

## THE MODERN TITANIC. URBAN PLANNING AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN KINSHASA

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*The covert violence, the risk, the uncertainty and the possibility of daily life in Kinshasa resides in the gap between official visions and unofficial reality. Using two cases in which water is being turned into land, Filip De Boeck reveals the need to envision a 'near future' that hyphenates dream and reality; a plan predicated on incremental transformation rather than destructive, radical, exclusionary change.*

'Even though something can be inserted easily enough into the mirror, none of us knows precisely how and when it can be taken out again. Do mirrors have looking-glasses too, deeper layers, echoes perhaps incessantly sounding the fathomless?'

'Then only does he see, low in the night on the sea, quite close in the dark here, not much further than a scream away, rising in their wake, screw-thud by screw-thud exactly duplicated, *the other ship*.'

Breyten Breytenbach, *Mouir*.

### Challenges Of Urban Growth In Africa

In November 2010 UN Habitat, the Nairobi-based agency that monitors the world's built environment, published a report on *The State of African Cities 2010: Governance, Inequality and Urban Land Markets*. In this detailed and substantial report, it is noted that there will be three times as many people living in Africa's cities by 2050. The transformation of a rural population into a predominantly urban one is neither good nor bad on its own, says UN Habitat. Still it implores African countries to plan their cities better, to avoid the development of mega-slums and vast areas of deprivation across the continent, for living conditions in African cities are now the most unequal in the world. The pattern remains that of "oceans of poverty containing islands of wealth", states the UN Habitat report.

Whatever the value of the figures presented by UN Habitat, it is clear that the speed of growth of some cities on the African continent indeed "defies belief", as the report states. Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the city upon which I will focus here, is one of the fastest growing urban conglomerations on the African continent today. This megalopolis "that does not respond to reason" and in which "everything that cannot exist flourishes", as the Angolan author José Eduardo Agualusa remarks in his latest novel *Barroco Tropical*, this urban giant, which others have described as the quintessential postcolonial African city and one of the most drastic urban environments of the world, is the fastest-growing African city in absolute terms, with 4 million extra people expected in the next ten years, a 46% increase of its 2010 population of 8.7 million.

Kinshasa ... the quintessential postcolonial African city and one of the most drastic urban environments of the world

This means that the city of Kinshasa is not only facing the huge responsibility of ameliorating the already very poor living conditions of its urban residents, but also implies that it has to develop a new policy to stop or prevent the further spread and growth of the already substantial slum areas in and around the city, which today extends 100 kms west, south and east of its original center.

That task will necessitate a big effort from all layers of government – from the municipalities, the governor of Kinshasa, the various provincial ministries, the national government to the presidency itself – to arrive at a strategic urban planning which takes the needs of the poor – the vast majority of this city – into account, without discarding them.

How can and should a city such as Kinshasa – with a yearly municipal budget under US\$ 23 million, barely enough to cover its administrative salaries, with more people living on a daily income not exceeding 1 US\$ than anywhere else in the world, and with 75 % of its population under the age of 25 – cope with such growth? How should a country such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, which, in spite of recent and ongoing attempts at administrative reform, is often viewed as a case example of a 'failed' state, respond to such an enormous challenge?

During the campaign leading up to the 2006 presidential elections, President Kabila announced his 'Cinq Chantiers' program, his Five Public Works. The concept summarizes Kabila's efforts to modernize education, health care, road infrastructure, access to electricity, and housing accommodation in



5 Chantiers en marche!  
 Photo: Courtesy Filip De Boeck

DR Congo. In 2010, the year in which Congo celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence from Belgian colonial rule, and a year before the next presidential elections, the ‘chantiers’ were geared into a different speed, especially in the country’s urban agglomerations, and in Kinshasa in particular. For the first time, perhaps, since the ‘*Plan décennal pour le développement économique et social du Congo*’, the 10 year program which the Belgian colonial administration put into practice between 1949 and 1959, there is an encompassing project on a national

scale which, even if it is not a fully fledged Marshall Plan to secure the country’s future, seems to present something of an attempt towards an overarching governmental plan or programme to respond to the nation’s most pressing and urgent needs, or at least that of its elites, specifically with regard to its urbanisation.

