



COLONIAL AND  
POST-COLONIAL  
LANDSCAPES I

ARCHITECTURES,  
CITIES,  
INFRASTRUCTURES  
IN AFRICA

COAST TO COAST RESEARCHERS' BOOK

**Colonial and Post-Colonial Landscapes I  
Architecture, Cities, Infrastructures in Africa**

**Coast to Coast Researchers' book**

*Coordination*

**Ana Vaz Milheiro**

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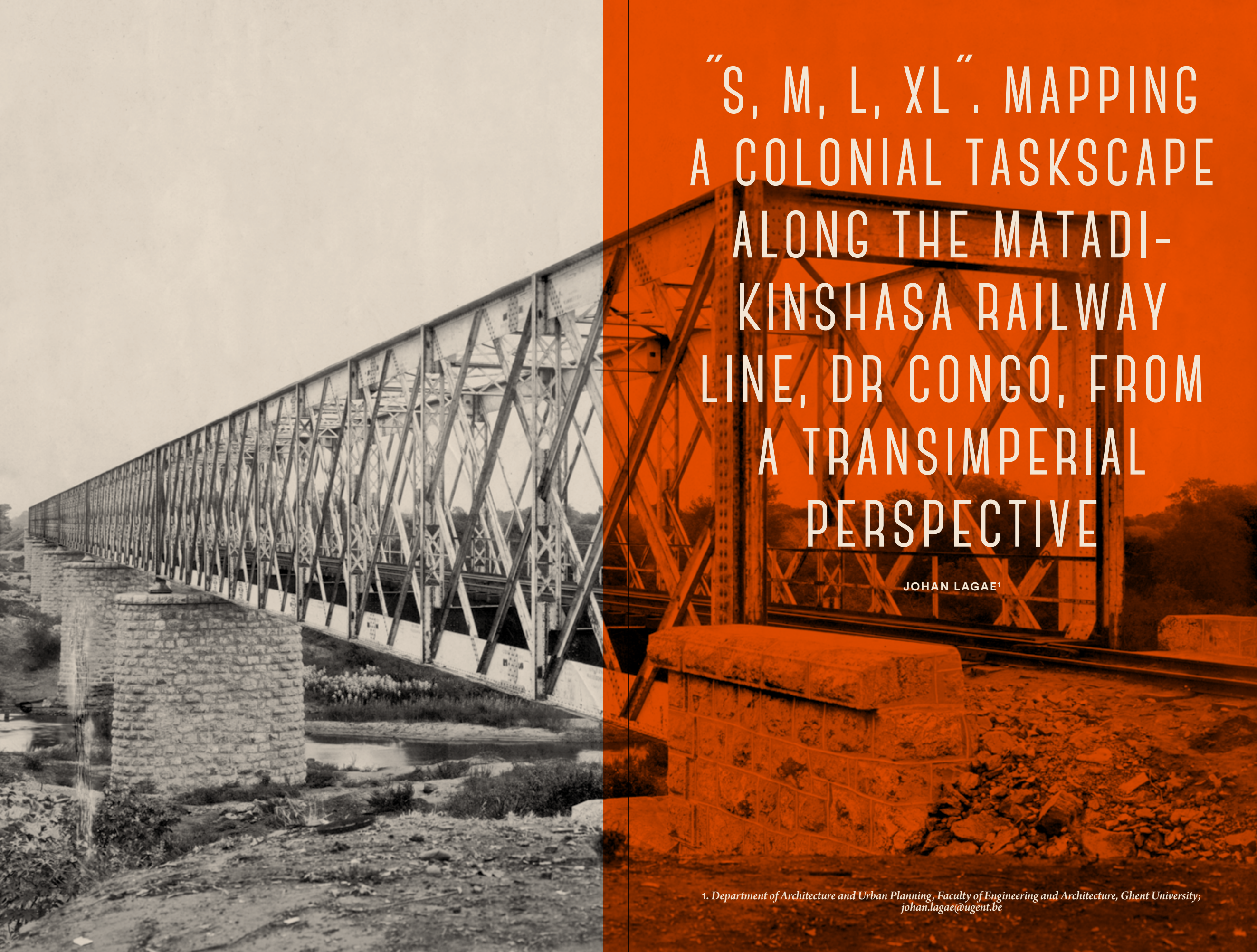
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“S, M, L, XL”. MAPPING  
A COLONIAL TASKSCAPE  
ALONG THE MATADI-  
KINSHASA RAILWAY  
LINE, DR CONGO, FROM  
A TRANSIMPERIAL  
PERSPECTIVE

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## ON THE POLITICS, POETICS AND PROMISE OF INFRASTRUCTURE

In 2010, the year coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the independence of the Belgian Congo – the country now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – *Magnum* photographer Carl De Keyzer presented a series of photographs of vestiges in the former Belgian colony in an exhibition at the Antwerp Museum for Photography entitled *Congo (belge)*.<sup>1</sup> One of the photographs on show depicts a young Congolese policeman with automatic rifle standing in front the remnants of a metal bridge near the port city of Matadi.<sup>2</sup> This bridge, constructed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, originally served as a crucial crossing over the Mpozo river for trains travelling from Matadi to the inland capital city of Kinshasa, the city formerly known as Léopoldville.<sup>3</sup> The photograph depicts a piece of infrastructure which is now obsolete: the railway tracks are completely overgrown and the metal bridge is rusty. Somewhat ironically, given the derelict state of the infrastructure, an inscription in green paint on one of the bridge's beams reads: “metals in the service of man. w.w.w.com”, while the presence of the policeman suggests that the bridge, despite its current state, has still kept some of its original strategic importance. In 2009, the Congolese photographer Kiripi Katembo produced his much acclaimed series *Un regard*, capturing vignettes of the city of Kinshasa via reflections in puddles of stagnant water that abound in the capital city's streets.<sup>4</sup> The surprise effect generated by the upside down mirroring of scenes photographed in these pools is particularly striking in two images that capture the remnants of railway tracks, which in the heyday of colonialism connected sites of economic production in the colonial capital city to the Matadi–Kinshasa railway line. Again, we are confronted here with an infrastructure that, at least according to Western standards, is ‘failing’. Yet Katembo's photographs should not be read as indictments of DR Congo as a ‘failed state’. Rather they testify of the continuing relevance of this infrastructure, even at a moment in time when transport by train has come to an almost complete standstill in Kinshasa: today these tracks function as important short-cuts for the large crowds of the city's inhabitants, or *Kinois* as they are commonly called, making their way on foot through the immense urban territory of Congo's capital city in their daily struggle for survival. De Keyzer's photograph of the Mpozo bridge equally is not to be seen as a nostalgic portrait of a now ruined infrastructure which once

1. Carl De Keyzer, *Congo (belge)*, [with a text by David Van Reybrouck], Lannoo: Tielt, 2010. See also <https://www.carldekeyzer.com/congo-belge> (accessed on 3 January 2021). This exhibition was accompanied by a second exhibition, entitled *Congo belge en images*, curated by Carl De Keyzer and Johan Lagae and displaying a series of almost 100 late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century photographs of colonial Congo.
2. <https://www.carldekeyzer.com/congo-belge/xnzpvrvd6gdbofybkfq2i0kb35p4sy> (accessed on 3 January 2021).
3. Throughout this chapter, I will use the contemporary names of localities and write Kinshasa rather than Léopoldville, Mbanza Ngungy rather than Thysville, or Lubumbashi rather than Elisabethville. The port city of Matadi has retained the name it had during colonial times.
4. After being displayed at the Picha Biennale in Lubumbashi in 2010, the series *Un regard* quickly gained international acclaim and was included, among others, in the exhibition *Beauté Congo 1926-2015 Congo Kitoko*, which was on show in 2015 at the Paris' *Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain*. Photographs of this series are widely available on the internet, see a.o. <https://www.featureshoot.com/2014/04/kiripi-katembo-siku-un-regard/>. For a very insightful analysis of the work of Katembo, see Tristan Gilloux, “Persée au Congo: la ville africaine dans le miroir de la ruse photographique de Kiripi Katembo”, *Play Urban*, n° 1, 2016, pp. 153-156.

was the pride of the Belgian colonial conquest of Central Africa, nor are the other images of his *Congo (belge)* project depicting houses, churches, or schools built in colonial times, for that matter. Rather, the *Congo (belge)* series is an effort to capture the legacy of the – often surreal – physical manifestation of the colonial ambitions of a small country that colonized a territory in Central Africa about 80 times its own size. Or, to use a trope from colonial literature, De Keyzer's photographs testify to the fact that in Congo “le petit belge a vu grand”.<sup>5</sup>

