

THE TOWER. A CONCRETE UTOPIA

Notes on a video-installation by
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THE TOWER

The Tower stands in the middle of the industrial zone of Limete, one of the municipalities of the city of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Part skyscraper, part pyramid, part citadel, this unfinished and ragged twelve storey building strangely sits among the warehouses, industrial plants, railroad tracks and new houses under construction that constitute the built environment of *Limete industriel*. Towering high above this desultory landscape, defying gravitational laws and urban zoning rules, this uncommon architectural proposition forms one of the city's strangest and enigmatic landmarks. A giant question mark, it begs for a profound reflection on the nature of the city, the heritage of its colonial modernist architecture, the dystopic nature of its infrastructure, and the capacity for utopian urban dreams and lines of flight that it nonetheless continues to generate.

The proud owner and (together with his wife) the sole inhabitant of the Tower, is a middle-aged man, a medical doctor who specializes in 'aeronautic and spatial medicine'. In 2003, '*Docteur*' (as everybody calls him) bought a small plot of 13 m². Assisted by two architects, he set out to build a four storey building. But well before reaching that level, Doctor fired the architects and from there, without a clear plan, he became his own architect (and this is the norm rather than the exception in Kinshasa). Somewhere along the line, however, Doctor got carried away by his love for and preoccupation with the skies, and soon what had started as a modest and more regular housing construction evolved into an increasingly megalomaniac vertical proposition, reaching ever higher into the sky, and eating up ever more cement and concrete. Sacrificing his own finances, health and peace of mind to realize his 'vision', Doctor thus gradually lost control over the building site. The Tower took over and started to impose its own unstoppable logic, building itself to its logical conclusion, while Doctor became the Tower's hostage, its visionary martyr. The tower itself, so Doctor hopes, will be completed by 'posterity' (for he is very aware of the fact that he will probably not be able to fully achieve the Tower in his own life time).

I would argue that the tower may be understood as an idiosyncratic but also programmatic, and even messianic, statement on the nature of a more ideal and livable future city. First of all, Doctor stresses the functionality of the building, even though that functional level obviously leaves much to be desired from an infrastructural point of view. There is no running water or electricity inside the building, for example, and the plumbing for the many bathrooms and toilets that are planned on every floor has simply

been forgotten or omitted). But beyond the level of its material infrastructure, Mr. X envisages the – as yet unfinished – building as a city in itself, a humanistic project that transcends the city, while simultaneously recreating it within its own confines, incorporating all kinds of people and activities. The Tower sets the scene for a new vertical and autarkic urban community. On the first and second floor a number of medical cabinets have already been installed. They turn the base of the building into a hospital and a site for the healing of bodily harms. Other floors are designed to become lawyer's offices (on the third floor), a restaurant for all the future inhabitants of the Tower (on floor six), and even an entire aviation school (on the fourth floor). Scattered throughout the labyrinthine building there will also be rooms and offices for visiting philosophers, poets, inventors and scientists. Finally, high above the ground, on the building's windy top floor, in the company of birds and close to God, is the place for soul healing. The building's spire invites one to pray, but also to contemplate the beauty of the natural world, of the Congo River and of Kinshasa's many hills. Looking out over the stage of the city below, it offers the perfect setting to reflect upon human nature itself, with all of its virtues and vices, its possibilities and shortcomings.

Thus situated at opposite ends of the Tower, the healing of body and soul bracket the whole idea of the Tower itself. Between ground floor and spire, the Tower offers a continuum between corporeal and mental matter. Architecturally, these two levels are connected by means of what Doctor refers to as an "ergonomic" flight of stairs, dangerously spiraling towards the top. The main function of the Tower is thus to turn the urban residents into better, more fully integrated, human subjects. In the Doctor's vision, therefore, the Tower will also function as a tourist site, a place to visit and retreat to, where people will be able to resource themselves before plunging back into the chaos of the surrounding city.

But the Tower does many other things as well. In Doctor's own words, his tower is an attempt to "illuminate the hole", to transcend the bare life and the mere level of survival that the city imposes upon its inhabitants, and to turn it into something else. It is, for example, a perfect structure for the visual observation *and* control of life on the ground level. The Tower is also a watchtower. It is a perfect vantage point to observe suspect movements and warn of imminent terrorist attacks in the city. And thanks to an intricate system of antennae that has not yet been put in place, the Tower, in the maker's mind, will also operate as a control tower for air traffic: if for some reason, the infrastructure of Kinshasa's international airport should not work, airplanes will be able to use the Tower as a beacon to make a safe landing. The Tower is also a solid safe haven, a Noah's ark for Kinshasa's inhabitants in case of a flood, for example, or the more unlikely event of a tsunami (less far-fetched as it seems, perhaps, for those who, like most Kinshasians, believe in the possibility of an apocalyptic end time). In fact, the Tower functions as an overall protective device against all forces of nature. In this way, it also 'splits' the winds and storms during the rainy season and thus protects neighboring homes. The fresh breeze that constantly blows through the Tower's many rooms also



Remainder of pedestrian bridge along the Boulevard Lumumba.



