

Participatory Research: a Case-Study in Chicala, Luanda, Angola

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Abstract

With the end of Angola's civil war in 2002, Luanda embarked on an overwhelming course of regeneration. The oil-fuelled boom dramatically changed the city's social and urban order. However, investments pursued by local authorities and foreign planning entities often fail to take into account the vitality pervading the city's *musseques* (informal settlements). As a result of the city centre's ongoing 'modernization', entire neighbourhoods are destroyed and their inhabitants pushed to ever more peripheral areas. This article proposes alternative methodological approaches to urbanity, based on ongoing participatory research taking place in Chicala, one of Luanda's most central *musseques*.

Palavras-chave: participatory research, field work, informal cities, musseques, Luanda, Angola

1. Introduction

"I turned back to that night-lit city, and this time I looked and saw its neighbor. Illicit, but I did. Who hasn't done that at times?" (MIEVILLE, 2011 [2009]: 49)

The City & The City is a fictional narrative staged in two co-existing cities, whose residents are forbidden to look at their neighbours. In case of accidental eye contact with a 'foreign' person, vehicle or building, they must immediately unsee the unwelcome scene, or else risk being brought to justice.

In Luanda, this fiction becomes reality. In the first days of my 2012 research trip, I witnessed a personal reaction that revealed itself quite relevant and instructive with regards to the research methodology I will be presenting in this article. I met a female lawyer, in her late 30s, who worked at the headquarters of an Angolan bank within a newly-finished high-rise on the Avenida Agostinho Neto, a long road extending the bay's promenade to the Southern side of the city. I told her I was living in the bordering self-built neighbourhood known as Chicala 2, and was astonished with her reaction: "I don't even look at it, I ignore it. I prefer to face South and see these new buildings: this is the Angola I want to live in." She had no regrets regarding what her westward avoidance might be depriving her of, for example, the beautiful sight of the sun setting beyond this African city. She accepted this deprivation, as long as it meant she might continue to avoid contemplating Chicala's unpleasant edifications, piled up by the ocean.

Within the following weeks of my 2-month journey, I realized that this persistent aversion to Luanda's musseques (informal settlements), set in motion by upper-class urbanites, has become deep-seated in the Angolan and expatriate elite. During my meetings with architects, planners, developers, power brokers and local authorities, I would take note of the arguments they produced against the non-planned territories: these were mostly related to the "illegality" of the constructions, a situation seen to afford the Government and real estate agents full legitimacy in taking over the sites to re-build them according to an official planning framework.

Chicala is earmarked for demolition and replacement by a topnotch financial and residential district. The future of over 60,000 families living in this central neighbourhood is as of yet still uncertain – eviction and displacement to the peripheral resettlement colonies of Zango or Panguila, in the city's outskirts, is deemed by local authorities to be the appropriate solution. This is the contradiction of progress: agents linked with global economic and political 'forces' are capable of "building and destroying" at a similar pace (BERMAN, 1988: 60-61). My contention, however, is that the virtues of having low- and mid-income workers closer to the city centre, and the costs of planning and building large-scale resettlement colonies for the urban poor (not to mention the problem of social exclusion), are reasons enough for their permanence.



Figure 1 - Plan: Chicala and Surroundings. Drawing by Paulo Moreira with Lara Ferreira. November 2012.



Figure 2 - Resettlement colony of Panguila, outskirts of Luanda. Photo by Paulo Moreira, May 2012

2. Hypothesis

Is there an alternative way of thinking urbanity that might gradually integrate the 'formal' and 'informal' topographies of Luanda, both of which equally contributive to the city's history, rather than subjugating the latter to the Neoliberal policies of economic growth pursued by Angolan authorities and foreign investors since the end of civil war, in 2002?

My investigation has sought to answer this question, challenging those radical opinions which refuse to acknowledge the manifold richness pervading non-planned settlements. It raises questions about the official strategies which aim to usher out the musseques. Through the deciphering of a particular case, Chicala, the study presents urban informality as a coherent possibility, deserving of its rightful place in the Luanda's social and urban order. I propose an approach to the city more socially just than the strategy currently in place, which hinders the musseques' proper development and excludes them from care and investment enjoyed by other areas within the city centre.