These two photographs offer a useful starting point for a reflection on the relevance of infrastructure as a topic of investigation for architectural historians interested in things colonial. For while scholarship on colonial architecture and urban planning has significantly expanded in the last two decades, its focus has seldomly been, until recently, on the railway lines, roads, port infrastructures, pipelines, factories and mining compounds, warehouses, or workers' camps that shaped colonial territories and that in many colonial territories make up a major, if not the largest part of the colonial built environment. Architectural historians, I contend, have much to learn from the ‘infrastructural turn’ that occurred in other disciplinary fields. Anthropologists have in recent years (re-)discovered infrastructure as an “exciting” – rather than a “boring” – subject of inquiry precisely because of its periodic breakdown and malfunction, leading to ethnographic inquiries of clogged pipelines and potholes, especially in (urban) contexts of the so-called Global South.<sup>6</sup> But within this disciplinary field, as well as in the domain of science and technology studies (STS), infrastructure has also been employed as a means to construct alternative narratives of modernity, that allow clichéd notions of efficiency and functionality to be countered. Moreover, ethnographers, geographers and STS scholars alike have by now pointed out the possibility of reading infrastructure “politically”, illustrating the extent to which pipelines, highways and electric lines not only “embody visions of progress” but also “serve vested interests, enforce regimes of control, and create geographies of abjection and segregation”, while at the same time also “provoking claims and demands from below”.<sup>7</sup> “Infrastructure”, Marco De Nunzio has it, “has not only shaped ideas of the public good, but also informed people's experiences and understandings of citizenship as a right to infrastructural provision and connectivity”.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in line with what Brian Larkin argued in a seminal 2013 article, infrastructure as the “physical network through which goods, ideas, waste, power, people and finance are trafficked” can also speak of something else than just bio- and technopolitics. For it can “release different meanings and structure politics in various ways: through the aesthetic and the sensorial, desire and promise”.<sup>9</sup> Infrastructure

5. Pierre Halen has skillfully unpacked the multivalent nature of the trope in colonial literature in his book *Le petit belge a vu grand. Une littérature coloniale* (Brussels: Editions Labor, 1993).
6. Marco Di Nunzio provides a useful and concise synthesis of this emerging field on knowledge, including an extensive bibliography in a piece entitled “Anthropology of Infrastructure”, published in *Governing Infrastructure Interfaces - Research Note*, n° 1, June 2018, 4 pages.
7. Marco Di Nunzio, “Anthropology of Infrastructure”, p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
9. Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, 2013, pp. 327-343 (p. 327).

can have a “poetic mode” in that its “form is loosened from technical function”, and recently other scholars have further elaborated this notion of “the promise of infrastructure”.<sup>10</sup>

### SEEING LANDSCAPES AS TASKSCAPES

While such work can help us, as architectural historians working on colonial territories, to broaden our understanding of the politics, uses and imaginaries embedded in infrastructural elements in the areas we study, we might also learn from the research produced in the disciplinary field of *Landscape Urbanism* in order to find ways of thinking and mapping infrastructure across scales, from the small (a physical artefact, a building), to the medium (a street, a urban site or a complete urban territory) to the large (a region, an administrative territory, a colony) to the extra-large and global scale. This particular field significantly opened up an understanding of cities through the lens of both landscape and infrastructural networks.<sup>11</sup> While much of that work, which flourished in particular during the early 2000s, remains mostly limited to present-day European or North American contexts, it did much for the development of novel graphic and cartographic tools to visualize and map in compelling ways flows of people, goods, materials and energies across scalar dimensions. Pierre Bélanger’s 2017 book *Landscape as Infrastructure* comes to mind here, as well as more recent work that engages with mapping territories of extraction between the camp and the city, or with local and global petroleumscapes.<sup>12</sup> Through testing such mapping techniques and visualizations of networks in colonial settings, we can complement the growing body of STS-scholarship on technology in (post)colonial territories.<sup>13</sup> Similarly it is timely to investigate the spatial dimensions of urban machinery and regimes of distributing water or electricity, for instance, which were crucial in governing colonial cities, as some historians of Africa have recently started to investigate.<sup>14</sup> For such research can help in refining the use of

10. Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta & Hannah Appel (eds.), *The promise of infrastructure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.
11. For an overview of this interdisciplinary field, see Charles Waldheim (ed.), *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2006. For a specific monographic example, see Kazys Varnelis (ed.), *The Infrastructural City. Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, Barcelona: Actar, 2009.
12. Pierre Bélanger (ed.), *Landscape as infrastructure: a base primer*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017; Jeannette Sordi et al. (eds.), *The Camp and the City. Territories of Extraction*, LISt Lab & Messagerie Libri Milano, 2017. For various new cartographies and ways of mapping global petroleumscapes, see among others Richard Misrach & Kate Orff, *Petrochemical America*, New York: Aperture, 2014; Eve Blau (ed.), *Baku: oil and urbanism*, Zürich: Park Books, 2018; and research projects on petroleumscapes led by Carola Hein at the TU Delft.
13. An early example of this is Daniel Headrick’s still seminal study *The tools of empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Oxford university press, 1981. For a more recent example, see David Arnold, “Europe, technology, and colonialism in the 20th century”, *History and Technology*, vol. 21, n° 1, 2005, pp. 85-106. Scholars also have started to formulate a postcolonial critique on such STS-studies that see technology in the Global South as an pure result of export from the colonial centre or metropole to the colonial periphery. An interesting initiative in this respect is the STS-Africa network, which brings together a wide array scholars from various origins and disciplinary fields, see: <https://lost-research-group.org/sts-africa/about-sts-africa/>.
14. Interesting historical research work on urban *équipement*, such as electricity, in francophone colonial contexts is compiled in Chantal Chanson-Jabeur et al. (eds.), *Politiques d’équipement et services urbains dans les villes du Sud*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004. For some discussions in other colonial contexts, see Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore. Power Relations and the Built Environment*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003; Freek Colombijn and Joost Coté (eds.), *Cars, conduits, and kampongs: the modernization of the Indonesian city, 1920-1960*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Michel Foucault’s notion of “governmentality” in colonial settings.<sup>15</sup>

Looking at colonial territories from the perspective of landscapes and infrastructures can also serve as an invitation to architectural historians to shift their interest from landmark buildings and signature urban landscapes to the realm of the more mundane, the banal, or, to use Alex Bremner’s words, to ‘grey architecture’ that provided the crucial scaffolding for the colonial enterprise.<sup>16</sup> This opens up new venues for research going beyond the focus on representation and the “politics of design” of colonial architecture and urban planning, a trope which gained prominence ever since insights from postcolonial theory entered architectural historiography in the course of the 1990s and has remained rather dominant till now.<sup>17</sup> For if the colonialism was indeed also a cultural project, as Edward Saïd taught us, it was nevertheless triggered, first and foremost, by economic interest.<sup>18</sup> Many, if not the largest part of colonial endeavours were based on the logic of extractive economies, which induced disruptive regimes of forced labour as well as major transformations of existing landscapes.<sup>19</sup> In colonial contexts, it is useful therefore to think of landscape in terms of production and labour, as cultural geographer Don Mitchell has done.<sup>20</sup> Here, however, we propose using the broader notion of “taskscape”, which social anthropologist Tim Ingold coined as an alternative to “landscape” in order to describe a socially constructed space of human activity, understood as having spatial boundaries and delimitations.<sup>21</sup> Apart from inviting us to think in other than the purely visual register – Ingold explicitly points out the acoustic when explaining his notion – the advantage of drawing on this notion of taskscape consists of the attention it draws on temporality as a taskscape; it is about being perpetually in process, rather than in a static or otherwise immutable state. This is useful when thinking of the legacies of – often degraded – colonial infrastructures. Instead of reading these as static ruins, it is more productive, as Ann Laura Stoler argued when writing on “imperial debris”, to view them from the perspective of an ongoing process of “ruination”.<sup>22</sup>

What I propose then, is a plea to rethink the role we can play as architectural historians in investigating colonial infrastructures and landscapes by drawing on a wide array of ideas and concepts borrowed from various disciplinary

15. For an important and still stimulating study on colonial spatial governmentality, drawing on a profound rereading on Michel Foucault’s work, see Stephen Legg, *Spaces of colonialism: Delhi’s urban governmentality*, Blackwell Publishers: Malden, 2007.
16. Alex Bremner (ed.), *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016 (in particular page 13 of the introduction); Ibid., “Blue, Green and Grey: Toward a new history of architecture, infrastructure and empire”, paper presented at *A World of Architectural History-conference*, The Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL), London, 2018.
17. For a discussion of the shifts in historiography in this domain, see Johan Lagae & Bernard Toulrier, “De l’outre-mer au transnational. Glissements de perspectives dans l’historiographie de l’architecture coloniale et postcoloniale”, *Revue de l’Art*, n° 186, 2014, pp. 45-56.
18. In addition to Edward Saïd’s seminal 1978 book *Orientalism*, we can point here at Nicholas Dirks’ classic study *Colonialism and culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 1997).
19. Here we are largely excluding settler colonialism, which was often triggered by other agendas and developed through other dynamics.
20. For a concise discussion of Don Mitchell’s approach, see John Wylie, *Landscape*, Key Ideas in Geography-series, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, pp. 99-108
21. Ingold, Tim. (1993) “The Temporality of the Landscape”, *World Archaeology*, 25(2): pp. 152-174
22. Ann Laura Stoler (ed.), *Imperial debris: on ruins and ruination*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013

fields, while complementing these by bringing attention to their material, spatial and multi-scalar dimensions, ranging from the local to the global. This is, of course, much to ask for. To sketch out what the potential of such an exercise might be, I will focus in what follows on one particular piece of colonial infrastructure and its related taskscape, which I already hinted at by starting from the two earlier-mentioned photographs of Carl De Keyzer and Kiripi Katembo: the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line that formed the economic backbone of the Lower Congo region during colonial times.