Constructed in the mid-1950s, the site Cielux OCPT (Office Congolais de Poste et Télécommunication), colloquially known as 'the Building' (le Bâtiment), is located in Sans Fil ('Wireless'), a neighbourhood of the populous municipality of Masina. The Cielux site is a branch of Kinshasa's central post office. A grand modernist L-shaped building, it used to house a section of the national radio, and it functioned as an outgoing relay station for international telephone and telegraph communications (hence the name 'wireless' which is now used to refer to the neighbourhood as a whole). Today the building is squatted by some 300 people, mostly unpaid government employees of the Ministry of Telecommunications.
Photo: Site Cielux, Municipality of Masina, March 2013



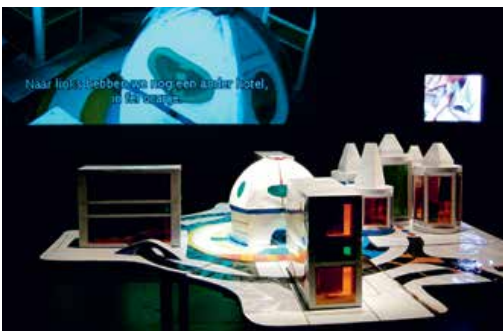
Advertisement for the rehabilitation of the échangeur, one of Kinshasa's landmark towers constructed during Mobutu's reign. This rehabilitation was part of President Kabila's cinq chantiers or 'five public works', a vast infrastructural overhaul program that was started in the years prior to the 2011 presidential elections. The billboard reads: 'Yesterday's dreams, today's realities, tomorrow's better future'. After the elections the 5 chantiers were relabeled as 'The Revolution of Modernity'.
Photo: Echangeur, Municipality of Limete, March 2013

makes the Tower a welcome place to retreat from the city's heat. In the maker's mind, the Tower thus proposes a strong ecological and sustainable alternative when compared to most of the housing in the rest of the city. It engineers a greener way of life in the polluted environment of Kinshasa. Ideally, it will be powered by solar energy (one day Doctor hopes to cover the Tower's surface with solar panels), and the protruding cement roofs are designed to 'absorb' rain water and 'breathe' it back into the city's smoggy atmosphere. The rooftops themselves may be turned into gardens, where chickens and goats might be kept.

In spite of the Tower's phantasmagoric character and the moralist and religious (messianic and apocalyptic) notions that underpin its, and unhindered by infrastructural obstacles and shortcomings, Doctor's discourse about the Tower actually reworks many of the propositions made earlier by colonial modernist architects and urban planners. If, on a very general level, the vertical *topos* of the mountain, as the physical site of domination, control and subjugation, may be considered as colonialism's basic geographic figure (after all, Stanley's first trading post was built on top of Leopold Hill – currently Mont Ngaliema), colonial modernist architecture subsequently incorporated and translated this idea of the mountain into vertical statements. These were gradually emerging in the urban landscape of the 1940s and 1950s. For example, the Forescom Tower, located in what is now Kinshasa's downtown district of Gombe, became one of the early landmarks of Belgian colonial modernist urban architecture. Completed in 1946, and soon to be followed by other, even more impressive high rise buildings of tropical modernist signature (see Lagae 2002), the Forescom Tower was Kinshasa's first skyscraper and with its ten storeys one of the first of its kind in Central Africa.² As such, it reportedly was a source of pride for both the colonizers and the colonial subjects alike. For the former, it represented the success of the colonial enterprise, while it allowed the latter to dream of partaking and being inserted into a more global modernity. The building was the tangible proof that Léopoldville was well under way to become the first *Poto moindo*, the first 'Black Europe'. Pointing towards the sky, the Forescom Tower also pointed to the future. And because some of its architectural features made the building look like a boat shored along the Congo River, the Tower also seemed to promise to sail Léopoldville to the distant shores of other wider (and whiter) worlds beyond the horizon of the Congo River basin. The Forescom Tower thus gave form to new hopes, prospects and possibilities. It materially translated and emblematically visualized colonialist ideologies of progress and modernity. Simultaneously, it must be added, it also embodied the darker repressive side of colonialism, with its elaborate technologies of domination, control and surveillance. Here as well, the tower was also a watchtower, the built extension of the panoptical colonial Big Brother. As such, the figure of the tower forcefully reminds us of the fact that the colonial urban landscape of Kinshasa largely came about as the result of a very intrusive history of (physical and symbolical) violence and domination, marked by racial segregation, as well as by violent processes of dispossession and relocation.



