

# Housing middle-classness: formality and the making of distinction in Luanda

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There is no middle class in Angola, just the very poor and the very rich, and so there is no one to buy these sorts of houses. (Elias Isaac, head of Open Society Angola, referring to Kilamba, cited in Redvers 2012)

I think the middle class is really being strangled, where will it land up? It will land up in Kilamba Kiaxi, in the high-rises. (Diogo, Luanda, 2011)

## Introduction

On 11 July 2011, President José Eduardo dos Santos opened the first phase of the new satellite city of Kilamba. Made up of a series of green, blue, yellow and pink Chinese-designed high-rises, the initial phase of 20,002 apartments was meant to house approximately 80,000 people and included schools, clinics and new infrastructure. As the flagship project of the Angolan state's post-conflict housing programme, Kilamba was, as Buire (2014: 300) has argued, 'politically crafted to be the shop-window of the Angolan miracle', an indication of the country's new-found prosperity. Local media and publications from the ruling MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) advertised Kilamba as proof of the post-conflict state's care for the population and its capacity to overcome the wreckage of Angola's twenty-seven-year civil war. However, as much as Kilamba was meant to be evidence of the new, it reproduced long-standing links between the state, formality and urban distinction.

This article argues that, in Luanda, formal housing was central in performing the boundary work through which middle-classness was made. In the midst of an oil boom, a growing number of Luandans began to desire housing that appeared aesthetically formal, believing it to be a superior option for the realization of middle-classness than the most popular means of accessing housing: self-building. Based on fieldwork undertaken between 2011 and 2016, the article draws on interviews with and observations of individuals who aspired to the category of 'middle class' and nevertheless often felt that achievement of this aspiration was precarious. At the centre of this precarity lay the question of formal housing inasmuch as the significant gap between income and shared imaginations of what constituted a middle-class residence haunted those I spoke to. Equally important, however, was that the use of housing, rather than its mere ownership, was a means of indexing 'correct' comportment and hence distinction. This desire for

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formal housing had its roots in colonial beliefs about domesticity and comportment as well as in transnational imaginations of housing and status. As a growing group of generally formally employed, well-earning individuals – a middle class, in other words – developed understandings of class influenced by media, travels and experiences of living abroad, they began to think about the limits and potentials of their status, moving beyond national boundaries. However, with real-estate prices at record highs, interest on mortgages astronomical, flagging interest in self-building (referred to locally as *autoconstrução* or autoconstruction) and rent widely viewed as a waste of money, the state became the means for those who considered themselves ‘middle-class’ to access such housing. As such, the formal house became the site where fine calibrations of status and inclusion intersected with a political economy in which the state played a central role in facilitating the realization of desires for middle-class status.

If work on the state’s role in the production of the middle class has tended to centre on public service employment, urban formality in terms of the built environment shifts attention to other financial practices through which middle classes are rendered reliant on the state for their economic and symbolic reproduction. It also extends existing explorations of the impact of the rise of the middle class on urban aesthetics (Fehérváry 2013; Ghertner 2015; Mercer 2014). While informality has generally been identified as the central characteristic of African urban life (De Boeck and Plissart 2004; Simone and Pieterse 2017), there has nevertheless also been a long history of identifying formality with status and power, whether colonial or postcolonial. In Angola, this has been most obvious in the ongoing association of the formally planned areas of the city (*cidade*) with modernity and the more informal areas (*musseque*) with backwardness (Roque 2012). As an object of aspiration, then, the aesthetics and use of formal housing have historically been means through which Luandans cemented their status in the city, and they continue to shape contemporary understandings of being middle-class.

### Transnational class-making and new city building in Luanda

Aesthetic distinction is a central aspect of class differentiation (Bourdieu 1984). How and what people consume constitutes their public identities and in the process differentiates social categories. Despite some critiques that have called for a focus on Marxist-based notions of class, rather than Weberian distinctions of status (Southall 2015), a growing number of studies of the African middle class have centred their attention on consumption (Iqani 2015; Posel 2010; Schubert 2017; Spronk 2014). In doing so, such approaches have generally framed class as an emergent performance maintained through everyday boundary-making practices. Nevertheless, consumption is itself a fraught practice that can render fragile the maintenance of class distinction. Purchases and investments carry highly discrepant social recognition, often summed up in the difference between what is seen as wasteful and what is seen as morally responsible (James 2017). While providing insight into the shared orientations through which class is made, consumption is therefore only successful as a status marker to the extent that the distinctions that it exhibits are mutually recognized and valued. Class, after all, is generally not understood along one spectrum of distinction, but

through multiple objective and subjective measures (Noret 2017). It is this question of recognition and its multiple forms that has created anxiety among Africa's emerging middle class, who often feel that their status is at risk on financial, symbolic and performative grounds.

During the period of my fieldwork, consumption was a constant object of discussion and aspiration. The end of Angola's civil war in 2002 intersected with a sudden rise in the international price of oil, the primary source of government revenue and the country's largest export. The oil glut enabled imported goods to flood Angola, funded by the country's burgeoning foreign exchange reserves. The result was a 'culture of immediatism' (Schubert 2018), in which rampant desires for and practices of conspicuous consumption shaped quotidian life. Luanda's stores were inundated with goods from Portugal, Brazil, South Africa and China. Almost everything was available for the right price. Representations of Angola as a new 'El Dorado' flooded international media. This consumerism was supported by the Angolan state's post-conflict drive to bring about an elite ideal of Angola as 'urban, civilized, and Portuguese-speaking', investing in housing, infrastructure and the redevelopment of leisure areas (Soares de Oliveira 2015: 19). The media emphasized an upwardly mobile country, shorn of the constraints and humiliations of the war era. Many of those who had studied overseas in places such as Brazil, Portugal, the UK and South Africa embraced these ideals and more general imaginations of an urban global middle-class lifestyle that advertising, national reconstruction and their travels had exposed them to. The petrodollar salaries available to those few Angolans who had the education and connections to occupy well-paid positions meant that large cars, frequent trips to Portugal for shopping and relaxing at new restaurants became de rigueur. If the oil boom changed relatively little for the poor, the middle class found new opportunities for consumption, employment and leisure.

