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Cement citizens: housing, demolition and political belonging in Luanda, Angola

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ABSTRACT

Slum demolition in the name of urban renewal is a common practice in contemporary African cities. Many organisations have tracked the rights violations that demolitions entail. What has been overlooked, however, is the political significance of slums, which this paper argues produce their own imaginations of 'good urbanism' becoming critical sites for the imagining of urban political belonging. Exploring the case of urban redevelopment and slum demolition in Luanda, Angola, this paper argues that in this megacity, quotidian notions of citizenship are mediated through the material and aesthetic worlds of slum housing construction, more specifically the cement-block house. It draws on theories that understand citizenship and belonging not simply as juridical categories but more substantively produced through shared imaginations and symbolic worlds. This paper shows that urban politics needs to be understood as mediated through deeply material struggles over emplacement and incorporation that hinge on competing normative visions of the urban.

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Introduction

Following the end of Angola's civil war (1975–2002), the capital city, Luanda, found itself awash in dreams of becoming a 'world-class city'. The war had been won by the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), which used its dominant position to launch a project of 'national reconstruction', ostensibly to repair the broken country materially and politically. In practice, reconstruction became a means of attempting to solidify the MPLA's political control (Schubert 2015; Soares de Oliveira 2015). Drawing from the country's oil profits,¹ the MPLA-state extended its reach through infrastructure projects and the building of clinics, schools and housing. In Luanda, state and private initiatives intersected in a construction frenzy that rapidly reshaped the city centre and peripheries. New high rises, luxury condominiums and state-sponsored housing remade experiences of urban life

However, if construction was the hallmark of a new order, then the way in which it was enacted suggested that the majority of inhabitants would be excluded from the post-conflict city. Approximately 80% of Luanda's 6.5 million residents live in areas that could be defined

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as ‘slums’ known locally as *musseques* or *bairros* (World Bank 2011, 32). Since 2001 these areas have been subjected to multiple mass demolitions.² Those affected reach into the hundreds of thousands.³ While some have been resettled in state-planned rehousing zones, others have been left to fend for themselves.⁴ Civil society groups and human rights organisations have argued that these demolitions are evidence of state impunity. State representatives argue exactly the opposite. They claim either that inhabitants are illegally occupying land, or that by removing people to rehousing zones, state institutions were placing them in safer better quality housing than they currently inhabited.⁵

At the heart of the government’s reasoning lies an aesthetic imagination of what constitutes ‘good urbanism’ rooted in material and aesthetic criteria. Such ‘sociotechnical imaginaries,’ Jasanoff (2015, 4) has argued, are ‘collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publically performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through and supportive of, advances in science and technology’. This definition anchors political visions of the good life in the urban materialities enacted, shared and expressed in images, constructions, objects, performances and practices. The new buildings of Luanda’s construction boom, advertisements of lush green leisure spaces and government housing programmes all intersected to promote the imagination of a new Luanda, that the state oil company publication chose to describe as ‘West Africa’s Dubai’ (Sonangol 2008).

These aesthetic imaginaries paralleled similar urban development initiatives in Africa that borrowed heavily from visual imagery stemming from the Middle East and Asia to project a vision of urban modernity, based in an elitist vision of the city (Watson 2013).⁶ While the aesthetic forms these imaginations have taken might be new, they reproduce a long history in African cities of the conflation of specific imaginations of urbanism, usually drawn from Euro-America, with modernity and progress (Ferguson 1999; Rakodi 1986). Such experiments presuppose and remake existing relations of power in urban spaces (Ong 2011), enacting an aesthetic politics of belonging and exclusion based in imaginaries of what I refer to as ‘good urbanism’. Arguments about ‘good urbanism’ in this way generate categories and practices of inclusion or exclusion grounded in aesthetic criteria.

The new Luanda presupposed the elimination of the city’s *musseques*, the primary sites of city-building in Luanda. Planners and residents however, often described them as disorderly, dirty, ‘anarchic’, and constructed of poor materials, all evidence, it was claimed, of the dangers they posed to the city. However, this paper argues, *musseques* have historically generated their own aesthetic and material imaginations of good urbanism. While taking up some of the normative criteria for urbanism espoused by the state, they also generate their own visions of the relation between materiality and political belonging. During my fieldwork in Luanda,⁷ I found that residents of *musseques* readily made distinctions between what they referred to as *casas de bloco* (cement block houses) and *casas de chapa* (corrugated iron houses). This distinction was reiterated among local NGO and civil society organisations when they described constructions as either *construção definitiva* (permanent construction) or *construção provisória* (provisional construction). The former term was used to describe cement block housing, while the latter was used to describe housing made from any other materials. For many, *bloco* (cement block) indexed modernity and belonging, while *chapa* (corrugated iron) indexed backwardness and poverty. In the wake of demolitions, victims complained bitterly about the destruction of *casas de bloco* which they understood to have given them status in the city. Their move to *chapa* (corrugated iron), while they waited for rehousing, was seen as going backwards, of being abandoned by the state.