In what follows, I will analyse the impact of the ‘5 chantiers’ program and the ocular and spectral politics underlying the Congolese government’s plans for the future expansion of Kinshasa by introducing two concrete cases: a first case focuses on the expansion of fields in the Malebo Pool, exemplifying the current modes of ‘informal’ urban expansion and random occupation of space in the city. The second case deals with the development of a new urban project, the *Cité du Fleuve*.

The juxtaposition between the two cases reveals the tensions which, I argue, constantly exist between the reality as lived by millions of urban dwellers in Kinshasa today, and the official vision of Kinshasa’s urban future which political leaders and urban planners seem to share. As Edgar Pieterse has recently noted, the existential core of urbanism is the desire for radical change, but this radical impulse often stands in sharp contrast to the necessary prudence which characterises a more incremental change that often seems to be lacking in today’s African urban centers. It is the profound hiatus between the official urge towards radical urban planning and reform, and the on-the-ground practices of everyday urban life and survival that produces some of the worst violence and insecurity which urban dwellers have to face and cope with in their daily struggle for survival in the urban context.

The history of the Democratic Republic of Congo

has, of course, been marked by blatant political violence, produced by a sometimes harsh colonial regime, as well as by a violent decolonization process (1960-1965), thirty years of ruinous reign under Mobutu (1965-1997), a long and painful political transition against the backdrop of violent warfare which involved many of Congo’s neighbours (1998-2003), and a slow and fragile process of democratization and state reform after the 2006 presidential elections. In recent years Kinshasa received its share of that violence: it lived through two massive and violent waves of looting in 1991 and 1993; it was briefly drawn into the war in Brazzaville, on the other side of the Congo river, in 1996 and 1997; it was invaded by the former Rwandan allies of Kabila sr. in August 1998; and it saw some of its worst violence in the period immediately prior to the 2006 elections, when two presidential candidates, Jean-Pierre Bemba and current president Kabila, openly engaged in armed clashes in the streets of Kinshasa, leaving hundreds of people dead. Yet, one might argue that, in spite of this recent violent history, Kinshasa was spared the worst.

Given its importance and size, its poor administration, its lack of insertion into a formal economy, its insufficient policing, its extremely young population, and the growing insecurity in many parts of the city due in part to the failing material infrastructure which leaves large areas without running water or electricity for weeks or even months, Kinshasa nevertheless consists of a chaotic but relatively peaceful social environment in which overt physical violence has remained the exception rather than the rule. Its production of violence lies elsewhere: violence is much more covert, and it is often produced in the folds of the city, the shadow zones or grey areas



Kinshasa traffic jam.

Photo: Butembologie - skyscapercity.com

existing between the practical level of its everyday existence and the official discourses and practices of its administrative and legal frameworks which are supposed to regulate, sanitize, control and discipline life in this unruly city. Often, it is in this gap that the city's insecurity, but also its possibilities, are located.

### **Colonial urban planning and the subsequent random occupation of urban space**

Born out of a trading post at what is now known as the Malebo Pool (formerly Stanley Pool) along the Congo River in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Léopoldville rapidly grew into what essentially was a segregationist, Janus-faced city with a white heart, *La Ville*, the home of the city's European population, and a surrounding, quickly growing peripheral African city, commonly referred to as *La Cité*, home to an increasing number of Congolese. The African *cités* of Léopoldville were in part the result of a large-scale housing scheme launched by the Belgian colonial

administration, a plan marked by the modernist ideals that were also *en vogue* in Belgium at the time. Between 1949 and 1959, thousands of houses were thus built by Belgian urban planners and architects, in an impressive effort to respond to the demographic explosion of the city and the increasing social unrest this engendered after World War Two.

To some extent the division between *La Ville* on the one hand, and a growing number of townships on the other, continues to mark Kinshasa's landscape today. In the past the two areas were not only separate from each other along racial lines, they were also physically set apart by railway tracks, strategically placed army barracks (such as the notorious Camp Militaire Lt. Col. Kokolo) and other *zones tampons*, empty no man's lands which spatially drew a divisive line between these various living areas. These zones of separation were also responsible for the fact that the city became spatially scattered. Even today, in the historical heart of Kinshasa many of these empty pockets of land have not yet fully densified in terms of housing and construction.