#### “PENETRATING” THE “HEART OF DARKNESS”

In 1958, the year of the famous Brussels’ World’s Fair and only two years before Congo would gain its independence, René J. Cornet published the fourth and extended edition of his acclaimed and award-winning book *La bataille du rail*. In this bestselling volume of just over 400 pages, the first edition of which had originally appeared in 1947, Cornet presents a detailed account of the construction of the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line, from the first field explorations initiated around 1884, to the long and troublesome execution which started in 1890 in the port city of Matadi and was only concluded by the official inauguration of the arrival of the railway line in Kinshasa on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 1898.<sup>23</sup> Early in the book, Cornet explains the *raison d’être* underlying the challenging enterprise which the book’s title so compellingly evokes. Indeed, from Matadi, a site located about 150 kilometres upstream from the Atlantic Ocean, to Stanley Pool (today: Pool Malebo), the location where the colonial outpost of Léopoldville, the later Kinshasa, was founded, the Congo

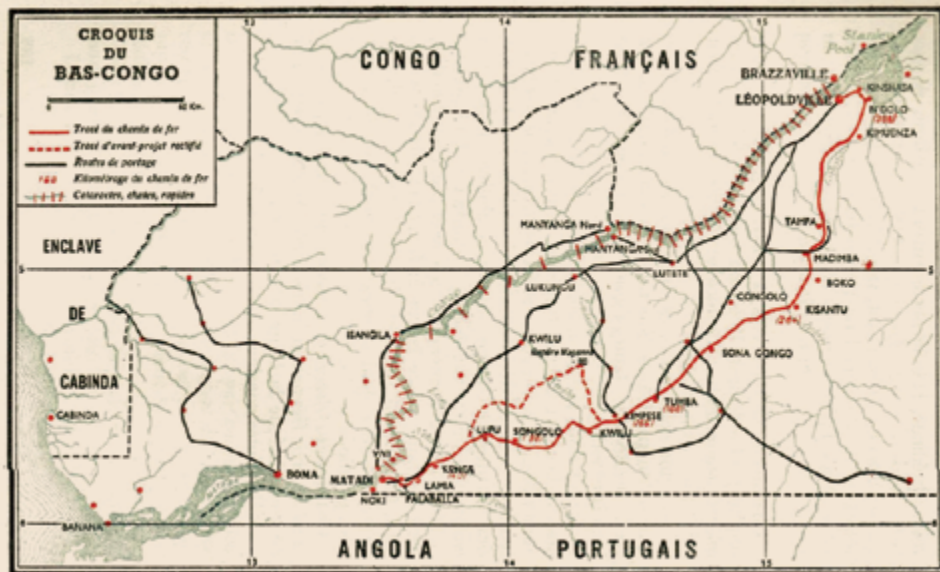


Fig. 1. Map of the Lower Congo region with an indication of the trajectories of the Routes des caravanes as well as the trajectories of the first Matadi-Kinshasa railway line (1890-1898) and the new railroad built during the 1920s. Source: René Cornet, *La bataille*, op. cit., p. 186.

23. René J. Cornet, *La bataille du rail*, Brussels: Editions L. Cuyppers, 1958 (4th edition; 1st edition: 1947). For a very extensive, yet rather hagiographic documentation of this railway line, situated in the larger networks of railroads constructed in colonial Congo, see Charles Blanchart e.a., *La rail au Congo belge. Tome 1: 1890-1920*, Brussels, Blanchart ed., 1993.

river is unnavigable over a length of about 350 kilometres, due to a series of rapids and waterfalls [Fig. 1].

This “obstacle cyclopéen”, as Cornet described it, considerably hampered an efficient economy of exploitation, as it blocked the access to and exit from the Central African hinterland which, in itself, could actually be unlocked quite easily via the fine-grained network of rivers and streams of the Congo basin, allowing one to penetrate by boat deep into what Joseph Conrad famously described as the “Heart of Darkness”. No wonder that Henri Morton Stanley, the legendary explorer who was commissioned by King Leopold II to investigate the potential of the region, reported on his return that “sans le chemin de fer, le Congo ne vaut pas un penny”.<sup>24</sup> There were, of course, trade routes in use between Matadi and Kinshasa. But late 19<sup>th</sup> century written accounts, as well as some rare photographs, testify to the horror encountered along these tracks, with corpses of carriers who died of exhaustion not being an uncommon sight.<sup>25</sup> If the Congo Free State project of King Leopold II was to have any future, no effort should be spared to construct a railway connection between Matadi and Kinshasa, even if this would inevitably entail huge challenges: large parts of the trajectory would need to be realized in an environment that was extremely hostile to construction work because of the extreme topography, especially in the region near Matadi, and because of the tropical, hot-humid climate in the Lower Congo region that burdened the acclimatization of the colonizers’ white bodies.

Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial literature and visual propaganda constructed a myth on the railroad scripted along a narrative which, on the one hand, presented the train as an “agent of civilization” and, on the other, played on a sexualized imaginary of the railroad “penetrating” previously unviolated territories.<sup>26</sup> While some echoes of this myth pervade Cornet’s book, it first and foremost reads as a celebratory account of a remarkable engineering feat, successfully accomplished under the supervision of military officer and entrepreneur Albert Thys, one of Belgium’s prominent “heroes” of this pioneering period.<sup>27</sup> Having been an event with a high level of media coverage in contemporary press and colonial journals, the visual record of

24. This – French version – of Stanley’s phrase quickly became a widely cited quote in colonial literature, most often without precise reference. In Stanley’s writings we can find various versions of the original, but an important one is to be found in Henri M. Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding of the Free State*, vol. 1, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, London, 1885, p. 463. For the historical context of Stanley’s phrase, see Henri Nicolai, “L’image de l’Afrique centrale au moment de la création de l’État Indépendant du Congo”, in Jean Stengers (ed.), *Le Centenaire de l’État Indépendant du Congo. Recueil d’études*, Brussels: ARSOM, 1988 (esp. p. 20 and footnote 34).

25. A rare photograph depicting such a scene is reproduced in Carl De Keyzer and Johan Lagae (ed.), *Congo belge en images*, Tiel: Lannoo, 2010, Plate xviii, pp. 34-35 (accompanied by an explanatory text written by the Congolese historian Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu).

26. In his study of colonial literature Pierre Halen has unpacked this myth for the context of the Belgian Congo, referring to similar studies of Edmond Maestri for the francophone colonies (see Halen, *Le petit belge*, op. cit., pp. 270-273), while Raymond Corbey has pointed at this myth as a trope in late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century colonial postcards from Central Africa. See Raymond Corbey, *Wildheid en beschaving. De Europese verbeelding van Afrika*, Nijmegen: Ambo, 1989, p. 52.

27. For an extensive hagiographic biography of Albert Thys (1849-1915), see the *Biographie coloniale belge*, vol. IV, 1955, pp. 875-881 ([http://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/notices\\_thys\\_albert\\_jean\\_baptiste\\_joseph](http://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/notices_thys_albert_jean_baptiste_joseph)).

the enterprise of building the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line is immense.<sup>28</sup> In Cornet's book, several photographs present the reader with portraits of a wide array of the pioneering colonial men involved, while others vividly depict the challenges to be overcome. Many images zoom in on the territory's accidented topography with its steep, rocky cliffs, along which the railway line often curves dangerously. Some photographs incorporated in Cornet's book provide a glimpse of the human labour involved in preparing the terrain and constructing large-scale infrastructures such as bridges, tunnels, artificial slopes and retaining walls, especially in the first section of the trajectory in the proximity of the port city of Matadi, a territory described in contemporary sources as particularly hostile.<sup>29</sup>

While such late 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographs of construction sites at the time acted as vignettes of progress realized, today we can, as visual historian Christraud M. Geary proposes, "read them against the grain", and approach them as accounts of the blunt and gruesome labour regime, which underpinned the colonial penetration of the Central African territory.<sup>30</sup> The construction of this first railroad indeed came at a great financial and, more importantly, human cost. An often repeated quote in early sources reads that "chaque traverse du chemin de fer du Congo représentait un cadavre!" ("every railway sleeper of the Congo railway counts for a corpse!").<sup>31</sup> Cornet's book does not remain silent on the huge mortality rates among those who worked on the railway line during the eight years of its construction. It cites an often mentioned statistic: 132 Europeans and 1,800 Africans and "Asiatiques" lost their lives in building the railway line. Yet, the image on the cover of 1950s editions of the book conveys a totally different message: it depicts the muscled, virile body of an African worker, in the form of a sculpture by Arthur Dupagne, a Belgian artist responsible for some of the most emblematic monuments celebrating Belgium's *mission civilisatrice* in Central Africa.<sup>32</sup> This choice is not a coincidence, as Dupagne also authored the *Monument au chemin de fer à Léopoldville*, erected in Kinshasa in 1948, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the construction of the railway line. Its iconography is in line with late 19<sup>th</sup>-century propaganda of the railway line as an instrument of progress, while it also, tellingly, paid tribute to the 132 fallen Europeans, all listed with their individual names, and the anonymous mass of African and "Asian" labourers.