However, despite new income and consumer opportunities, life for the middle class was difficult. Housing was considered one of the primary markers of their status (Auerbach 2017; Rodrigues 2017) and yet many felt that their income did not match what was required to maintain the standard of living of a 'proper' middle class. As Diogo, an advertising executive, explained to me:

It's a bit fallacious to say that we have a very successful middle class in Angola, because we don't. That is, even if an Angolan earns like a middle-class person, he can't live like a middle-class person. He has to live like people who live in low-income housing in Holland or in Portugal or in any other place.<sup>1</sup>

Diogo's statement is familiar to those who have studied the African middle class in that it highlights the tension between financial resources and lifestyle. The oft-discussed financial precarity of the emerging middle class and the extremely low official benchmarks used to define someone as middle-class in Africa (in some studies a middle-class person is classified as someone who enjoys an income of US\$2 per day) are two of the primary reasons why researchers have cast doubt on the definitions of 'middle class' produced by financial institutions such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank (Stoffel 2017). Class,

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<sup>1</sup>Author interview with Diogo, Talatona, 18 August 2011.

however, is not necessarily best measured through absolute economic indicators, but by 'the way that people in African countries ... think and speak about their own position in society' (Lentz 2017: 17). Diogo was not just concerned about the cost of housing, but, more significantly, that the kind of housing he would be able to afford would mean that his performance of status would not carry across international borders. His consumption risked not being recognized as symbolically bestowing middle-class status on him. His transnational framing of the category of 'middle class' was what raised doubts for him about the actual existence of the Angolan middle class.

This transnational dimension is important in locating the politics of housing at the centre of debates about the 'cultural worlds' and 'boundary work' of the African middle class (Lentz 2017). The autoconstruction of houses has become a key means through which a new middle class is marking its presence on Africa's urban landscapes (Mercer 2014; 2017). Luanda is no exception. Over the last decade, however, informal construction in Africa has increasingly been matched by state and private investments in housing projects, principally aimed at what appears to be a middle class or elite (Murray 2015; Watson 2013). If autoconstruction speaks to the unofficial means of accumulation and world-making through which people manage the uncertainties of life in contemporary African metropolises, then these new projects appear to be the latest attempt by states and other investors to perform their power on the landscape and repackage African urbanism by keeping pace with the glamour of international urban trends. These new city projects draw on considerable transnational financial flows and mobilize urban aesthetics to align cities with their foreign counterparts, thereby assimilating them into internationally defined status categories (Chatterjee 2004). The aesthetics of housing and planning have therefore become central to the assertion of global inclusion as well as to personal aspirations for self-transformation. If self-building had long been the primary path to accessing the house of one's dreams in Luanda, new state and private housing investments have proffered the opportunity to live in idealized objects of international urbanism. As with the 'family houses' built in Hungary in the post-socialist era (Fehérvári 2013), housing aesthetics in Africa have become key to aligning oneself with emerging local and international status categories. Formality – not simply in the legal sense but also in the aesthetic sense – is central to this alignment, underlying the ideal of 'a modern cosmopolitan construction of urbanity' that has driven the post-conflict redevelopment of Luanda (Rodrigues 2017: 175–6).

While formality is a historically changing category, generally contingent on what the state classifies as formal (Roitman 2005; Roy 2005), Ghertner (2015) has suggested that, in recent years, the desire for 'world-class' city status has increasingly made legality and urban formality into aesthetic categories. In Luanda, there is a precedent for this. Imaginations of urbanism in the city have historically been divided between mutually dependent terms – *cidade* and *musseque* (or increasingly *bairro*). While the word *cidade* initially referred to Luanda's formally planned colonial-era core, it has come to stand in more generally for idealized imaginations of 'good urbanism'. This is usually associated with a material and aesthetic formality in the sense of officially planned urban grids and access to public infrastructure such as sanitation, water and electricity. In contrast, the term *musseque* is associated with supposedly 'deviant' forms of urbanism, often described as 'disorganized', emphasizing the lack of aesthetic

properties that accompany understandings of desirable urbanism (Gastrow 2017). However, these terms do not describe just physical attributes or location. During the colonial period, the term *musseque* was associated with areas occupied by Africans. This was exacerbated in the twentieth century when African and *mestiço* elites were driven out of the *cidade*'s prime real estate through laws regulating access to employment, the demolition of their homes in the wake of urban real-estate development, and growing racism caused by increased white immigration. Akin to fears expressed by colonial authorities in other African countries who argued that the 'slums' were spaces for the production of both 'material and moral' dangers, in Luanda colonial social scientists lamented that *musseques* were catalysts for criminality and prostitution (Bissel 2010: 160; Moorman 2008). These terms therefore developed racialized class associations that continue to this day, in which *musseques* are understood as backwards, poor, rural and informal, as opposed to *cidade*, which indexes modernity, development and formality (Roque 2012).

