

Speculating Kinaxixi

Andrea Pavoni

1. Urban spaces are never what they appear to be. Vision is tethered to the present, while cities are replete with spectral presences, like those emanating from the sedimented violence of colonialism or the pristine visions of development utopias. Archival reconstruction and critical deconstruction can retrace or denounce this ghostly matter. Yet they fall short of addressing its expression – the force it harbours, the form it takes, the effects it conjures. When the overlapping temporalities composing a place are arranged in a linear sequence, what is gained in historical clarity is lost in speculative insight. What that means when it comes to write (a) place is the question that kept haunting me as I negotiated, under the scorching sun, the elongated roundabout of *Largo do Kinaxixi*, looking for a merciful shade and some kind of entry point to access the multiple layers composing this most intricate of Luanda's sites. Today, the square has a sleek attire. After renewal works, it reopened for the 49th anniversary of Angola's independence, November 11, 2024. It has new patches of grass, benches, surveillance cameras, streetlights, public restrooms, an amphitheatre and a luminous fountain. All this makes up for the eerie emptiness that had been left by the demolition of a famous market, almost twenty years before. At the centre of the square, a little puddle evokes the original meaning of Kinaxixi [from *kina* – pit, hole; and *xixi* – spring water], if we are to follow Luandino Vieira's etymological proposition.¹

2. In his Marxist recipe for critical urban theory, David Harvey urges 'to get behind the surface appearances' and 'unmask the fetishism of commodities'.² Such a revelatory endeavour can surely explain Kinaxixi, at the cost of losing something else, however, something intangible emanating from both past and future, something that lingers in the atmosphere like spectral dust, feeding a spell that seems to hold the city in its grip. The accumulation of time, value and desire in certain urban places makes them pregnant with overflowing intensities that are recalcitrant to causal interpretation and dialectical critique. In Walter Benjamin's illuminating analogy: 'The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure – precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the contents of dreams.'³ What if certain places likewise dreamt on our behalf, so overfull with memories and expectations that they spoke to us as if through digestive hallucinations?⁴ If this is the case, then a different epistemological stance could be foregrounded, a knowledge that resisting the surgical desire to penetrate the surface would rather try and 'adhering to the skin of things', seeking to attend to their metastable juxtapositions rather than flattening them into a linear narration.⁵ Such a knowledge would be perhaps closer to a mode of divination than to one of revelation.⁶

3. 'Dreams deserve solid foundations' [*os sonhos merecem bases sólidas*]. Thus read a banner from Grow Construction, on the fence encircling the building site of the Kinaxixi Shopping Centre. In their

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rendering – the only *place* in which they are completed – the three towers dominating the square look like any other tower that has been mushrooming in central Luanda since the end of the civil war [1975–2002]. Grotesquely severed, socio-economically, from the rest of the city, the skyline of central Luanda, as a shiny crystallisation of the dark agency of Angola’s oil reserves – Africa’s second largest – reflects back on the streets through its mirrored façades, with hypnotising effect. Take the Kianda Towers, four buildings scraping the sky at almost 100 metres, locked in an encircling embrace, mirroring Luanda’s bay on their blue glass facades as they affirm – the company responsible for their shimmering cover suggests – ‘Angola’s capacity to project itself towards the world.’⁷ This is not the case of the Kinaxixi towers, however. Notwithstanding their completion date(s) having been announced several times already, they remain unfinished, their concrete entrails fully exposed, until a new influx of investment would restart the construction work and give them the shiny cover they crave for. Mirrorless, for the time being, they are condemned to see their concrete nakedness reflected back in the water, their skeletons emerging shakily among the leaves and the occasional rubbish floating in the puddle. Perhaps this is what the puddle is for: a device for catoptromancy divination. By placing one’s body at the right angle between the water, the towers and the sun, a reflection appears, a dialectical image conjuring the towers as the present ruins of a dubious future.⁸ The photographic reproduction imbues the reflection with a magical value. It tempts us to look for the futures nested into the image like particles of *cacimbo*, the drizzly mist that engulfs Luanda’s mornings in the dry season, as a static where the city’s optical unconscious buzzes intermittently. In the picture I took, the towers are looming over the statue of Njinga Mbandi, the cunning and ruthless 17th century queen warrior of the kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba, heroine of anti-Portuguese resistance, and icon of the square’s current revamping: ‘The Queen is Back’, reads a giant billboard, ‘Where History has Future’.