All in all Cornet's *La bataille du rail* remains, just like many of the contemporary sources, a celebratory narrative framed through the lens of na-

28. The Africa Museum in Tervuren holds large collections of photographs on this railroad, but one also finds extensive visual documentation in the archives of the missionary congregations involved in the construction. See inter alia the photo album "Catalogue des photographies prises par les aumôniers du chemin de fer du Congo pendant l'existence de la mission de Matadi, fondée par sa grandeur monseigneur Stillemans évêque de Gand, 1891-1899", which is conserved by Kadoc, Leuven (Fund KADOC KFHI841) and which can be consulted online via: [http://depot.lias.be/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE2486317](http://depot.lias.be/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2486317)

29. A good example is Edmond Picard, *En Congolie*, Brussels: Ferdinand Larquier, 1896.

30. Christraud M. Geary, *In and Out of Focus. Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960*, Washington: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2002, p. 39.

31. Cornet, *La bataille*, op. cit., pp. 377-378.

32. For a rather conventional art historical situation of Dupagne in the colonial art scene, see Jacqueline Guisset (ed.), *Le Congo et l'art Belge 1880-1960*, Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 2003, esp. pp. 198-199

tional pride: the construction of the Matadi-Léopoldville railroad served as a testimony to the fact that, above all, "le petit belge a vu grand au Congo".<sup>33</sup> As such, it differs significantly from the *Gruelgeschichte* on the construction of the new Matadi-Kinshasa railway line which Jules Marchal, a former colonial administrator, published between 1999 and 2000 as part of a trilogy on forced labour in colonial Congo. His painstakingly detailed reconstruction of the construction of the new trajectory during the 1920s, indeed stressed almost exclusively the fact that this new piece of colonial infrastructure, just like the previous one, came at great human cost.<sup>34</sup> Yet, we want to argue here that as a piece of colonial infrastructure, the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line in fact urges us to tell another story. Gaining a full understanding of it requires engaging with a more complex and wide-ranging scalar perspective that goes beyond the strict Belgo-Congolese framework which still dominates large part of the current historiography on colonial Congo.<sup>35</sup>

#### SITUATING THE RAILROAD IN A TRANSIMPERIAL PERSPECTIVE

As historian Jean-Luc Vellut has long argued, the Congo Free State was a well-connected territory and a truly international enterprise from the very beginning, not least because at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 King Leopold II had obtained the rule over the territory on the explicit condition that it would remain a free trade zone open to other European powers.<sup>36</sup> Cornet's description of the collection of the library of Matadi demonstrates that already in the early days of colonization news from all corners of Europe arrived in the Congo Free State, albeit it with some delay: "dans une vaste salle de lecture on trouve plus de quarante quotidiens (belges, français, anglais, allemands, portugais, italiens), soixante revues périodiques et trois mille cinq cents volumes qui font l'objet d'un service d'abonnements".<sup>37</sup> Historian Vincent Viaene tellingly wrote that the Congo Free State was an international colony "in which international public opinion disposed of more potential eyes and ears than in any other colony".<sup>38</sup> Moreover, early travel accounts teach us that boats navigating between Antwerp and Matadi made regular stop-overs in Tenerife and Lisbon among others, creating connections and encounters that cannot be grasped via the simple colony-metropole framework.

33. For a key official and nationalist narrative on the railway line, published at the time of its inauguration, see a.o. A. Gilson, "Le chemin de fer du Congo", in F. Goffart, *L'oeuvre colonial du roi en Afrique. Résultats de vingt ans*, Brussels: Vve Monnom, 1898, pp. 73-109.

34. Jules Marchal, *Travail forcé pour le rail: l'histoire du Congo 1910-1945*, Borgloon: Bellings, 2000. The other two volumes are *Travail forcé pour le cuivre et pour l'or* (1999) and *Travail forcé pour l'huile de palme de lord Leverhulme* (2001).

35. Tellingly, almost all of the contributions included in a recent survey of the most recent historical research on Congo provide analyses that remain within the strict Belgo-Congolese framework. See Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro and Guy Vantemsche (eds.), *Le Congo colonial. Une histoire en questions*, Renaissance du Livre, Waterloo, 2020.

36. Jean-Luc Vellut, "Réseaux transnationaux dans l'économie politique du Congo Léopoldien, c. 1885-1910", in L. Marfaing & B. Reinwald (eds.), *Afrikanische Beziehungen, Netzwerke und Räume* (Münster: LIT Verlag, Münster, 2001), pp. 131-146. See also Jean-Luc Vellut, *Congo. Ambitions et désenchantements 1880-1960. Carrefours du passé au centre de l'Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 2017).

37. Cornet, *La bataille*, op. cit., p. 322.

38. Vincent Viaene, 'Internationalism and the Congo question: an introduction 1875-1905', paper presented at the International colloquium *Religion, colonization and decolonization in Congo 1885-1960*, Leuven, November 8th - 10th, 2010.

The early colonization of Central Africa benefitted largely from already existing patterns of connectivity and mobility, such as pre-colonial trade routes and commercial networks.<sup>39</sup> Urbanization emerged in many occasions precisely on those sites where inhabitation existed already.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, earlier political and cultural entities, such as the famous Kongo Kingdom, remained influential to some extent, even if their geographies sometimes were cut up by boundaries defined in the context of the “Scramble for Africa” that took place during the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference.<sup>41</sup> We should not forget, however, that it often took decades to go from the division of the African continent, as agreed upon in Berlin by drawing abstract lines on a map, to an effective implementation of borders between colonial territories on the ground, based on a complex and in many cases convoluted process requiring negotiations in European diplomatic circles as well as the concluding of treaties between explorers and African customary chiefs.

The lengthy process of installing the border between the Congo Free State and Portuguese-ruled Angola forms a case in point. The first Belgian agents arriving in the Lower Congo region needed to position themselves with caution within an already existing and competitive economic milieu as French, Dutch and most importantly Portuguese traders had preceded them for decades, often in the context of the Atlantic slave trade which had thrived in sites like Boma.<sup>42</sup> Even in terms of the *mission civilisatrice*, Belgians could not claim to be the pioneers in the region, as protestant missionaries of British and Scandinavian origin had already been erecting small outposts of religious conversion for several years before the first Catholic congregation, the missionaries from Scheut, arrived from the metropole in the region around 1888.<sup>43</sup>

Such global, regional and local dynamics impacted strongly on the financing, construction and functioning of the Matadi-Kinshasa railway. Funding for construction work was to a large extent secured by playing out ongoing rivalries between Belgium and Great Britain, as both sought to tap into the – albeit until then still quite uncertain – economic potential of the Central African hinterland. British influence in the area would remain strong, particularly during the first decades of Belgian colonization. But so was that of French colonials who, on their way to *l’Afrique Equatoriale Française*, were required to take the Matadi-Kinshasa railroad and then embark on

39. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (ed.), *L’Afrique des routes. Histoire de la circulation des hommes, des richesses et des idées à travers le continent africain*, exhibition catalogue, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris: Actes Sud, 2017.

40. For scholarship that pays attention to such pre-existing settlement patterns in sites that became important colonial cities like Kinshasa and Matadi, see: Léon De Saint Moulin, *les anciens villages des environs de Kinshasa*, Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 197; Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu, “La région de Matadi dans les années 1880”, in Jean Stengers (ed.), *Le centenaire de l’État Indépendant du Congo. Recueil d’études*, Bruxelles: Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-mer, 1988, pp. 323-349.

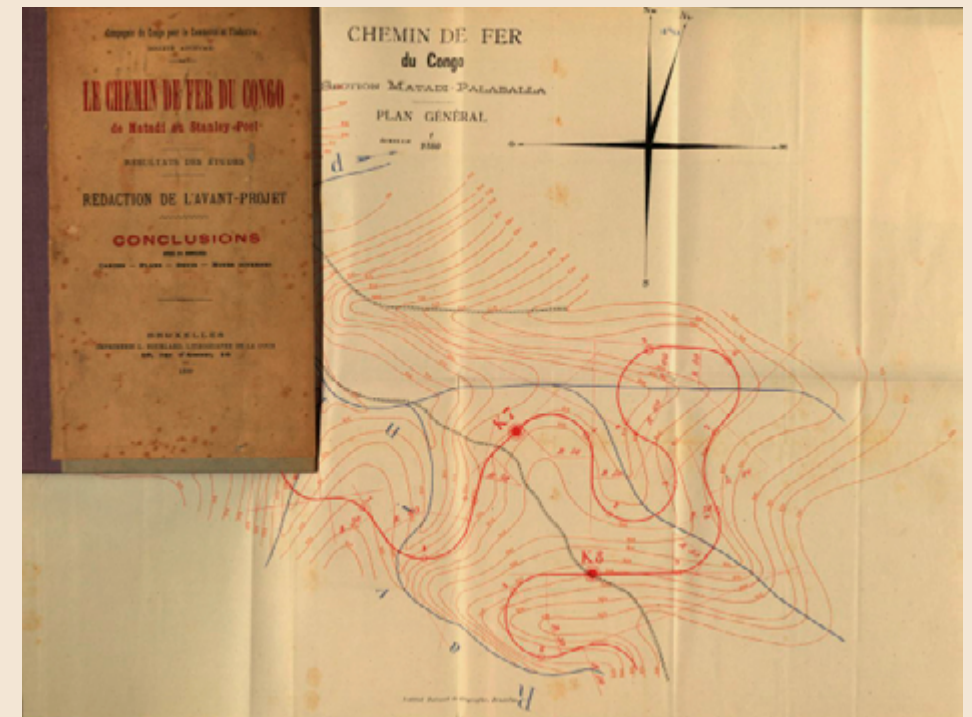
41. On the complex geography of the Kongo Kingdom in the *longue durée*, see various contributions in Koen Bostoen & Inge Brinkman (eds.), *The Kongo Kingdom: the origins, dynamics and cosmopolitan culture of an African polity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

42. Historian Francois Bontinck has written excellent detailed studies of this Portuguese presence. See also Johan Lagae, Thomas De Keyser & Jef Vervoort, *Boma 1880-1920. Colonial capital city or cosmopolitan trading post?*, [cd-rom], A&S Books/KMMA, Gent/Tervuren, 2005.

