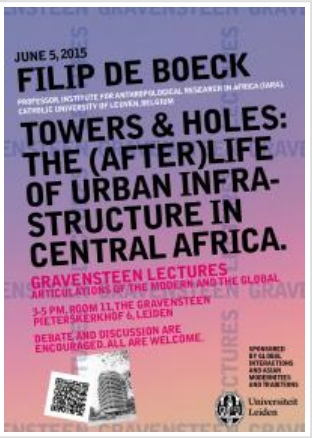
Universiteit Leiden

Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS)

Humanities

5 June | Gravensteen Lecture | Filip de Boeck

Professor Filip de Boeck (Leuven) will give a lecture on: "Towers and Holes: the (after)life of urban infrastructure in Central Africa." Gravensteen, Room 11, 3-5pm. All are welcome.



Date & Time
5 June 2015
3-5pm
Venue
Gravensteen, Room 11
Pieterskerkhof 6
2311 SR Leiden
(map *(http://www.leidenuniv.nl/loc/index.html?lang=en&loc=6)*)
Reception to follow at the Faculty Club Brasserie

Towers and Holes: the (after)life of urban infrastructure in Central Africa

This presentation offers a reflection on the legacy of colonial modernist architecture in Kinshasa (DRCongo), the social afterlives of colonialist infrastructure, and different historical and contemporary utopian visions of the city.
Through its architecture, colonial modernity introduced the notion of the vertical in the emerging urban landscape of the 1940s and 1950s. One of the early landmarks of Belgian colonial urban architecture was the Forescom tower. Built in 1946, it was Leopoldville's first skyscraper, and one of the first high rise buildings of Central Africa. Pointing towards the sky, it also pointed to the future. It embodied and made tangible new ideas of possible futures, and as such the tower materially translated and emblematically visualised colonialist ideologies of progress and modernity (while simultaneously also embodying the darker repressive side of colonialism, with its elaborate technologies of domination, control and surveillance).
Today, however, rather than referring to the ideal of the vertical, Kinshasa's inhabitants often seem to resort to the concept of 'hole' to describe the urban infrastructure in which they live. On a first level the notion of the hole (*libulu* in Lingala) refers to the physical holes and gaps that mark the urban surface (potholes in the road, the many erosion sites that characterize Kinshasa's landscape), but *libulu* also refers to the site of the prison, for example, and more generally it has become a meta-concept to reflect both upon the material degradation of the colonial infrastructure, and upon the closures and the often dismal quality of the social life that punctuates the material ruination of the colonial city.
How is the gap between colonial tower and postcolonial hole filled in the experience of Congolese urban residents? How liveable is the legacy of colonialist modernity in the contemporary urban setting? What are the social afterlives of the colonial infrastructural heritage, and what dreams and visions of possible futures, if any, does that colonial legacy still

trigger for the residents of Kinshasa today? And how are these older visions replayed and reformulated in the age of a global neoliberal capitalism that has (once again) turned the city into a huge building site?
Focusing on a number of specific historical and contemporary built sites in Kinshasa, Filip De Boeck reflects upon colonial modernity's promises, its visions of possible futurities, and the way in which these visions continue to inspire (or not) urban life in Central Africa today.
Chair: Jan-Bart Gewald *(http://www.hum.leiden.edu/history/staff/gewaldjb.html)* (Professor of History, Leiden)
Discussant: Meike de Goede *(http://www.hum.leiden.edu/history/organisation/staff-history/goedemjde1.html)* (Lecturer in History, Leiden)

Speaker Bio

As the coordinator of the Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa (IARA, formerly the Africa Research Centre), a Research Unit of the Faculty of Social Sciences, anthropologist Filip De Boeck *(http://www.kuleuven.be/wieiswie/en/person/00021683)* is actively involved in teaching, promoting, coordinating and supervising research in and on Africa. Since 1987 he has conducted extensive field research in both rural and urban communities in D.R. Congo (ex-Zaire). His current theoretical interests include local subjectivities of crisis, youth and the politics of culture, urban infrastructures and the transformation of private and public space in the urban context in Africa. Filip De Boeck has published extensively on his research. Together with Alcinda Honwana he edited *Makers and Breakers. Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005). Other book publications include *Kinshasa. Tales of the Invisible City*, a joint book project with photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart (Ghent/ Tervuren: Ludion / Royal Museum of Central Africa, 2004), which was also translated into French (*Kinshasa. Récits de la ville invisible*. Brussels: Renaissance du Livre, 2005), and for which De Boeck received the Henry Lavachery award from the Académie Royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique in 2008.

In 2010 De Boeck released *(http://soc.kuleuven.be/web/componentpage/7/38/eng/57)* , a 70 minute long documentary film 'Cemetery State *(http://soc.kuleuven.be/web/componentpage/7/38/eng/57)* ' which examines urban youth's politics of death in a Kinshasa graveyard. A Belgian Dutch co-production, that was financed in part by a grant from the Flemish Film Fund (VAF), it won the Mirror Award (Spiegelprijs) in April 2010, and was screened in several national and international film festivals. Together with Congolese photographer Sammy Baloji De Boeck is currently working on a book and exhibition project about new urban extensions in DRCongo. This is part of a larger research project on new satellite cities in three African countries (Kenya, Congo, Ghana).

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