4. Quinaxixe, as it was originally spelled, was the name of the lagoon that flooded this area, and whose ‘muddy waters’, writes Arnaldo Santos, ‘were copper-coloured and looked metallic and thick beneath the intense sun.’⁹ For a long time, the lagoon had been the limit of colonial Luanda, the threshold where urbanisation ended and woodland began: *Hic Erant Leones*.¹⁰ About a century ago, the contradictory dialectics between civilisation and wilderness was solved with typically colonial manoeuvre: the lagoon was covered, and *Largo Leonardo Carneiro* was born. It is said that Kianda, the water spirit of Kimbundu mythology that inhabited those waters, has been restless ever since. The puddle I am staring at, a reference to the ancient lagoon, can hardly contain Kianda’s exuberance, which overflows in the collective imaginary, real estate brochures, and the subsoil. In 2023, a building collapsed a few steps from the square – its foundations had been infiltrated by water. A similar fate had been foreseen for a 20-storey building that the Portuguese had left unfinished a few years before the 1975 independence, after realising that underground water had made its foundations shaky. In the next decades, hundreds of people would precariously inhabit its unfinished structure, without running water, electricity, parapets, and façade, while the sinister silhouette of a crane was watching over them from the top of the building – unconcerned, unremoved. Finally, in 2012, the crane was taken out, the people evacuated, the building demolished. In *O Desejo de Kianda*, a 1995 novel by Pepetela, the buildings around Kinaxixi begin to mysteriously fall down, one by one, as Kianda’s fugitive desire erodes the concrete structures that imprisoned her aquatic domain.¹¹ According to a survey, at least 36 buildings in Luanda are currently at risk of collapse.¹²

5. Today’s unfinished towers grow over the invisible ruins of the Kinaxixi Market, itself demolished in 2008. This impressive example of modernist architecture, built in 1950s from a project by Vasco Vieira da Costa, was an iconic place of the capital. It was there that Agostinho Neto, the first president of independent Angola, loved to spend his time ‘at six o’clock of a hot evening / and just sit there’ – as one of his most famous poems goes.¹³ With time, the market had become more than a market. It was a place of meetings, marches, encounters, as well as an informal market sprawling around the formal

one. Among the general dismay at its senseless destruction, some ventured as far as defining the original construction a “cry of freedom” that, challenging the colonial regime, set a novel architectural posture.¹⁴ The pernicious celebration of Portuguese modernism as an exception to the fascist regime in power by then – hence its common definition as ‘tropical modernism’, rather than colonial – tends to depoliticise the architectural dimension in the same way as the imperial nostalgia depoliticises the aesthetic of old Luanda.¹⁵ Disseminated through an extensive market of books, films, documentaries, blogs and dedicated social media pages, colonial *saudade* transforms Lusophone Africa into a screen where a nostalgic posture toward a beautiful past that is no longer is projected, while systematically erasing the violent conditions that made that supposedly glamorous life possible in the first place.¹⁶

6. In the sixteen years that took renovating the square, the queen Njinga, also known as Ginga, was relocated in the courtyard of the ancient fort dominating Luanda’s bay. During this time, she had to share the space in the awkward company of a few statues of the former colonial power, there exiled: Diogo Cão, Paulo Dias de Novais, Pedro Alexandrino, Afonso Henriques, Luís Vaz de Camões. Camões, the most important figure in Portuguese literature, is the legendary writer of *Os Lusíadas*, an epic 16th century poem celebrating the “discoveries” of Portugal. In the 1930s, *Largo Leonardo Carneiro* took the name of *Largo das Lusíadas*. In 1935, an imposing monument was erected at its centre. It showed a woman with wings, brandishing a sword, leading a bunch of soldiers. To the annoyance of historians, the winged victory commemorating the first world war would soon be renamed *Maria da Fonte*, after a legendary Portuguese heroine that had led a peasant revolt in the north of Portugal in the 19th century. The square itself would come to be popularly known as *Largo Maria da Fonte*. When the Portuguese ran away, in the wake of the independence, Angolan and Cuban soldiers detonated the statue. A soviet tank stood at her place, until the end of Soviet Union made also that monument obsolescent.

