with the pattern of reinvestment in the urban core that has occurred from Boston to Berlin, luxury high rises are replacing residences inhabited by Angolans who moved in after the Portuguese departed; or musseques close to the city that the authorities have cleared. Social engineering by the state coupled with profit driven construction firms have produced some startling contrasts in land and real estate values. In the city centre, the price of land can run as high as $800 per square metre; in suburbs such as Viana in the east, or Cacauco in the north, land values can be $100 per square metre. Thus a fancy three-bedroom, three-bathroom house in the posh neighbourhood of Miramar in Luanda can cost $3 million, whereas a modest three-bedroom, two-bath apartment in Kilamba now costs a “mere” $78,000.

Slick videos preach social responsibility on Youtube, but harrowing news accounts of murder and mayhem, corruption and crime suggest that things are very different on the ground. Attacks by rebel separatists in the province of Cabinda, where most of the country’s offshore oil drills are located, call attention to the hostility felt by some local residents because of the lack of development and local politics. Robbery and carjackings are common in the capital, although official statistics are unavailable. Consider also the gruesome death of Barbara Sá Nogueira, a manager of Banco Millennium, a Portuguese multinational bank whose Angolan subsidiary is partially owned by the Sonangol. Judith da Silva, a “friend” of the victim, confessed to her murder. She is rumoured to have killed her out of jealousy and over a $15,000 debt she owed to Sá Nogueira. On Facebook, the singer Daniel do Nascimento bitterly decried this and other senseless murders in Luanda noting that “at this rate, the country will have as many cemeteries as buildings. Even people will be walking concrete blocks, without hearts, without souls, without anything!” Material progress has created more social distress as concrete blossoms harden hearts and the frenzies of capital cannot be neatly contained.

Forced removals and futuristic longings – the sinister tales of Luanda’s everyday existence alongside city boosterism, and growing differentiation between the revalorised urban core and the areas outside the capital – no doubt makes this city another “ordinary” urban metropolis, subject to similar processes and dynamics as São Paulo or Shanghai. Yet, it is equally important to consider the political ramifications of the government’s rather ordinary “spatial imagination”. Will the construction of urban fantasies guarantee the legitimacy that the government so badly wants? Not if the water doesn’t run and the lights aren’t on.

49. Tomás, A. (2012) op cit, p. 48
51. World Bank Development Workshop, (2011) op cit, p.92