After 1960 the number of *cités* increased drastically. Existing *cités* further densified and expanded, and others were added. Some of these post-1960s expansions had been planned by the Belgian colonial administration, but many others were added onto the existing urban core in a rather unplanned and chaotic fashion. Today, the city continues to spread incessantly in a western and southern direction towards the Lower Congo, and eastwards, way beyond Ndjili, Kinshasa's national airport, towards the foot of Mangengenge Mountain, the eastern gateway to the city.

It is in these increasingly numerous urban areas that the city's inhabitants, giving little or no credence

to the claims of official urban planning and related matters of the map, have started to re-territorialize and reclaim the urban space, develop their own primal and provisional forms of urbanism, and infuse the city with their own praxis, values, moralities and temporal dynamics. In the fifty years of the post-independence period this process, which started in pockets of autonomous life at Kinshasa's margins, has engulfed the city as a whole, marking a move away from the physical and mental 'place' of colonialism (its spatial layout, its work ethos, its time-management and its language, French). Unhindered by any kind of formal industrialisation or economic development, the city has bypassed, redefined or smashed the colonial logics that were stamped onto its surface. It has done so spatially, in terms of its architectural and urban development, as well as in terms of its socio-cultural and economic imprint.

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A striking example of this dynamic is provided by the transformation that the Malebo Pool is currently undergoing. Over the past twenty years the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods along the Congo River have converted large parts of the Pool into arable land. They were inspired by the example of the Koreans, who started to develop rice paddies in the Malebo Pool in the 1980s. When the Koreans abandoned these rice fields in the 1990s, the local population took over, and further expanded the farmland into the river, often with very basic tools or even with their own bare hands. By now, in certain areas





Edge of Kinshasa  
Flickr: FredR

such as the mouth of the river Tshangu near the Ndjili airport, the empoldered area is already reaching 10 kms into the Malebo Pool. In this way more than 800 out of the 6000 hectares that make up the Malebo Pool have already been transformed from water into arable land.

Over the years, the official authorities, from the National Ministry of Agriculture down to the municipal level, have made half-hearted attempts to impose a legal framework to direct, control and, above all, tax these new farming activities on previously non-existent land. In theory, the state administration has the right to allocate the land to farmers. The latter are supposed to make a payment to the land registry office of the province of Kinshasa, before being able to obtain various authorisations from different government agencies, ministries and municipalities. After this long and tedious process, a farmer then acquires the right to use the land for as long as he wants, on the condition that he can prove it is continuously cultivated. The municipality is

supposed to send an inspector to check on this once a year.

In practice, however, none of these regulations and procedures is applied in any straightforward way. The inspector has never come, and since none of this land is on any official map, the authorities often don't even know which land should be paid for. In reality this huge new garden belt is organised outside any clearly defined form of government control on the ground. The factual 'ownership' of these gardens is, therefore, in the hands of some 80 farmers' associations. These have divided the riverine farmlands into a number of sectors which in turn are subdivided into a varying number of 'blocks', each consisting of hundreds of tiny garden plots that rarely surpass 2 to 6 acres. A sectorial president (officially representing the level of the municipality but in reality acting quite independently), aided by a number of '*chefs de bloc*', oversee the farming activities of over 1000 farmers. They also organise the trade with the thousands of women who each day buy up the gardens' produce and ensure the vegetables' distribution over a large part of the city's numerous markets.

In this way Kinshasa's inhabitants not only continue to connect with the city's and river's long-standing (precolonial) market and trading history, they also remind us of the fact that the city has not only looked into the mirror of colonialist modernity to design itself, but that it has always contained a second mirror as well. This second mirror is provided by the rural hinterland, Kinshasa's natural backdrop, which does not only form the city's periphery, and feed the peripheral city, but which has also deeply penetrated the city, spatially, economically, socially (in terms of the ethnic make-up of

large parts of Kinshasa), and above all, culturally and psychologically. Rather than pushing the rural out, Kinshasa's urban identity has constantly been invaded and formed by, blending with and depending on rural lifestyles, mentalities, moralities and modes of survival.

