

The Architectural Review

Belgian imperialism: the colonisation of the Congo

5 September, 2018 By Johan Lagae



The architectural and urban colonial legacy of the Congo should not be seen through the prism of a Belgian-Congolese context, but from a global perspective

Early December 2018, the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, built between 1904 and 1908 at the initiative of Leopold II, is going to re-open its doors after a long and intensive renovation process. Following a masterplan by Flemish architect Stéphane Beel, the old building is now restored to its original grandeur by dismantling ad hoc interventions that occurred in and on the historical building over the course of time. A newly designed reception pavilion and a series of underground rooms for temporary exhibitions will completely reconfigure the approach of the world-renowned collections, encompassing ethnographic artefacts, historical maps and documents, zoological species, mining resources, etc. The RMCA is deeply entangled with the identity of Belgium. As Herman Asselberghs and Dieter Lesage noted in their 1999 provocative plea for rethinking what they considered the ‘museum of the nation’, it is the Belgian place *par excellence* that embodies most effectively ‘the strangeness of our own history’. Rather than just displaying ‘foreign masks’, the museum in their view illustrates first and foremost that at one point in history, Belgium had an interest in ‘displaying and looking at such foreign masks’.

The interest of the RMCA, however, reaches far beyond the national borders. Ever since Adam Hochschild's best-selling 1998 book *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, and the continuing scholarly and popular attention on the murder of Patrice Lumumba, Belgian colonisation in Central Africa is now commonly viewed as one of the most gruesome colonial regimes in Africa, and, as such, subject to vehement international critique. Despite this particular dissonant history of Congo's colonisation, the RMCA remains one of the most visited museums in Belgium, not least because almost every single family in Belgium counts a member who spent time in the Belgian colony. Personal memories thus are deeply entangled with a popular understanding of Congo's past, complicating (scholarly) attempts at developing a more nuanced understanding of the country's colonial history.