This paper argues that the *bloco*–*chapa* distinction is an emic division that challenges stereotypes of *musseque*. It posits a competing vision of ‘good urbanism’ and political inclusion to that of the new Luanda. It does this by investing *bloco* with the status of ‘good urbanism’ and political belonging, thereby troubling dominant aesthetic imaginaries. Imaginations of inclusion stemming from *bloco* disrupt the othering of ‘slum’ areas as places of a defective urbanism.

In making this argument, I build on scholarship that argues that informal housing construction is a primary means through which urban dwellers claim rights to political inclusion (Holston 2009; Makhulu 2015; Nielsen 2011). However, I depart from these by suggesting that housing construction, while often intersecting with dominant urban imaginations, simultaneously posits alternative and competing urban visions. Luanda’s auto-constructors do not simply wish to be incorporated into an existing urban frame but aim to assert the value of an alternative urban vision. This becomes the basis for disputes over urban and political inclusion, providing an insight into the production of modes of citizenship that lie in the material, aesthetic and symbolic realms.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature on citizenship in Angola. Noting the shortcomings of liberal models of citizenship, I propose to study urban political inclusion through the rubric of ‘belonging’. While including rights-based notions of citizenship, it allows for more flexible and complicated productions of inclusion through aesthetic, material and symbolic norms. The paper then investigates the violence implicit to the imposition of the aesthetic imaginary of the new Luanda. It shows how this imaginary demonises the *musseques*, thereby laying the basis for their demolition. I then describe the tradition of *musseque* neighbourhood construction, showing how building in cement block is the central process through which people stake a claim to belong in the city. Finally, the paper explores reactions to demolition couched in anger at the loss of cement block homes. In doing this, it shows both how *bloco* has become valued as a mark of belonging, but also how the politics of *bloco* and *chapa* become the basis for a material critique of contemporary urban development.

Belonging and citizenship in Angola

While Angola has all the trappings of a multiparty democracy, it is generally viewed as an authoritarian political system, with considerable power concentrated in the ruling party and the president (Martins 2016; Messiant 2007; Soares de Oliveira 2015). The key to the MPLA and the president’s power have been their control over economic opportunities, state institutions, and increasingly, the legal system. The result has been the emergence of a clientelistic political system in which proximity to people in key positions and the ability to negotiate what Angolans refer to as *esquemas* (schemes) to access anything from birth certificates to business opportunities have produced an informalised ‘shadow state’ parasitic on the official structures of governance. This system is paralleled by the active use of either co-optation or sometimes outright force against those who are openly critical of the regime (Schubert 2010). Thus, it becomes difficult to imagine what constitute substantive experiences and practices of citizenship.

Scholarship has dwelt extensively on the limits of liberal rights-based citizenship in accounting for the complexities of belonging in most African countries. These critiques have generally fallen into three categories. Firstly, they have focused on the difficulties liberal

citizenship faces in including claims based on cultural or ethnic difference that run counter to its promises of universal inclusion (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004; Nyamnjoh 2007). A second critique argues that rights-based citizenship is confined to specific groups within the state, usually the wealthy and the urban (Chatterjee 2004; Mamdani 1996), rendering it an ill-fitting analytic for explaining the practices of political, economic and social incorporation that those outside of such categories experience. Finally, a third literature seeks to balance the first two critiques. It argues that people are neither inside nor outside of citizenship but tend to oscillate between different categorisations of inclusion and exclusion contingent on context and capacity to mobilise certain claims and obligations (Comaroff 1998; Martins 2016). As such, citizenship is a shifting category which emerges situationally.

However, Angola presents a slightly different conundrum. Akin to what Mbembe (2001) has described as *commandement*, in Angola one finds a system in which powers of political, economic and social inclusion are exercised through mobilisation of extra-judicial and extra-institutional means such as economic favours and symbolic resources. Such systems hinge not on the reciprocities of citizenship but on coercion. In Angola, poverty has become a primary means of managing the population (Messiant 1992) with service delivery and even access to basic goods often being portrayed as gifts from the state rather than a meeting of basic citizenship rights (Messiant 2001). In what sense then, is an analytic of rights-based liberal citizenship relevant to the Angolan context, or even more specifically to the *musseques* as the historical site of the urban poor?

The response of most scholars of Angola has been to analyse the symbolic, material, aesthetic and economic practices with which people construct claims to political inclusion that may or may not be rights-based (Messiant 2007). The state, after all, is not only enacted through institutions and laws but through performances of its presence in material objects and imaginaries (Aretxaga 2003; Das and Poole 2004; Hull 2008). In Angola, these symbolic systems interact with unofficial redistributive and patronage networks as well as the structures of institutional formality to produce a context in which claims to belonging are not purely based on rights-based citizenship (Messiant 2007).