These distinctions are also, however, materially embodied, not just between the *musseque* and *cidade*, but in distinctions between the kinds of housing available in *musseques* and their differentiations from each other and from the *cidade*. *Musseque* housing in the colonial period was described as 'provisional' in its construction; in contrast, the *cidade* was defined by cement high-rises and formally built detached housing (Monteiro 1973). Nevertheless, even within the *musseques*, distinctions in materiality marked status. Messiant (2008: 216) argues that, among Africans during the colonial period, a 'three-tier stratification of Luanda's topography' emerged, in which the elites moved into newly built 'residential suburbs' such as Bairro Operário and Bairro Indígena, the working class into *musseques* close to the city, and those recently arrived into 'shanty towns'. Nowadays, within the *musseques*, residents distinguish a person's wealth and status in relation to whether their house is *construção provisório* (provisional construction) or *construção definitiva* (permanent construction); the latter is generally used to refer to cement block homes (Gastrow 2017). Thus, even among what could be classified as 'informal' areas, aesthetic distinctions plot houses along a spectrum of desirability and status contingent on how closely they align with the perceived materials and formal planning of the *cidade*. While many wealthy Angolans also build their own homes, for these houses to be considered 'middle-class', the expectation is that they should be constructed with brick (*tijolo*) rather than cement blocks (*bloco*), be painted, and ideally be designed by an architect (Auerbach 2017: 91, footnote 69). These houses must therefore embody aesthetics that align with shared social beliefs about what formality looks like. The status accorded to materials and spaces that map onto assumptions of formality and permanence – in contrast to the perceived undesirability of the informal and its association with *musseques* – therefore has a long history and takes on variations contingent on income and location.

The aesthetic and sociological connotations of formality and materiality, and *cidade*–*musseque*, were arguably evident in the Angolan state's post-conflict housing plan. In the wake of the civil war, the Angolan government launched what was referred to as its 'national reconstruction' programme. While broadly aimed at alleviating poverty and stabilizing the economy, in practice the term was loosely applied to a range of investments in public infrastructure and housing. The vision guiding these investments was very much in the style of 1960s and 1970s top-down state-driven modernization plans (Vines *et al.* 2005).

Funded by oil credit lines, the programme was premised not only on the destruction of informal settlements, but also on the distinct aesthetic and spatial separation of the poor and the aspirant middle class. Officially launched in 2009, the National Housing and Urbanization Programme (*Programa Nacional de Urbanismo e Habitação* or PNUH) promised to build 1 million homes by 2012. While a significant number of these were to be built by the private sector and another section through site-and-service programmes, the rest was state-subsidized housing and retroactively incorporated existing housing schemes under its auspices in addition to launching new projects. The subsidized housing fell into two categories: ‘social housing’, which referred to housing built for people who were forcibly removed; and a range of subsidized commercial projects, where those with the necessary funds could purchase housing. It is into the latter category that Kilamba and other *novas centralidades* (new centralities) fell, and it is these that have become the public symbol of the PNUH.

As the first ‘new centrality’ to be built, Kilamba was the object of significant publicity. It featured prominently in the MPLA’s media campaign during the 2012 election. Notably, however, it differed in aesthetics and provision from the resettlement zones. In resettlement areas such as Zango and Panguila, to which former *musseque* residents had been forcibly removed, the state subsidized the construction of match-box houses, often of poor quality and sometimes lacking infrastructure such as water, electricity and sanitation, with secondary and tertiary roads generally left untarred. In contrast, the high-rises of Kilamba promised connection to all the necessary infrastructure, the roads of the project were tarred, and verticality suggested appeals to the ‘luxified skies’ of the global elite (Graham 2015). As such, Kilamba enacted ‘the long-awaited rupture with the *musseques*’ (Buire 2017: 24), suggesting the arrival of a new type of urbanism that would propel inhabitants into a ‘dignified’ modern status. As such, formal housing, of which Kilamba is an example, becomes one lens through which to link a global urban aesthetics to the relationship between the state and the making of the middle-class.

### Accessing formality: the state, autoconstruction and credit crunches

Kilamba, christened with the war name of Angola’s first president, Agostinho Neto, had originally been advertised as a social housing project when its construction began in 2008. The government promised that apartment prices would not rise above US\$60,000. However, between then and the opening of its first phase in 2011, its status had transformed. The cheapest apartment cost US\$125,000, far more than most Angolans could afford. After both local pressures and the humiliation caused by the international press labelling Kilamba a ‘ghost city’,<sup>2</sup> the prices were dropped to US\$70,000 for some apartments and a rent-to-buy scheme was established. Applications to register for an apartment flooded in. Despite this, Kilamba was still limited to a particular group, defined in the project’s initial list of eligibility requirements. One had to be an Angolan citizen,

<sup>2</sup>The first mention of Kilamba as a ‘ghost city’ was in a BBC article. This led the *Jornal de Angola*, the state-owned newspaper, to run an editorial refuting these allegations, the kind of pointed attack usually reserved for regime opponents or high-stakes political issues.

be resident in Angola, not already own a house or an apartment, and have a permanent or long-term employment contract. When I read this last requirement out to my friend Cláudio, he burst out laughing. If this was the case, he said, then the apartments were only for people from the state. While his comment is not entirely accurate, as people working for banks or oil companies also qualified, Kilamba arguably represented an attempt to conjure the image of a prosperous Angola on the urban landscape based on formal, and often state, employment. There was, however, a desperate need for state intervention if the current generation of mid- to high-ranking civil servants, or those employed by major businesses, hoped to enjoy the same kinds of status associated with living in the *cidade* as their predecessors had had. In Luanda, runaway real-estate speculation meant that houses on the private market easily cost anywhere from US\$300,000 to over US\$2 million, well beyond the means of most people who considered themselves middle-class.