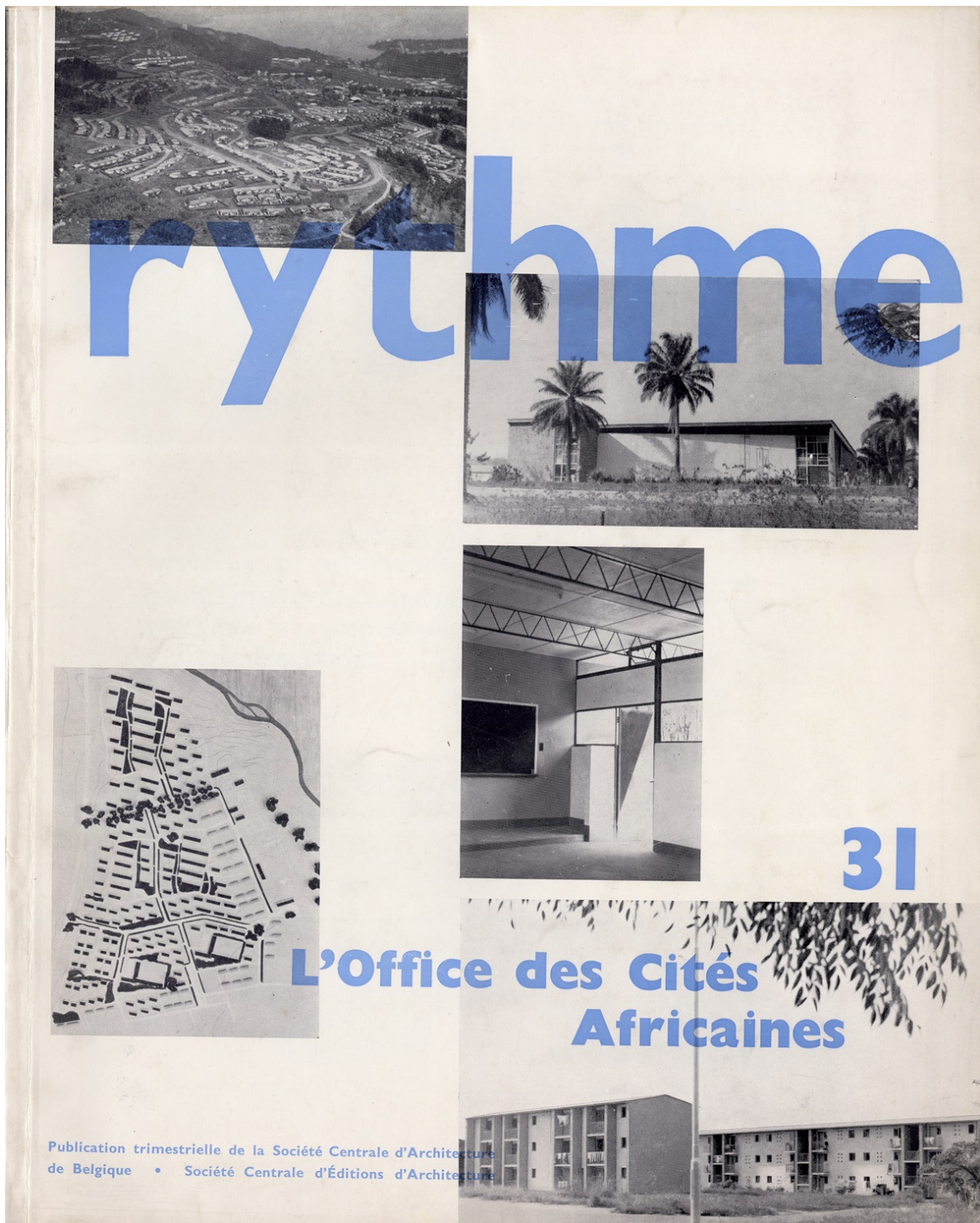


Sba kmma ©luca beel (33)

The renovated Royal Museum for Central Africa, by architect Stéphane Beel, viewed from the new reception pavilion. Image: Luca Beel

So the stakes at the re-opening of the museum are high, echoing international expectations in 2005, when the RMCA mounted a large-scale historical exhibition, entitled *The Memory of Congo: The Colonial Past*, which received major, albeit diverging, critical acclaim. An investigation of the architectural and urban colonial legacy in Congo, I argue, forms a powerful tool to get beyond simplified visions of Congo's colonial past and to write alternative histories that are allowed to question the multiple possible layers of meaning embedded in one of the main tropes of colonial literature, namely that in Congo, 'le petit belge a vu grand'.

Paraphrasing Edward Said, one can contend that to successfully 'possess an empire', one needs, first, to 'have an idea of possessing an empire'. Belgium seems to have lacked such an idea. If Leopold II understood all too well the need for a colony if his small kingdom was to occupy a place of importance on the geopolitical map of Europe, the Belgian government, who took over the Congo Free State in 1908, a year before the king's death, showed much less enthusiasm for a colonial adventure. In colonial literature from the interwar and immediate postwar years, one often comes across authors who explicitly lament the lack of 'national pride' in overseas affairs, describing the average Belgian as a 'provincial' rather than someone possessing a true 'colonial spirit'.