7. When the market was demolished, the indignation was universal. Almost. ‘Countries have to modernise’, read a vitriolic comment in the aftermath of the destruction. ‘Let’s stop the whining and clinging to old things. The world is dynamic, life is dynamic. Tear it down and build something that is useful to Angolans’. Like the market, the text continues, ‘other buildings will come down so we can have a Modern Angola without reminders of a past of servile condescension.’¹⁷ There is no need to buy into the narrative of Lusotropicalism to understand that destroying the market has been a reckless and foolish act. One hardly incoherent with the climate of Angola’s noughties, however. After the end of the long, bloody civil war, the winning MPLA party has been systematically replacing the political question of national reconciliation into an infrastructural endeavour at national reconstruction.¹⁸ Particularly in Luanda, the past has been methodically effaced in a oil-inebriated haste, while the future was re-modelled towards the ideal of a rich, advanced, global city – a new Dubai, as the limited imagination in power pictured it, whose skyline was meant to materialise a ‘desire to stress disjuncture with the past.’¹⁹ In 2015, Luanda achieved the dubious feat of becoming the most expensive capital of the world for expats.

8. I talk to a young architect who works in an atelier involved in the revamping of both Kinaxixi square and rua Rainha Ginga, a key commercial avenue and oldest street of Luanda’s city centre. The project *Nossa Ginga* [our Ginga] is based on a few placemaking interventions with benches, trees and posters – most of which were gone, or rapidly decaying, when I visited the place a few months later. From Forbes to the São Paulo 14th Biennale, *Nossa Ginga* has gained international admirers, positioning itself, as the description in the Biennale’s website goes, as ‘more than an architectural or urban project . . . It is a movement of social, cultural and economic transformation for Luanda.’²⁰ We end up talking, as it happens, about Luanda’s chronic lack of maintenance, reflected in the infrastructural decay of many of rua Rainha Ginga’s buildings. Since the Government has amply shown to be incapable of dealing with the problem, he argues, there is only a solution left: to force the local

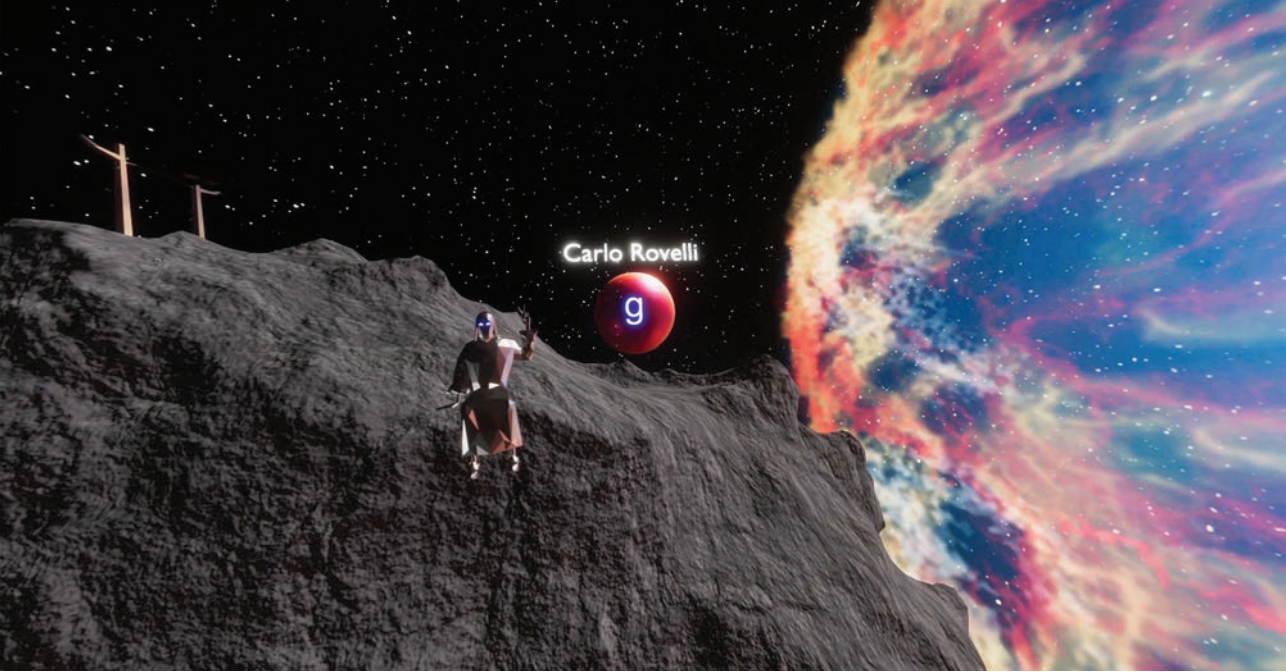
inhabitants to sell their apartments, and let the private companies in. They will know how to turn it into a world class street – like Oxford Street in London, Avenida da Liberdade in Lisbon, or Brooklyn in New York. A pretty curious bunch of references, I ponder in silence, so different between themselves and so at odds with rua Rainha Ginga's actual vibe.