The paper therefore shifts between discussing 'citizenship' and discussing 'belonging'. This is because what informal construction contests, I argue, are the broader imaginaries of belonging, of which citizenship, a rights-based discourse, is only one feature. This does not mean that categories of the law and rights were irrelevant to my interlocutors. Quite the opposite. Many of them criticised the state for not following the Constitution and for infringing on their human rights. Nonetheless, these statements were based on a more fundamental contestation over what constituted the bases for being able to make these claims in the urban context. The grounds of these contestations were the concept of 'good urbanism'. It is to the contestation of these visions that that the rest of the paper turns to unravel the relationships between construction, urban imaginaries and political belonging in Angola.

Enforcing visions of good urbanism: the New Luanda and the *musseques*

Luanda's post-conflict era ushered in an urban experimentation in meeting the promises of the past and enacting the future. Until the launch of the Luanda Metropolitan Master Plan in December 2015, there was not one single coherent plan for the city.⁸ Instead a variety of redevelopment and housing plans existed under different agencies, government institutions and private companies. These included among others, four new satellite cities (Kilamba,

Cacauco, Kapari, Km44), a variety of rehousing zones (Zango, Sapú, Projecto Morar and Panguila), and a number of construction projects managed directly by the Presidency. What united these projects, I argue, was not any single plan or institution but an aesthetic imaginary of what the new city should look like.

This imaginary exhibited itself in the numerous billboards, state publications, posters and official pronouncements, as well as the actual buildings of the new city. Together they created an urban imaginary which promoted vertical living, luxury condominiums and state-approved low-cost housing laid out according to a grid-like pattern. These buildings and images congealed an aesthetic imaginary that argued that a more desirable city could be produced through the elimination of *musseques*. State representatives and policy documents argued that this new city would transform people living in *musseques* into proper citizens defined by their adherence to urban norms and residence in aesthetically proper homes. One prominent architect explicitly referenced this understanding in a power point presentation in which he described the opportunity of eliminating ‘urban chaos’ in Luanda as a process which would transform ‘irregular occupants’ into ‘legal citizens’ (Gameiro 2010).

The new vision of the city presented the *musseques* as characterised by illegal land occupation, and poor housing construction and infrastructure provision. Although it is true that many *musseques* residents lack legal tenure, this is the result of new legislation, rather than a long-term historical fact. In 2004, the Angolan National Assembly passed a new Land Law.⁹ Contrary to Angola’s Civil Code, which explicitly recognised land rights acquired through good faith occupation and adverse possession,¹⁰ the 2004 Land Law explicitly rejected rights deriving from these practices.¹¹ These provisions were applied retroactively, invalidating all land claims not formalised according to the 1992 Land Law.¹² The majority of the city’s inhabitants became illegal occupiers of the land they may have lived on for more than a decade.

While legislation transformed the *musseques* into illegal occupations, the aesthetic imaginary of the new Luanda played a substantial role in framing them as emblematic of illegality. Ghertner (2015) has noted that in instances where urban planning is difficult due to weak institutions and a lack of reliable statistics collection, planners and courts often turn to aesthetic criteria such as cleanliness, ‘order’ and noise to determine the status of constructions. Such considerations were written into Angolan legislation. Two of the primary state housing policy documents – the 2007 Law for Housing Development and its 2009 Regulations –, argue that ‘(1) buildings must follow the government’s perception of what is “appropriate” and (2) constructions considered by the state to infringe on this requirement must be demolished’ (Viegas 2016, 608). According to such considerations, essentially, if something looked illegal, it was illegal.

This aesthetic legal sensibility was made apparent by the fact the emphasis on *musseques* illegality seemed arbitrary given that the poor state of Luanda’s cadastre meant that even people living in the officially planned sections of Luanda often lacked proof of ownership. A woman I interviewed explained that in her childhood home, located near to the president’s residence in the city centre, hardly anyone had ever paid rent. The apartments had been occupied after independence, and although an Angolan family claimed that they owned the building, they lacked the documentation to prove this. The building therefore existed in a legal limbo.¹³ The new buildings associated with the emerging ‘world-class’ Luanda also had an ambiguous legal status. Buildings often failed to follow their architectural plans and began construction prior to receiving approval. Designs that met existing aesthetic

imaginaries of good urbanism therefore lent legality to a construction, even if in actuality its legal status was questionable.

It was the new Luanda's entanglement with historical imaginations of good urbanism stemming back to the colonial era that enabled these confluences of aesthetics and legality. *Musseques* is a relational term, historically represented as a 'deviant' urbanism in contrast to another urban category, the *cidade* or 'city' (Gastrow 2015; Moorman 2008). Although, traditionally referring to the city's colonial core, *cidade* can more generally be mobilised to describe areas that embody shared understandings of 'good urbanism' in terms of planning, infrastructure, legality, design and materiality. The distinction between the two was from early on marked by infrastructural considerations, which laminated onto senses of urban exclusion and inclusion. The term *musseques* derives from the Kimbundu word *mu-seke* meaning 'sandy place', and became increasingly used to describe areas inhabited by Africans following the forced removals of Africans from the *cidade* in 1864 (Monteiro 1973; Pepetela 1990). It constituted a nod to the soil of the areas to which Africans were expelled (Moorman 2008). The word, however, also indexed an infrastructural deprivation in relation to the tarred roads of the *cidade de cimento* (cement city). *Musseques* indexed sand, *cidade* indexed cement.