This middle-class generation was the first one, post-independence, to be completely exposed to the whims of the market in the search for formal housing. There has long been an informal market in housing sales and land that runs at market prices. Nevertheless, the needs of the higher-earning formally employed class have historically been partially met by formal and informal arrangements with the state and the MPLA. Upon independence in 1975, hundreds of thousands of colonial settlers fled Angola, leaving their empty homes behind. Angolans quickly began to occupy these residences. Some people broke into them or were given them by departing Portuguese. Others negotiated with People's Neighbourhood Commissions<sup>3</sup> to access housing. As the post-independence state established itself, it tried to assert control over this abandoned housing. In 1976, the infamous Confiscation Law (*Lei de Confisco*) was introduced. The law declared that any property whose owners were outside the country for more than forty-five days (other than for medical, educational or state reasons) could be confiscated in favour of the state.<sup>4</sup> This led to a slew of nationalizations. By 1983, the Angolan state owned approximately 127,568 housing units (Cain 2017).

While the nationalization of property partially undermined the socio-economic divides of *musseque* and *cidade* (Rodrigues 2009), formal housing was more easily accessed by those with close connections to the party and the state (Tomás 2012). The few post-independence housing projects that existed, such as complexes constructed by the Cubans, were preferentially distributed to state employees. In the early 1990s, when the housing stock was privatized, residents of state-owned housing were once again spared the inequities of market-based valuations. Sales prices were estimated according to existing rentals, which had not been significantly adjusted since the 1970s. As a result, properties were sold for well below market rates. Information provided by the *Jornal de Angola* at the time suggested that the mean amount paid per property was approximately US\$31.25<sup>5</sup> – this was

<sup>3</sup>These *Comissões Popular do Bairro* were independent but MPLA-aligned neighbourhood committees that emerged during the struggle for independence. In the initial post-independence years, they managed neighbourhoods' everyday affairs.

<sup>4</sup>*Diário de República*, I Series, No. 144, Law 43/76 of 19 June 1976.

<sup>5</sup>By June 1997, the state newspaper claimed that 80,000 houses worth US\$2,500,000 had been sold (Santana 1997). If this is true, then, on average, each house was sold for US\$31.25.

for apartments that might have fetched a few hundred thousand dollars if exchanged at market value. Many of those who purchased these apartments were subsequently able to rent them out to companies, foreign workers and international organizations for thousands of dollars, meaning that early access to the formal housing of the *cidade* became one of the bases for class reproduction. While, given the country's massive housing shortage, most Angolans were forced to build their own homes, preferable treatment given to those people connected to the state meant that those few who lived in the apartments of the *cidade* were largely sheltered from the market in a way in which those who engaged in autoconstruction were not. This shifted with the end of the war in 2002, which coincided with the high prices and real-estate speculation characteristic of oil booms.

In the post-conflict moment, Luanda's aspirant middle class suffered from the same pressures brought about by the gap between aspiration and income as are found in many other countries on the continent (James 2014). In addition to quality health and educational facilities, accessing housing that people felt was reflective of their status was one of their main challenges. Despite a general belief that rent was a waste of money inasmuch as it was an unproductive investment, many people rented in order to remain in the areas where they preferred to live, or they continued to live with their parents. This was the situation for Nelson. He was in his early forties and had grown up in an apartment in the neighbourhood of Kinaxixe, in the *cidade*, that his parents had occupied in the mid-1970s. Nelson's father was a successful businessman, while his mother came from a working-class background. He had begun a university degree in Portugal, but failed to complete it when a family emergency had called him home. He now worked for a major oil company and rented a one-bedroom apartment in the city centre from a friend for US\$1,000 a month. Recently divorced, he and his ex-wife had previously stayed with their two children in an annex on her parents' property, located in an elite residential neighbourhood. He was averse to self-building, explaining that it was hard to get a property deed and that it took a huge amount of '*esforço*' (effort) as one constantly had to check up on the process. He had also grown up in the *cidade* in an apartment block and was looking for a similar kind of pre-built property. He wanted to buy a house, but he needed a home loan in order to do so. Even with the assistance of his employer, which paid 35 per cent of monthly instalments on its employees' mortgages, he felt that he was limited to two options, both of them state-subsidized housing developments: Nova Vida and Kilamba. The private developments were simply too expensive. Frustrated by his salary's inability to provide the prerequisites of what he viewed as a middle-class lifestyle – education, health and purchasing power – he explained that he wasn't sure it even made sense to talk about an Angolan middle class: 'Despite earning well, life is really difficult. Maintaining a middle-class level is really difficult.'<sup>6</sup>

Nelson's laments were commonly heard ones. Much of the 'middle class' in Angola engages in business in addition to their formal employment in order to make ends meet (Schubert 2017). However, his trajectory also points to the growing ambivalence about autoconstruction as a desirable choice for

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<sup>6</sup>Author interview with Nelson, Luanda, 12 November 2015.

homemaking. This uncertainty regarding self-building was evident in the case of Orlando, in his early thirties and working in the banking sector, who lived in Kilamba despite owning a plot of land where he could build. Orlando's family had arrived in Luanda from Huambo when he was ten as *deslocados* (internally displaced persons). Gradually, from money earned by his father in Angola's diamond areas and other savings, they had purchased several plots of land on the urban periphery, for autoconstruction and occasionally speculation. While his parents had realized their upward mobility through processes of land purchase and housing construction, he explained to me that projects such as Kilamba were important because a 'new generation' of university graduates had emerged:

that today are part of a middle class. These people started to create pressure to have housing that was compatible with their social status. They were different to their parents, who patiently built, were building with the flow of their income. This middle class had access to formal employment and higher salaries, so they had access to bank credit.

