

## 'Dream Cities' in Africa: polemics around Expu Gongá, the 'New City of São Tomé'

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### **Abstract**

In the African archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe, a new project announced an urban revolution: involved in polemics, the Expu Gongá – a private development by the Chinese group Guangxi Hydroelectric Construction Bureau and the Angolan company Investimentos e Projectos Angolanos, with public participation –, if confirmed, would be located in the outskirts of the capital city and occupy 210 hectares of land, in a 58-month construction process of 300 million dollars of investment.

In a country of around 187.000 inhabitants, two thirds of which living below the poverty line and in precarious dwelling conditions, and where housing policies hardly contribute to tackling the needs of the low-income population, the prospect of a 'new beginning' appears fascinating. The long-desired house in a brand new 'dream city' – picture profoundly imprinted in the imaginary of a society to which much if often denied – is here advertised by the developers as finally possible, both for the upper and middle classes and for the low-budget families.

Nevertheless, while some see this project as the ultimate opportunity of modernization, critics arise to the process (a twenty-five-day competition for a proposal for both design and construction), the adequacy to the demand and the indifference to the problems within the existing urban areas. This commission also raises comparisons with other large-scale developments in African contexts, which have been intensely criticized for inadequate high-density solutions and low-quality construction standards. Furthermore, recent experiences of current housing provision – both in São Tomé and Príncipe and other African territories –, when not accompanied by careful economic support, have often proved incapable of reaching the lower-income populations, therefore perpetuating the inadequate living conditions of the most needed.

The future of this specific project is still uncertain: as the government changed, the new political decision-makers have announced that this process is to be suspended. Nevertheless,

rather than discussing the content of the proposal or its future, this paper aims at debating the process, the social aspirations and representations, as well as the political background, that have created the conditions for this process to take place and that have shaped the discourses and debates around it.

Keywords: real estate development; Africa; Chinese urbanism; housing policies; developing country

### **THE DREAM OF A NEW START<sup>1</sup>**

The territory has always been an arena for the dispute of powers amongst socioeconomic groups, as well as a tool for the concretization of individual and common aspirations. Thus, the built environment has long been reflecting the ambitions, interactions and conflicts of the societies that produce it, and its analysis may thus offer some clues on the transformations and dialectics that there take place.

New cities and urban peripheries – being the chance of a planned brand-new start – emphasize the different discourses that are produced for sustaining or criticizing specific lifestyles, political positions and social representations. In opposition to the situations of progressive transformation of the built environment throughout time, the task of planning from scratch a whole new city – or extensive parts for expansion of an existing one – represents a gesture of overall *intentionality*. Therefore this existence of a *purpose* has often not only reflected aspirations and social constructions of the context where the project is created, but has also required the production of arguments to support it, transforming this process into a specially interesting laboratory for discussing social and political agendas.

Projects for new cities or urban peripheries have long been visible fields of suggestion and claim of different lifestyles, intentions of modernization and new urban configurations. Example of these intentions have been the new towns and urban models of the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century – the 'garden city' by Ebenezer Howard, the 'linear city' of Arturo Soria y Mata, the ideas of 'functional zoning' or 'neighborhood units'<sup>2</sup>, amongst many other examples –, have shown the desire to produce new forms of social organization and spatial distribution, corresponding to new visions of order and social interaction.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a draft paper that will be further developed in subsequent versions of this theme.

<sup>2</sup> MUMFORD, L. (2004, orig. 1982).

Throughout the twentieth century, these aspirations became a motto for further experimentation and materialization of urban and dwelling proposals: the modern lifestyle represented the dream and rise of a new society, for which an innovative image of spatial organization was often imagined.

More recent projects and proposals have also repeatedly shown how spatial intervention may indeed become a tool for ideological and political agendas, and private investments and developments have grown into powerful mechanisms to undertake this role, through the production and fulfillment of aspirations, in a process that becomes especially clear in planned major interventions in the built environment. New cities or large urban expansion areas have thus become instruments to reach both collective visions of progress and modernization, and individual social achievement.

### **AFRICA AS A LABORATORY**

The African territories were fertile laboratories for the discussion of models for the production of social and spatial order, having witnessed the proposal and occasionally the implementation of several experiments, taking the form of major urban plans or renewal projects. Colonial occupation has indeed demanded not only the definition of clear intentions to dominate and invent<sup>3</sup> territories and societies, but also their divulgation and propaganda as gestures of progress, modernization and human achievement, an essential condition for legitimating the presence and role of colonial management<sup>4</sup>.