The small-scale modes of action that punctuate rural living – often reformulated yet continuing within the urban context – provide Kinshasa's inhabitants with urban strategies of survival. These – often unsteady, provisional and constantly shifting – possibilities and action schemes are perhaps not the only ones available to Kinshasa's residents to give form to the making and remaking of associational life in the city (think also of the mobilizing force of Neo-Pentecostalism, for example), but as a lever for the conceptualisation of collective action in the urban configuration it is impossible to underestimate their importance. It is in local zones and domains such as the one described above, with its myriad activities and its complex web of 'informal'



Farming in Kinshasa  
Photo: Courtesy Filip De Boeck

economies that have spun themselves around the river and Kinshasa as a whole, that the city illustrates its own production, and generates the possibility of economic survival and of social life in the urban context. Here the city reveals itself not as the product of careful planning or engineering, but rather as the outcome of a randomly produced and occupied living space that belongs to whomever generates, grabs and uses it. Of course, this occupation is always accompanied by (the threat of) expulsion. The whole of the city is caught in a waxing and waning movement between capturing and letting go, invading and retreating, seizure and expulsion. Since the urban residents of Kinshasa stand in no steady or lasting proprietary relationship to anything they own, scarcely even to the space they seize, occupy and inhabit, unsteadiness or movement becomes a form of property in and of itself. Life in the city often takes on the aspect of a semi-nomadic journey generated in the temporality of the moment.

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Plans are one thing, journeys another. That is also why such random occupation of urban space almost always engenders new conflicts. Again, the riverine fields provide a good example. The creation of new arable land in the Malebo Pool has led to innumerable and sometimes violent clashes concerning ownership and land rights over this previously non-existent land. On one level, these conflicts are mainly played out between the farmers' associations and the Teke and Humbu *chefs de terre*, Kinshasa's original landowners. The latter have sustained their

livelihood since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by selling plots of ancestral land to the city and its inhabitants. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, they are running out of land to sell. That is the reason why they turned to these newly available plots of land, claiming ownership over them. Backed by some government officials, but without the farmers' consent, they started to sell large stretches of this new farmland to individuals and families, who, in turn, started to destroy the gardens to convert them into shanty areas. Hundreds of new 'landowners' constructed their shacks in what essentially is a very unhealthy swamp area that does not exist on any official map of the city, lacks even the most basic infrastructure in terms of water, electricity and sanitation, and is totally unfit for habitation.

What complicates matters is that the farmers, the land chiefs and the owners of the newly constructed houses are each backed by various administrative and judicial instances on the municipal and the

provincial level. This has created a highly explosive situation leading to ongoing violent clashes between the various parties involved. In one instance, in early 2010, the bodyguards of a local traditional Teke chief, backed by some army officials, attacked a provincial minister while the latter visited a disputed site with some policemen and ordered the destruction of infrastructure on what he considered illegally occupied farmland.

Yet, in spite of such conflicting interests, and the uncertainties and constant renegotiations these clashes entail, it is this organic approach to the production of the city and its spaces that enables Kinois (residents of Kinshasa) to survive at all. In many respects, Kinshasa's *cités* are conceived around architectures that remain almost invisible, and are defined by lack and absence on a material level. And many activities in the city become possible not because there is a well-developed infrastructure available to sustain them, but rather because that



*Botteghe di sera*  
Kinshasa, Agosto 2005.  
Flickr: nimzilvio



*Taglio e cucito "La benedizione di Dio"*  
Kinshasa, Agosto 2005.  
Flickr: nimzilvio

