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Note

1 All participants are referred to by pseudonyms in the chapter.

Chapter 8

The Politics of Repair: Talatona and Luxury Urbanism in Luanda, Angola

Claudia Gastrow

Eu queria morar em Talatona, eu queria morar em Talatona, eu queria n
emTalatona, o meu sonho é morar em Talatona.

('Eu Queria Morar em Talatona', MCK 2

Introduction

It was poetry night at King's Club, a nightclub in the up-market neighbourhood Alice. Due to its pool tables and dedication to live music, it was a favoured venue f Luandans with some disposable income who were seeking a reprieve from the com Brazilian and US pop hits streaming from the speakers at the beachfront area of the the loud bass of one of the city's other favoured evening haunts, Elinga. It offere alternative possibilities, occasionally hosting talks on African history and identi regular open mic nights for the city's aspiring poets. The success of the evening re nervous newbies proffering their words to a supportive crowd and a smattering of r who would perform to shouts of approval. On this evening, though, the emcee was problems getting regulars to come on stage. Turning to a woman in the audience, wh the familiar way he addressed her, seemed to be a regular, he asked her to come up an some of her poetry. She declined, laughing. He then began to get the audience in explaining that she was a great poet and whipping up support for her. She still, h refused to bow to the pressure. Eventually, trying to jokingly persuade her, he looke across the audience and, lowering his voice, whispered into the mic, 'I'm cement, sand. Let's mix and make a house'. The crowd roared with laughter. The house, a amongst its many meanings, is strongly associated with matrimony and reproduc Luanda. In fact, the Portuguese word house (*casa*) is a homonym of marry (*casar*), l to headlines in newspapers, especially during the housing shortages of the 1980s and regularly being titled 'Quem casa quer casa' (Who marries, wants a house). The refer sand and cement indexed the most common means of accessing housing in L especially amongst the urban poor: autoconstruction (*autoconstrução*).[1] Across the c especially as one edges towards the periphery, roadside vendors peddling crushe trucks of sand and bags of cement indicate the 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat 2000) contemporary world's most insistent city-builders.

In Luanda, the gradual construction of a cement-block house is a long-term process through which people establish urban belonging (Gastrow 2017). Builders make a material claim to place and in the process signal to others their intention to make a life in the city. Families, businesses and friendships multiply in these homes that constantly emerge on the urban periphery. It is from these deeply entrenched understandings of social reproduction that the emcee drew when he asked the female poet to create a house with him. With such a good line, it seemed the only answer she could give was 'yes'. However, she smiled and called back 'sure, but only if it is a three story in Talatona!' The crowd roared even more with approval, and the emcee jumped back, his eyes wide open as if recovering from shock. There were few responses that could have better stumped the emcee's statement. Talatona, home to oil executives, gated communities and Luanda's most well known mall, *Belas Shopping*, is widely identified as a zone of the elite. In a city where the majority of the population lives in *musseques* ('slum' areas largely made up of decaying colonial social housing or autoconstructed cement-block homes), the manicured lawns, spacious residences and infrastructural services of Talatona's *condomínios* (gated communities) are indications of luxurious consumption and sensual experience. The woman was suggesting that unless the emcee was extremely wealthy, his chances of making a *casa* with her were limited. With such a brilliant response, the emcee pleaded poverty, admitted defeat and eventually managed to convince someone else to take the stage.

The comedic exchange however, while a jovial one, trod into the murky realms of economic segregation and political power in Luanda. Houses enable a parsing of emic notions of belonging and status as they are 'both concrete embodiments and imaginary representations of people's relations to their conditions of existence [...] they channel personal experience into a public idiom, architecture' (Holston 1991: 456). Luanda was no exception to this. If I passed a particularly luxurious home or building, and asked who owned it or lived there, I was given the response '*um chefe*' (a boss). Talatona's houses then, like the houses of the wealthy anywhere in the world, are objects of conspicuous consumption, performing economic power through their materiality. However, to make a claim to Talatona is not only about wealth, but status and power. The division between Talatona and the *musseques* is not simply understood as one of affluence, but one of modernity and development. Although usually translated as 'slum', *musseque* has a far more substantive meaning, used to refer to almost any area that deviates from shared norms of desirable urbanism (Gastrow 2017). In this model, normative urbanism, represented by what Angolans refer to as *cidade* (historically used to describe the colonial city centre, but which more generally indexes areas of formality), represents modernity. As the perceived antithesis of the *cidade*, the *musseques* become the location not just of poverty but of backwardness (Roque 2012). To demand a house in Talatona then, as the female poet had, is a demand not simply to wealth, but a status defined by normative imaginations of modernity and urbanism.