Indeed, focusing on the African territories with Portuguese influence, one can detect both the several periods of intense investment in the organization of the built environment, and the close relation with their synchronic social and political backgrounds and ambitions. Furthermore, one can also detect how, each time, they have been both the product of aspirations and of social misconceptions, meaning that misjudgments kept being repeated regardless of the regimes.

The long mercantilist period, with the definition and occupation of colonies, was followed by the great impetus of mechanization and standardization of production, as well as of social progress. Indeed, throughout the transition between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, major works were undertaken to shape African territories: land movements, roads and railways, energy production and other basic infrastructures, buildings and plants, all served the purpose of reinventing spaces and societies into the colonial projects of progress and

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<sup>3</sup> MUDIMBE, V. Y. (1988).

<sup>4</sup> MARTINS, A. C. (2010).

economic success. By this time, the discussions around labor conditions and hygienist concerns became important mottos for the reinforcement and redefinition of the colonial role of civilizing otherwise primitive contexts, using great plans and interventions in the built environment as tools.

With similar concerns and propaganda, the modernization after the Second World War provided a whole new level of action, especially based on intense public works and investment, for supporting the idea of a strong and generous Nation. Schools, medical centres, sports grounds, parks, avenues and housing units, all became part of extensive efforts to build an image of 'overseas provinces' out of the African territories, even though these actions still reflected the contrasts and stigmatized visions of profoundly fragmented societies.

After independence, and following major changes in social and economic structures, an accelerated and intense exodus of population towards urban areas took place in most African Nations. In this context, the raise of new challenges and the affirmation of new identities have once again set the built environment as the ground for the dispute of powers and the fulfilment of social aspirations. Recent interventions display the complexity of this asymmetric legacy where, even though with efforts towards social welfare, the low-rent population has often been neglected and forced to find mechanisms to overcome an absence of solutions.

Thus, throughout time, the built environment has both witnessed, and contributed to, the formulation and materialization of ideologies, repeatedly producing *artificialness*: an intentional establishment of specific patterns of spatial order, but also of social status or behaviour, fabricating an image for an aspiration and creating the discourses to support it. This process has thus served social representations – collective aspirations, individual dreams, social mobility, status – but has at times also incurred into using mechanisms of segregation, sometimes intentionally, and in some other cases as an involuntary consequence of instruments of social distinction. A crude example of these approaches are the proposals for colonial new towns and urban peripheries, which visibly show the paradox of, while trying to introduce hygienist and presumably socially-aware ideas, ended up being profoundly stigmatizing [Fig.1].

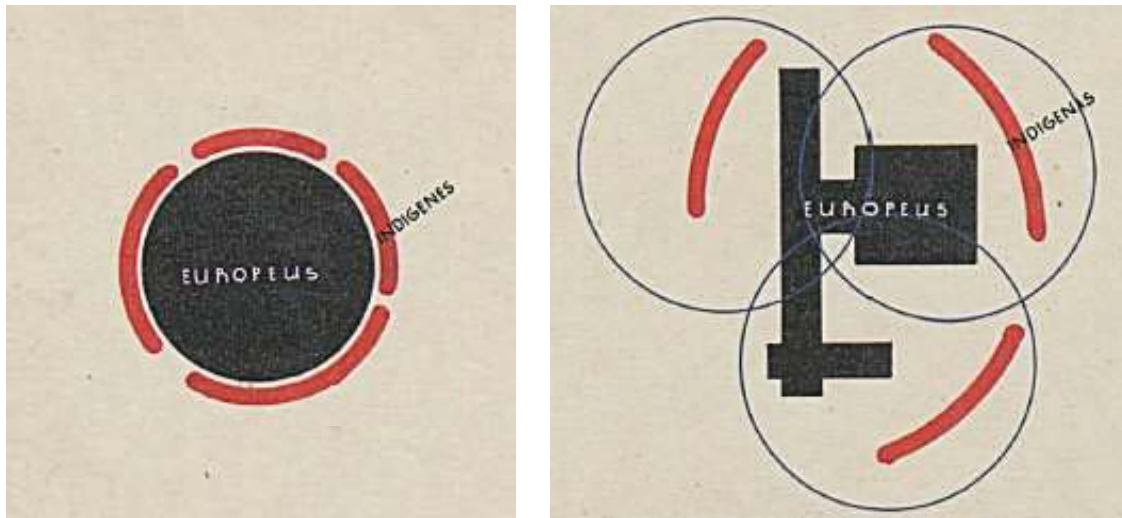


Fig.1. Diagram of colonial new towns according to Vasco Vieira da Costa (with the European settlers in the centre, surrounded by the indigenous population), and his proposal for Luanda's Satellite City N°3 (VIEIRA DA COSTA, 1948). These diagrams thus show not only a 'social zoning', but also a very distorted representation of the real proportions of population, representing the European settlers with a scale predominance that they never achieved, but rather emphasizing the symbolic importance attributed to each social group.