43. The Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) initiated its prospection in the Lower Congo region around 1879 and became installed in Kinshasa in the early 1880s, while the Svenska Missionsförbundet (SMF) became active in the Lower Congo region in 1878.

a ferry to cross the Congo river at the Stanley Pool to reach their destination, because the construction on the famous *chemin de fer Congo-Océan* connection between Pointe Noire and Brazzaville would only start in 1921 and last until 1934.<sup>44</sup> Yet, it was the tensions between Belgium and Portugal regarding the control of the accessibility of this part of Africa that impacted most directly on the construction of the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line. At the Berlin Conference, King Leopold II had secured that the estuary of the Congo river would become part of the territory of the Congo Free State, but the obtained tract of land under his rule bordering the Atlantic Ocean remained very small and squeezed in between two Portuguese owned territories: the enclave of Cabinda to the North and Angola to the South [see Fig. 1]. In geopolitical terms, the building of the railroad thus was an undertaking of the highest strategic order. Ongoing discussions regarding the precise trajectory of the border between the Congo Free State and Angola complicated early construction work of the railroad, especially in the immediate surroundings of Matadi, which, in fact, was in very close proximity to the Angolan border [see Fig. 1].<sup>45</sup> Given the challenging topography in the area of and near the port city, the Belgian engineers working on the first railroad project thus had very limited space for manoeuvre in defining possible scenarios for the most

Fig. 2. Plan of “Chemin de fer du Congo. Section Matadi – Palaballa”, 1899. Source: *Le chemin de fer du Matadi au Stanley Pool. Résultats des Etudes. Rédaction de l’avant-projet. Conclusions*, Brussels: Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l’Industrie, 1889, n.p.



44. This was still the trajectory taken by the famous French novelist André Gide on his way to Central Africa in 1925, to investigate the devastating human costs linked to the realisation of Congo Océan railway, see André Gide, *Voyage au Congo*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1927 (Ed. 1993, Paris, Gallimard), p. 15.

45. At the Berlin conference it was decided that this border would follow the course of the Congo river from the Ocean to the site of Noki, some 9 kilometres from where the future port city of Matadi would be built. Just above Noki, it would turn inland along a horizontal line drawn on the map, yet tracing this precise trajectory on the ground was still subject of some negotiation. For a discussion of the definition of the border between the Congo Free State and Angola, and the related border conflicts, see from a Belgian colonial perspective, see Pierre Jentgen, *Les frontières du Congo belge*, Brussels: Institut Royal Colonial belge, 1952.

efficient trajectory. A plan of extremely sinuous trajectory of the railway in the section of Palaballa, included in a preliminary study published in 1889, leaves little doubt on the complexity of the undertaking [see Fig. 2].<sup>46</sup>

Not surprisingly, this section significantly hampered the usefulness of the whole enterprise, and during the 1920s, it became necessary to reroute the railway line, especially in the region in close proximity of Matadi, as the initially executed trajectory proved much too cumbersome for large and heavy trains to navigate. This led to long diplomatic negotiations with Portugal as it was immediately clear that the most efficient technical solution implied that part of the new trajectory should be built on Portuguese-ruled territory. In exchange for the small area of 3 km<sup>2</sup> near the M'Poza river that would allow the Belgian railway engineers to proceed with the best spatial solution for the new railway line, the Belgian government finally agreed in 1927 to give Portugal an immense tract of land measuring no less than 3,500 km<sup>2</sup>, the so-called *Botte de Dilolo*, located at a significant distance to the east. This exchange needs to be understood as part of the larger strategy underscoring the construction of the Benguela railway line which would link the port city of Lobito in Angola to the southern region of the then Belgian Congo, thus providing an alternative and efficient route to bring minerals from the Congo to the metropole, avoiding the complicated trajectories from Lubumbashi to the then Rhodesia and from there to harbours situated in Mozambique or South Africa. But the swap of land would also allow Belgium's rival colonial power to tap more efficiently into a very profitable region, rich in diamonds and copper.<sup>47</sup> This episode illustrates that while political forces underscored the division of the African continent among European powers, their economic agendas often forced them to allow flows and connectivity across colonial and imperial borders. Railway lines on the continent thus introduced a spatial order that differed and at times even opposed administrative divisions. Following such infrastructural lines not only allow us to gain a better understanding of what Guilia Scotto has recently termed "colonial and postcolonial logistics" that defy political frontiers,<sup>48</sup> but also to write alternative histories of specific places in Africa, drawing on a notion like "portals of globalization" that speaks of how populations engaged with the global condition in a specific locality.<sup>49</sup> Understanding the Congolese city of Lubumbashi as an urban centre connected until the 1950s to the outside world primarily via railroad connections to *l'Afrique Australe*, all the way to Cape Town, as well as to Lobito in Angola and Beira in Mozambique, rather than to Kinshasa,

46. See the published report entitled *Le chemin de fer du Matadi au Stanley Pool. Résultats des Etudes. Rédaction de l'avant-projet. Conclusions*, Brussels: Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l'Industrie, 1889.
47. For a discussion based on diplomatic correspondence between Belgian and Portuguese authorities, conserved in the Fund *Affaires Etrangères* of Africa Archive in Brussels, see Fien Deruyter and Jana Vandepoele, *Mapping*, op. cit., pp. 65-67.
48. Guilia Scotto, "Colonial and Postcolonial Logistics", *Footprint*, vol. 12, n° 2, 2018, pp. 69-86.
49. This notion was coined and is currently used in productive ways by a group of scholars working around Matthias Middell at the University of Leipzig. See the following themed issues of *Comparativ. A Journal of Global History and Comparative Studies*: "From railway juncture to portal of globalization: making globalization work in African and South Asian railway towns", *Comparativ*, n° 4, 2015; "Portals of Globalization in Africa, Asia and Latin America", *Comparativ*, vol. 27, n° 3 / 4, 2017.

for instance, helps us to see how this mining city in the Belgian Congo was actually made and shaped to a large extent by "des gens d'ailleurs", a term used in contemporary sources to mainly indicate the presence in the city of non-Belgian white colonizers, such as Portuguese, Greeks and Italians, as well as middle figures such as people having migrated from regions in Asia.<sup>50</sup>

In many ways, the Matadi-Leopoldville railway line was also built by "people from elsewhere", as Cornet points out on several occasions. While technical expertise came mainly from Belgian engineers, several of them had already gained a broad international experience in regions like Turkey, Russia or Asia minor.<sup>51</sup> Some foreign engineers were recruited as well, like André Sjökrone from Sweden.<sup>52</sup> Diplomatic manoeuvres were used to recruit the right skilled labour from abroad, as for instance when 200 "terrassiers" from Abruzzo and Calabria in Italy were headhunted by the *Compagnie du chemin de fer du Congo* because of their specific skills.<sup>53</sup> The quality of expertise of the white staff working on the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line, however, often left much to be desired.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the real "nightmare" for those supervising the construction of the Matadi-Léopoldville railway line consisted, as Cornet writes, of finding a sufficient number of black and coloured workers who could be tasked with the most cumbersome and labour intensive operations. The hardship suffered by carriers along the *Route des Caravanes* in the preceding years had left its mark: the region was gradually confronted with depopulation and whenever recruitment campaigns crossed the region in search of "hommes adultes et valides", the men who fitted that category would flee their villages. Construction work thus necessitated an active recruitment of workforce from elsewhere. Initially these came from Guinea and other regions along the West-African coast, including so-called "Crooboy", "Accras", "Sierra Leone", "Haoussas", and workers who had previously laboured on the Dakar Saint-Louis railway line.<sup>55</sup> But recruitment would also extend to the East African coast, and more specifically to Zanzibar, previously already connected to the Central African region because of a long history of trade. The recruitment remained a challenge throughout the whole building process, requiring Albert Thys to conduct intensive negotiations in high circles in Paris and London, as well as with "des intermédiaires bizarres et divers au Mozambique, aux Indes, au Zoulouland, en Chine, en Afrique du Sud, à Sumatra, au Japon".<sup>56</sup> Cornet's account as well as contemporary sources speak of tensions that rose among