The aesthetic imaginary of the new Luanda has recently replaced the historical colonial buildings of the city centre as the primary marker of 'good urbanism'. This is mostly because the existing aesthetic and infrastructural criteria that separated these from the *musseques* are under strain. Years of poor maintenance has led to a slow collapse of buildings and services in the city centre. This has caused residents to question how different their housing situations are from the *musseques*. This was perhaps most strongly put in a 2014 track by Angolan hip hop artist MCK entitled 'Vertical Ghettos'¹⁴: 'They say they are from the city but they live very poorly, Mutamba's high rises are vertical ghettos'. Mutamba is the name of Luanda's city centre, and 'they' are obviously its inhabitants. Highlighting the aging buildings' lack of water connections, electricity shortages and rubbish problems, MCK emphasises the tenuous dividing line between them and the *musseques*. In contrast, he states, 'it's because of this that I only want Talatona'. Talatona is an elite residential and business zone which is largely composed of gated communities. At the peak of the real estate boom in Luanda, houses there were listed as selling for anywhere between US\$7000 to US\$11,200 per m² (Zenki 2013). The line is a reference to MCK's 2012 song entitled 'I want to live in Talatona'¹⁵ in which he described life in Talatona as dreamlike, characterised by crystal glasses, indoor plumbing and what he calls 'an urbanised area'. It is Talatona, not the original *cidade cimento*, which in his work represents desirable urbanism. The world-city aesthetic embodied in Talatona was therefore displacing the historical *cidade cimento* as the signifier of 'good urbanism'.

Colonial era ethnographies had disparagingly described the bricolage construction of *musseques* houses, which included wood, corrugated iron and salvaged pieces of metal (Moorman 2008). Today, the aesthetics of provisionality continue to feature significantly in how people talk about *musseques*. State institutions, elites and developers commonly describe *musseques* neighbourhoods and houses as 'anarchic', 'disorderly' and 'clandestine'. These descriptions carry political, economic, social and civilisation connotations as it is not just that *cidade* is associated with good urbanism but with good people and development. In contrast, people and spaces associated with 'bairro' or *musseques* are understood to be backwards (Roque 2012). *Musseques* have historically carried a burden then of their materiality bearing witness not only to economic deprivation, but being associated by elites as

an undesirable and maladjusted. It was precisely these notions of development and order vs. backwardness and chaos, which the state mobilised to argue that forced eviction of people was for their own good. The rehousing zones, in the state's discourse, became places that offered infrastructure and planned housing to residents living in deplorable conditions. However, such accounts would find themselves in conflict with emergent challenges that derived from the very areas which had historically been cast aside – the *musseques* – and the object that was the derision of state planners – the cement block house.

Cement citizens

'I think people came here because they had dreams', said Raul,¹⁶ a long-time resident of Vamos Andar,¹⁷ a neighbourhood in the municipality of Cazenga. He and other residents explained the area's history to me: the peregrinations that led to their arrivals and the intersections of lives and bricks that had converted a colonial-era agricultural zone into a densely populated area. Raul, a school teacher, had been one of the neighbourhood's first residents, arriving as a child in 1976 with his father. At the time, there were 10 settler-built houses. 'Bush surrounded this neighbourhood' he explained. Over the years more people arrived and built their homes. The stories they told were about transformations performed through labour – from seeking to settling, clearing bush and making the area 'urbanised', from *casas de chapa* to *casas de bloco* – accretions of effort, investment and hopes for the future.¹⁸ While musseque residents often lamented the poor conditions of the *musseques* which subjected them to sanitation, water and electricity problems, they nevertheless had pride in their homes.

Autoconstructors, James Holston (1991, 449) has argued, should be considered 'the modern pioneers of city building'. In Luanda, the incapacity of the state and private sector to deliver affordable housing has meant that autoconstruction has become the primary means through which the city has expanded. Indeed, Luanda's landscape is marked by constant construction activity. A 1999 UNDP report described Angolan families as 'pequenos construtores' [little builders]. The family made cement blocks, carted water, dug foundations, and with the help of a *pedreiro*¹⁹ and friends would build their home (UNDP 1999, 63). Robson and Roque (2001) noted that it was usually only when they owned their own *casa de bloco* (cement block house) that, during the war, internally displaced people felt that they had managed to 'settle' in Luanda. After the war ended, and despite government expectations that people would 'return' to their rural homes, migration to and construction within the city continued as Angolans sought to better their lot in life. The sign of this betterment was the cement block house or *casa de bloco*.