Nowadays, major interventions in the built environment seem to show different intentions: the recent proliferation of extensive private investments, led by the pulse of the real estate market, is indeed quite different from the previous rationales of hygienism or colonial propaganda that had earlier led to the implementation of major plans and public works. The recent focus of offer appears to aim at the aspirations of the individual, rather than at an ideology or the production of an image of the collective, even throughout regimes of socialist orientation. Therefore, facing a whole new set of strategies towards the creation of demand and the production of an offer, the 'dream city' has recently become a commodity to be consumed.

## **THE AFRICAN ARCHIPELAGO OF SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE**

Located in the Gulf of Guinea by the Western African coast and over the equator line, 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 (mainly throughout the sixteenth century), coffee and cocoa (from the

mid-nineteenth century until nowadays). The plantation of cocoa placed this territory in a hegemonic position in the worldwide exportation market at the outbreak of the twentieth century, but nevertheless, this successful period soon came to an end as production declined and the price of this raw product devaluated in international markets<sup>5</sup>. This territory thus inherited an economy based in labour-intensive agriculture, performed firstly by slaves and later by contracted labour, but that shaped a profoundly hierarchized society, which is still evident in the present social fragmentation and in a consequent difficulty in the civil mobilization towards common goals<sup>6</sup>.

The modernization process of the mid-twentieth century introduced improvements in the agricultural methods and in the living conditions within the estates, but failed to retake former levels of economic outcome. Simultaneously, urban plan for renewal and improvement of the existing settlements also tried to respond to the political will of conceding and transmitting the idea of modernity and social commitment: several urban plans were ordered in 1955 to the Eng. Santos Paiva for five towns: Trindade, Guadalupe, Neves, Angolares and Madalena [Fig.2].

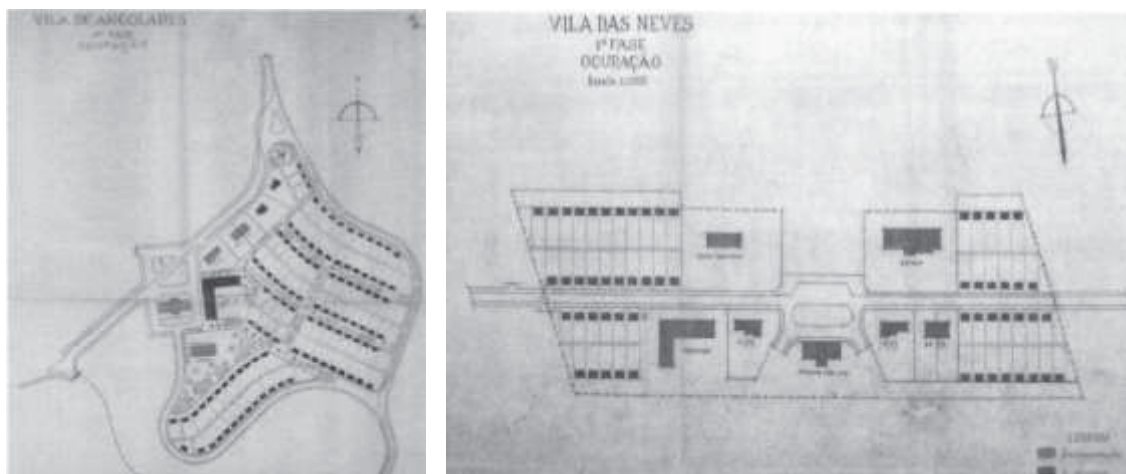


Fig.2. Examples of Urban Plans by the Eng. Santos Paiva: Angolares (capital of the district of Caué) and Neves (district of Lembá) [Ministério do Ultramar, IPAD's archive].

Adapted to the reduced scale of the existing settlements, these plans aimed at transforming them into district capital cities, by rearranging their central areas through a kind of 'urbanization kit' that combined the creation of a civic center (with medical center, school, administration and market around a public outer space) and the design of a set of housing

<sup>5</sup> TENREIRO, 1961.

<sup>6</sup> NASCIMENTO, 2008a.

units (with different typologies according to the social groups they were aiming at). The implementation of these plans, which turned out to be only partial in most cases, ended up building only a fraction of the expected facilities and housing. Nevertheless, these plans demonstrated the ambivalence and asymmetries produced throughout these processes of modernization and reconversion of existing settlements, and the visions and roles of each social group in the process.