Orlando highlighted that the preference for formal housing was not simply about having a house, but was based on new financial options and finding a house that fitted one's 'status'. He clearly suggested that autoconstruction did not. Of course, this was not entirely true. There were many 'middle-class' Angolans who had turned to autoconstruction and their well-designed self-built housing indexed desirable class status. The area of Benfica, for instance, was well known for having what many saw as 'middle-class' autoconstruction due to the size and aesthetics of the homes, and the willingness of state institutions to install infrastructure post hoc. Such areas were considered desirable but nevertheless plagued by many of the infrastructural shortages and unclear legal statuses that people often tried to avoid by accessing formal housing. In addition, implicitly, autoconstruction was always slightly tainted by associations with uncontrolled construction, in contrast to the mythical order of the planned grid and pre-built houses and apartment blocks of the *cidade*. Orlando's preference for pre-built housing highlighted this ongoing tension within Luanda about the status of pre-built, aesthetically formal housing versus self-built housing in a context where the former has historically been associated with wealth and power and the latter has been considered a necessary evil forced on people by war conditions and state incapacity. If, for many, investing in a self-built home of a certain quality was enough of a status index, for others aspirations were shifting towards the desire to purchase pre-built formal housing, reiterating historical practices that had placed those with higher social status in the *cidade*.<sup>7</sup>

This preference for formal housing was evident in Orlando's own choice of residence, indicating the desire that he had suggested to occupy a home that suited his 'status', while managing his financial situation. Orlando had lived with his parents until 2013 and had only begun to feel 'pressure' to have a house when he became engaged. Orlando, like most of those I spoke to, considered rent 'a massive waste', but he was also averse to current credit conditions. In 2013 he had approached his employer, a local bank, for a loan of US\$250,000 to purchase an apartment in a series of new blocks built next to Filda, the city's venue for expos. Many of the

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<sup>7</sup>Author interview with Orlando, Luanda, 26 November 2015.

banks, like the oil company that employed Nelson, had reserved apartments in these new developments and then created in-house opportunities for their employees to purchase them. Nevertheless, when Orlando did the calculations, he decided against borrowing the money. He calculated that if he paid back the loan over a period of fifteen years with an interest rate of 14 per cent (what the bank was offering), he would have to pay approximately US\$3,000 a month, meaning that, ultimately, he would pay more than US\$500,000 for his apartment. He instead purchased a twenty-by-ten-metre plot in Capolo, near the Catholic University of Angola, with the intention of building. Then, however, Sonip, the company responsible for managing Kilamba's sales at the time, announced that prices would be reduced to US\$70,000 and introduced lease-purchase agreements – 'This made it cheap because you didn't need credit,' he explained. Orlando purchased in Kilamba. He still owns the plot of land but has never built on it.

The ambivalence about autoconstruction was not only because of its symbolic association with *musseques* and a previous era of hardship, but also because, with formal land tenure difficult to obtain, construction was risky. Leila, who held a degree in international relations from a local university and currently worked in a public relations company, embodied this hesitancy. As a child, she had lived in her family's apartment in the city centre, which her uncle had occupied during independence and had then given to her father when he married. She rented a house with a friend in Morro Bento, just to the south of the city centre, where she paid US\$350 a month in rent. The neighbourhood had no water connections and so they had water brought in by a tanker and stored. She wanted to live in the city centre. If this was not possible then she supposed the best option would be to purchase land and build her own home. The problem was 'the ceding of land. It's not clear, it's confusing. I don't feel like it's easy to just go to the administration and pay your money. Often people say that they are selling land, but you go there and it's smallholders selling, or people who bought from smallholders selling.' Usually, these kinds of private land sales were not legal, and even when they were, people, in collusion with commune or municipal administrations, often sold the same plot of land to multiple buyers so that when one arrived in court, 'there are three or four people that are owners of the same plot of land, all with documents from the administration'.<sup>8</sup>

Formal housing, in the form of state investments such as Kilamba and private developments in upscale areas such as Talatona, an elite neighbourhood made up predominantly of gated communities, therefore provided a new possibility for the realization of middle-classness. Despite the aspiration for such housing, however, the possibilities of accessing it were severely constrained. Unlike the South African context, where the middle class finds itself highly indebted (James 2014), the Angolan middle class found itself priced out of credit, making its hopes for bridging the gap between aspiration and income increasingly difficult to realize. Although Angola has the third largest banking sector in Africa, accessing mortgage facilities is risky for both the borrower and the lender (CAHF 2017). Not only are institutional capacities to estimate creditworthiness weak, but the difficulties faced in registering property mean that banks find it almost impossible to collect on defaulting loans. The result is that interest rates on mortgages are

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<sup>8</sup> Author interview with Leila, Luanda, 2 November 2015.

extremely high. In 2017, Standard Bank offered home loans with a 24.5 per cent interest rate over twenty years (*ibid.*). For most people, such rates were simply too expensive. Diogo, who was looking for a home for himself and his German wife, didn't want to live in Kilamba and so had originally sought to purchase an apartment in Talatona. He had found a small apartment for US\$300,000 and approached his bank for a loan, but the financial demands were simply too great. His inability to purchase the home he wanted led him to question whether it was possible to talk about an Angolan middle class. To repeat his earlier comment: 'I think it's a bit fallacious to say that we have a very successful middle class in Angola, because we don't. That is, even though an Angolan earns like a middle-class person, he can't live like a middle-class person.'<sup>9</sup> Diogo felt that not being able to purchase a formal house meant that he would not be able to meet the criteria of being 'middle-class', increasingly defined by international markers of urbanism such as formal housing.

