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Book review:
The Aesthetics of Belonging: Indigenous Urbanism and City Building in Oil-Boom Luanda
Claudia Gastrow, 2024

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Abstract

In The Aesthetics of Belonging: Indigenous Urbanism and City Building in Oil-Boom Luanda (2024), Claudia Gastrow argues that aesthetic judgements mediate urban citizenship and emerge as a key factor in urban governance. Gastrow's analysis examines Luanda during the oil boom (2002-2014), which saw spectacular economic growth and massive investments in urban redevelopment, accompanied by widespread demolitions of the city's self-built neighbourhoods. Combining participant observation and interviews with archival research, often engaging with communities through NGOs such as Development Workshop and SOS Habitat, Gastrow traces how Luanda's majority areas are built and governed. Against the notion of informality, she argues for Indigenous urbanism as a more accurate frame for understanding how belonging, community, and rights have been historically constructed through material practice. Her core argument links aesthetic governance to urban citizenship—showing, for instance, how materials such as concrete blocks versus corrugated iron function as moralised markers of urban respectability. Her book is essential reading for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand urban transformation beyond reductive formal/informal or modern/traditional binaries.

Keywords

African cities, aesthetics, architecture, political belonging, Luanda

At a time when the international order shaped by colonial power relations is being simultaneously challenged and reinforced, it is worth examining how colonial logics continue to shape cities in multiple ways. For this, Claudia Gastrow's *The Aesthetics of Belonging* is a

significant and provocative intervention in Luanda's post-war urban scholarship, advancing a compelling argument about how aesthetic judgments—and the materials, forms, and styles they valorise—mediate political belonging. Its core strength lies in reframing *musseques*—self-built neighbourhoods housing the majority of Luanda's population—not as deficits of urban order but as Indigenous urbanisms whose material practices underwrite claims to citizenship. As a theoretical contribution, the book persuasively argues that aesthetics co-produce political membership in African cities.

The Aesthetics of Belonging examines Luanda during the oil-boom period (2002–2014). This post-conflict era, marked by the end of Angola's 27-year civil war and the arrival of large-scale Chinese oil-backed loans, saw the country's GDP expand from $15 billion USD to $145 billion USD. Against this backdrop, the ruling party MPLA (The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), articulated national reconstruction as its central political project, launching massive investments in infrastructure, housing, and urban redevelopment. Luanda became a showcase for ambitious projects, including airports, stadiums, leisure areas, and the development of satellite cities such as Kilamba. Yet these transformations were accompanied by the widespread demolition of *musseques* displacing hundreds of thousands of residents.

This period of rapid change has generated an exceptionally rich scholarly literature, much of it ethnographic, on housing policy, urban renewal, political economy, and resident struggles. Key contributions include studies of state-led urban visions (Croese, 2018), petro-capitalism (Cardoso et al., 2023), demolition and redevelopment processes (Moreira, 2021), modernist planning ideologies (Buire, 2022), migration to new *centralidades* (Udelsmann Rodrigues, 2022), land markets and housing politics (Cain, 2013), as well as Tomás (2022) monograph on Luanda's spatial and social boundaries. Gastrow's book—an expanded and revised version of her doctoral dissertation—firmly belongs within this corpus, but distinguishes itself through its analytic focus on aesthetics and political belonging. Her distinctive intervention is to place aesthetics at the centre of political membership claims, arguing that entrenched aesthetic orientations rooted in the city's materialities classify who and what belongs to the urban—and hence to the polity (p. 20). This offers a fresh lens that complements and complicates existing political-economy accounts of Luanda's transformations.

Methodologically, Gastrow combines participant observation and interviews with archival research, often engaging with communities through NGOs such as Development Workshop and SOS Habitat. She offers a reflective account of how her identity as a white South African shaped her encounters in Angola, where the entangled histories of apartheid subimperialism and anti-colonial solidarity inflect everyday interactions. The discussion of positionality is careful and candid.

The opening fieldwork vignette on the 2009 demolition of two *musseques* introduces a sustained critique of "informality" as a category that obscures the material complexity of African practices from dominant understandings of urbanism and perpetuates the characterisation of *musseques* in terms of lack or deficit. Gastrow argues for Indigenous urbanism as a more accurate frame to understand how belonging, community, and rights

have been historically constructed through material practice (p. 21). In this case, indigeneity is regarded more as a political relationship than a strict identity, recognising both historical ties to land and place and acknowledging people's relational standing to power—particularly in relation to settler colonialism. Gastrow maintains that both indigeneity and urbanism are reshaped through how urban space is used, produced, and contested. In Luanda, urban indigeneity develops through spatial and architectural practices. She situates this within colonial imaginaries that cast Africa as not only *terra nullius* but also *urbs nullius*—a "white space" that disavowed Indigenous influence on urban formation and representation of Black Africans as alien to the urban (p. 35), arguing that the concept of Indigenous urbanism allows for the inclusion of Black African practices within the broader framework of urbanism. This move foregrounds how racialised histories of material practice continue to shape contemporary urban classification.