The independency brought wide socioeconomic changes, along with major territorial transformations: the nationalisation of great part of the land<sup>7</sup>, followed by an agrarian reform twelve years afterwards in which the land was partially distributed through small plots by former employees of the agricultural enterprises, introduced a radical mutation not only in the land division, but also in its role and function. Thus, the land in São Tomé and Príncipe remains a very complex challenge, due to the overlapping of several forms of ownership and use, as well as of regulation entities to monitor and manage it. In a young nation where the regulatory system is still being set, and with this increased complexity in accurately perceiving land tenure, the built environment reflects the hesitations, opportunities and abuses of the fragility of the absence of adequate and efficient regulation, of the negotiations case by case, and of the lack of public information and discussion of intervention processes in the built environment.

Furthermore, the struggle for development of this young Nation adds a further level of complexity of social and territorial intervention in this territory: nowadays, the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe is part of the groups of Least Developed Countries and Small Islands Developing States, as its small scale and insularity, the high costs of infrastructures and transports or the dependency on the exterior<sup>8</sup> represent additional challenges.

The city of São Tomé, its capital, is paradigmatic of this challenge to overcome urban disparities. Despite its small scale in comparison with the Central Africa context, its urban population was 58.9% in 2007, growing at an annual rate of 3% from 2005 to 2010<sup>9</sup>, presenting therefore a growth trend that is similar to its bigger African counterparts [Fig.3].

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<sup>7</sup> The nationalization affected the land of the estates owned by colonial settlers, and was roughly 86% of the total surface of the country (UNDP, 2008: p.54).

<sup>8</sup> UN-OHRLLS, 2011: pp.2-3.

<sup>9</sup> UN-DESA, 2009: p.37.

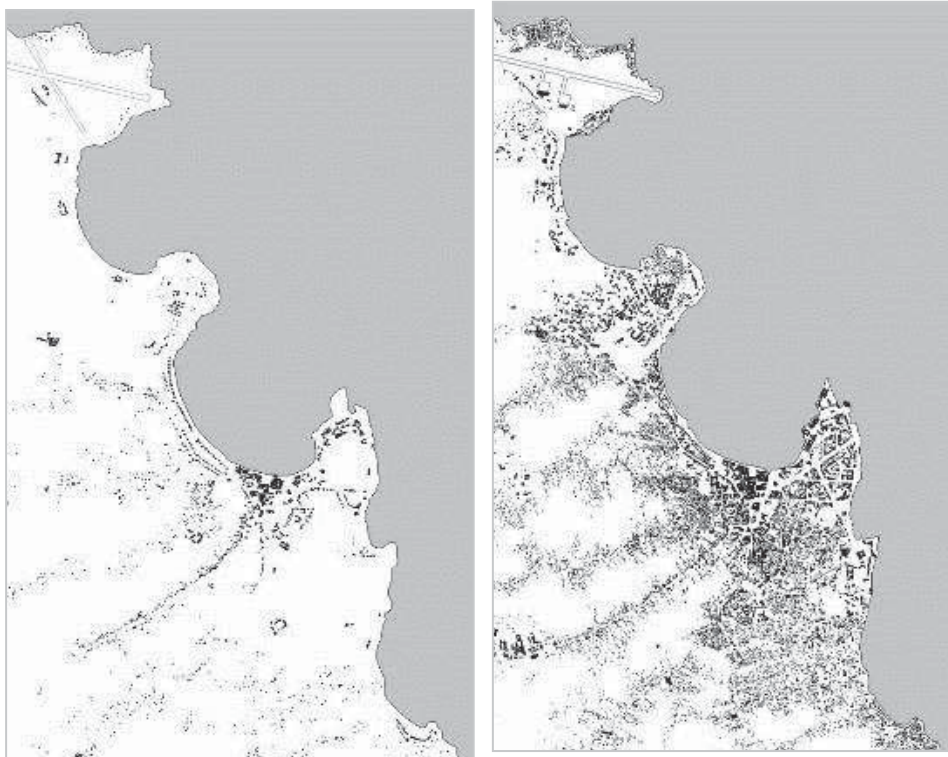


Fig.3. Diagram of the evolution of the city of São Tomé in five decades, from 1958 to 2010 [FERNANDES et al, 2012, based in the Military Cartography of 1958 and in GoogleEarth imagery].