50. Sofie Boonen, *Une ville construite par des « gens d'ailleurs ». Développements urbains à Élisabethville, Congo belge (actuellement Lubumbashi, RDC)*, unpublished PhD, Ghent University, 2019; Sofie Boonen and Johan Lagae, "A city constructed by «des gens d'ailleurs». Urban development and migration policies in colonial Lubumbashi, 1910-1930", *Comparativ*, n° 4, 2015, pp. 51-69.
51. A case in point is the engineer Claude Zboinski, who was involved in the first preliminary fieldwork missions in 1884. Cornet, *La bataille*, op. cit., pp. 41-42; See also the lemma on Zboinski in the *Biographie coloniale belge*: [http://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/notices\\_zboinski\\_claude\\_hyacinthe\\_th%C3%A9ophile](http://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/notices_zboinski_claude_hyacinthe_th%C3%A9ophile).
52. It should be noted here that engineering faculties of Belgian universities, like those in Liège and Ghent, were internationally acclaimed in the late 19th century and attracted many students from abroad, in particular in domains related to infrastructure and building construction.
53. Cornet, *La bataille*, p. 199.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 180. Later in his book Cornet provides the following data that speak of the colonial obsession with quantitative bureaucracy: on a total of 7,921 African workers, 1,607 came from Senegal, 4,559 from anglophone colonies, 77 from Liberia, 344 from the coastal regions of Congo and only 1,334 from local regions along the trajectory of the Matadi-Léopoldville railway line. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

this heterogeneous African labour force, with moments of conflict and strikes erupting on a regular basis. Such episodes bear witness to the agency of these workers, who at times skilfully circumvented control and punishment by retreating to the adjacent colonial territories of Portuguese Angola or *l’Afrique Equatoriale Française*, where Belgian colonial agents had no authority. Tellingly, an 1892 experiment of bringing in Chinese laborers, as a result of their successful involvement in building railways in the Dutch Indies and the United States, turned into a complete disaster. Within just a couple of weeks, of the 540 recruited Chinese workers, 300 had either succumbed under the heavy work load or fled to adjacent regions within the Congo Free State, and even as far as Zanzibar.

#### FLOWS, CONNECTIONS, AND BORDERS IN A GLOBALLY INTERCONNECTED COLONIAL TASKSCAPE

The conventional historiographical perspective on the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line has been to view it primarily, if not exclusively, as an infrastructural instrument underscoring Belgium’s extractive colonial economy, as it allowed a direct flow to be created from colony to metropole. In this spatial logic, natural resources such as ivory, rubber, palm oil, coffee or cotton, as well as minerals like diamonds and gold and metal ores like copper or cobalt were harvested and mined in the inner territory of Central Africa. They were then moved by boat to Stanley Pool along the fine-grained fluvial network of the Congo basin and subsequently transported by train from Kinshasa to Matadi, to finally, be shipped to the port city of Antwerp, the main Belgian gateway from and to the colony before airline traffic between the metropole and Central Africa became regular after 1945.<sup>57</sup> Finished products produced by metropolitan industries as well as an increasingly larger number of colonials followed the inverse route to enter the colonial territory and its market via the portal gateway of Matadi. This, however, is a very reductive view on the global interconnectedness triggered by the infrastructure of the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line. In line with the research on “spatial formats under the global condition”, initiated by Mathias Middell and in particular the way in which Geert Castryck has applied this to the African context,<sup>58</sup> but also following Jean-Luc Vellut’s plea to study the history of Congo in a much broader international perspective,<sup>59</sup> we argue that it is timely to develop a much more comprehensive mapping of the flows and connections related to the Matadi-Kinshasa railway and the colonial taskscape it produced over time. Doing so requires paying attention to complex interactions, both in and

57. As mentioned, minerals harvested in the Southern province of Katanga were transported via other routes, going south, east or west by rail, a practice that continues till this day.
58. Steffi Marung & Matthias Middell (eds.), *Spatial Formats under the global condition*, in the series *Dialectics of the Global*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019 (with a contribution by Geert Castryck). Geert Castryck also edited the themed issue of the journal *Comparativ* on railway cities as “portals of globalisation” (see footnote 49) and did fascinating work on the East African city of Kigoma: Geert Castryck, “Bordering the Lake: Transcending Spatial Orders in Kigoma-Ujiji”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 52, n° 1, 2019, pp. 109-132.
59. For a concise and clear articulation of this argument, see Jean-Luc Vellut’s critical book review of Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem’s seminal 1998 survey *Histoire du Congo. de l’héritage ancien à la République Démocratique*, which was published under the telling title «Prestige et pauvreté de l’histoire nationale. A propos d’une histoire générale du Congo» (*Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, 77 (1999), pp. 480-517). See also the references to Vellut’s work mentioned in footnote 36.

between Europe and Africa, as well as acknowledging the often particular dynamics that occurred at the margins of colonial territories, which recently have become the subject of scholars working in the field of border studies.<sup>60</sup> What is needed, in other words, is a truly transimperial perspective on this piece of colonial infrastructure which, together with the Congo river, formed the economic backbone, or, as engineer Egide Devroey put it in the early 1930s, the “artère vitale” of the Lower Congo region and the Belgian colony at large.<sup>61</sup>

The inauguration of the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line in 1898 formed a watershed moment for the development of an efficient extractive colonial economy in the Congo Free State, with increasing numbers of goods and people being moved. Slowly, but gradually, a number of colonial outposts and production sites started to emerge along the infrastructural line that changed the pre-colonial territorial order of things and initiated a process of gradual – albeit limited – urbanization in the Lower Congo region. Around the turn of the century, a network of both Protestant and Catholic missionary posts also took shape in this territory. Yet, these networks did not necessarily follow the new order installed by colonial government. The congregation of the Jesuit fathers, for instance, developed a particular regional strategy of creating a separate world of their own, an utopian Christian landscape as it were, consisting of a dense network of chapel-farms interconnected via earthen roads – 450 kilometres in total by 1910 – which only connected to the official regional backbone of the Matadi-Kinshasa railway in one specific location: the missionary post of Kisantu, situated at kilometre 247.<sup>62</sup> It was not until the 1920s, however, that a distinct colonial taskscape with a wide array of economic nodes of production really started to take shape in the Lower Congo region, drastically changing existing landscapes in the process. In 1921, the then Minister of Colonies, Louis Franck, launched an extensive public works programme for the colony, comprising transport infrastructure across the colony and the construction of public facilities in the growing urban centres, in order to provide the Belgian Congo with the infrastructural “armature économique” necessary for a more efficient “mise en valeur” of the colonial territory.<sup>63</sup> Now that the Congo had been taken over by the Belgian government from King Leopold II in 1908 and that the Great War had ended, the era of exploration and prospection of the Central African territory came to an end. What was now expected and needed from the colonial enterprise was a real return on investment, which was hampered by the old Matadi-Kinshasa railway because of its material characteristics and complex trajectories in some of its sections.

60. For a compilation of early research on the topic, see Paul Nugent & A.I. Asiwaju (eds.), *African Boundaries. Barriers, conduits and opportunities*, London: Pinter, 1996. Fascinating work on the borderland between Congo and Rwanda from a historical research was done by Gillian Mathys in her PhD entitled *People on the move: frontiers, borders, mobility and history in the Lake Kivu region 19th-20 century*, Ghent University, 2014.
61. Egide Devroey, *Le Bas-Congo: artère vitale de notre colonie*, Brussels: Goemaere, 1933.
62. Bruno De Meulder, “Mavula: An African Heterotopia in Kwango, 1895-1911”, *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 52, n° 1, 1998, pp. 20-29.
63. Strangely enough, this large investment plan of Louis Franck has not yet triggered much scholarly research. The most comprehensive historical survey of economic activities and colonial companies which were founded during this era to date is Frans Buelens, *Congo 1885-1960. Een financieel-economische geschiedenis*, Berchem: Epo, 2007.

The modernization and rerouting of the Matadi-Léopoldville railway during the 1920s was directly linked to Louis Franck's project of "mise en valeur". While changes in the trajectory near Matadi were induced by the difficulties encountered because of the extreme topography of the rocky landscape, the decision to make a major detour between kilometres 153 and 247 of the old trajectory was taken to facilitate better connections to the new sites of economic production which were popping up in the region [see Fig. 1]: from the site of Lukala where a cement plant had been founded in 1920 (kilometre 153), continuing along plantations for sugar in Moerbeke-Kwilu (kilometre 175) and for palm oil in Kolo (kilometre 193), to a quarry and crushing plant in Kiasi col (kilometre 216) [Fig. 3].