House-building drew its participants into a web of legal and symbolic norms of belonging, beginning with the initial step of land occupation. This process inevitably brought builders into a relation with some kind of local authority, whether official or unofficial. While in theory it is possible to request land through approaching state institutions, the tendency is to occupy and then attempt to legalise. People who are not building on land belonging to their family, generally purchased land from *camponeses*²⁰ (peasant farmers) or with the assistance of the *comissões de moradores* (residents' committees). While sales by *camponeses* could feasibly be done without official state knowledge, residents' committees have a more complicated relationship with formal state institutions. Although not generally recognised by state institutions, these neighbourhood level committees are responsible for the everyday

bureaucratic running of Luanda's *musseques*, which includes providing proof of residence documents and managing land sales.²¹ While in theory residents' committees should only have been the first step prior to submitting requests for legalisation, their presence on their ground, often in close relationships to the ruling MPLA party, led many to feel that if the residents' committee had approved a sale, it was indeed legitimate, if not entirely legal.

The process of land registration could take years. Few people I spoke to had successfully legalised their land. The most legible indication of ownership in the absence of legally recognised tenure then was construction. It publically communicated that the land had been claimed, and indicated that some form of administrative negotiation had taken place. The house implied not only a claim to occupation, but what Amin (2014, 145) has referred to as an 'infrastructure of place', a material object which orientates and congeals shared notions of place, and can mark ownership, investment and a political claim, even and perhaps especially in lieu of legal title. Not all construction, however, was considered equal, in the types of recognition and security that it granted.

House construction is a long process with several material steps that act as metaphors for the financial stability, social and political incorporation of the person who is building. The first step in claiming ownership of land was usually erecting a corrugated iron house, a *casa de chapa*. *Casas de chapa* were not seen as permanent solutions to housing, but as transitional steps towards the creation of something more significant, a *casa de bloco*. Residents would stay in *casas de chapa* while they saved to purchase construction materials. The move to *bloco* was a gradual one, taking many years and contingent on financial possibilities and family assistance. Thus, for example, Lena, who worked as administrator in a primary school, explained that although she had moved to Vamos Andar in 1985, she had only begun to build in *bloco* in 1993. During those initial years, she had lived in what she described as *uma casinha de chapa* (a little corrugated iron house) consisting of two rooms. Little by little, her partner and she had saved and bought sand, cement and other materials to construct their home. By 2011, with the house still not completed, it had three bedrooms, an indoor kitchen, an indoor bathroom, a living room and a large walled yard. The investment she explained was for her children so that she would leave something for them.²² Given the time that it took to save and build, houses in progress were very often surrounded by stacks of bricks, piles of sands and collections of crushed rock, creating an aesthetic of urbanism in emergence, which also acted as sign of aspiration towards something else – the *casa de bloco*.

The *casa de bloco*, however, was not simply about stability; it incorporated the owner into an imagination of linear development and good urbanism. This desire to move to *bloco* was driven by the notion that *chapa* was a temporary solution and the multiple negative associations with the material, which marked it as socially undesirable, less developed and as an indicator of poverty. Ironically, these were all the associations usually applied to the *musseque* as a whole, but within the *musseque*, a material distinction was made between *bloco* and *chapa* so that these associations were laminated onto *chapa*, while being dissociated from *bloco*. This was apparent in arguments over compensation following demolitions, where homes' material became a central basis for the perceived validity of compensation claims.

In 2009, the homes of up to five thousand people were destroyed during a series of demolitions of the Bagdad and Iraque neighbourhoods. The then Deputy-Governor of Luanda for Technical Affairs, architect Bento Soito, was quoted in a local newspaper as explaining that it was not houses that had been demolished but *cabanas de chapa* [corrugated iron

huts].²³ The notion that these were not ‘proper’ structures due to their materials made their demolition almost a nonissue in his eyes. The representatives of Bagdad–Iraque fought back, not by arguing that *chapa* had any worth, but rather by insisting that the houses were not *chapa* but *bloco*. Discussing their legal case, one of the neighbourhood representatives commented, ‘we don’t have houses according to the complaint, they are *casebres*, corrugated iron houses, of zinc ... over there the population doesn’t have houses, only *casebres*. They wrote this in the process’. The word *casebre* in Portuguese is roughly translated as ‘hovel’ evoking the imaginations of provisionality, poverty, and exclusion that the term *musseque* often evoked. Nevertheless, I pushed the representative slightly more on what such language might suggest:

- Author: So they wrote that there were no *casas de bloco* there?
- Representative: No, none, there are *casebres* that are inside a savannah
- Author: What is a *casebre*?
- Representative: A *casebre* is a little house like this, a worthless house. Understand?
- Me: Is it made of grass (*capim*)?
- Representative: Either of grass or of corrugated iron. You build it randomly, it is the house of the poor.
- Author: Okay.
- Representative: There are houses which don’t have anything to do [with a house] and then they are inside the bush (*capim*), inside the savannah²⁴

The exchange powerfully illustrated the symbolic distinction that rested in the difference between *chapa* and *bloco*. *Chapa* indexed poverty, wildness, rurality, a *casebre*. In contrast, *bloco* was worth preserving, it suggested urbanism and permanence. Bernardo, a housing rights activist who was working with the three neighbourhoods to press for compensation, explained to me that the population was ‘disgusted’ by the government because the residents had had *casas definitivas* (permanent houses) which were, he explained, different to *casas de chapa*.²⁵ Destroying *bloco* was ground for political mobilisation, seen in the numerous attempts to meet with the state, demand compensation and threatened protests that occurred in the face of the destruction of *casas de bloco*.