Throughout history, the city has taken the role of interface between the exterior and the inner part of the territory, responding to the main demands of, on the one hand, providing the logistic support for stops of maritime commercial routes (thus the importance of its first implantation on a sheltered bay) and, on the other, to allow the penetration to the territory for its exploration and the outflow of raw products. It was only from the mid-twentieth century that major efforts of modernization implemented new expansion axis, along with public buildings to materialize the idea of a modern city, allowed to expand beyond the initial bay. This urban configuration remains the same in the present day, with a consolidated core and a few expansion axes, maintaining a radial structure that supports all the other fragments that have grown on it, many of which are formed by precarious settlements.

Thus, the city gathers several urban challenges that would need extensive and simultaneous actions: the creation or improvement of the social facilities and services, the urgent and thorough upgrading of the areas of inadequate housing conditions, the rehabilitation of the existing colonial core, as well as the improvement and rehabilitation of the public areas (streets, squares, waterfronts). According to the different arguments, these challenges have



both been faced as, on the one hand, the image of degradation of the existing urban centre or, on the other hand, the utmost priority that needs urgent investment.

### **THE *EXPU GONGÁ* PROJECT, THE '*NEW CITY OF SÃO TOMÉ*'**

Following a public tender<sup>10</sup>, in August 2014, for both design and construction of a large area of urban expansion in the outskirts of the capital city, the winning proposal was announced: '*Expu Gongá*', the '*New City of São Tomé*', would be a private development by the Chinese group *Guangxi Hydroelectric Construction Bureau* and the Angolan company *Investimentos e Projectos Angolanos*, with public participation. If confirmed, it would become a 58-month construction process of 300 million dollars of investment, in a project involved in controversy. As meanwhile the government changed and this process was suspended, it is not intended to discuss here the proposal or its further developments, but rather the discourses that led the political, social and investor's agendas. Indeed, the access to the information on the proposal ended up being quite limited<sup>11</sup>, as the document wasn't publically released and therefore the available data was either of the public presentation<sup>12</sup> [Fig.8] or published through media<sup>13</sup>. Nonetheless, even though the information on the project itself might be filtered in its content and limited in its extension, the media becomes the arena where the arguments of the debate are more evident, and therefore it became one the most interesting sources for our discussion.

The competition was already polemic: announced on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August through a public advertisement, it established the deadline for the presentation of the proposals to the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, therefore granting twenty-five days for the development of a plan of infrastructure and construction of an area of 210 hectares.

The winning proposal [Figs.4-6], designed by the Cape-Verdean atelier *Maurício dos Santos Arquitectos*, created a network of avenues and roads (connecting the directions of the center of the old city of São Tomé, the airport and the town of Santo Amaro) that would support the area with institutional buildings, an urban park and dwelling zones (gathering a wide diversity

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<sup>10</sup> MOPIRNMA-STP, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> It was not possible to analyze the document of the winning proposal since the request made to the Ministry of Infrastructure, Natural Resources and Environment, in December 2014, was rejected on the grounds of the new executive being not yet aware of the cases inherited from the previous government and therefore, not being able to authorize the consultation or public disclosure of official documents.

<sup>12</sup> The information indicated here is based on an interview to the Director of the *Direcção-Geral de Ordenamento do Território e Desenvolvimento Urbano*, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2014, who provided the information released in the public presentation of the project during the ceremony of laying the first stone.

<sup>13</sup> "Empresa chinesa Guangxi constrói a nova cidade de São Tomé", *Téla Nón*, available at <http://www.telanon.info/politica/2014/10/01/17560/empresa-chinesa-guangxi-constroi-a-nova-cidade-de-sao-tome/>, and "Autoridades lançam primeira pedra para construção da segunda cidade de S. Tomé", *Jornal Transparência*, of 02.10.2014, available at <http://www.jornaltransparencia.st/sociedade8345.htm>.

of housing typologies that varied in height and unit combination, from detached and semi-detached houses, to blocks of up to five-storeys high). It was also announced the public development of housing for the low-rent residents, thus presenting this project as an offer for both the upper and middle classes and for the low-budget families.