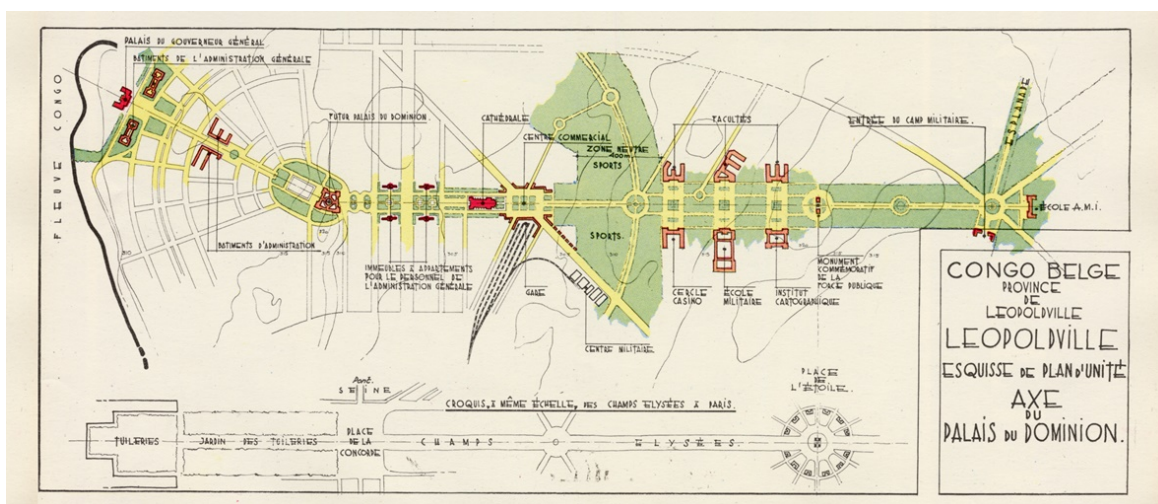
Ar fig 4

The cover of Rythme, no 11, on the Office des Cités Africaines, 1960

The troublesome planning and construction of Kinshasa as the new capital city of the Belgian Congo, a story that starts in the early 1920s and lasted until the eve of independence, on 30 June 1960, seems to prove their point. In contrast to Morocco under French rule or the building of New Delhi in British India, architecture and urban planning were not used by the Belgian authorities as tools to anchor its colonial power in stone. This is not to say that no ambitious projects were launched. Quite the contrary, and between 1923 and 1960, a number of fascinating and sometimes overstretched designs were proposed to give Kinshasa, or Léopoldville as it then was called, a majestic cityscape. But nothing came, for instance, of Georges Ricquier's 1948 urban plan for 'le Grand Léo', which included a monumental axis that was to surpass the Paris Champs-Élysées. In the end, the urban landscape of the capital city was shaped according to a modest and pragmatic approach.

'One can contend that to successfully "possess an empire", one needs, first, to "have an idea of possessing an empire". Belgium seems to have lacked such an idea'

The story of the building of the new residence for the governor general similarly was one of failed ambitions. An architectural competition launched in 1928 led to no result, and the project that would finally be constructed from 1956 onwards according to a classicising 1951 competition entry of architect Marcel Lambrichs, was unfinished when Congo became independent in 1960. Ironically, the building immediately became the symbol of the new independent state of Congo, later Zaire, and today is still known as the Palais de la Nation. There are striking parallels with Brussels. In the mid-'50s, the then Minister of Colonies, for instance, was still hoping to have his administration housed in an impressive new administrative complex along the Avenue Louise, one of the capital city's most important boulevards. However, the government opted for a less prestigious solution, providing accommodation in the newly planned Cité Administrative, illustrating once more how economic and pragmatic considerations were prioritised over issues of representation.