In Angola, however, where economic power and social status are almost inevitably linked to political power, these spaces of perceived formality and modernity, as well as the houses that define them, act as a critical assemblage of suspect financial relations, processes of urban

displacement and political connection. Suspicions of these homes have only grown over the past two decades as Luanda has undergone a rapid process of urban redevelopment, which has involved the destruction of multiple *musseques* and the forced displacement of their residents (Gastrow 2014). *Musseque* houses, while mocked by the wealthy as poor quality, also constitute their own system of political belonging and aspiration, as construction signals one means through which those marginalized from state power try to instantiate claims to urban belonging, a right to place in the city. Their destruction undoes the political claims that have congealed in them, upsetting existing patterns of negotiation with the MPLA and means of performing urban citizenship, which focused on the construction of the house (Gastrow 2017). The rise of Talatona's condominiums parallel to the destruction of *musseques* means that luxury houses catalyse critiques of the current political system even as they congeal lifestyles that many Luandans aspire towards.

Talatona's houses, however, act as more than sites of critique. In their material and political contingency, they show luxury to be a representation that relies on constant repair to maintain its fragile performance and legitimacy. Talatona's houses draw attention to the fraught relationship between the successful performance of luxury and the socio-economic systems underpinning the wealth that enables it. In Angola, luxury cannot outrun the deep socio-economic inequalities and resulting material processes and affective orientations of its larger context. Materially, Talatona's houses are as embedded in the 'aesthetics of repair' (De Boeck and Plissart 2005: 228), the constant patching and improvisation required to sustain social and material relations of life in many African cities, as the *musseques* are. Politically, their existence generates suspicions regarding the legitimacy of the wealth underpinning their emergence. As a result, Talatona's *condomínios* are rendered materially and politically fragile, their appearance of luxury constantly threatened with moments of slippage.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the form of interviews, everyday observations and media analyses,[2] the rest of the chapter explores the question of maintenance in relation to Talatona's luxury *condomínios*. In order to do this, the chapter first provides a brief history of Talatona from its conception as part of the Luanda Sul Project to its rise as one of the symbols of Angola's petro-capitalism. Following this, I briefly examine the material conditions of life in these 'luxury' homes to highlight the work that is central to maintaining them. I show how their political significance emerges more from public imaginations of the good life that is assumed to exist behind their walls, than the actual living conditions within the *condomínios*. Finally, I examine Luandans' perceptions of the *condomínios* to unpick how beliefs about the illicit underpinnings of wealth and power are read into and through the walls of Talatona. Rapidly multiplying across the southern stretches of the city over the past two decades, the *condomínios* have become symbols of a 'capitalism gone viral' (Soares de Oliveira 2015: 160). This proliferation has occurred on the ruins of *musseques* demolished to make way for the wealthy. The *condomínios* therefore highlight the production of political belonging as a financial question. Their very bricks and mortar congeal processes of illegitimate accumulation and brutal exclusion. For Luandans, then, the condominiums, while very much a lifestyle that many would like to replicate, are equally

evidence that citizenship is more determined by money than by legal status, in a country where as a victim of housing demolitions once explained to me, 'everything is business'.