Chapters 2–3 illuminate how *musseque* residents—self-identified as Luanda's Indigenous planners, architects, and builders—understand demolition as an attack on Indigenous urban space. Their status as city-builders, however, does not confer protection: while *musseques* are imagined as the cradle of Angolan nationalism, they remain marginal in the city's official spatial patrimony. Following Roy (2017), Gastrow presents eviction as a privileged entry point into urban land questions, revealing a moral economy of materiality—the shared belief that rights to housing and emplacement accrue through construction and repair (p. 160). The disjunction between formal legal frameworks—under which fewer than 20% of peri-urban plots are formally titled—and everyday practices results in the criminalisation of the urban majority. Neighbourhood commissions, though extensions of the ruling party rather than community organisations, tacitly legitimised Indigenous urbanism by issuing locally recognised documents that functioned as de facto forms of tenure (p. 168). The analysis brings into sharp relief the disconnect between legal abstraction and material practice—and how the latter grounds claims to belonging.

Chapters 4–5 turn to the politics of comfort and the aesthetics of class, examining people's aspirations for a *casa com condições* (a house "with conditions"), which describes the housing dreams people often envisioned for the future, referring mainly to infrastructural connections that support daily activities and foster comfort and modernity. These aspirations collide with differentiated state criteria that favour middle- and upper-class apartments in *centralidades* such as Kilamba over resettlement housing in areas like Zango. Gastrow argues that class hierarchies are thus embedded in national housing policy. She also introduces the concept of "aesthetic dissent" to capture how political critique is articulated through judgments of design and materiality, particularly in debates over "world-city" aesthetics—often condemned as foreign, "not typical for an Angolan" (p. 254), yet alluring in promises of modernity and upward mobility (p. 235). This concept is one of the book's most original contributions. An open question (for further research and for policy audiences) is whether aesthetic dissent translates into institutional change or circulates primarily as diagnostic critique without durable political effect (p. 233, p. 236).

The concluding sections note some recent developments under President João Lourenço (since 2017), which were initially thought to mark a shift from José Eduardo dos

Santos's nearly 40-year-long rule, and reiterate that Luanda's new urbanism is not a simple "cut-and-paste" import but is deeply entangled with local histories.

As a theoretical contribution, *The Aesthetics of Belonging* persuasively links aesthetic governance to urban citizenship—showing, for instance, how materials such as concrete blocks versus corrugated iron function as moralised markers of urban respectability. It details how concrete-block houses (*casas de bloco*) signify urban status and belonging, while corrugated-iron houses (*casas de chapa*) index backwardness. These aesthetic distinctions are not merely symbolic: the state mobilises them to differentiate "legitimate" from "illegitimate" constructions and to adjudicate compensation after demolition. By tracing how material judgments inform eligibility and redress, Gastrow reveals the intimate entanglement of aesthetics with bureaucratic reason and policy practice.

For policy audiences, the book's insights imply that recognition frameworks (compensation, tenure regularisation, resettlement design) must attend to material practice and community-anchored aesthetics rather than narrowly juridical categories. The findings could be employed to suggest concrete policy mechanisms (e.g., pathways for recognising neighbourhood-commission documents within formal registries, design standards that valorise everyday materials, or participatory processes that adjudicate demolition decisions). As it stands, the book provides a powerful diagnosis of how aesthetic norms encode exclusion in law and practice.

A strength of *The Aesthetics of Belonging* is its refusal to romanticise *musseques* while insisting on their centrality to city-making. Still, two tensions are worth flagging for scholarly debate. Firstly, the essentialism risk: framing *musseques* as Indigenous urbanism powerfully reclaims erased histories, yet it may risk flattening internal differences of class, gender, generation, and migrant status if not carefully contextualised. Secondly, foreignness vs. aspiration: critiques of "world-city" aesthetics as foreign sit alongside their magnetic pull; this ambivalence is analytically rich, but its political implications—when comfort and modernity are unequally distributed—deserve further probing. A further observation concerns the implications of NGO-mediated access: such channels arguably facilitate entry yet may also calibrate which voices are most audible and which spaces become thinkable as the "field." The book is alert to these tensions; however, a more explicit methodological assessment of how site selection and institutional gateways may shape claims about Indigenous urbanism would further strengthen its ethnographic rigour.

The book dialogues productively with English-language urban studies on Luanda. A next step—valuable for readers across Lusophone countries—would be to draw out more explicit engagements with Angola's local scholarly traditions and Portuguese-language debates on colonial and postcolonial urbanism, although Gastrow does incorporate Lusophone and Angola-based scholarship, such as Ângela Mingas's (2024) work on the urbanistic and cultural value of *musseques*. Comparatively, the argument travels well: brief gestures to analogous processes in other African cities help readers gauge the book's portability beyond Luanda, without diluting its careful specificity.

The Aesthetics of Belonging is theoretically inventive, empirically grounded, and analytically sharp. By demonstrating how aesthetics and material practices co-produce political belonging, Gastrow opens new terrain for African urban studies and for scholars of informality, citizenship, and governance. The study is essential reading for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand urban transformation beyond reductive formal/informal or modern/traditional binaries—and it invites further engagement with Angola's Lusophone scholarship and with policy pathways that translate aesthetic critique into equitable urban futures.

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