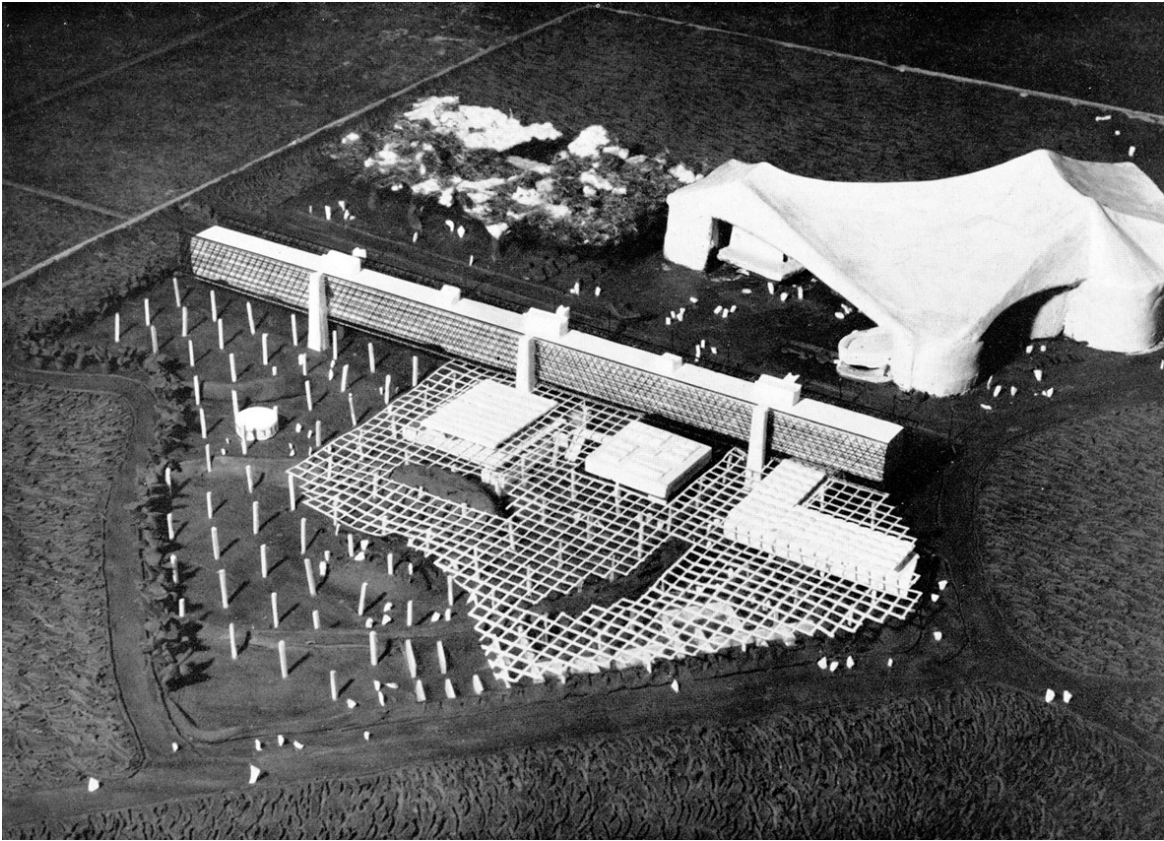


Ar fig 2

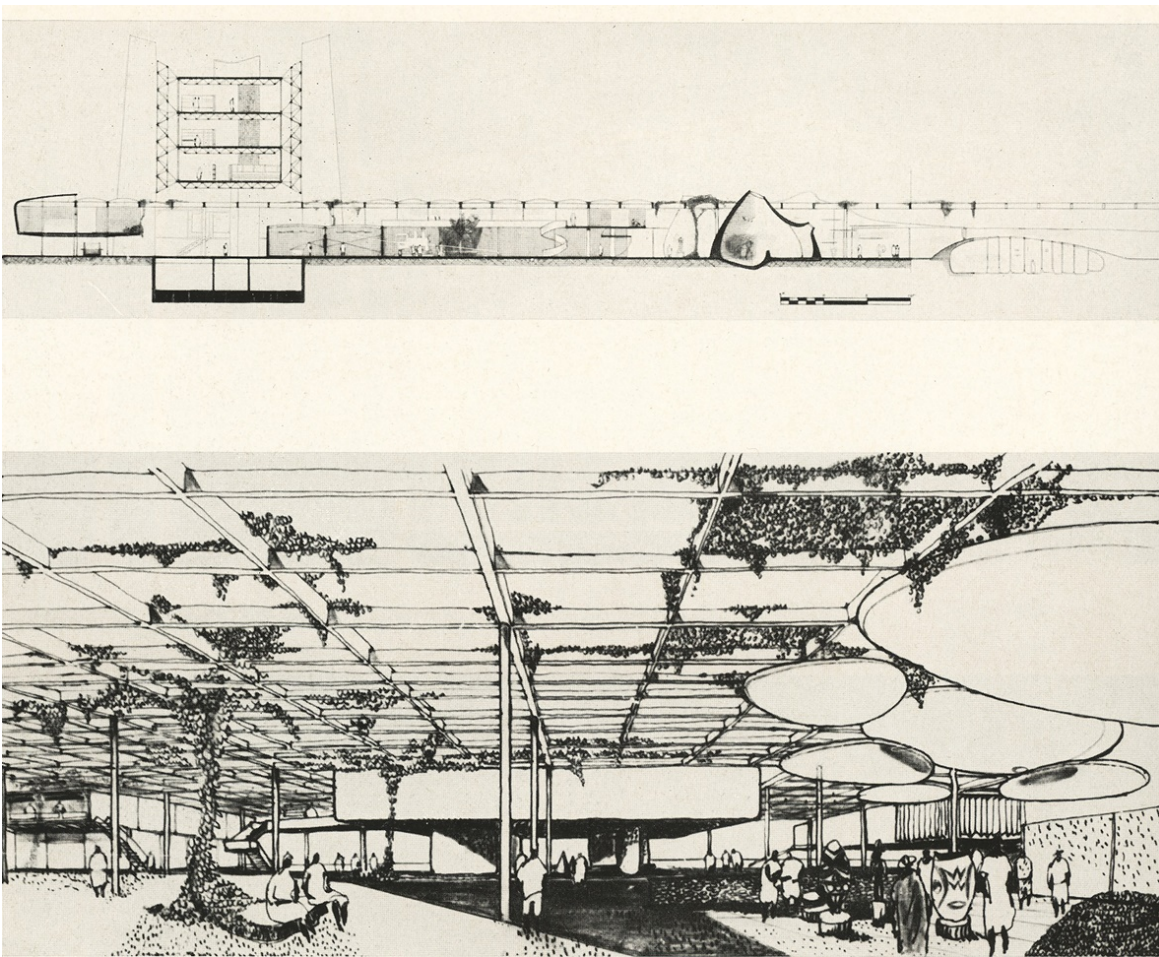
Masterplan for the Axe du Palais du Dominion, Léopoldville, architect Georges Ricquier, 1948