Recently constructed private gated community with exclusive apartments. Photo: Municipality of Lingwala, March 2013



Pume Bylex, Tourist City, 2008. Photo: F. De Boeck/K. Van Synghel



Forescom Tower. First skyscraper of Kinshasa, 1946. (Undated postcard, collection J. Lagae)

THE HOLE

How livable is the legacy of colonialist modernity in the contemporary urban setting? What remains of the colonial infrastructural heritage on a material level? What kinds of social (after)lives does it still enable, and what dreams and visions of possible futures, if any, does that colonial legacy still trigger for the residents of Kinshasa today?

In postcolonial Kinshasa, much of modernity's promises and dreams have turned into a nightmare. The city is littered with colonialism's broken infrastructural dreams, with fragments and figments of a modernity that has become part of an irretrievable past. And 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, Kinshasa's *lingua franca*) refers to the physical holes and gaps that have come to scar the urban surface (the many potholes in the road, or the numerous erosion sites that characterize Kinshasa's landscape).³ But *libulu* may also refer to the dark hole of the prison, for example, or the city's shadow economy.⁴ Often, the concept of the hole is used to make ironic comments upon the state of things in Kinshasa and Congo as a whole. Take the following example: A couple of years ago, a Kinois businessman opened a dance bar next to the Forescom Tower and called it *Le Grand Libulu*, 'The Big Hole'. The formula proved successful and the owner opened two more bars with the same name in more distant parts of the city. In the meantime, the name itself has been adopted by other more informal small bars and dances throughout the city, offering a typical Kinois response to the hole: if we have to live in a hole, we can as well dance in it!

But even if the hole has emerged as a kind of meta-concept to reflect upon both the material degradation of the colonial infrastructure, and the closures and the often dismal quality of the social life that followed the material ruination of the colonial city, the question remains how the gap between colonial tower and postcolonial hole is filled in the experience of Congolese urban residents? Except dancing, what other possible answers does Kinshasa come up with in response to the challenge posed by the hole? If the city has transformed towers into holes, how can holes be 'illuminated' to become towers again?

REWORKING THE LEGACIES OF COLONIALIST MODERNITY

Ever since independence, the inhabitants of Congo's urban landscapes have been turning away from former colonial models, and have redefined the spaces of colonialism on their own terms. Kinshasa's residents appropriated the former colonial housing infrastructure, for example, reassembling and translating it in ways better suited to the local rhythms of social life. Using their own bodies as building blocks, Kinois have designed alternative architectures for their city. Through music and words, they have invented new acoustic landscapes for their city, and in doing so they have also moved away from the colonizer's language. And there have been many moments of collective rebellion in which the mirror of

colonialist modernity was violently smashed and destroyed.⁵ And yet, Kinshasa somehow also constantly returns to, and remains hypnotized by, the images reflected in the mirror of colonialist modernity. Often this fascination is expressed in playful ways that, because of their ludic and parodying nature, also manage to transcend a mere mimetic reprise of the colonial legacy and of former metropolitan models. Think, for example, of the *sapeurs'* appropriation of western designer clothes, or the fact that Bandalungwa and Lemba, two municipalities in Kinshasa, are currently engaged in a dispute over the ownership of the title of 'Paris' and *ville lumière*, even though (or precisely because) both are heavily hit by constant power cuts and remain in the dark during many days on end.⁶

The same continuing fascination with modernity's propositions marks the work of Kinshasa based artists such as Kingelez Bodys Isek or Bylex. Both are known for the utopian urban visions that transpire in their artistic work, and especially in pieces such

as *Ville fantôme*, 'the Phantom City' (by Kingelez – see De Boeck & Plissart 2004: 250-251) or the *Cité Touristique*, the 'Tourist City' (by Bylex) (cf. Van Synghel & De Boeck 2013). Whereas the maquettes that gave form to the colonial urban plans of the 1950s are slowly decaying (as are the neighborhoods that they gave birth to), the maquettes of these two artists revive and rework many of the modernist urbanist propositions, albeit with a specific twist. In different ways, the emancipatory and humanitarian preoccupations of colonial modernity, but also its religious overtones, its moralizing framework, its authoritarian and totalitarian nature, and its obsession with security issues and control, return incessantly in their artistic oeuvre and in the form and content of the ideal city that they propose. What is striking in these propositions, is the fact that the ideal city is not viewed as an entity to inhabit on a permanent basis, but as a place to counterbalance existing cities, a place to visit and resource oneself. The ideal city is, in a way, a