3. Methodology

"Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth (...). The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below", below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers. (...) These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen." (DE CERTEAU, 1988: 93)

My ongoing doctoral research at The Sir John Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture & Design, London Metropolitan University, proposes an understanding that goes beyond a "practical" or "theoretical" response to the research question (in this respect, this PhD programme differs from more familiar protocols employed in conventional architectural research). How can architects act in contexts of political conflict or social deprivation? The methodology I have so far pursued in my investigation relates aspects of the discipline of architecture with the abundance of noteworthy aspects of other orders, inherent to the situation being studied.

The methodological approach is anchored on a postcolonial framework which reads the city as a hybrid territory, a place where planned and non-planned topographies co-exist in a setting of reciprocity. This research grants special attention to the heterogeneity of society itself, making terms and methods familiar to the social sciences relevant to this architectural analysis of Chicala and Luanda (JACOBS, 1961: 154). Overall, the epistemological framework of the research is centered within the sphere of practical knowledge¹. This approach has taken shape in two distinct dimensions:

a) Firstly, there is an exchange between the observer and the phenomena observed. I have been residing in Chicala, hosted by local residents, for 1-to-2 month periods since 2010. This direct experience of the customs and habits of my host family and their neighbours, whilst gradually "assimilating the language", as Jane Jacob puts it, might afford better preparation "against outside forces that would shatter their life" (JACOBS, 1961: 323). Living in Chicala has made it clear to me that social order is often the result of a constant dialogue and negotiation between the private and the collective, between biography and

history (MILLS, 1959). The history of the house is the result of the family's history, reciprocal to the neighbourhood's history, and so on. As Aldo van Eyck once said, "a city is not a city unless it is also a huge house – a house is a house only if it is also a tiny city." (VAN EYCK, 1999: 49)

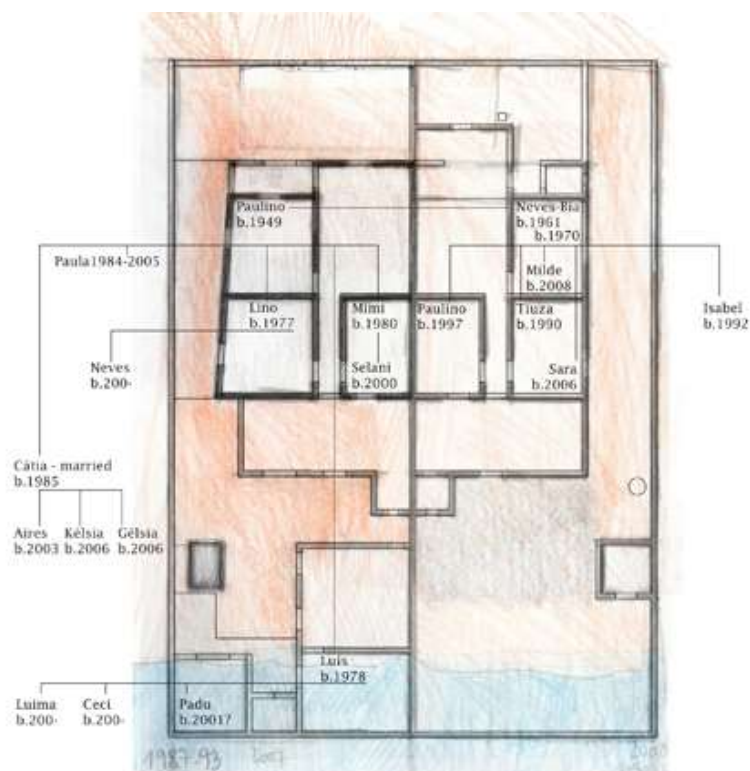


Figura 3 - House Plan / Family Tree. Drawing by Paulo Moreira, 2011.

b) The second dimension of my methodological approach is founded on the ideal of field work built on collaboration. I have been working with 4 local architecture schools since 2011². Over 120 local architecture students and 250 residents have so far taken part in a series of participatory workshops, consisting of data collection and design proposals. The methodologies put in practice have aimed to give all those concerned a part to play: the residents in consenting to describe their lives and show us their houses and the students in empathizing with the people and documenting their testimonies. The solidarity so readily fomented amongst Chicala and non-Chicala institutions, appears to have generated some promise of symbiosis between the neighbourhood and the city.