Yet Belgium did build a lot in Congo, especially during the postwar years, when the government launched its first – and last – *Ten Year Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Belgian Congo* in 1949. Housing, urban planning, education and healthcare, as well as transport infrastructure and agricultural development, counted as key focal points of the plan, which aimed at introducing a colonial variant of a welfare policy. It resulted in an immense built legacy. A fine-grained network of office buildings for colonial administrations, post offices, schools and hospitals was realised, reaching even the most remote parts of a territory which, as colonial propaganda did not fail to stress time and again, measured 80 times the size of the mother country. In Congo, 'le petit belge' indeed seemed to see things big.

Drawing on information wilfully provided by official propaganda services, postwar international media like *Time* magazine or *Life*, started to describe the Belgian Congo as a 'model colony'. But it was not just a question of quantity. Specific parts of the *Ten Year Plan's* built production met with respect from the international professional community as well. American architect Richard Neutra, for instance, mentioned that the housing schemes of the Office des Cités Africaines (OCA), providing accommodation for the ever-growing African population in Congo's major cities, were among the most promising architectural achievements he had encountered on his African trip. Among the 126 entries from 25 different countries to an international competition for a cultural centre in Léopoldville/Kinshasa, launched in 1958, were some of the most daring designs of the era, as Udo Kultermann pointed out in his 1960s surveys of modern architecture in Africa. Even the standardised architecture of type buildings, despite its often mundane nature, at times testifies to the undeniable métier of the architects employed in the public works departments in Brussels, Kinshasa and the provincial branches of the colony. The most prominent Belgian Modernists never engaged in colonial affairs. Some of their bread and butter peers, often linked to the Brussels' real-estate milieu, were nevertheless men of talent, as the Corbusian work of Claude Laurens makes clear.



