Diagram of the contemporary city of São Tomé, based on satellite imagery and military cartography [GoogleEarth2010, IGC-JIU-MU 1958]   ■ exterior public space   ● public facilities and services

colonial core or settlements

areas with predominance of informal or irregular dwellings

private developments

urban developments

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Bridging the urban divide between the informal and the planned city.
The African microstate of São Tomé and Príncipe as case-study.

The worldwide acceleration of the process of **urbanisation** of the last decades has induced great pressure in the urban built environment, especially in developing countries, where this growth could not be met by similar provision of support structures, thus creating extensive disparities and informal settlements. This has happened in megacities, but also in their smaller counterparts.

Focusing on the **case-study of São Tomé** and using the data collected during research and fieldwork, this paper will present an analysis of the urbanisation process, its heterogeneity and its spatial repercussions of unbalanced distribution of public space and dwelling conditions.

These will contribute to the discussion of options for challenging these disparities within the urban built environment, their **misconceptions** and disarticulations, namely the role of planning, design and stakeholders as catalysers for development.

the formal and the informal city

The notion of informal settlement encompasses a broad set of conditions of human occupation of the territory that often include a concentration of socially and economically-deprived groups, substandard housing, little access to infrastructures/ services and/or irregular land tenure and construction. To integrate this group, **the criteria may thus be of socioeconomic, physical, spatial or legal background**, varying widely to include the settlements known as *slums*, but also situations that, even though not lacking on basic living conditions, may be considered irregular concerning land or construction regulations. These also vary according to geographic location, cultural issues and specific urban setting, forming therefore a very wide and ambiguous set of situations.

Nevertheless, and regardless of the difficulties to define this wide set of circumstances, the core issues that are to be here discussed concern deprivation and disparities in these urban areas, which contribute to unfair distribution of resources, access to welfare services and use of space. It is stated by the United Nations Organisation that **A divided city is one that fails to accommodate its poorer residents, regardless of the social and cultural riches they might contribute**" (UN-HABITAT, 2008b: xii). This definition stresses that these urban disparities represent not only the fail towards ensuring human rights and welfare, but also the loss of the chance to fully develop the potential of these inhabitants, thus representing a wide and outreaching loss for the society. Hence the spatial divide is not just the reflection of socioeconomic differences, but especially the materialization of obstructions in the struggle for the improvement of the human condition.

challenging the urban divide

In order to fight deprivation, disparities and the urban divide, urban aspirations rely on acting towards **inclusion and urbanity.**

Several standpoints have been used to explain underdevelopment, which have also been transposed to the study of urban growth in developing countries. After overcoming the strategy of exclusion undertaken through slum eradication during the early 1960s, the awareness on the needs and the potentials of informal dwellers - raised by contributions of authors such as John Turner, Colin Ward, Charles Abrahams, Hassan Fathy or William Mangin - has dictated a shift towards more inclusive policies.

what has changed?
After these first writings on urban growth and projects on the improvement of the dwellings in the developing world, nowadays some aspects differ:

rurality and urbanity. if the urbanisation process throughout the mid-twentieth century was fed by the rural exodus and the growing urban areas still retained some of the characteristics and behaviour patterns of that origin - the idea of "*peasants in cities*" (MANGIN, 1970) - nowadays this profile has changed, as new generations are already born within urban background, and overlaying diversified populations shape an hypermodern heterogeneous city.

subsistence. as these areas increase, the methods for rural subsistence (as small-scale animal breeding or vegetable growing), even if desired, are progressively no longer viable. This induces an increased pressure on urban income-generators, which means that in the face of the inability for the regular system to absorb newcomers at a similar rate and to provide them with employment, informal economy sprawls.

land and property. these informal areas, besides spreading, are also in this process of densification, as new generations emerge and newcomers continuously arrive. The difficulties in the access to land and the opportunity to generate income, promote the development of rental and sub-rental schemes, as former and successful inhabitants move out or take their chance to climb up the social ladder. These areas suffer therefore a continuous process of sub-division, repeating its structure into increasingly smaller scales, as a "fractalization".

construction. the relation between inhabitants and dwellings: as the first generation of rural exodus took the role of providing their new urban accommodation - often through self-construction or joint initiatives - following generations inherited these structures and newcomers often sub-rented land or rooms within another's property. This probably means that nowadays and within informal settlements, the connection between most inhabitants and their houses may be different from the one established previously during the mid-XXth century.

public action. if the intervention capacities of public administration have formerly been already quite constrained, especially in developing countries, nowadays the panorama may be even more disturbing, as global economic crisis reduces investment and funding in all areas. Therefore, rethinking planning strategies for intervention is utterly urgent.