The associations of cement block with development indicated its entanglement with existing material ideologies of modernity while presenting a vernacular critique thereof. One afternoon, in Vamos Andar, I sat in the lounge of Dona Cristina while Raul spoke passionately about the benefits of building in adobe, explaining that the material kept the house cool and lasted for a very long time. Given this, I asked him why people did not continue to build in adobe. He responded that if he built a house of adobe or wood, people would think he was ‘backwards’. ‘People build in cement to be modern’ he explained. While *musseque* residents had therefore accepted the distinctions between modern and backwards, permanent and provisional, cement and adobe that had usually mapped onto the *musseque* itself, they had reworked it, so that a certain materiality of the *musseque* – *casas de bloco* (cement block houses) – constituted good urbanism and modernity, and with that a popular architectural claim to belonging that competed with the visions of modernity espoused by the new Luanda.

Studies of urban unofficial construction have shown that residents perceive house-building as a grounds for the claiming of citizenship rights (Holston 2009; Makhulu 2015; Nielsen 2011). However, I argue while Luanda's *musseque* residents did use the existence of their homes to demand compensation, argue for better services and dispute demolitions, they themselves distinguished between *casas de chapa* and *casas de bloco*. In doing this, they were not simply arguing for incorporation into existing norms of citizenship but promoting an imaginary of belonging based in the materiality of their homes, which challenged the aesthetic imaginaries of the new Luanda. By insisting on the value of *casa de bloco*, they were shaping the grounds through which claims to rights could be made. In this case, their houses could no longer simply be dismissed as 'anarchic' but had to be taken seriously as objects of good urbanism, through which demands and rights could be articulated. While such discourses reiterated the very prejudicial vision of the *musseque* propagated by elites, developers and state institutions, these were applied to the *chapas* and other signs of *construção provisória*, not, necessarily to the *casas de bloco*. This argument for a legal claim to a space rooted in the materiality of the cement block house was unravelled by demolition, marked by a seeming reversal in the teleology from *bloco* to *chapa*, from *construção definitiva* to *construção provisória*.

Chapa and the downgrading of citizenship

José Manuel sat weeping in front of me, his thin frame quivering. He recounted to me how, in 1986, he was grabbed from his school in Huambo by FAPLA²⁶ and put into the army. He fought for 10 years, until he was finally demobilised in 1997. Hoping to better his life, he found his way to the capital, Luanda. Once there, he made a living fishing, and eventually met his wife and settled down in an autoconstructed neighbourhood on the southern periphery of the city. He bought a plot and built a three-room *casa de bloco*. One day in 2003, some men appeared in the neighbourhood and told everyone that the government had reserved the land and that they would have to move. The men told them not to worry, that they would all receive land 'with conditions', a term usually implying land with some kind of formal connection to the city's infrastructural grid. However, the neighbourhood rejected the offer, saying that they wanted *casa por casa* [a house for a house]. The government representatives capitulated and promised them houses. The population therefore agreed to the removal. The day of removal was both unexpected and violent. Police arrived out of the blue with dogs and began to beat the surprised population who were loaded onto trucks and dumped in an area known as Fubu, with no housing or infrastructures. After many desperate requests and complaints, their 'compensation' was eventually provided: 12 × 28-m lots and \$400. However, no documents proving legal tenure were distributed and \$400 was not nearly enough to rebuild a house, which at its most basic, in 2012, cost US\$6,000²⁷ to construct. José Manuel, with tears trickling down his face explained that he carried a pain inside him because he had never been able to afford to rebuild his *casa de bloco*. Like him, many others continued to live in *casas de chapa* with no electricity or water. Weeping he looked at me and said, 'This country is evil.'²⁸

José Manuel's devastating story recounts a process of urban incorporation and urban unmaking though the physical destruction of his *casa de bloco* and his downgrading to a corrugated iron structure – *chapa*. It is a story, unfortunately, which is all too common. Since the late 1990s, and rising in numbers since the end of the civil war in 2002, housing

demolitions have become one of the primary experiences of life in Luanda. The list of neighbourhoods is a memorial to crushed dreams. To mention just a few, Boa Vista in 2001, Soba Capassa in 2002, Cambamba I, Cambamba II and Banga Ué in 2004, Iraque and Baghdad in 2009, and Mayombe and Areia Branca in 2013 were all reduced to rubble. As reported by residents themselves, and local and international human rights organisations, these demolitions frequently occurred with little or no warning, and were characterised by the presence of heavily armed police, military and private security forces. People were often forced out of the area with no alternative accommodation offered.²⁹

What most reports of demolitions have been unable to capture is the profound material unmaking of belonging that demolition enacts. Demolition is the physical undoing of citizenship. People watch their homes collapsing, cracking open and crumbling in front of them. If building in *bloco* is a process of claiming belonging through asserting a competing version of ‘good urbanism’, then demolition can be understood as concretely reversing that process. What emerges in numerous accounts of despair is a cement politics, an understanding of state violence read through the rejection of the claim to inclusion that cement block houses represent. Given the poverty of most *musseque* residents and the frequent lack of decent compensation, people experienced the undoing of belonging in the disappearance of cement homes and their downgrading to corrugated iron. The move from *casas de bloco* to *casas de chapa* transformed residents’ assessment of their citizenship, providing vivid evidence of the state’s rejection of the claims inherent to *bloco*.