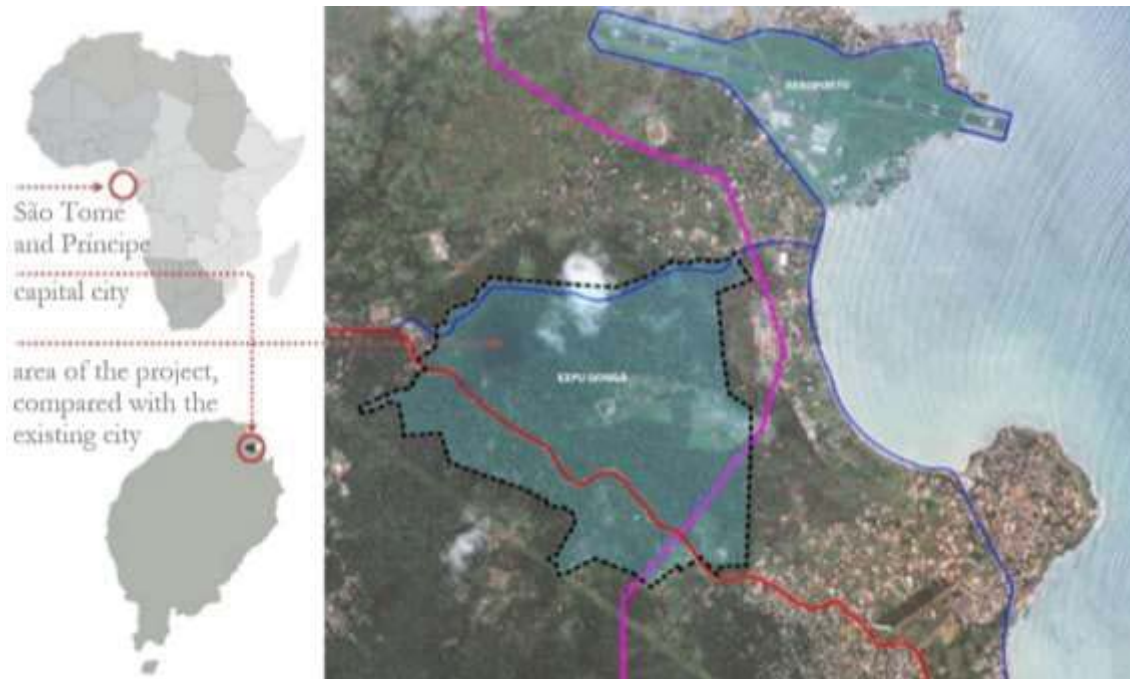


Fig.4. Location of the project within the African continent, the island of São Tomé and comparison of the area with the existing city [source: mauriciodossantos.com (with translation of subtitles)].