Ar fig 5

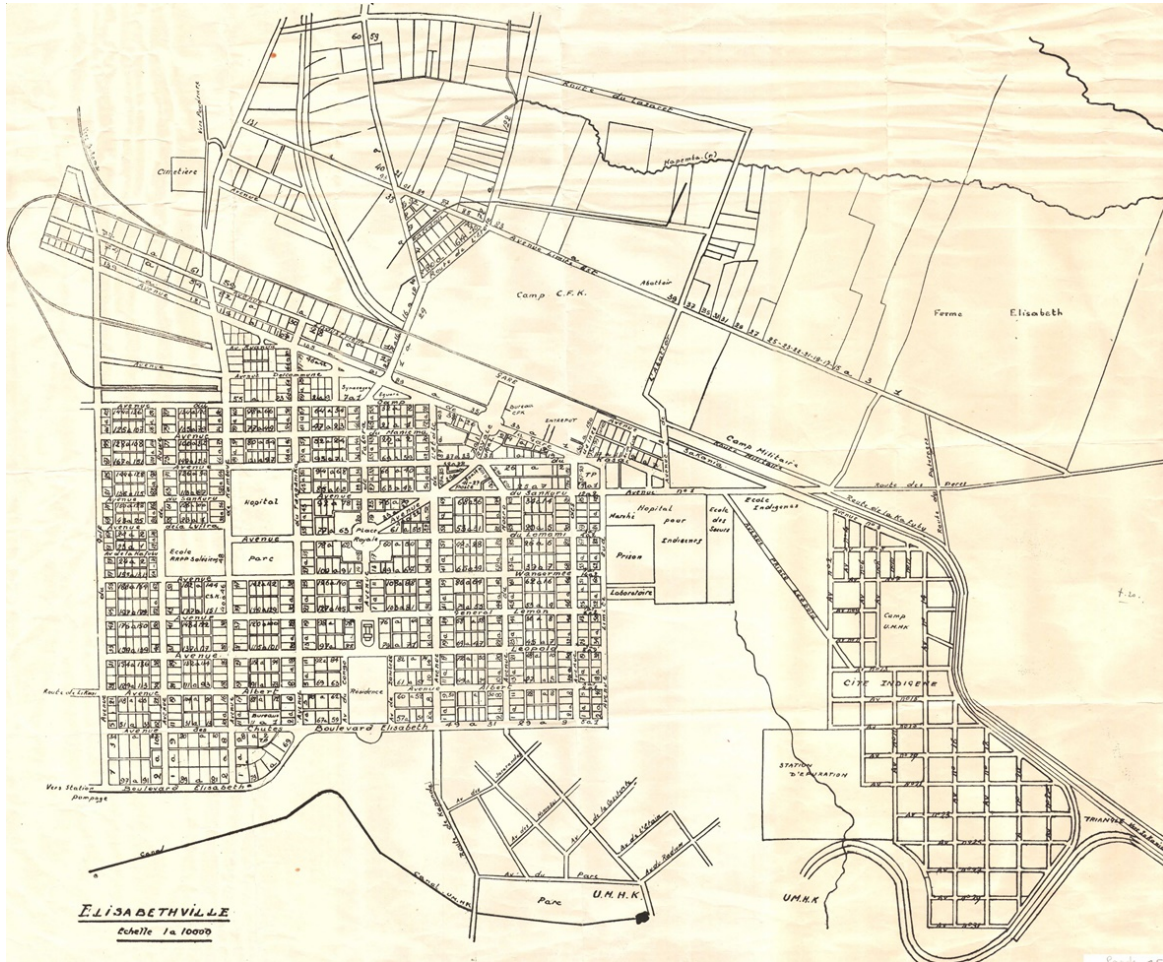


Ar fig 5bis

The competition entry for a cultural centre in Kinshasa by Takamasa Yoshizaka, 1958, in Udo Kultermann, *Neues Bauen in Afrika*, Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1963

But we should not forget that modern architecture is not necessarily emancipatory in nature, especially not in a colonial context. The OCA housing schemes remained extremely paternalistic in their conception of African dwelling practices. In that sense they are not so far removed from the profound social engineering embedded in the design of labour camps and workers' houses, a key topic of architectural investigation in the postwar years. A 1950s scheme for an ideal *cit  indig ne*, organised around an administrative building, a church, a sports field and a market, leaves little doubt of who was in charge of all aspects of everyday life. Schools and hospitals are not only crucial components of a colonial welfare agenda, but also intrinsically linked to policies of control, discipline and biopolitics. And the *Ten Year Plan* also triggered the building of a significant number of prisons. As Nancy Rose Hunt puts it evocatively, the Belgian Congo was a 'Nervous State', in which shining infertility clinics coexisted with bleak penal colonies.

Such ambivalences of colonial policy strikingly come to the fore in the domain of urban planning. In tune with practices elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, the organisation of urban form in the Belgian Congo was based from the mid-1920s onwards on the principle of spatial segregation along racial lines. The colonial city was a dual one, with a European part neatly divided from the African *cit  indig ne*, or native town, by a buffer zone that in colonial planning terms was called the *zone neutre* or the *cordon sanitaire*.