Figure 4 - Workshop for Social Architecture, Chicala, Luanda. Photo by Willian Fernandes, August 2011.

4. Field work

Site surveys have contributed to the identification of institutional structures underlying the complex fabric of Chicala, as well as an elucidation of the population's demographics, their living conditions, their meeting places and everyday cycles. The material gathered has inspired the formulation of insights that may shed light on alternative forms of living in the city (these findings will form the bulk of my doctoral thesis).

This 'bottom-up' approach represents a novel design/research strategy in the context of Luanda. But it has been a slow process. Given the nature of the context under study, preparing field work is a complex procedure, both at University and at local political levels. Permits are necessary, both for carrying out interviews with common citizens as well as for surveying buildings (by drawing, photography or video). The amount of time spent obtaining these permits can be as long as the actual time spent surveying the site. These are strenuously bureaucratic but necessary procedures. However, obtaining official permits is often no guarantor of smooth sailing. One must be prepared for a certain amount of spontaneity and immeasurability.

For instance: if a camera is turned towards a governmental building, even one far in the background, one's intentions might need explaining to policemen³. If a student team mistakenly surveys an area different from that planned, the information obtained should nonetheless be considered relevant and made use of. Adaptation becomes a research

method in itself. Charles Keil has named these artifacts of research spontaneity “participatory discrepancies” (KEIL, 1994 [1987]: 96).

When participants perform their tasks with absolutely metronomic coordination, the resulting loss of autonomy can become dehumanizing. But when aspects of the research are interpreted and negotiated by participants themselves (students or residents), their involvement becomes visible as interactions between people take place. This is the very nature of praxis: an exercise of choice, the basis for a democratic city (CARL, 2012).

Interpreting “participatory discrepancies” is a natural response. The data may appear wrong or incomplete. But architectural design is not simple matter of talent or expertise; it involves solidarity with one’s fellow-citizens. In developing this research, “participatory discrepancies” have become a methodological tool, a source of knowledge, the foundations of a true collaborative investigation. Moreover, any dream of exhaustively converting a rich urban topography into data is absurd – there will always be a tradeoff between depth and breadth, and, when it comes down to a choice between them, depth is inevitably more illuminating.



Figura 5 - Field work in Chicala, Luanda. Photo by Paulino Damião, August 2011.



Figura 6 - Field work in Chicala, Luanda. Photo by Paulino Damião, May 2012.

4. Findings

Scrutiny of Chicala's order confirms Jennifer Robinson's suggestion that "in poorer contexts much of contemporary urbanism is enacted" (ROBINSON, 2006: 86). People have their own ways of being in the world, without necessarily following what planners would recognize as a proper "line of pedestrian desire" (WRIGHT, 2009: 14). Chicala was not planned according to official policies or standard building industry protocols. Nonetheless, it has plenty of promise in functional terms. I believe that by studying this distinct locus we can learn about how informality works in the context of Luanda. If we only manage to look closely enough, we can grasp each feature as a microcosm of a larger urban continuum (BERMAN, 1988: 196,197).



Figura 7 - RHEMA temple in Chicala. Photo by Willian Fernandes, May 2012.

For instance, the proliferation of temples pertaining to different religions is representative of Chicala's multi-layered urban life. Fieldwork carried out in 2011 and 2012 identified 14 religions and 10 temples within the territory, high numbers for a relatively confined and apparently socially cohesive urban setting. 42% of the population is Catholic, yet there are no Catholic churches in the neighbourhood – so churchgoers walk to Praia do Bispo or Baixa. On the other hand, the main temple for RHEMA devotees in Luanda is located in Chicala⁴. 60% of the 300 weekly attendants come from neighbouring areas. Similar findings arise from the residents' areas of work or study: over half of the local residents commute to the city centre or its immediate surroundings. These facts help underline Chicala's dialogue with Luanda and vice-versa.



Figura 8 - EDEL and EPAL signs. Photo by Paulino Damião, May 2012.