Talatona and the Rise of the *Condomínio*

The word 'Talatona' inspires imaginations of comfort and luxury amongst many Luandans. The area was born in the mid-1990s as part of the Luanda Sul Project. Responding to the desperate need for housing and infrastructure, the project proposed the development of land to the south of Luanda's existing boundaries. With Angola only having officially abandoned socialism in 1991, Luanda Sul was conceived of and presented as the first market-driven response to the city's housing problem (Cardoso 2015). The vehicle for this development was the Urban Development Company (EDURB),[3] founded as a public–private partnership in 1996 between the Luanda provincial government's company of EPRO-URBE[4] and Brazilian firm Prado Valladares to manage and oversee the Luanda Sul Project. Although EDURB controlled the project and sales, Luanda-Sul was meant to be completely 'auto-financed', with the money for the project being generated through land and real-estate speculation. Land that had been ceded to the Luanda provincial government by the Angolan state would be developed with basic infrastructures by Brazilian multinational Odebrecht (Cardoso 2015).[5] The land would then be sold to real-estate developers, the profits of which would in turn be used to cover the costs of having installed the infrastructure, as well as the building of low-cost housing. With its seeming abandonment of state intervention, the project won international awards for its market-orientated solution to housing.

The success of Luanda Sul hinged off Angola's petrodollars and elite buy-in. The project foresaw the development of three areas – Talatona for the wealthy, Novos Bairros for directed site-and-service construction, and Projecto Morar, a rehousing zone for people to be forcibly displaced by planned urban development initiatives.[6] The project's financial security depended on the profits that were projected to accrue from the sale of land in Talatona for housing development. If investors would not build in Talatona, the project itself could not get off the ground. Angola's oil economy, however, answered the call. The first company to announce, in 1994, that it would purchase land in Talatona for real-estate development was Sonangol, Angola's national oil company (Anon. 1994). The then governor of Luanda, Justinho Fernandes, publicly encouraged other companies to follow Sonangol's example in order to turn the 'dream' of Luanda Sul into a reality. Other oil companies followed suit, promising to rent or purchase housing in Talatona for their employees (Jenkins et al. 2002).

The *condomínio* quickly became the defining architectural and planning feature of Talatona. 'Gated' architecture already had some local origins in the form of housing for *cooperantes*[7] during the socialist period and United Nations staff compounds (Rodrigues 2009).[8] However, the first official *condomínio* is usually identified as the Vila do Gamek, built by Odebrecht in 1986 to house its employees. The *condomínios* really boomed, however, following the end of Angola's civil war in 2002. The end of the war coincided with a surge

in the international price of the country's primary source of revenue – oil. The oil bonanza ushered in what Schubert (2015) refers to as a 'culture of immediatism', an environment in which conspicuous consumption and the desire for quick wealth came to permeate everyday interactions and aspirations. Luxury cars, imported food and designer handbags were the manna of the city's oil rich. In Luanda, which has consistently trumped New York, Tokyo and others for the dubious honour of the most expensive city in the world for expatriates (BBC 2017), Talatona became one of the most expensive places to live. In 2013, the average price per metre squared in Talatona for housing was estimated at about US$7000 (Zenki 2013). The area is now home to dozens of upscale *condomínios*, an international school, a business park and a conference centre. Many residents enjoy access to swimming pools, communal leisure areas and the assumed security of a boomed entrance. The city's first major American-style mall is located there, replete with cinemas and a food court.

Talatona has been central in the spread of imaginations of a consumerist and sensually lush 'good life'.[9] With names such as Monte Belo (Beautiful Heights) and Dolce Vita (Sweet Life), advertisements for the buildings emphasize their exclusive features and aspirational lifestyle as part of the world of luxury that they are meant to embody. They promise to lift a person out of the everyday difficulties of urban life, in the process becoming objects of desire. Such dreams of escapism were expressed in everyday actions. A friend of mine who worked as a driver for an NGO once recounted to me how, at a wedding he had attended, the bride and groom, who were not of wealthy means, had spent much of the time after the ceremony driving through Talatona trying to negotiate with the guards of various condominiums to let them take their wedding photos inside. This was a testament not only to the shortage of desirable public space in the city, but to how desire became sequestered behind the walls reserved for only a few. However, the reality of what lay behind the walls often differed from what observers projected on to them. The next section examines this discrepancy to highlight the fantasies that lay at the fulcrum of the politics of luxury in Luanda.

Luxury as Maintenance?