Ar fig 10

Lubumbashi urban plan showing, left, the European town and, right, the first *cit  indig ne* with the *zone neutre* between. Undated plan (c1929), Africa Archives, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels

The urban plan of the city of Lubumbashi, formerly known as Elisabethville, in the southern mining province of Katanga, provides one of the most telling examples of this principle. After a decision to erase the existing, and allegedly ‘filthy’ African settlement in 1921, the urban plan was redrawn by 1929 to introduce a *zone neutre* of over 700 metres, in order to protect European residential areas from the potential health threat of the *cit  indig ne*. Rather than a reality, such a threat was imagined to legitimise racial segregation. In the port city of Matadi, for instance, the principle of a *zone neutre* was introduced after 1928, by relocating the African settlements and workers’ camps on the other side of a natural cliff. Due to stagnant water during a large part of the year, this so-called *cordon sanitaire* in fact was infested with mosquitoes, posing a major concern to the city engineers in their tireless effort to sanitise the city. In Kinshasa, the *zone neutre* was only introduced *a posteriori* in the early 1930s and, moreover, in a very piecemeal way, so that the spatial segregation remained largely incomplete.

A textbook application of colonial planning principles was more often than not hindered by local conditions, such as insufficient funding, complex topographies, or already existing built fabric and settlement patterns. Urban plans also often met with various forms of local contestation by both Africans and intermediate figures who were crucial for sustaining local urban economies, such as Portuguese, Greek or Italian small traders.



Ar fig 13bis

Synagogue in Lubumbashi by Raymond Cloquet, 1929

Cities in the Belgian Congo – but also rural areas for that matter – were always made and shaped by myriad actors, some of whom remain conspicuously absent in the current historiography. One of the most important landmarks of interwar architecture in Lubumbashi, for instance, is the synagogue, a brick building in Modernist lines constructed according to a 1929 design of the Belgian architect Raymond Cloquet, and commissioned by the important local Jewish community, which had arrived in Congo via Southern Africa.

Along the commercial axes in various Congolese cities, one can still today read the presence of these ‘people from elsewhere’, whose societal position cannot be grasped by the essentialising dichotomy coloniser/colonised. A case in point is Ismail Youssuf Patel, a trader of Indian origin, who in the late 1920s arrived in Congo via Africa’s East Coast and finally settled in Mbandaka, an urban centre on the Congo river 400 kilometres upstream from Kinshasa, in 1934. Walking the streets of Mbandaka in April 2015, we were reminded by local informants that Mr Patel was locally considered the *bâtisseur de Mbandaka* (the ‘builder’ of Mbandaka).



Ar fig 14bis

Trading house built by Ismail Youssuf Patel along Avenue Mundji in Mbandaka, c1950s. Image: Johan Lagae



Ar fig 6bis

Seat of the provincial administration in Mbandaka, designed by Service des Travaux Publics, 1950s. Image: Johan Lagae

Throughout the colonial period, the number of (Belgian) architects remained limited, a phenomenon the professional press did not fail to lament by writing that the Belgian colony was being built by *des gens d'ailleurs* (people from elsewhere). Ever since the 1910s, construction work was often done by Italian builders. And while major Belgian construction firms such as the Compagnie Congolaise de Construction – a colonial branch of the prominent Belgian contractor Blaton – started to become more dominant in the Kinshasa scene in the 1950s, in smaller urban centres the role of non-Belgian European contractors continued to be strong.

Looking at architecture and urban planning in the former Belgian Congo thus raises questions about how we have written its history so far. If the remarkable colonial built legacy clearly testifies to an incredible energy with which *le petit belge* tried to govern an immense territory at the heart of the African continent, then tracing the building history of particular urban sites, particularly in the capital city of Kinshasa, points to the lack of an imperial vision underlying colonial policies. As the examples of the Lubumbashi synagogue or the trading houses built by Patel in Mbandaka indicate, our understanding of Congo's colonial past remains quite incomplete if we stick to a framework based on exclusive Belgian-Congolese terms. What is needed are narratives that embrace a European-African, or, better even, a truly global perspective when considering Congo's colonial past. It remains to be seen if such narratives will find their place in the new permanent displays of the soon to re-open Royal Museum for Central Africa, that ultimate *lieu de mémoire* of the Belgian colonisation of (and in) Central Africa.

This piece is featured in the AR's September 2018 on Belgium – click [here](#) to pick up your copy today