For Leila, Orlando, Diogo and Nelson, purchasing a house was going to be possible only through state intervention. Kilamba has been recognized as a symbol of the state's attempt to conjure a middle class on Angola's landscape (Buire 2017; Pitcher and Moorman 2015). Some have argued that housing provision has been used to draw the middle class into alliance with the ruling MPLA, even if somewhat unsuccessfully (Croese and Pitcher 2019). However, Kilamba also points to the basic financial mechanisms through which and for whom formal housing is made possible. The existing Housing Development Fund (Fundo Fomento Habitacional), which in theory is meant to support the construction of low-income social housing, has mostly been used 'to subsidize loans for public servants in state housing projects' (CAHF 2017: 64). At present, estimates are that one needs to earn at least US\$1,500 a month to afford the state's rent-to-buy options (*ibid.*: 64). As such, there is a need to understand projects such as Kilamba, which are increasingly notable on African landscapes, as financially engineered efforts to produce middle classes. In the process, cityscapes are being remade to match internationally circulating notions of the global middle class that intersect with local understandings of the symbolic significance of formality. Formality as aesthetic both drives and is a product of these investments. The formal house, however, is perhaps necessary but not sufficient to affirm status; rather, as the following section suggests, it has become a testing ground for performing middle-class habitus, for separating a more established middle class from those who 'merely' have money.

### Testing class

One of the primary difficulties when analysing class, especially in regard to consumption, is the ambiguity of what consumption indexes. Presumably, one must have the income to access goods that signal status, thereby suggesting an economic grounding for the class classification. Nevertheless, there is increasingly a suspicion that someone could capture the signs of wealth through suspect means, meaning

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<sup>9</sup>Author interview with Diogo, Talatona, 8 August 2011.

that the mere possession of signs of wealth is sometimes not enough to index class position. Consumption can act as a ‘bluff’ of one’s economic status when its performance is not backed by actual financial resources (Newell 2012). This suspicion of the relation between consumption and income was evident in Luanda, with distinctions between what were often viewed as ‘shallow’ and substantive expenditures playing a role in distinguishing ‘real’ wealth from fast money. Onlookers often made snide comments that people with expensive cars were in fact poor, but used the car as a public sign of wealth to perform a higher status than they had (see also Durham 2020). Without visible signs of consumption, however, it becomes difficult to understand how class is signalled and recognized.

While a key aspect of signalling class in Luanda was based on residing in an adequate home, one’s use of the home – one’s comportment, that is – was central in providing credibility to the act of consumption. Thus, the formal house also became the means for performing middle-classness through everyday actions. The notion that the built environment enabled the realization of middle-classness was reflected in the aspirations of my interlocutors, who felt that their middle-class status could be realized only if they embodied the lifestyle that formality offered. The flagging attractiveness of autoconstruction, then, was not only because of the frustrations over bureaucratic hurdles, legal uncertainty and the significant drain on time and everyday stresses that these induced, but also because the pre-built, aesthetically ‘formal’ house was seen as key to enacting shared notions of class. My interlocutors voiced concerns that informally planned houses and neighbourhoods, even in wealthier areas, placed limitations on developing a middle-class habitus. Middle-classness was not simply a financially precarious category; it was a symbolically and aesthetically precarious one that leaned heavily on material supports for its realization.

Luandans’ understandings of class habitus have their roots in the colonial era. Prior to mass white immigration in the twentieth century, the local black and *mestiço* elite had already distinguished themselves from other Africans by living in central areas of the city as well as through ‘language, eating habits and mental outlook’ (Birmingham 2006: 87). This focus on behaviour received renewed weight with the introduction of the 1954 *Estatuto de Indígena* (Native Act). Under this legislation, black and *mestiço* Angolans were classified as either *indígena* (native) or *assimilado* (assimilated). *Indígena* were subject to forced labour and restrictions on territorial movements (Vera Cruz 2006). In contrast, *assimilados*, while still suffering the brunt of everyday prejudices, were granted the full rights of Portuguese citizenship. In order to be granted this status, however, one had to show that one had rejected ‘African’ ways of life. This involved home visits in which applicants had to prove that they spoke Portuguese, were Christian, dressed in a Western way and ate with a knife and fork. State assessors also demanded that ‘[t]he family had to reside, at minimum, in a decently built wood-framed, zinc-panelled house’ (Morton 2013: 721–2).<sup>10</sup> The distinction therefore assumed a division between backwardness

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<sup>10</sup>Morton (2013) undertook his research in Maputo rather than in Luanda. While there were differences in colonial administrations, it seems fair to presume that reasonably similar expectations existed between the two colonies with regard to what could act as a suitable indicator of assimilation.

and civilization congealed in comportment and its material supports. Despite the official abandonment of the Native Code in 1961, and, after independence in 1975, the embrace of the socialist ‘New Man’ as the social symbol of cultural transformation in the subsequent two decades, colonial notions of assimilation continue to be the model for shared beliefs about desirable class habitus (Soares de Oliveira 2015: 19).