analysing São Tomé and Príncipe

Located by the Western African coast in the Gulf of Guinea, the archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe was a former Portuguese colony for five centuries, becoming an independent Nation in 1975. During the colonial period, its economy relied mostly in the trade within the Atlantic commercial routes and as a plantation territory, used for the cultivation of extensive crops, such as sugar-cane, coffee and cocoa. The independency brought wide socioeconomic and territorial changes, namely the nationalisation and redistribution of great part of the land. Nowadays, the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe is part of the group of Least Developed Countries and Small Islands Developing States, gathering extensive fragilities in the struggle for development.

the capital city of São Tomé

The city of São Tomé has grown from an initial core by the seaside to stretch along the coast and inwards along the road network. The urbanisation process intensified greatly during the last fifty years, following not only the modernization of the city and its plan of the early 1960s, but especially in response to the independency process, the employment opportunities created, and mostly due to the shrinkage of the agricultural production and the rural exodus. The present urban area reflects this legacy, where the older core and its irradiating axes are still noticeable, forming now a dispersed urban area without clear limits. With around a hundred thousand people, it gathered in 2007 58.9% of the total population, at an annual growth rate of 3%, sharing similar developing struggles with its African counterparts.

a. 15th   b. 16th   c. 17-18th   d. 19-20th   e. 20th
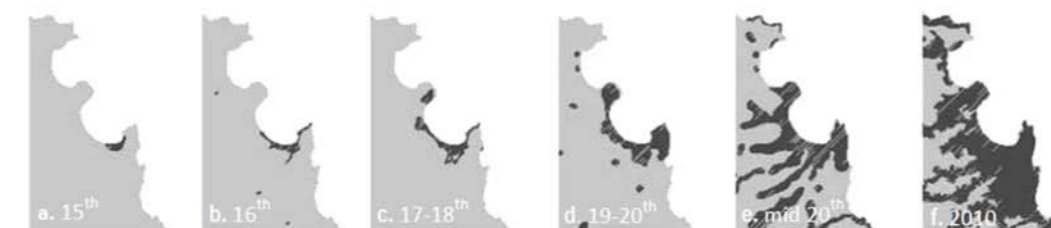
the urban divide

From the late colonial city to the present-day urban environment, most of the infrastructures or public facilities remain similar, even though the city has expanded to more than ten times its size, meaning a growth for which its infrastructures were not prepared and a severe loss of the conditions of its inhabitants. Additionally, the concentration of these amenities in the older parts of the city, most of the post-independency expansion areas lack in their provision, contributing to an unbalanced distribution of public space and services, condition reflected also upon the housing panorama: above 70% of the urban dwellings were considered precarious (census 2001).

The urban built environment gathers a wide diversity of strategies of settlement, with different patterns, logics and rhythms, glued together into a patchwork. Nevertheless, they are not enclosed into easily recognizable and delimited areas, but form juxtaposed fragments, which reflect simultaneous but rather clashing socioeconomic dynamics: the emergence of underprivileged areas, private investments that represent the insertion of clusters into the built environment, or services related to a highly rotating touristic population.

challenges, misconceptions and setbacks

Throughout interviews and conversations with inhabitants and agents involved in the decision-making process concerning the built environment, several constraints and ambiguities were pointed out, namely:

notion of common good. it was stressed that individualism and disrespect for the public asset were usual, and with repercussions not only at economic levels but also in the built environment;

family structure. the frequently large or single-parent family structure were mentioned as factors of socioeconomic vulnerability of the household, often relying on the extended family as safety;

land micro-division. it was mentioned that the land subdivision throughout generations, especially in large households, was undertaken down to a scale that hindered subsistence or articulation of actions;

access to land. both the touristic sector and the expectations on oil revenue have induced impact on land prices, contributing to enlarging the gap between the privileged and the deprived;

rural exodus and urban livelihood. it was raised the difficulty in finding formal employment and the reduction of rural subsistence strategies, inducing the dependency on informal economy;

savings and planning. the difficulties of poor families in performing savings and longer-term planning were also mentioned, along with the lack of mechanisms to support these initiatives;

policies and discrimination. it was referred by inhabitants that certain development actions ended up benefiting only a part of the deprived population, and were turned into both an income source and a tool for improving one's social position at the expense of others;

need and action. and finally, it was also mentioned that even though much was spent in assessment, policies often relied on factors that were different from the needs, such as funding and targeting of the donors, subverting the priorities of urgent necessities.

The fragmented space reflects thus the fragmented society that derives from the combination of the colonial legacy, the outcome of post-independent socioeconomic restructuring and the impact of contemporary liberal mechanisms. The urban divide is fed upon the disparities on the access to several features, such as land, services, welfare and income. Nevertheless, it is not only a result of socioeconomic differences, but is also being perpetuated by disarticulation, misunderstandings and misconceptions within the processes of intervention.

The intervention in the built environment cannot solve, by itself, socioeconomic problems nor disparities. Neither can it predict an uncertain future. Nevertheless, it might contribute to improving living conditions and to raising awareness and articulation between citizens, and therefore, act as social catalyser for inclusion.