Talatona's *condomínios* are objects of aspiration. Lives are imagined as potentially transformed through inhabiting them. Angolan political hip-hop artist MCK's 2012 track, 'Eu Queria Morar em Talatona' ('I Wish to Live in Talatona'), with which this chapter opens, captures these sentiments. The song is a play on Brazilian musician Gabriel's trenchant critique of socio-economic inequality in Brazil 'O Resto do Mundo' ('The Rest of the World'), whose chorus is a repetition of the lines 'Eu queria morar numa favela, o meu sonho é morar numa favela' ('I wish to live in a favela, my dream is to live in a favela'). In this track, the narrator is so destitute that even life in a favela seems desirable. MCK flips this desire, voicing the prayers of a young man from one of Luanda's *musseques*, who seeks deliverance from his circumstances by wishing to live in Talatona. Imagining a life of ease characterized by public lighting, children's playgrounds, crystal glasses, hot tubs and indoor plumbing, the

narrator comments 'Eu não sou Gabriel, eu não quero favela, cresci na miséria, to farto dela' ('I'm not Gabriel, I don't want the favela, I grew up in misery, I'm sick of it').

MCK's track is not only a comment on inequality and consumerism, but also indicates the gap between public representations of elite urbanism that Talatona conjures, and the realities of what luxury means in Luanda. The questionable nature of luxury is most noticeable in the ongoing infrastructural challenges that the *condomínios* face. In 2016, I visited a house in the Condomínio Cajú in Talatona, one of Sonangol's flagship condominiums. From the view outside the walls, it met all imaginations of exclusivity. A peak through the booms suggested a lavish communal area and securitized access. My friend who was driving had to leave his identity card at the entrance. However, as we travelled through the complex, its luxuriousness became increasingly suspect. While some private gardens in front of homes were well tended, the shared areas were largely desiccated green spaces. A disused, weed-ridden children's playground stuck out as a poor experiment in performing US-style suburbia. Even the houses seemed less grand than they had appeared in Sonangol's glossy in-house magazine, *Saber Viver* (*Know How to Live*) for its former employee-housing cooperative, the Cooperativo Cajueira.

After having a drink with some residents of the complex, my friend and I left to pay a visit to an acquaintance of his, promising to return later as we had been invited for dinner. Within the hour, however, the owner called and told us not to bother. The area's electricity had cut and the condominium's generators were not working. The luxurious condominium in one of the most elite areas of the city was sitting in darkness. In an equally awkward situation, in Monte Belo, the condominium complex in Talatona where oil giant Chevron houses many of its foreign employees, residents were instructed to only use bottled water for cooking and brushing teeth (Marques de Morais 2012). The water of the US$250 million dollar complex, it turned out, was being trucked in untreated by tankers, the same ones that serviced many of the 'slum' areas on the periphery of the city. Unable to count on the water grid or even the building's own purification systems, Monte Belo's wealthy residents were dealing with the uneasy contradictions of what 'luxury' meant in Luanda.

Talatona's condominiums powerfully illustrate that luxury is situationally constituted (Armitage and Roberts 2016). In many other parts of the world, Talatona's houses and apartments would have been middle- or upper-middle-class accommodation. However, in a context in which the majority of the population has little to no access to reliably constructed buildings, regular water, electricity or sanitation connections, access to these, which in much of the global North would be classed 'necessities', becomes glossed as a luxury. It is this particularity that highlights the question of repair as lying at the heart luxury. Even when Talatona's residents were meant to have access to infrastructural pleasures, it was not clear that they were guaranteed access in the ways in which the appearance of the houses might have led those accustomed to an easy match between surface and depth to assume. In contrast to descriptions of gated communities in Equatorial Guinea (Appel 2012) or Brazil (Caldeira 2001), even with extensive effort, Talatona's *condomínios* did not manage an entirely successful sense of separation from the city around them.