infrastructure is *not* there, or only exists through its paucity. People's lives in large parts of the city unfold around truncated urban forms, fragments and figments of imported urban technologies, echoes of built environments from the colonial period, and recycled levels of infrastructural accommodation. Although these infrastructures might have originated as the product of a careful engineering of urban space, they no longer function along these lines today. Constantly banalized and reduced to its most basic function, that of a shelter, the built form is generated by a more real, living city which exists as a heterogeneous urban conglomeration through the bodies, movements, practices and discourses of urban dwellers. This embodied praxis of urban life is embedded in, as well as produces, the entanglement of a wide variety of rhizomatic trajectories, relations and mirroring realities. All of these enjoin, merge, include, fracture, fragment and re-order the urban space. They create, define, and transform new sites of transportation, new configurations of interlaced spatialities, new regimes of knowledge and power, new public spaces of work and relaxation, and new itineraries which often pursue inversions upon other urbanites' journeys but which, almost invariably, also engender new clusters of relations and social interactions. And the more there are opportunities to short-circuit any dependence on (unstable) infrastructure and technology, and to bypass the intricate questions of maintenance, ownership and so on, the better all of these actions and transactions seem to work.

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Of course, this level of urban functioning outside of the official frameworks of formal urban planning is characterised by precariousness and hardship, and defined by necessity. Therefore, it is often far from an ideal way to live. But yet, at least to a certain extent, it also seems to be efficient and to work for many. It generates a specific agency in a specific urban experience. It also generates the capacity or the possibility to become a wilful actor in these urban networks. And it is efficient because it allows urbanites to be local producers and controllers of infrastructure and technology, rather than local consumers of technology imported from elsewhere. It transforms city dwellers from passive victims into active participants with their own social, economic, political and religious agendas, which are often situated far beyond the level of mere survival. Concretely, it offers them a considerable freedom to capture the sudden possibilities opened up by unexpected occasions that are generated by the synergies and frictions of urban life. These energies constantly force the urban dweller to master the tricky skills of improvisation. Kinshasa's inhabitants seem to be very good at doing exactly that: at being flexible, at opening up to the 'unexpected' that often reveals itself outside the known pathways that constitute urban life as most in the Global North know it. Urban residents of cityscapes such as Kinshasa are highly skilled at discovering itineraries beyond the obvious, and at exploiting more invisible paths and possibilities that lay hidden in the folds of urban domains and experiences. Often, these urban residents (and apart from a wealthy but small elite that includes almost everyone in Kinshasa, a city without a well-developed middle-class) have trained themselves to tap into this imbroglio, and to exploit to the full

the possibilities these juxtapositions offer. They are constantly busy designing new ways to escape from the economic impositions and excesses that urban life imposes on them. They often know where to look and what to look for in order to generate feasibility within what is seemingly unfeasible.

### ***“Oceans Of Poverty, Islands Of Wealth”?* The New Governmental Politics Of Erasure And Of Spectral Urbanisation**

All of this stands in sharp contrast to the official planning of the city that the urban authorities and the Congolese government have recently committed themselves to after decades of disinterest and *laissez faire*. For some years now, a successive series of city governors has been engaged in 'cleaning up' the city. This cleansing basically boils down to a hard-handed politics of erasure, destroying 'irregular', 'anarchic' and unruly housing constructions, bulldozing bars and terraces considered to be too close to the roadside, and banning containers, which Kinosis commonly convert into little shops, from the street. The same is happening to the small street 'restaurants' known as *malewa* (which provide many women, and therefore whole families, with an income), as well as many other informal structures and infrastructures allowing urban dwellers to survive in the volatile economy of the street. The urban authorities not only started to wage a war against these 'illegal' structures and activities but also against the very bodies of those who perform or embody them. Amongst those who first fell victim to the state's effort to 'sanitize' and recolonise the city, rewrite the city's public spaces, redefine who has a right to the street and to the city, were Kinshasa's street children



and youth gangs, commonly referred to as *bashege*, *pomba* and *kuluna*.

The word *kuluna* derives from the Lingala verb *kolona*, which means: to plant, to sow, to cultivate. The verb is, of course, itself a derivative of the French coloniser, while also referring to the military term *colonne*. *Kuluna* originated with urban youngsters from all over Southwest Congo who would walk all the way to the diamond fields of the Angolan province of Lunda Norte in order to try their luck there and return with diamonds or dollars: a very common practice in the early 1990s, and to a lesser extent, still today. Walking the small trails through the forests of northern Angola they would follow each other and form a line, like a military cohort, while penetrating and ‘colonising’ new and unknown territory. In the same way these youth gangs re-territorialize the city.