Infrastructures and services can be very revealing. In terms of water provision, Chicala has three main sources: a) official tap water; b) informal water tanks; c) water containers. Tanks and containers can be purchased at informal markets at 20-30 dollars/cubic meter, whilst tap water is far cheaper at 30 cents/cubic metre. Despite the areas known as Chicala 2 and Chicala 3 not having tap water access, by the 2012 election campaign most houses had been labeled with an EPAL sign, an electoral promise that houses would be connected with Luanda's piped water infrastructure. This is an important moment – the population's voting-power exerts a significant influence on Luandan politics. Upgrading is possible, if rulers are interested enough.

6. Conclusion

This research will give rise to a manual, of sorts, for participatory practice applied to data collection from concrete realities, drawing inspiration from what Jane Jacobs calls Social Architecture: "when there is little money to spend on architecture, then surely greatest architectural imagination is required. Sources for modest buildings and images with social purpose will come (...) from the everyday city around us, of modes buildings and modest spaces with symbolic appendages." (Jacobs 1961: 155).

Part of the project's 'legitimization strategy' has been to present these research methods and findings to institutions unaware of – or resistant to – the continued existence of Chicala and the musseques in general. I often recall Teddy Cruz' words exalting the social and political dimension of our profession: "we as artists and architects can be the translators of

an ethical knowledge, of an intelligence embedded in these communities of practice.” (CRUZ, 2009) At the end of my 2012 field trip, I organized a fête, a public ceremony, in one of Luanda’s most important public venues. The city was invited to celebrate Chicala’s culture through music, exhibitions, capoeira, and film, with the project’s participants recognized for their work.

The amount of interest the event generated showed some promise of symbiosis between Chicala and Luanda. I like to see this occasion as a ‘device’, of sorts, one exemplifying how architects and urban practitioners can contribute to the development of the ‘collective memory’ of a place. By bringing Chicala’s culture to one of Luanda’s main theatres (Elinga Teatro), I made many who might usually avoid looking at the neighbourhood see its inhabitants for who they really are, and applaud their actions. This, I hope, was a small step toward full recognition.

NOITE DA CHICALA

Exposição
Cinema
Capoeira
Música

7 de Junho
18.30 - 4.00
Elinga Teatro

Entrada
gratuita

Programa:

18.30 Abertura da Exposição
Fotografias de Paulino Damião "Kota 50"
e estudantes universitários sobre o
"Exploratório Urbano da Chicala"

19.30 Filme "Casinha/Kubico"
Curta metragem de Paulo Moreira sobre duas
casas no Porto e na Chicala e sua relação com
a vizinhança e a cidade

20.00 Roda de Capoeira
Demonstração realizada pela Escola
Abadá Capoeira

20.20 Concerto
Por Armando & Acácio, músicos do Quintal do
Tio Jorge, "Os Cabo-verdianos da Chicala"

21.00 Encerramento
do "Exploratório Urbano da Chicala", com
entrega de diplomas aos participantes

21.30 Movimento Xis
Dj set / Stef the Cat (Berlin, Alemanha)
e MaZiva Zillah (Luanda, Angola)
até às 4h da manhã!

MOVIMENTO X NEAAUD

Figura 9 - “Noite da Chicala”. Poster by Paulo Moreira with photo by Paulino Damião, June 2012.



Figura 10 - “Noite da Chicala”: Paulo Moreira distributing diplomas to students. Photo by Paulino Damião, June 2012.

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¹ For a philosophical understanding of 'practical knowledge', see Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Reason in the Age of Science*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982 [1981]. Gadamer explores the topic in the essays *What is practice? The Conditions of Social Reason*; *Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy* and *Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task*.

² More precisely, I have collaborated with: Departamento de Arquitectura, Universidade Agostinho Neto; Núcleo de Estudo das Artes, Arquitectura, Urbanismo e Design, Universidade Lusíada de Angola; Núcleo de Estudos Arquitectónicos, Instituto Superior Politécnico Metropolitano de Angola and Departamento de Arquitectura, Universidade Metodista de Angola.

³ Due to its proximity to the political-administrative centre, the Presidential guard raids the streets of Chicala on a daily basis.

⁴ RHEMA is a Baptist movement.