9. The new Kinaxixi is meant to 'recover the feeling of joy, represent aspects of Angolan culture in a didactic way, and provide inclusive experiences to all users', as I read from the website of the architectural atelier. The aesthetic incorporates various historical and cultural references, objects, masks, even ceramic tiles [*azulejos*], whose colours evoke the fruits and vegetables of the old Kinaxixi Market, while informal vending is now prohibited. This gives an eerie twist to the stated intention 'to turn the square into an open air museum'.²¹ Arguably, Kinaxixi already embodied the complexity this flat rhetorical expression suggests – albeit in a rather less subdued way. As Roberto Vecchi argues:

Here we have evidence of the multiple temporalities – and narratives – that combine in the heterogeneous time of the city, including those that belong, as objects of destruction, to a phantasmatic plane and therefore transcend an exclusively synchronic line. In this sense, one could consider Kinaxixi an open-air museum of Angola, both in terms of mythography as well as history and spectrography.²²

Including, we may add, the multiple futures that have been rehearsed and have crumbled in this square. This is why unmasking or denouncing its current revamping is far from being enough. When urban places are under a spell, the question is not only one of demystifying but also, perhaps most importantly, one of reenchanting: 'out-fetishizing the fetish', as Michael Taussig puts it: *enfeitigar o largo*.²³

10. In a recent installation, Kiluanji Kia Henda reimagined the moment when Angolan and Cuban soldiers detonated the statue commonly known as Maria da Fonte. He does so by shifting the focus from what was destroyed – a symbol of colonial power – to the acoustic result of this gesture, as it resonated on the emptied plinth: the clamour of the explosion, the chanting of the soldiers, the actual *cry of freedom* that, for a moment, inhabited the square. Diving into the visual archive of the time, Henda further composed a series of collages into eight posters depicting eight imaginary music groups: "Imperialist Killers", "Anticolonial Sonic Waves", "Iconoclastic Sound Systems", and so on. *The Sound Is the Monument [O Som é o Monumento]*, reads the work's title.²⁴ In the persistent rhetorics of colonial *saudade*, which I myself heard reproduced at times, by locals, in Luanda, the destruction of Maria da Fonte was an example of the natives' lack of cultural sensibility – a similar rhetoric accompanied the criticism of the market's destruction. Conversely, the current reconstruction of Kinaxixi seeks to retrofit the square within the continuum of history, carefully smoothing over its frictions, not so dissimilar to what the colonisers did with the old square. Henda's montage avoids these equally essentialising moves.²⁵ It repurposes the past – its invisible ruins, dissipated sounds, and contested memory – by working against the grain of historical method, swapping accuracy for evocation, linear reconstruction for critical montage, historical narrative for absurdist fabrication. By wrenching out Kinaxixi from the continuum of history, his divinatory experiment is able to express the atmosphere detonated in the square in the aftermath of liberation, and the way in which the past still lingers in the square's present like dust, that is, like 'a prediction scattered in infinitesimal particles, dancing and silent, similar to so many dots of randomness: dots of the future'.²⁶ As the title of another piece dedicated by Henda to Kinaxixi goes: *History is a Bitch*.²⁷