In an attempt to stamp a new material and moral scale onto the city’s surface, the urban authorities started to organise operations such as *Kanga Vagabonds* (‘Grab the Vagabonds,’ an operation reported by Belgian anthropologist Kristien Geenen), in order to expulse street children and *kuluna* from the city’s public eye. But this urban policy went much further than purifying the streets of unruly kids, or prostitutes. What it envisaged was a much more harmful attempt at wilfully disrupting what is commonly referred to as the ‘informal economy’, the proverbial *système D* or *Article 15*, which essentially refers to the entrepreneurial capacity of urban dwellers to generate the networked agencies, coping mechanisms and survival strategies discussed above. In Kinshasa, every singular life is embedded in a multiplicity of relationships. Many of these relationships are defined by family and kinship ties,

but many others have to do with the specific ways in which one inserts oneself – has to insert oneself – in multiple complex, often overlapping, networks which include friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, members of one’s church congregation, professional relations and so on ... Within the megalopolis that Kinshasa has become, this capacity ‘to belong’, to socially posit oneself within as many different collectivities as possible, and thereby to obliterate anonymity (in itself an almost unthinkable concept), is crucial to survive and to exist beyond the raw reality of mere survival and bare life. The capacity for insertion constitutes the prerequisite for a life worth living in this kind of urban environment, in economic as well as social terms. The state’s brutal destruction of citizens’ material and social environments under the guise of urban reform, which once again seems to be inspired by earlier moral models of colonialist modernity, therefore forms a violent attack on precisely that crucial creative capacity which is a *sine qua non* to belong, and to belong together, in the city. The official urban politics ‘orphans’ many urban residents and in the end defines them as out of place in the contours of this newer, cleaner, ‘better’ and more ‘modern’ urban environment.

[The state’s brutal destruction of citizens’ material and social environments under the guise of urban reform ... forms a violent attack on precisely that crucial creative capacity which is a sine qua non to belong, and to belong together, in the city.](#)

The same exclusionist dynamics are fuelling an even more outspoken attempt at redefining what a ‘proper’ city means today. Inspired by Kabila’s “Cinq Chantiers” program, downtown Kinshasa (*la*

*Ville*) is currently undergoing a quite radical face-lift under the guidance of Chinese engineers, Indian or Pakistani architects, and real estate firms from Dubai, Zambia or the Emirates. Along the main boulevards and major traffic arteries all trees have been cut down and adjacent gardens and fields destroyed, while the roads and boulevards themselves were widened to become eight lane highways leading right into the heart of the city. Some landmark buildings have been embellished or restored, while others have made way for new construction sites on an unprecedented scale. Plans also exist, so the city’s rumour mill has it, to build a new viaduct connecting an upgraded Ndjili International airport with *La Ville* (and more precisely with its Grand Hotel, one of the two international hotels of downtown Kinshasa). The viaduct will follow the Congo River, and run over and above the heads of the hundreds of thousands of impoverished inhabitants of the densely populated municipality of Masina, thereby relegating them to new urban folds and shadow zones out of sight of those who have a right to the new city.

Today, also, almost every main street and boulevard of Kinshasa is covered with huge billboards in a sustained politics of ‘*visibilité*’ for the 5 chantiers policy. The boards announce the emergence of this new city and offering the spectral, and often spectacular though highly speculative and still very volatile, vision of Congo’s reinsertion into the global oecumene. The advertisements promise to bring ‘modernisation’ and ‘*un nouveau niveau de vie à Kin*’ (a new standard of life to Kinshasa). Apart from the classic infrastructural works (bridges, roads and street lights for example), the billboards also show representations of soon-to-be-constructed conference centres, five star hotels, and skyscrapers with



Modern Paradise  
Photo: Courtesy Filip De Boeck

names such as ‘Modern Paradise’, ‘Crown Tower’ or ‘Riverview Towers’. Many advertisements sport a portrait of President Kabila alongside the statement that Congo will soon be ‘the mirror of Africa’. Kinshasa, in other words, is again looking into the mirror of modernity to fashion itself, but this time the mirror no longer reflects the earlier versions of Belgian colonialist modernity, but instead it longs to capture the aura of Dubai and other hot spots of the new urban Global South.