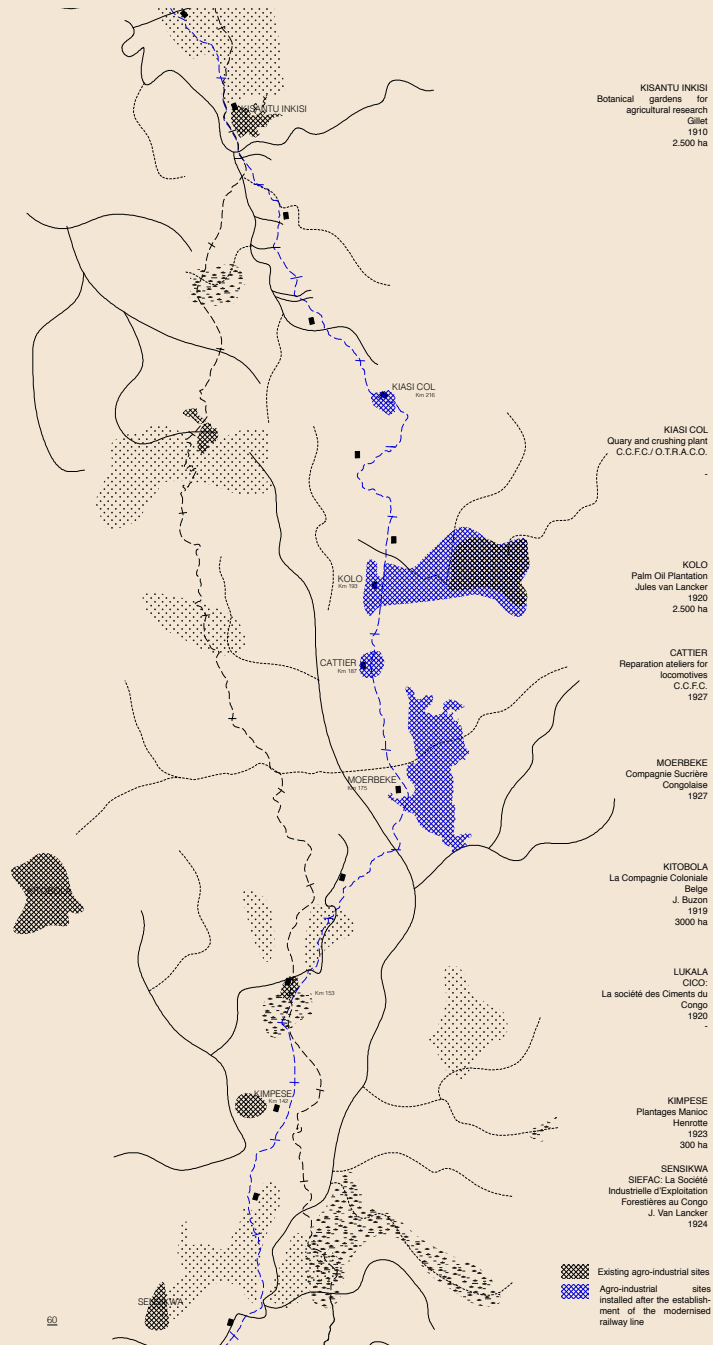


Fig. 3. Economic nodes along the new Kinshasa-Matadi railway line. Source: Deruyter & Vandepoele, Mapping a transforming colonial landscape, unpublished master's dissertation, 2018, p. 70.

In Cattier, situated at kilometre 187, a large maintenance workshop for trains was erected, which replaced the existing, large facilities in Mbanza-Ngungu (then known as Thysville), which had been the main repair centre of the *Compagnie du chemin de fer du Congo* along the old trajectory. The latter site now lost its economic importance, yet remained connected with the new railway line through a small track, as the site profited from a milder climate and thus continued to function as a popular destination for colonials seeking leisure and repose. Today, visitors to the small city of Mbanza Ngungu cannot but be struck by the immense "railway graveyard" of the former maintenance centre [see Fig. 15].

At the inland end point of the railway line, in Kinshasa, another detour was implemented to serve the newly emerging industrial neighbourhood of Limete. From there the railroad connected to a new inner city railway

FIG 9 Passerelle du chemin de fer sur l'Inkisi



FIG 10 Usine à Ciment "CICO" au km 172, 1927



FIG 11 Ferme de Luvituku (Bas-Congo), manioc cuttings from the Kimpese plantation



FIG 12 Atelier du chemin de fer



> MAP 6 Rising industries in the Bas-Congo region  
v  
FIG 9: AP.0.0.23317  
FIG 10: AP.0.2.5597  
FIG 12: AP.0.1.2914.  
MRAC

FIG 11: Compagnie Coloniale Belge. Plantations et élevages de KITOBOLA. (PEK)

network serving key sites of economic production dispersed in the urban territory, such as the Utexteo textile factory or the Chanic boat repair ateliers situated in the western part of town, where the first colonial outpost actually had been located.<sup>64</sup> Along the new railway track in the eastern part of the city, a modern harbour infrastructure expanded significantly over the following decades, especially after 1923 when it was decided that Kinshasa would become the administrative capital of the Belgian Congo, a decision that only came into effect in 1929. But it was in particular after 1945 that the skyline of Kinshasa as seen from the Congo river became gradually dotted with large quays, huge cranes, large warehouses and impressive silos. This transformation of the capital city into an efficient transfer hub and a true portal node of large-scale economic activity was preceded by infrastructural developments in the port city of Matadi. Already in the mid-1920s, Matadi was described in one of the most emblematic travel accounts of the time as follows: “Matadi est une révélation. Quelle activité! Quel modernisme! Voilà ce qui est encourageant! S’il n’y avait pas les noirs, l’ambiance et la chaleur, on se croirait dans un port européen”.<sup>65</sup> Both cities grew into important reservoirs of “main d’oeuvre”. Yet their urban form also underwent a major change in those interwar years as it became subjected to colonial urban planning practices following the principle of spatial segregation along racial lines that, in the era of “segregation mania”, was common in colonial cities in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.<sup>66</sup> As a result, workers’ camps, especially in Matadi, but later also in Kinshasa, became gradually disconnected from the main sites of labour, which were the large railway yards and the expanding ports. This had a huge impact on the everyday life of laborers because of the more time consuming trajectories between home and work, which were navigated mostly on foot, and in Kinshasa also by bike or sometimes even by bus.

Huge infrastructural change also started to reshape the whole Lower Congo region, often at considerable distance from the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line itself. The 1920s saw the construction of an ever-growing road infrastructure network, in which both the local government and private companies played their at times conflicting role, shifting between agendas of profit maximization and of territorial control.<sup>67</sup> During the 1930s, a number of impressive hydraulic power stations were built in sites like M’Pozo, Sanga and Zongo, using the energy potential of tributary rivers of the Congo river, to provide the railroad, as well as the different nodes of economic production and the burgeoning urban centres along its trajectory with much needed electricity [Fig. 4].

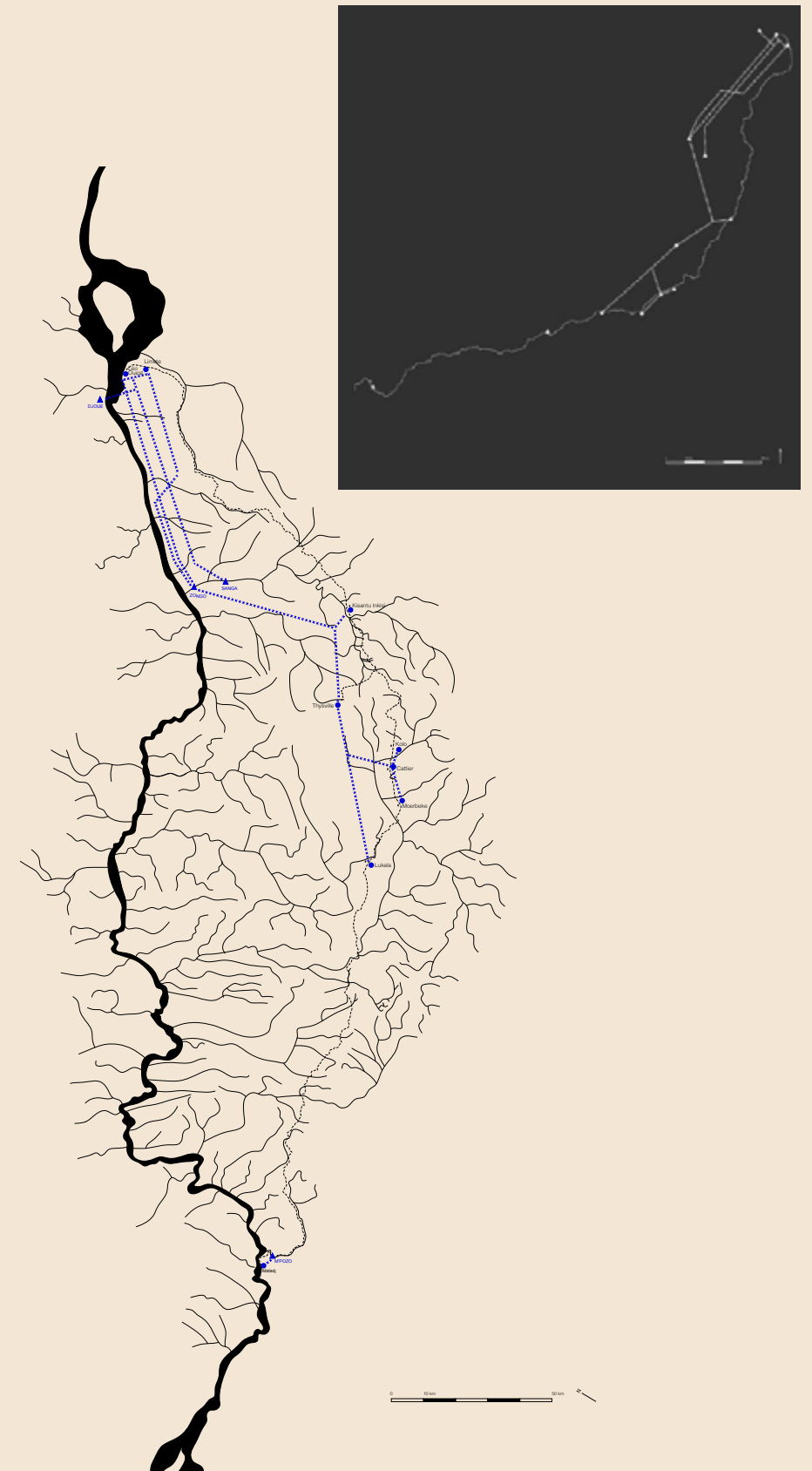
64. For information on some of these sites, see Johan Lagae & Bernard Toulhier (eds.), *Kinshasa*, Brussels: CIVA, 2013 (esp. ‘Parcours C: le fleuve et le port’, pp. 68-89).