'The Tower', local skyscraper under construction.
Photo: Municipality of Limete, March 2015

resort. But whereas a real resort such as the South African Sun City brands itself as a 'kingdom of pleasure'⁷, Bylex's Tourist City is a more reflexive resort that trains the muscles of the mind. And again, the main protagonist is the figure of the tourist, so central to the Sun City concept. In Bylex's city, the tourist is not a pleasure seeker, but someone in search of inner growth. This inner wisdom may be acquired in the city's central building, the Royal Dome. Part temple and part museum, the Dome is a place of contemplation and reflection. It is here that all the knowledge of the world is stored and made accessible. After his visit to the Dome, the tourist inevitably has to return to the imperfections of the real city which he calls home. Replenished with new inspiration, creativity, reflexive capacity and imagination, the tourist is ready to counter the urban dystopia on the ground and to bring the existing city back in balance again, in order to make it a better place for all.

Bylex's utopian alternative Kinshasa strongly resonates with Doctor's Tower vision (and in fact the Tower forms the logical material realisation of this artistic cardboard and coloured paper dream). Similarly, the Tower is in tune with a number of urban developments that are currently being built in Kinshasa in the form of satellite cities and new gated communities. Here the *Cité du Fleuve* is the best known and most prominent example (cf. De Boeck 2011). It is the name given to an exclusive development situated on two artificially created islands that are being reclaimed from sandbanks and swamp in the Congo River. *Cité du Fleuve* echoes many of the ideas behind concepts such as Stanford economist Paul Romer's 'charter city', that is, a special urban reform zone which allows governments of developing countries to adopt new systems of rules and establish cities that can drive economic progress in the rest of the country. The *Cité du Fleuve* also replicates the segregationist colonial city model that proved so highly effective during the Belgian colonial period.

Surprisingly perhaps, the construction of the *Cité du Fleuve* and other similar real estate developments does not trigger a lot of conflict or criticism in Kinshasa, not even from those who are being chased out of their homes and off their fields to make way for these new developments. Clearly, for better or for worse, and in spite of former failures, the idea of a 'revolution of modernity' (the slogan by means of which the central government currently brands its efforts to rebuild the city and the country) has not lost its appeal. In combination with an aesthetics that links the older colonial modernist models to the shiny looks of Dubai and other new urban hotspots in the Global South, the possibility of a tabula rasa, of starting anew and building a better, cleaner and more orderly city, simply appears to be irresistible in an urban world where holes have become the main infrastructural units. In this sense, the modernist urban planning ideals are like Bylex's city or Doctor's Tower. They do not make for real places in real urban futures, but they allow one to break away, at least mentally if not physically, from the city's real condition of ongoing decline, and from the worries and ruminations that its ruination constantly generates.

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NOTES

- 1 The 'Tower' video-installation and the photographs by Sammy Baloji result from two Kinshasa research trips that Baloji and anthropologist Filip De Boeck made together in March 2013 and March 2015. De Boeck and Baloji are currently working on a joint exhibition and book project about new urban publics and spaces in Congo.
- 2 Also see De Boeck & Plissart 2004: 29 for a photo of the Forescom Tower.
- 3 The largest erosion holes are given personal names, such as the *libulu Manzengele* in the municipality of Ngaliema. This particular hole became so famous that its name was adopted by a Congolese nightclub in Bobigny, Paris.
- 4 *Wenze ya libulu*, the 'market of the hole' is a market place in the municipality of Barumbu, but more generally it means an 'informal' market where things are sold under the official price (see Lusamba Kibayu 2010: 314).
- 5 One may refer here to the massive lootings that swept across the city and the country in the early nineties (cf. Devisch 1998).
- 6 The mayor of Lemba even painted the slogan 'Lemba is Paris' above the entrance of the municipality's administrative headquarters. Similarly, on Facebook, one finds several pages called 'Lemba c'est Paris' or 'Bandal c'est Paris'. The notion of mimesis in the postcolonial context deserves a more thorough treatment than what is possible here, but for some interesting reflections on the qualities of the mimetic in relation to modernity (in the context of Abidjan) see Newell 2012. On Kinshasa also see De Boeck and Plissart 2004: 20ff).
- 7 In Kinshasa, the idea of a resort-like 'kingdom of pleasure' materialized most strongly in Mobutu's own Chinese palace, built on the presidential site of Nsele, north of Kinshasa's national airport along the Congo River. The palace itself is now an abandoned ruin.