The starkness of this material transformation was clear to me when I visited Bairro 1, Bairro 2 and Bairro 3, adjacent neighbourhoods that had suffered multiple demolitions since 2004 to make way for a public–private housing project for civil servants. Residents’ houses had been knocked down, but no provision had been made to rehouse them. When the land was not eventually used, they decided to continue squatting in the area and negotiate with the company managing the project and the Luanda Provincial Government to be rehoused. On top of the ruins of their former homes, they had constructed *casas de chapa*, harsh reminders of their current conditions.

Chapa revealed the violence of the aesthetic imaginary of the new Luanda, as well as exposing the economic inequalities that structured urban life. *Chapa* highlighted demolition victims’ poverty as many could simply not afford to rebuild or purchase alternative homes. It created a sense among them that they were politically disposable to the state because of their urban and economic status. Many residents noted that only wealthy people and ‘foreigners’ could reside in the project’s houses. One woman who had lived in the area since 1977 argued that the state was not interested in putting them in nice houses because ‘we are from a low level’. Instead, she said, the houses in the project were for:

the high level, these [people] have houses in the project. Now, we who are from the lower level, it is here in the *chapa*. Because, if we had a high level like them, would they still demolish our houses and put us here in a *casa de chapa*? To live in a house without windows, without anything ... we are part of the lower level.³⁰

One of her neighbours was a woman in her late fifties who had lived in the area since before independence farming for a living concurred. When I asked her about her current life, she responded,

Living here? Wow, the atmosphere here ... okay, what is it? When the sunrises you can’t stay inside your house. It’s hot! You have to stay in the shade, you have to sit there and abandon

your house. But those people there [in the project] they don't have to abandon their houses. The houses are nice and fresh.³¹

The wealthy and privileged, like the *cidade*, and like *bloco*, had status. The poor of the *musseques* were downgraded in status, financial situation and imaginations of personal and social advancement.

If construction in *bloco* symbolised a future-orientated movement towards good urbanism and political inclusion, then being reduced to *chapa* involved a sense of sliding backwards. Harms (2013, 346) argues that demolition is experienced as 'a set of visceral engagements with time'. People are left in situations of ambiguity, unclear about when they might be moved and under what conditions. In these three neighbourhoods, understandings of temporality congealed in the materiality of *chapa* and *bloco*. Wrapped up in the linear modernist teleologies of the *cidade* and *bloco*, residents felt that their 'development' was at best being stalled and at worst being undone, through the process of living in *chapa*. One male resident described living in *chapa* as being in jail.³² He was stuck, unable to move. Similarly to José Manuel, many residents simply lacked the finances to rebuild in another part of the city. Others were hopeful of being rehoused and simultaneously fearful of repeat demolitions. As a result even if they could begin to gather money for the slow process of assembling construction materials, they were concerned that they would lose their investments again. They therefore stayed in *chapa*.

This temporal-material experience transformed them from citizens to outcasts in their eyes, and people described their situations using social figures of abandonment and exclusion. A member of the residents committee for Bairro 2 argued that being stuck in *chapa* had turned them into *reféns* (hostages), because they were being held back from investing in *bloco*.³³ The state was trapping and stunting them, not assisting them. One woman in Bairro 2 explained that at least if they had word from the government they would feel better but they were being left lingering:

If they had said, if they were doing, if the government [*governo*] was doing it like this, it took us from there and put us in *casas de chapa*, and now they were saying 'okay, so, because we destroyed ... your houses, the *casas de bloco* that you had, we demolished them, so we are going to offer you lots of money for you to build here, or to build somewhere else' that would be fine. But now we are not hearing anything, and we are still in this situation. And in this way the heat is coming, and people are dying for nothing with this waiting. The waiting is too much in *chapa*. Now, what are we meant to do?³⁴

Being stuck in *chapa* indicated being caught in waiting,³⁵ especially when moving into *bloco* was not seen as a possibility. The materiality of this waiting was evident when walking through the neighbourhoods. Unlike most of the city, there were no piles of brick waiting to be used, no sand, or crushed rocks or iron bars leaning against walls. The investments in the future and in a vernacular imagination of good urbanism had been cut short, and with that, the dreams of political inclusion that accompanied them.