At the same time, the billboards powerfully reveal the tensions and disjunctures between these mirages and images of the new city and the histories and temporalities of the lives currently lived in Kinshasa by most. In this way, in February 2010, I was struck by two adjacent billboards on one of Kinshasa’s main boulevards. One showing an image of a new shopping mall, complete with fountains and gardens, soon to be constructed along the boulevard, while a poster right next to it advertised a

new brand of Aladdin lamp, still the most important tool for many Kinois to light up their nights because large parts of the city are not, or no longer, or only at unpredictable moments, connected to the city’s failing electricity network.

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The most striking billboard of all is to be found near the Beach, Kinshasa’s main port. Today, however, the Beach has become an industrial wasteland. The riverbank itself is hidden from view by boats that have all sunk and no longer offer possible lines of flight; instead cadavers of boats, in every possible shade of rust eaten brown, just lie there stranded, immobilized, stuck in the mud and entangled by floating carpets of water hyacinths. It is this very same setting that was chosen by a real estate firm that calls itself ‘Modern Construction’ to erect a new conference centre. On a huge billboard, a poster again shows a photo of a smiling Kabila. On his left and right, one beholds a computer animated picture revealing the new international conference centre, which will be built in the form of ... a giant cruiser, complete with a rooftop terrace and restaurant. This building, Kabila seems to tell the Kinois, is the ultimate metaphor for the new Kinshasa and the new Congo. It offers the nation a new start and promises a prosperous voyage *en route* to global modernity. Even if, rather cynically, the name given to the building by the project developers is ‘Modern Titanic’, the image of the ship setting sail towards a new future for Kinshasa is powerfully seductive. Although there

is no doubt in anyone’s mind that the odds against the Titanic *not* sinking are overwhelming, and although many urban residents in Kinshasa know that they will never have a right to this new city, the hope which this naval image engenders, the hope for a better future, for new and more advantageous ways to cruise through life and navigate the city, simply proves to be irresistible. Even those who count themselves amongst the President’s political adversaries cannot help but exclaim: ‘If only this were true’, or ‘And what if it would be for real this time?’ Although utopias usually remain locked within the realm of pure speculation and material impossibility, Kabila’s ‘chantiers’ seem to have awakened new hopes, seem to have rekindled a dormant capacity to ‘believe’ and to dream against all odds: *C’est beau quand-même, ça fait rêver!* people exclaim, ‘It is so beautiful that it makes one dream.’

But nowhere does the *speculum* of neoliberal global modernity conjure up the oneiric more spectacularly (and nowhere does it reveal its exclusionist logics more strongly) than in another construction project, which, as the developer’s website states, ‘began as a dream in 2008’ and is currently underway: the *Cité du Fleuve*. This is the name given to an exclusive development to be situated on two artificially created islands. These will be reclaimed from sandbanks and swamp in the Congo River, and will partly overlap with the riverine agricultural area described above, forcing its current occupants to leave. The Main Island, the larger of the two, will offer mixed commercial, retail and residential properties, while North Island, the smaller of the two, will be reserved strictly for private homes and villas. The two islands will be connected to Kinshasa by means of two bridges. The *Cité du Fleuve* is





Modern Titanic  
Photo: Courtesy Filip De Boeck

supposed to relocate the entire Kinshasa downtown area of Gombe. According to the current plans it will span almost 400 hectares, include 200 residential houses, 10.000 apartments, 10.000 offices, 2000 shops, 15 diplomatic missions, 3 hotels, 2 churches, 3 day care centers, a shopping mall and a university. The Main Island, the larger of the two, will offer mixed commercial, retail and residential properties, while North Island, the smaller of the two, will be reserved strictly for private homes and villas. The two islands will be connected to Kinshasa by means of two bridges.