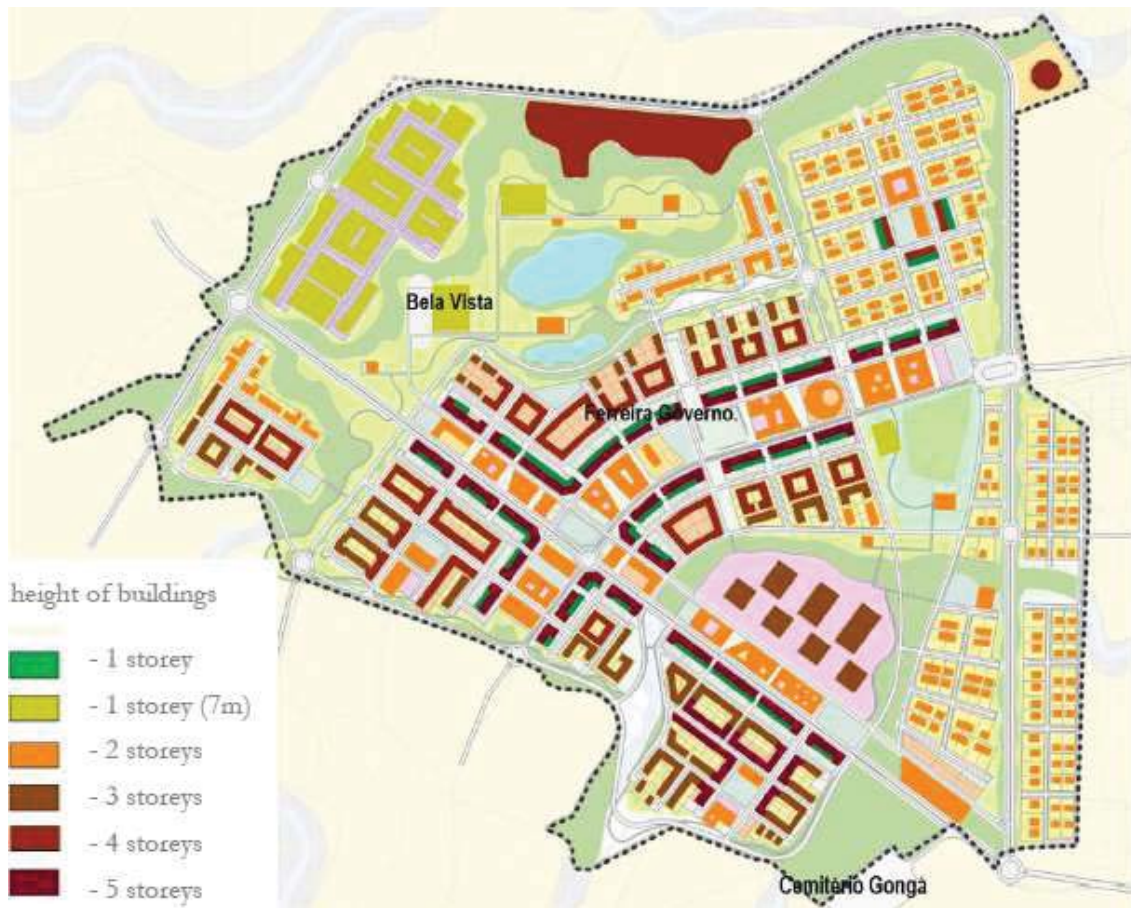


Fig.5. Plan of the expansion area of Expu Gongá [source: mauriciodossantos.com (with translation of subtitles)].



Fig.6. Image of the plan [source: www.mauriciodossantos.com].



Fig.7. Announcement of the project on location [source: Ana Silva Fernandes, 2014].



Fig.8. Ceremony for laying the first stone of *Expu Gongá* and public presentation of the project in October 2014 with representatives of the different partners [sources: Têla Nón, Global Gulf Investment].

Within the public presentation and its media divulgation, this project was described in its intentions and configurations, promising to provide the offer for the long-desired wish of modernization of the urban environment. With that vision, the former Minister of Public Works Fernando Maquengo stated that "*The new city will be a city that will integrate all the*

*needs that are already standard in the cities of other places. This means that the people of São Tomé are also entitled to a city that represents them for the future"*<sup>14</sup>.

## **VOICES AND OPINIONS**

Taking the debate in the media as an instrument to measure and analyze the discussion of this project within civil society, the reactions to this presentation were varied, though leaving the impression that fundamental issues were hardly raised.

In addition to the deficit of awareness and knowledge concerning the creation of a new city, the discussion tended to focus on a judgment of intentions of the politicians and investors involved, often pointing out the purpose of fulfilling individual interests and harming collective resources. In addition to references of misappropriation of public funds, opinions also stressed that this tender contained election intents, stating that such a project should wait for the new government. Otherwise, they claimed this rush in the process might risk repelling investors (even adding that no serious investor would take part in such a process). Indeed, the debate on the political intentions replaced the public debate on the issue of a new city. Somehow, the scarce information about the project gave space to comments and interpretations based more on one's political motivation – through affection or disaffection towards the ruler – than at an evaluation of the project itself. In fact, the unrestrained, and often offensive, tone of the comments – either for or against the action of a politician – possibly also contributes to undermining social trust and the debate on merits or demerits of what was presented as a solution to social problems. There were scarcer comments on hypothetical fragilities of infrastructure (as the supply of water and electricity), or on inadequate typology and house prices for low-income families. Finally, one of the opinions against the suspension of the project had to do with the jobs that this company could create, though implicitly admitting it would be low-skilled and cyclical employment. Nevertheless, the inference of the creation of employment resulting from the city's construction was logical and plausible, but devoid of factual information. Opinions also pointed to other pressing needs, namely the construction of a new market, a hospital or, at another scale, to a deep water port.

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<sup>14</sup> “Empresa chinesa Guangxi constrói a nova cidade de São Tomé”, *Téla Nón*, available at <http://www.telanon.info/politica/2014/10/01/17560/empresa-chinesa-guangxi-constroi-a-nova-cidade-de-sao-tome/>, (translation by the authors of this paper).

## **FURTHER ISSUES**

Adding to those opinions, several issues should also be addressed or further analyzed in their background and content.

One of them is related with the primordial intent of preparing a competition for an area of urban expansion and its justification through a kind of 'myth' of starting anew, that is, the idea of modernization and 'international standards' as associated only with this type of new intervention (from scratch) and through private developments. The promised dream was certainly not a suburb, but rather a new center, focused on a lifestyle of the new elite, inspired by foreign influences. The inconsistency of this argument doesn't rely on a clear support to private investment or to the real estate market – undoubtedly important economy catalyzers - but rather in its justification as the ultimate, and sole, opportunity for modernization. Furthermore, in face of the difficulty to attract investment into this territory, the use of this argument might indeed delay the rehabilitation of the existing city and the search for solutions for its present needs. In fact, this argumentation ended up being exactly the justification for the suspension of this project<sup>15</sup> by the subsequent legislature, when the Government changed in October 2014, later presenting the need to invest in the existing city.