Concluding thoughts

As dreams of new cities begin to shape African urban landscapes, this paper has argued that it is in the quotidian of 'slums' that challenges to imaginations of the urban are mounting and with that political identifications and conflicts emerging. In Luanda, while lamenting the poor conditions of their neighbourhoods, *musseques* residents nevertheless viewed *casas*

de bloco as indicative of belonging and modernity. When they were stripped of them during demolitions and reduced to *chapa*, people felt the violence of demolition perpetrated not only in the moment, but in the continued dwelling in *chapa* that they were forced to endure. Demolition entailed a rejection of the material politics of belonging that the cement block house represented.

African urban studies have had an ambivalent relationship to studying the slum, tending, erroneously, to treat slums as metonyms for the African city. Critics of this tendency have rightly pointed out that it frames the African city within a developmentalist approach that always posits it as deviant and lacking in relation to cities from the Global North (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008; Robinson 2002). However, not only are these developmentalist discourses strongly embraced by African urbanites themselves, but it is precisely the slum which appears to provide a critical response to them, even if the response remains entangled with the modernist assumptions of development. To understand political belonging in African urban centres then, and the quotidian grounds upon which citizenship and political critique are produced, the need is to not turn away from slums but to study them as legitimate urban forms in conversation with more globally idealised urban spaces. It is only through understanding the politics of materiality in the *musseques*, after all, that the full disillusionment of Luanda's cement citizens with contemporary urban planning and politics can be grasped.

Notes

1. Angola is the second-largest producer of oil in Africa. The end of the war coincided with a sudden rise in the international price of oil from US\$10 in 1999 to US\$147 in 2008 providing substantial funds for reconstruction (Soares de Oliveira 2015, 167).
2. For excellent reporting on demolitions in Luanda see Amnesty International (2003, 2007), Human Rights Watch (2007).
3. Statistics regarding people affected by demolitions are difficult to come by. However, I was told by a representative of Odebrecht that in only one rehousing area, Zango, they estimated that approximately 200,000 people had been rehoused.
4. The archives of SOS Habitat, a housing rights organisation formed in 2002 by victims of demolitions, suggest that thousands of Luandans have been forcibly removed with little or no compensation of any kind.
5. Many Luandans have voiced numerous complaints about the quality of housing in the state rehousing zones.
6. Two examples include the planned construction of a new capital Oyala, in Equatorial Guinea, and the ongoing investment in the Eko Atlantic project in Lagos, a privately administered city for 250,000 described as the 'future of Hong Kong of Africa'.
7. The bulk of the research for this paper was undertaken between March 2011 and September 2012. Subsequent research trips were undertaken in July–August 2013, November–December 2014 and October–December 2015.
8. See Viegas (2016).
9. Law 9/04, 9 November 2004.
10. See Article 1293 to 1297 and Article 1528 of Angola's *Codigo Civil*.
11. See Articles 6 and 8 of the Land Law.
12. See Human Rights Watch 2007.
13. Interview with Carla. Ingombota, Luanda. 2 November 2015.
14. *Guetos na Vertical*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXPqFwCTVS0>.
15. *Eu Queria Morar em Talatona*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiLBVijpjmI>.

16. Pseudonyms have been used for all names with the exception of public figures who have made statements in public *fora*.
17. The names of specific neighbourhoods have generally been given pseudonyms. The exception to this is when cases have been very public such as that of Iraque-Bagdad. The real names of municipalities and communes have been kept.
18. Group Discussion, Vamos Andar, Cazenga. 27 April 2011.
19. Literally translated the word means 'mason', but it references artisans specialized in housing design and construction in Luanda's *musseques*.
20. These accounts generally portrayed the *camponeses* as willing sellers. However, occasionally some interviewees explained that they believed that the sales were forced given the impossible situation that *camponeses* found themselves in. The sale, while often 'voluntary' then, was often a decision taken in situations of desperation.
21. Croese (2015) and Tomás (2014).
22. Lena. Vamos Andar, Cazenga. 17 May 2011.
23. 'GPL descarta culpa' *O Pais*. 31 July 2009, 23.
24. Interview with representative of Bagdad-Iraque. Camama, Luanda. 26 August 2011.
25. Discussion. Chimbicato. 1 July 2011.
26. *Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola*. These were the armed forces of the MPLA during the Angolan civil war.
27. This number was ascertained from discussions with a pedreiro in 2012 regarding the costs of building a poor quality basic two-room *casa de bloco*.
28. Interview with José Manuel, former resident of Honga. Benfica. 16 November 2011.
29. See Amnesty International (2003, 2007), Human Rights Watch (2007), and SOS Habitat (2012).
30. Woman 5. 5 March 2012. Bairro 2. Kilamba Kiaxi. Luanda.
31. Sara. 5 March 2012. Bairro 3. Kilamba Kiaxi. Luanda.
32. Pedro. 5 March 2012. Bairro 2. Kilamba Kiaxi. Luanda.
33. Member of Residents Committee. 1 July 2011. Bairro 2. Kilamba Kiaxi. Luanda.
34. Woman 5. 5 March 2012. Bairro 2. Kilamba Kiaxi. Luanda.
35. See Harms (2013).

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