According to the developers' website, *La Cité du Fleuve* will provide 'a standard of living unparalleled in Kinshasa and will be a model for the rest of Africa' and, so the website's comments continue, '*La Cité du Fleuve* will showcase the new era of African economic development.' In reality, once more, most people currently living in the city will never be able to set foot on the two islands. If all goes according to plan, the *Cité du Fleuve* will probably be accorded



La Cité du Fleuve  
Photo: www.lacitedufleuve.com, used with permission

the administrative status of a new municipality, and will be subject to its own special bylaws. Thus operated as a huge gated community, the *Cité du Fleuve* will inevitably redefine what is centre and what is edge in Kinshasa. The *Cité du Fleuve* echoes many of the ideas behind concepts such as the 'charter city', that is, a special urban reform zone which 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. But at the same time, it also replicates the segregationist model of *Ville* and *Cité* that proved so highly effective during the Belgian colonial period. It is clear that the islands will become the new *Ville* while the rest of Kinshasa, with its nine million inhabitants, will be redefined in terms of their periphery. In this way the new city map will redraw the geographies of inclusion and exclusion in radical ways, and relegate its current residents to the city's edges, in total disregard, also, of any of the farmers' and land chiefs' current claims over the land they themselves created. In this respect, the developer's



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website states: "One of the many factors that make *La Cité du Fleuve* unique in Kinshasa is that no land titles have existed on this property before (as it will be build on artificial land, where until now was only water on the Congo River. When you buy land at *La Cité du Fleuve*, you can rest assured that there are no possible claims on your property."

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As noted before, the emergence of the new city drastically changes the content and scale of what is deemed to be proper urban existence, and is going hand in hand with a destruction of the small-scale networked agencies and coping mechanisms that currently allow the majority of Kinshasans to survive in the city.

Undoubtedly, this re-urbanization process regularizes Kinshasa and ends its 'exceptionalism' in the sense that Kin's dynamics of urban growth has started, at last, to resemble that of other world cities in the Global South such as Dubai, Mumbai, Rio

or the urban conglomerations of Southern China. Simultaneously, however, Kinshasa will also join the shadow-side of that global process of urbanisation, a side revealing itself in an increasing *favela*-isation and an ever more difficult access and right to the city for many of its current inhabitants. Here, the spectral dimension of the marvellous inevitably combines with the dimensions of terror and the dismal. The nightmarish side of these new spectral topographies forms the tain, the back of the mirror which constantly reflects the occulted ‘underneath of things’, to use Marianne Ferme’s phrase, accompanying this process of ocular urbanisation, and bringing it back to the surface and into the daily life experience of the Kinois.

### **In Need Of A Near Future?**

It remains unclear whether the government seems to believe that these images of the new polis will emerge in any lasting way, otherwise why would a developer have chosen cynically to refer to his initiative as a ‘Titanic’? And the Kinois themselves are not easily fooled either: they know very well from past experiences not to trust or believe in the official discourses or the outcome of government policies. And yet, it is the very same impossible mirror that somehow also unites Kinshasa’s residents and its leaders. They do not only share the same longing for a better city, but, remarkably, they often also share the same dream of what that city should look like. Upon my asking the farmers who are in danger of being relocated due to the *Cité du Fleuve* development whether they were well aware of what awaited them, they stated: “Yes, we’ll be the victims, but still it will be beautiful.” In other words: even though the



Kinshasa on the night of November  
Flickr: CabreraLetelier

governmental management of the urban site generates new topographies of inclusion and exclusion, of propinquity and distance, and of haves and have nots, and even if this dream of a new future for the city simultaneously generates very tangible forms of ever more pronounced segregation, even then, those who will not be granted access to the new ‘Mirror of Africa’ revel as much in this dream of the modern city as the ruling elites. Both echo a far more widespread longing for the right of inclusion in global society.

What this tells us is that Congo is very capable of imagining new spaces of hope and better urban worlds in a (distant) future, but that its vision is often shaped by a desire for a radical *tabula rasa*, a desire that is shared by all but simultaneously engenders a total denial of the urban reality as lived by most today. The current lack of a clear trajectory or pathway, a bridge to straddle the divide between the here/now of actual city life and the there/then of urban utopia, will no doubt necessitate the construction of a new

kind of temporality, of the kind that Jane Guyer recently referred to as a ‘near future’. The implementation of such a closer temporal horizon might serve to hyphenate between reality and dream, and thereby enable the drawing of a roadmap that would lead the city forward through slow incremental transformation rather than through the sweeping gestures of radical change.