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## Luís Possolo's Luanda and Angola Naval-Radio Station

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Luis Gonzaga Pimentel Pedroso Possolo was born in Lisbon on July 7th. 1924. He graduated in architecture from the Lisbon Fine Arts Faculty in 1951 and later attended the inaugural 1954/55 edition of the Architectural Association Course of Training in Tropical Architecture, under the proposal of the Portuguese *Gabinete de Urbanização do Ultramar*, GUU (Overseas Planning Office) and approval of the Portuguese Overseas Affairs Undersecretary of State.

Possolo was the only Portuguese-speaking student in the course's class (which included a certain *K.B. Frampton...*), and his performance seems to have been of a high standard. In his report<sup>1</sup> for the Portuguese Undersecretary of State, he points-out that, from all designs produced by students, only seven were selected for the exhibition at the AA at the end of the Course - Possolo being the only one to have two designs shown. AA records of the Course still kept at the Association which we checked are rather colloquial: the grading of students is hand-written on a ruled-paper term-book - but they add evidence to support Possolo's words, since in the postgraduate list only R.S. Brown and Miss D. Lakosfki have a project graded "Store" each - whereas his 'market for Onitsha' and 'health-centre for Iraq' both do so.

Upon returning to Portugal, Luís Possolo started work at the GUU, designing or co-designing buildings around Portuguese overseas territories, from Portuguese India to Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, S. Tomé & Príncipe, Angola and Mozambique. From these, we dealt with a 1959 project for a Naval Radio Station carrying serial number 581 at the GUU, for a few reasons: to begin with, it consists of a fine set of buildings that was executed in Maputo (then Lourenço Marques) as well as Luanda - both certainly unaware of the existence of a *doppelgänger* on the opposite side of the African continent. Most of the edifices are still on-site in Luanda, but are no longer operational. Those in Maputo, however, are still in use and seem quite well-kept - although away from eyesight, since they are inside a military compound.

In this cluster of buildings, the two-storey cruciform-plan soldier barracks is most interesting, and quite in line with the days' architectural revisionist practices, relying on a symmetrical layout that offers a neo-colonial expression nicely balanced with a modern outlook - since its morphology, carrying structure and building system follow a tight, well controlled modular effort, as often found in modernist designs. Its plan also happens to show how racism was still enforced back then, since the identical wings of the building were allocated to 'Europeans' and 'Natives'...

Site conditions were different in both locations, so the essentially identical clusters had to be laid out accordingly. Possolo mentions these concerns in the descriptive document in the project file, pointing out with regret that only in Lourenço Marques (Maputo) could he '*achieve less exposure to sunlight and greater exposure to the breezes*', since in Luanda it was impossible to do so, owing to the plot siting. In his concern, he goes along with George Anthony Atkinson's paper in the records for the 1953 Conference on Tropical Architecture, held at the University College London: '*To obtain the greatest benefit from air movement on days when there is only a slight breeze, orientation in its prevailing direction is a first consideration though this must be balanced against the optimum*

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<sup>1</sup> Possolo, "Report", 3.

*shade provided when the long axis of a building faces north-south*<sup>2</sup>. In the soldier barracks, he also follows recommendations by Atkinson (who was to lecture at the nascent AA Course) for wide verandas with overhanging roofs and plans ‘*as open as possible and one room thick so as to ensure through ventilation*’.

Possolo’s auspicious period at the GUU, along with his course at the AA, then led him to privately design a number of highly creative projects – two of which, still extant, were particularly important in Mozambique and Angola’s infrastructural development and modernisation. Thus he designed the set of buildings for the Cambambe Dam, which made use of the huge flow of the Cuanza River and was the biggest infrastructure of its kind built in the Portuguese overseas territories to that date. The dam was quite fundamental in modernising Angola and its industry, and is still the largest hydro-electrical facility in Angola. The buildings by Possolo, still extant and well-kept, follow modern guidelines established at the AA Course, particularly regarding sun-shading devices. It was, however, on the other side of the African continent that Luís Possolo received the biggest private commission in his life: the Nacala Cement Factory, which he engaged in the late ‘50s and was built in the early ‘60s, a mile north of the Mozambican city and port of Nacala.

At Nacala, Possolo designed every single element in the factory (apart from the machinery), producing a beautiful industrial facility with offices, production units, storage silos, chimneys, circulation routes and landscaping all blending in an integrated way, quite unusual for industrial sites anywhere in the world in the 1950s, but especially so in Africa. The Nacala factory is still the leading cement facility in central and northern Mozambique.

In the mid-1960s, Possolo had his final opportunity of designing for the tropics, with a private commission for the *Barracuda* beach club and restaurant for the Isle of Luanda (by then already a peninsula), outside Luanda Bay. The facility was a hotspot for Luanda high society until the country gained its independence, but no longer exists. It fitted into the 1960s architectural design trends that followed the demise of so-called *High Modernism*, showing a clear step towards a more ‘African’ look, resorting to bamboo, wooden logs and thatched roofing, placing it at the core of the architectural concerns of the day.

This was to be Possolo’s last building in the tropics. His private practice was deeply affected by the 1974 revolution, not only overseas, but also in metropolitan Portugal. Luís Possolo died in 1999, in the same town where he was born 75 years earlier.

NOTE: Luís Possolo’s life and work as an architect, particularly with regard to projects done for Africa, has been researched in the framework of the Research Project *The Colonial Planning Office. Architectural Culture and Practice*, (ref. FCT:PTDC/AURAI/104964/2008) funded by the Portuguese research funding agency, *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia*.

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Naval Radio-Station Process File nr.581 stored in boxes 82 and 119 AHU-DGOPC/DSUH at the Overseas Historical Archive. Original drawings, on tracing paper, stored in rolls 122 and 124/Mozambique.

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<sup>2</sup> Atkinson, G.A. “Tropical Architecture”, 44.