Endnotes

- 1 José Luandino Vieira. *Papéis da prisão. Apontamentos, diário, correspondência (1962-1971)*, edited by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Monica V. Silva and Roberto Vecchi. Leya-Caminho, 2015: 745.
- 2 David Harvey. *The Urban Experience*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989: 8-9
- 3 Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Harvard University Press, 2002[1982], par. K2, 5.
- 4 Roman Vasseur. Site and Materiality. In Robin Mackay (ed.). *When Site Lost the Plot*. Urbanomic, 2015.
- 5 Michael Taussig. *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses*. Routledge, 2018, 44.
- 6 Filip De Boek. Divining the city: rhythm, amalgamation and knotting as forms of urbanity. *Social Dynamics* 41(1), 2015: 1-12.
- 7 See <https://www.reynaers.pt/inspiracao/referencias-de-projectos-em-aluminio/fachadas-kianda-towers-luanda>
- 8 In the ancient practice of catopromancy [from the Greek *κάτοπτρον*; mirror], mirrors were deployed as a divinatory rather than reflecting surface, a twisted art of speculation [from the Latin *speculum*: mirror].
- 9 Arnaldo Santos. *Quinaxixe*. Casa dos Estudantes do Império, 1965: 11 (my trans.)
- 10 Lion traps were set in this area, as ordered by the Governor Sousa Coutinho in an April 8, 1767 letter, in Manuel Costa Lobo Cardoso, *Luanda Antiga*. Museu de Angola, 1951: 12-13.
- 11 Pepetela. *O Desejo de Kianda*. Dom Quixote, 1995.
- 12 Faustino Diogo. Pelo menos 36 prédios estão em risco de desabar em Luanda. *Expansão*, 12 May 2023 [online].
- 13 Agostinho Neto. *Kinaxixi*, in *Sagrada Esperança*. Livraria Sá da Costa Editora, 1974 – the quote is from the translation by W.S. Merwin.
- 14 Elisiário Miranda, José Manuel Fernandes and Manuel Correia Fernandes. *Mercado Municipal do Kinaxixe/Kinaxixi (Quinaxixe)*, see <https://hpipt.org/pt/heritage/original/74>
- 15 Nuno Domingos. Colonial architectures, urban planning and the representation of Portuguese imperial history. *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 14(3), 2015: 235-55.
- 16 See e.g. Roberto Vecchi. A nostalgia colonial no País da saudade: fantasmagorias e pós-memória. *Confluenze. Rivista di Studi Iberoamericani* 12(2), 2020: 169-181.
- 17 In Clara Onofre, Angola: E o mercado histórico veio abaixo. *Global Voices*, 29 August 2008 [online].
- 18 Jon Schubert. *Working the system: a political ethnography of the new Angola*. Cornell University Press, 2017; Claudia Gastrow. *The Aesthetics of Belonging: Indigenous Urbanism and City Building in Oil-Boom Luanda*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2025.
- 19 Paul Jones. *The Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities*. Liverpool University Press, 2011: 123.
- 20 See <https://biennialdearquitectura.org.br/programacao/nossa-ginga/> (my trans.)
- 21 See <https://doladob.com/portofolio/mercado-do-kinaxixi/>
- 22 Roberto Vecchi. Genius loci e a imprescritibilidade do mito: arquiteturas simbólicas em tramas urbanas pós-coloniais (Luanda e Maputo). In *Memória, cidade e literatura: de São Paulo de Assunção de Loanda a Luanda, de Lourenço Marques a Maputo*, edited by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and Francisco Noa. Edições Afrontamentos, 2019: 201-211, 206 (my trans.).
- 23 Taussig, *Mimesis*, op. cit. In a similar sense, Antonio Bispo talks about *enfeitizar* [i.e. bewitch, from feitiço, fetish, originally meaning spell, charm] the language of the coloniser in order to weaken its power. Antonio Bispo, *A terra dá, a terra quer*. Ubu Editora, 2023.
- 24 See <https://www.aml.pt/agenda/lo-som-e-o-monumento/>
- 25 Cf. Gunther Gassner. Wrecking London's skyline? A political critique of how the city is viewed. *City*, 21(6), 2017: 754-768
- 26 Georges Didi-Huberman. *La Conoscenza Accidentale. Apparizione e Sparizione delle Immagini*. Bollati Boringhieri, 2019[1998]: 61, my trans; see also Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*, op. cit.: par. N10, 3.
- 27 See <https://oinstituto.pt/en/kiluanji-kianda/>