The point, however, is not that Talatona is 'not' luxurious. In comparison to the conditions of the rest of Luanda, it is. It is significantly more comfortable to live in the Condomínio Cajú or Monte Belo than in a cement-block home with no sanitation in Cazenga.[10] While there are infrastructural problems in Talatona, they are less frequent and more easily resolved by access to improvised back-ups such as generators and water-tanks. Rather than treating Talatona's luxury as a fake or surface, it is perhaps more useful to locate the condominiums as extreme examples of the fact that the images and objects within which shared imaginations of luxury are rooted have to be constantly repaired. If they are not, the dysfunctional socio-economic realities upon which such lifestyles are built might threaten to undo their successful performance of luxury. For, ultimately it is the image of luxury that the general public engages with, not the everyday work of maintaining it.

The desires and disappointments of Talatona's luxury are predominantly produced by its walls. Most Luandans will never step foot inside a condominium in Talatona, and, like MCK's young man praying to live there, can only project their fantasies of what life inside these spaces is like onto them. However, the mystery of these walls, the lack of knowledge of what lies behind them and the suspicions that they catalyse when intersecting with existing political frustrations means that luxury housing becomes a flashpoint for critiques of the wealth that underlies it and by association the ruling elite. The luxury house, as the next section shows, is one of the objects through which imaginations of the workings of political-economic power in Luanda, is constituted.

Disreputable Housing

'Who would spend two million dollars on a shoddily constructed house in the middle of nowhere?' Luis, a Portuguese architect working in Angola asked. His question was posed in relation to the fact that so many of Talatona's houses stood empty. Despite the supposed oil miracle of post-conflict Angola, the dark windows and silent yards indicated that the wealth was not enough to provide a Talatona life for everyone. For Luis, the answer to his question and the reason for the empty *condomínios* lay in the financial networks underpinning their construction. He believed that the houses were products of money laundering, somewhere for people to stash their wealth.[11] Houses were not necessarily there to be sold, but to be stored. An administrator at a property management company reiterated similar beliefs to me in discussing the difficulties of officially registering properties in Luanda. He believed the difficulty was created on purpose. If a property was not registered, the government could not tax it. A lack of registration also meant that there was no way of confirming who owned what or how many properties. 'People organize themselves through disorganization', he explained.[12] For Luis and the administrator, Talatona's houses stood at the centre of rumours and suspicions of illicit wealth, nepotism and corruption. They were material instances of what John and Jean Comaroff (1999: 293) have referred to as 'occult economies', the emergence of suspicions that in the age of neoliberalism, fabulous wealth is being reaped by

in the city [*cidade*] stay there. This is their business, condominiums, condominiums, it's only this that we are seeing.

Her comment spoke not simply to a collusion between government and the wealthy, but the very remaking of government into a business. In this world, it was *o governo* that followed profit at the expense of its citizens. Talatona's *condomínios* came under critique then as objects where people assumed the privatization of the state congealed. They were out of reach and built on questionable financial foundations. As *condomínios* mushroomed, the claims to urban inclusions and rights, materialized in the *musseque* home, were undone through demolition. Luxury housing, as much as it was desired, became deeply imbued with a moralizing account of accumulation and the effects of this on the political system and citizenship in Luanda. Its legitimacy was constantly being tarnished, the possibilities for repair waning each time that desire swung to frustration.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the repairs needed to maintain the performance of luxury are imbricated in the political-economic conditions that blemish its public image. Until the highly unequal socio-economic conditions of Luanda are resolved, Talatona's *condomínios* will always be in need of material and reputational repair. In Angola, and perhaps any other context of extreme socio-economic inequality, luxury will always be caught in a balancing act of illegitimacy and desire. As Coronil (1997: 178) has highlighted for the case of Venezuela, luxury consumption is means of gaining 'public recognition' by groups that have historically been excluded. Consumption indexes hierarchy, achievement and belonging both internationally and domestically (Coronil 1997), as such, perhaps especially in contexts of notable inequality, luxury is particular desired as a symbol of inclusion and status. But, in such contexts it is also constantly under question.