Middle-classness in Luanda was therefore precarious not only because of the gap between income and aspiration, but also because of how this gap threatened the realization of quotidian marks of distinction as embodied by aesthetic performance. A prime example of this fragility was provided by Diogo. He explained that a middle class could not endure living without water or electricity because of the aesthetic demands of their work and lifestyles:

If someone had to go to a meeting with a tie and suit and that person didn’t take a bath because they didn’t have water, or arrived with their clothes all creased because they didn’t have electricity, it would be complicated ... If his interlocutor were a foreigner, he’ll say, ‘Well, in Angola, I went to a company and the director smelt bad, the director of the company had creased clothing.’<sup>11</sup>

He explained that a friend of his, a doctor at the Multiperfil clinic, one of the city’s better equipped public hospitals, lived in what he viewed as a ‘*musseque*’. When it rained, the roads flooded and she was obliged to put her shoes in a plastic bag, carry a bottle of water, and walk through the neighbourhood until she reached the main road. When she arrived at the road, she would wash her feet with the water and then put her shoes on for work. For him, this was symbolic of the fact that:

[for] this generation that studied overseas, in Brazil, Portugal and other countries, when they come here, the level of sacrifice that they have to make ... just to have a little bit of dignity, I think in the end it is this, it’s dignity, it’s to feed oneself correctly, walk comfortably, that is be clean, and the thing is, I think that after that level of sacrifice, they have to make an effort just to have a bit of dignity, but they don’t manage to. They cannot. Really, it’s very complicated.<sup>12</sup>

The formal house was the path to dignity in the form of aesthetic comfort and embodiment that would mark one as ‘middle-class’.

The idea of dignity as a status provided by housing was one commonly voiced not only by those aspiring to middle-classness but also by state representatives trying to explain why state-subsidized housing was necessary. When discussing the importance of social housing for the poor, Carlos, an urban planner at IPGUL, the city’s urban planning office, explained that it ‘provided better living conditions for the population’ by giving them ‘dignified housing’. When I asked what he meant by this, his response was having ‘enough rooms, such as a lounge, bedrooms, a kitchen, and service areas, especially a yard [*quintal*], where, culturally, Angolans like to receive people’.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a former employee

<sup>11</sup> Author interview with Diogo, Talatona, 8 August 2011.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with Carlos, Luanda, 7 June 2011.

of Imogestin, the company managing the Nova Vida project, the first post-conflict state-subsidized housing development, which had originally been aimed at civil servants, explained to me that one of the reasons for the construction of Nova Vida was that it was not acceptable to have civil servants living in 'conditions lacking dignity'.<sup>14</sup> Many people I interviewed dreamed of accessing already-built housing with 'conditions' (*condiçoes*), the term used to refer to infrastructure connections. Despite many misgivings about the building of Kilamba and complaints about the prices, there is little doubt that it filled a particular niche in housing-starved Luanda, by providing a means for a new generation to ensure their urban transformation into a middle class.

The formal house, however, did not simply enable the possibility of achieving 'dignity'; it also allowed for a performance of the habits necessary to claim middle-class status. The inability to show a mastery over the 'correct' kinds of behaviour necessary to inhabit a formal house immediately marked one as not truly middle-class. As suggested earlier, consumption itself was increasingly coming under scrutiny as a criterion for the successful performance of class, as many felt that it could act as a fake indication of a person's actual wealth. In addition, many felt that wealth could not guarantee mastery of what was referred to as *educação* (education), which indexed socially desirable norms of conduct, such as using domestic and public space 'correctly'. Correct usage included keeping one's house clean and having knowledge of the finer indications of class, such as having hand towels in the bathroom. Owning and inhabiting a house was not enough; one had to inhabit it correctly. This belief was steeped in long-running assumptions about the inability of those who came from the *musseque* to use formal housing correctly. This discourse had emerged in the immediate post-independence period when the state blamed the 'habits' of rural migrants and people from the *musseques* for the degradation of many of the buildings in the *cidade*. Such views haunted everyday comments and interactions and worked to clearly laminate the *musseque-cidade* divide, and its accompanying associations with uncouthness versus civility, onto broader social imaginaries of comportment and class. This was evident in employers' often cutting comments about their domestic workers. One afternoon I was invited for lunch by an Angolan family in the Kinaxixe neighbourhood. They stayed in one of the mid-rise modernist buildings constructed in the 1950s and were relatively comfortable, with the son working for a major bank and the daughter employed at the state oil company, Sonangol. During the lunch, the mother suddenly raised her head and shouted out of the window, asking if the domestic worker, Lídia, was using perfumed bleach for the outside balcony. I didn't hear Lídia's reply, but it was clearly affirmative, as the mother began to complain that 'everyone' knew that perfumed bleach was for bathrooms, while normal bleach was for outside areas. This was followed by the daughter, Joana, frustratedly explaining that Lídia did not know how to wash glasses properly, always leaving greasy marks on them. These comments constituted more than abusive orientations towards a domestic worker; in the context of Luanda, they drew a firm line between who supposedly 'knew' how to use buildings and domestic products correctly and those who did not, and

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<sup>14</sup>Author interview with former Imogestin employee, Kilamba, 19 October 2011.

with that drew a line in terms of class habitus between those who did and those who did not belong in the *cidade*.

Equally, the formal house highlighted the precarity of middle-classness by separating those for whom a middle-class habitus was considered to be truly ingrained as an unconscious set of orientations from those who were 'shallowly' performing status through consumption. How the house was used acted as a litmus test for assessing class boundaries. This was evident in the story recounted to me by a state-employed architect, José Maria. We had been discussing the question of whether Kilamba was for the middle class or not. He wasn't sure if it was, because, as he narrated:

It's one thing to say that the middle class has a determined income per year, but this does not mean that the family is used to living in urban spaces or in an apartment block: how to pay levies, respect their neighbours, not play loud music ... It's one thing for the middle class to have money, but, for example, the caricature is this: in Talatona ... that is, for the upper class, the rich [*endinheirado*], there was a case that an architect told me about in one of the condominiums. The wife of one of the residents sold products at the bottom of the building; she set up a little market selling crackers and things. So, she transported the habits that she already had to an apartment block in an upper-middle-class area. There wasn't a gradual process of urbanization. That is, people have earned money, yes, extremely fast, so they are a middle class, upper class, fine, but in terms of education in urban citizenship, it hasn't been the same.<sup>15</sup>