Additionally, the process itself ended up showing plenty of fragilities. The announcement of the construction of the new city was unexpected (although there had been rumors on social networks a few months before) and the whole process was undertaken in record time. The rush of promoting an international and open competition a few weeks before the end of the legislature, meant the provision of twenty-five days for the presentation of proposals, a period which is fairly short for such a complex program and extensive area of development. Indeed, it raised suspicions that the time frame to prepare the proposal would probably be impossible to respect if not preceded by previous preparation, involving this process in additional mistrust and doubts.

Moreover, the format of 'design and construction competition' contains specificities that might be prejudicial in large operations, or at least that might limit their potential as opportunities for debating strategies for managing the built environment. For instance, factors such as lower budget, together with fast processes of design and construction, are often preferred, which ultimately limits a careful diagnosis of the existing context and the adaptation to local conditions, restricting as well a possible involvement of beneficiaries or

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<sup>15</sup> "Patrice Trovoada chumba projecto da nova cidade de São Tomé e não só", *Téla Nón*, 16.12.2014, available at <http://www.telanon.info/politica/2014/12/16/18209/patrice-trovoada-chumba-projecto-da-nova-cidade-de-sao-tome-e-nao-so/>. Nevertheless, the contract signed with the former Government probably includes rescission conditions, thus it is not yet clear the future development of this process.

target groups. Additionally, the combination of 'design' and 'construction' also restricts the number and profile of participants in the competition to companies or consortia with the capacity to undertake extensive areas of construction, thus limiting the discussion and the range of participants and solutions.

Also, in this process, affordable housing is promised but not explained in its strategy: indeed, in the few remarks on this theme, the responsibility of providing low-cost housing seemed to rely on either the role of public participation, or in negotiated fractions of the private investment, but in both cases focusing on limiting the rent prices. This strategy, which has been occasionally adopted by the public institute on housing for providing dwelling solutions aimed at the civil servants, has proved not to be able to reach the lower income population that stand below the poverty line<sup>16</sup>, who actually correspond to two thirds of the total population of the country. This way, this project may be repeating an orientation that does not benefit the sector of the lower-rent population, but rather an intermediate group, which may mean the loss of an opportunity to solve the most precarious situations.

One last issue of debate has been the profile of the international consortium that won this competition. In fact, the raised fears do not reside particularly in the nationality of the construction consortium - which actually involves several partners, being the project by an African design studio - but rather on the assumption that this contest in São Tomé and Príncipe can replicate mismatches occurred in other contexts<sup>17</sup>, by providing inadequate solutions, exceeding the demand from middle-class residents and not representing a solution for lower income people, resulting in an evident mismatch. The People's Republic of China has achieved hegemony in the international low cost construction sector, both in industry and in construction, through massive production and large-scale solutions, thus raising fears on a hypothetical importation of models, inadequacy of scale or architectural and social homogenization, which might prove especially inadequate in a context that has traditionally affirmed their identity through diversity.

The announcement of an hypothetical suspension of the project has intensified this debate, by putting opposing arguments face to face. Nevertheless, regardless of the future developments of this process, it should already lead to reflect upon what is to be learnt both from the project and from the scarce discussion it raised.

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<sup>16</sup> As stated by Arch. Alexandre D'Alva, *Instituto Nacional de Habitação e Imobiliária* [the National Institute for Housing and Real Estate] in 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. ZHUANG, 2014.

## FINAL REMARKS

The large scale, the socioeconomic relevance and the spatial impact of a 'new city' might have led to think it would become an important issue of debate in civil society. Nevertheless, surprisingly, it doesn't seem to have been the case: the discussion of this process ended up being quite fragile, and targeted towards the confrontation of personal non-informed opinions and political affiliations. Through repeated demonstrations of political supremacy, a sweeping project promptly emerged and rapidly faded away, and in face of an absence of in-depth civil discussion and mobilization, no responsibility seems to have been raised. This void risks creating opportunities for individual gains and abuses, repeating misconceptions and harming the common good, in a cycle that must be interrupted.

Understanding the potential of public debates as opportunities for the construction of a civil conscience, it is indeed hoped that this process might finally contribute to awakening the civil society and to raising awareness towards its role in discussing and deciding the future of their common resources, of which the built environment is relevant part. In this process, the task of civil mobilization towards exerting pressure on regulatory authorities might contribute to enforce their responsibility in a more equitable management of assets, understanding that even in face of the limitation of economic resources, public administration in fact holds the power and obligation to manage and guide actions of different agents towards the common good.

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