The urban material limitations created by the oil economy and suspected corruption constantly threaten to undo the objects and representations in which luxury in Angola is anchored. Houses run on generators and have to have water trucked in. Similarly, the actual status of Talatona's *condomínios* is constantly questioned as many suspect a network of elites and parallel governance to lie behind their construction. Although contemporary scholars have generally tried to move away from moralizing consumption practices both amongst the poor and the wealthy (Miller 1988; Iqani 2015; Armitage and Roberts 2016), as many of my interlocutors' comments suggest, ordinary people who interact with luxury goods bring their own judgements with them. Luis, the administrator, and the activists believed Talatona's luxury *condomínios* to be material manifestations of illicit profits, a means of laundering money and distributing wealth amongst friends and family. International organizations such as USAID have voiced similar concerns (USAID 2010). However, simultaneously, condominiums are also objects of aspiration, with people projecting imaginations of the

'good life' onto their walls. Talatona's *condomínios* have become contradictory sites of both the desire to be included in, but equally of the repulsion of, the political status quo. If repair, maintenance and patching have become one of the hallmarks of African urban life (De Boeck and Plissart 2005; Trovolla and Trovolla 2015) then the life of the wealthy in Angola is no exception to this. Talatona's *condomínios* are constantly in need of reputational repair, in addition to their physical maintenance. A point of view from the African continent then highlights luxury as a constant process of repair and fabrication, something teetering on the edge of unmaking rather than easily performing its status.

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Notes

1 The word 'autoconstruction' is a direct translation from the Portuguese word for self-building: *autoconstrução*. It has increasingly been taken up by scholars working on unofficial city-building as both an emic term for the Lusophone world and a more succinct term to describe processes of self-building.
2 The bulk of research for this chapter took place in Luanda between March 2011 and September 2012. It was supplemented by shorter annual fieldwork periods between 2013 and 2017.
3 *Empresa de Desenvolvimento Urbano*.
4 *Empresa Provincial de Participações em Programas de Urbanizações*.
5 Odebrecht is a major Brazilian construction conglomerate. It entered Angola in the early 1980s when it brokered the deal for the construction of the Capanda Hydroelectric Dam. Since then it has cemented its presence in the country through close relationships to the Angolan state. In the post-conflict period it has received various high-profile contracts, such as the rehabilitation of Luanda's roads and the construction of 'social housing'. For a more detailed account of Odebrecht's involvement in Angola, see Cardoso (2015).
6 The housing was designated for people who were to be removed from areas of the city centre earmarked for the construction of a new political-administration centre. In practice, some of these households were not removed or only removed years later, while individuals living in other parts of the city found themselves displaced more rapidly once the war ended. Demolition and rehousing landed up becoming far more complex means of managing urban space and exercising political power in Luanda than was perhaps initially conceived when Projecto Morar was constructed. See Gastrow (2014) for a more extensive account of these processes.
7 '*Cooperantes*' is a term used to describe foreigners who came to work for the Angolan state under the auspices of international socialist solidarity during the socialist period.
8 See Hatzky (2015) for an account of the residential separation of Cuban workers from Angolans.
9 I use the words 'imaginations' or 'imaginaries' in the plural to indicate that rather than political or other kinds of groups being characterized by monolithic shared narratives about what constitutes reality, 'multiple imaginaries can coexist within a society in tension or in a productive dialectical relationship' (Jasanoff 2015: 4).
10 A municipality in the city characterized by a mixture of self-built housing and poorly serviced colonial-era construction. Formal infrastructure in this municipality is extremely sparse.
11 Interview with Luis, Luanda, 20 April 2011.
12 Interview with Imogestim, Luanda, 3 May 2012.
13 Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola.
14 Interview with Diogo, Talatona, 18 August 2011.
15 Interview with SOS Habitat, Maianga, 5 May 2011.
16 For examples of reporting on elite corruption, see the work of Rafael Marques de Morais and others at makaangola.org as well as more recent reporting regarding former President

José Eduardo dos Santos' son's involvement in the attempted diversion of 500 million dollars (Eisenhammer and White 2018).

17 This number was derived from a conversation with a representative of Odebrecht, and represents only the number of people that they estimated they have actually rehoused. This does not include those who lost their homes and were not rehoused, or those who might have been removed and rehoused to housing projects not constructed by Odebrecht. Unfortunately, this is the only reasonably reliable number that I came across regarding removals and I therefore use it as my benchmark.

Chapter 9

Welcome to the Jungle: Tropical Modernism, Decadence and Gardening in Africa

Jonathan Cane