In José Maria's account, the building separated those who merely had the income to be middle-class from those who really embodied a middle-class habitus. Buire (2017) has found similar concerns among Kilamba's current occupants, who often highlight that the use of the buildings is the real 'proof' of someone's middle-class credentials. They are particularly anguished when they feel that they are not living up to the ideals that they have set themselves. Formality in this context is both aspirational and serves as an everyday testing ground for 'middle-classness'. The general negligence of property management structures, in the few instances in which they existed, meant that it was largely individual behaviour that determined the condition of apartments and properties. A person's comportment is therefore closely watched by their neighbours. It is not just the house that acts as a boundary-maker; its usage calibrates occupants' status of belonging to a middle class or not, in a context where petrodollar wealth has allowed for the ascent of individuals who some Luandans consider to be lacking in the *educação* to count as middle-class. The state's housing interventions are therefore a means for Luandans to align themselves with transnational notions of class, but also to enact local notions of class habitus on the urban landscape.

## Conclusion

Class is historically located and relational. The middle class is especially difficult to delineate precisely because it seems to be defined by its differentiation from

<sup>15</sup> Author interview with José Maria, Maianga, 9 August 2011.

'above' and 'below' rather than by any inherent qualities. This article has explored the growing distinction of middle-classness on Luanda's urban landscape through an investigation of state interventions into the provision of housing. While formality is often a legal category, it is also an aesthetic one, and a salient marker of status in a context where the majority of the population accesses shelter through unofficial means. In Luanda, transnationally calibrated markers of a 'middle class' have departed wildly from financial institutions' definitions, rooting themselves squarely in imaginations of world-class urbanism, formality and 'educated' behaviour. The consumption and correct usage of urban formality have become a means of boundary work.

Formal housing, however, has been difficult to access. The expense of purchasing in private real-estate developments meant that such housing was simply beyond the financial means of most of those who wished to live there. The answer to the demand for formal housing then lay in the Angolan state's subsidized housing projects such as Kilamba. Despite their desire to remain in the *cidade*, many of the people I knew who worked in NGOs, banks, the civil service and oil companies moved to Kilamba from their parents' homes and rentals in the city centre. They sacrificed the convenience of the centre for the prestige of formal homeownership, a move that would have been impossible without state subsidies. The aspiring middle class wanted to avoid the perceived shame of the *musseque* and the frustrations of autoconstruction, but was unable to afford the market prices of privately developed gated communities. The state therefore cushioned this key political and economic constituency by gathering them in 'new centralities' and other state projects. It enabled them to perform their status, something that would otherwise have been an impossibility for most. Simultaneously, new sites of formality produced the state as a notable presence on the landscape, the middle class and the state thereby mutually constituting one another.

While accessing housing in Kilamba may not necessarily have been a result of obvious party connections, as it was in the 1970s and 1980s (although party and personal connections nevertheless remained salient in the distribution of housing), it repeated a pattern whereby access to formal and serviced housing was associated with the state. This has been partially an attempt at political control, a means of assuaging a potentially critical population. It has also become an opportunity for the Angolan state to perform the existence of a prosperous Angolan citizenry on the urban landscape even as the majority of urban residents continue to live in deplorable conditions. However, at heart, what it reveals is that the state has been central in the making of a property-occupying, if not always property-owning, class, in the process constituting an urban middle class represented by and cultivating subjectivities through their location in sites of urban formality and official planning. From this, one can begin to read the division between supposed formality and informality not simply as being about imposing order or as the management of flexible legal categorizations, but as an ideological distinction through which middle classes are brought into being on the landscape.

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### Abstract

As one of the primary personal sites of financial investment, expression and public performance, housing has stood at the centre of contemporary studies of class in Africa. This article adds to the existing literature on housing and class by exploring residents' desires for formal housing in post-conflict Luanda, Angola. Luanda's residents increasingly believed that access to formal housing, not necessarily always legally but rather aesthetically defined, was a primary means of affirming middle-class status. By highlighting the links between class, urban formality and the state, the article argues that formal housing became a means for both the state and Luandans to produce middle-classness. Existing beliefs about compartment and urban aesthetics, which anchored subjective understandings of class in the house, intersected with a political economy in which the state played a central role in enabling access to new residences. As such, formality has become a key means through which middle-classness is transforming urban landscapes, opening up discussions about aesthetic belonging, financial stability and the role of the state in the making of Africa's middle classes.

## Résumé

En tant que l'un des principaux terrains personnels d'investissement financier, d'expression et de performance publique, le logement est au cœur de l'étude contemporaine des classes en Afrique. Cet article complète la littérature existante sur le logement et les classes en explorant les désirs de logement formel des résidents dans le Luanda (Angola) post-conflit. Les résidents de Luanda croyaient de plus en plus que l'accès au logement formel, pas toujours forcément défini légalement mais plutôt esthétiquement, était un moyen essentiel d'affirmer le statut de classe moyenne. En soulignant les liens entre la classe, la formalité urbaine et l'État, l'article soutient que le logement formel est devenu un moyen, tant pour l'État que pour les Luandais, de produire le « classe-moyennisme » (*middle-classness*). Les croyances existantes concernant le comportement et l'esthétique urbaine, qui ont ancré des interprétations subjectives de classe dans la maison, se sont recoupées avec une économie politique dans laquelle l'État a joué un rôle central en permettant d'accéder à de nouvelles résidences. En tant que tel, la formalité est devenue un moyen clé par lequel le classe-moyennisme transforme les paysages urbains, ouvre des discussions sur l'appartenance esthétique, la stabilité financière et le rôle de l'État dans la formation des classes moyennes d'Afrique.