65. Chalux, *Un an au Congo*, Brussels: Librairie A. Dewit, 1925, p. 24.

66. Johan Lagae, Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu & Luce Beeckmans, “Pour Matadi la question [de la ségrégation] est encore plus grave qu’ailleurs’: The making and shaping of a Congolese port city during the interwar years”, in Jacques Vanderlinden (ed.), *The Belgian Congo between the Two World Wars*, Brussels: ARSOM/KAOW, 2019, pp. 129-158; Luce Beeckmans & Johan Lagae, “Kinshasa’s syndrome-planning in historical perspective: from Belgian colonial capital to self-constructed megalopolis”, in Carlos Nunes Silva (ed.), *Urban Planning in Sub-Saharan Africa. Colonial and Post-Colonial Planning Cultures*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, pp. 201-224. For a discussion of this era of “segregation mania” in a global perspective, see Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation: a global history of divided cities*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

67. Laurence Heindryckx, “Governing economic interests: Interwar road construction in Belgian Congo”, *Belgeo*, n° 1, 2020, pp. 1-18 (available online: <http://journals.openedition.org/belgeo/43202>).

Fig. 4. Scheme of the powerscape of the Lower Congo region, illustrating the locations of hydraulic power stations and how they connect to the Matadi-Kinshasa railway-line. Source: Deruyter & Vandepoelle, Mapping a transforming colonial landscape, unpublished master’s dissertation, 2018, pp. 158-159.



When in the 1950s the landscape became dotted with a series of pylons to bring this energy to near and far away areas more efficiently, the transformation of the precolonial landscape of the Lower Congo region into a colonial taskscape reached its apogee. However, despite the large infrastructural investments realized especially in the context of the first Ten Year Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Belgian Congo (1949-1959), the region would never, to use the words of historian Guy Vantemsche, turn into a “Ruhr tropicale”.<sup>68</sup>

Mapping the flows of goods entering and leaving this colonial taskscape requires working across scales. Of course, a major part of the economic production was destined for the export markets, with the numbers of goods shipped from Matadi skyrocketing, especially after 1945. But export was not only targeting the metropole, as, for instance, a quick survey of the economic network of the *Sucrerie de Moerbeke-Kwilu* makes clear. Apart from Belgium, sugar produced on its immense plantation indeed was also distributed to Spain and several countries in Africa, from the neighbouring colonies of *l’Afrique Equatoriale Française*, Angola, Rhodesia, and Urundi to Cameroon, Senegal and even Morocco.<sup>69</sup> But production along the railway line was equally destined to local markets. The mid-1920s and again the period from the mid-1940s onwards witnessed a rapid growth of the African population in the major urban centres of Matadi and Kinshasa, as well as in smaller ones like Mbanza Ngungu, Kimpese and Kisantu. Basic but crucial questions needed to be asked on where and how these inhabitants were housed, but also how they were nourished, clothed and kept healthy. As such, several infrastructural elements along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line, both large and small, played a crucial role in the urban metabolism of these urban centres, as did the drinking fountains, abattoirs or sewer systems that were introduced in these cities.<sup>70</sup>

Archival sources as well as economic studies of colonial Congo provide ample quantitative data on how local consumption rates boomed after the colony recovered from the economic crisis that had hit it profoundly in the early 1930s, in the aftermath of the crash of Wall Street. To give but one telling example: beer production started early on during the interwar years, with the first brewery being built in Kinshasa in 1923, and it quickly became a crucial commodity in urban centres throughout the Lower Congo region. In the following years, beer consumption was closely monitored by the colonial authorities, not only to control alcohol abuse that might trigger unwanted behaviour or even contestation of the colonial order, but also because it generated a significant revenue through taxes, which, in turn, were crucial to

68. Vantemsche in Goddeeris et. al., *Le Congo colonial*, op. cit., p. 187.

69. This information is drawn from an analysis based on documents of the *Sucrerie de Moerbeke-Kwilu*, held in the State Archives in Brussels, see Deruyter and Vandepoele, *Mapping*, op. cit., pp. 146-147.

70. For a recent discussion on urban metabolism and how it relates to dimensions of infrastructure, urban planning and architecture, see David Peleman, Bruno Notteboom and Michiel Dehaene (eds.), “The Household of Urban Metabolism” [themed issue], *OASE*, n° 104, 2019.

reinvest in the infrastructure of the *cités indigènes* or “natives towns”.<sup>71</sup> Goods destined for urban consumption thus flowed along the railway line, as well as across the increasingly fine-grained road infrastructure network that linked local sites of food production at sometimes large distances to these urban centres. Landscapes were reshaped accordingly, with vast tracts of land being prepared for agriculture.<sup>72</sup> Some areas became affected by an ongoing process of deforestation triggered by the harvesting of wood to prepare charcoal, or *masala* as it is called in local parlance, which was used at a massive scale by urban families for cooking, a practice that is still widespread in Congo today.

But supplying local markets was often also an international affair. The Belgian Congo, for instance, became one of the first markets in Africa targeted by the Bata shoe company, which was building an African empire from its new UK-based headquarters, after the firm had left its foundational production site in Zlín, Czechoslovakia. While Bata shoes entered the Congolese market from 1930 onwards, the company opened a factory in Kinshasa in 1940, quickly becoming the key player in the local market.<sup>73</sup> In the early 1950s, the Swedish furniture producer Dux, reputed in Belgium for its good design, started a factory in Kinshasa as it saw an immediate potential for selling its products to the rapidly growing white population of Congo’s urban centres and for refurbishing public facilities, while it might also have already anticipated the future market of African consumers which emerged in the second half of the 1950s, when an albeit limited class of so-called *évolués* emerged in the main urban centres.<sup>74</sup> While goods flowed from and to the colonial taskscape of the Lower Congo region across scales, from the global to the local, so did people and knowledge. German engineering expertise and technology, for instance, was used in both the construction of a large concrete pier in the port of Ango Ango, situated in close proximity to Matadi, and in the cement plant of Lukala.<sup>75</sup> The plantation methods used at the *Sucrerie de Moerbeke-Kwilu* built on knowledge selectively borrowed from tropical zones across the world [Fig. 5].<sup>76</sup>

71. In his 1967 economic study, entitled *Industrialisation au Congo. La transformation des structures économiques*, Jean-Louis Lacroix provides general data on how the beer production in the Belgian Congo grew exponentially from the late 1940s onwards. Annual reports of the provincial administration of the Lower Congo region during the early post-war years demonstrate the obsessional attention given to beer consumption in cities like Matadi.

72. See a.o. Piet Clement, “Agricultural Policies and Practices in the Belgian Congo. The Origins and Implementation of the ‘Indigenous Peasantry’ Scheme (1917-1959)”, in Jacques Vanderlinden (ed.), *The Belgian Congo between the Two World Wars*, op. cit., pp. 83-128.

73. I’m indebted to Robby Fivez for his research on Bata’s African empire and its activities conducted in the context of his ongoing PhD-research.

74. For a first, brief discussion of the introduction of ‘good design’ furniture in Central Africa, see Johan Lagae, “Nomadic furniture in the ‘Heart of Darkness’. Colonial and Postcolonial trajectories of modern design artifacts to and from tropical Africa”, in Fredie Floré & Cammie McAtee (eds.), *The Politics of Furniture. Identity, Diplomacy and Persuasion in Post-War Interiors*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2017, pp. 15-32. African consumer culture in the late 1950s and early 1960s is still a rare subject of scholarly interest. For some first elements, see Daniel Tödt, *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung. Die Évolués in Belgisch-Kongo 1944-1960*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018 (for the question of the interior, see esp. pp. 168-169).

75. Apart from Robby Fivez’ PhD research, see especially the project “Conquering with Concrete. German Construction Companies as Global Players in Local Contexts”, supervised by Monika Motylinska (Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space).

76. Deruyter and Vandepoele, *Mapping*, op. cit., pp. 130-131. This policy of “selectively borrowing” was a widespread strategy in defining colonial policies. In the field of agriculture, it was already introduced before WWI by Edmond Leplae, who headed the Agricultural Department of the Ministry of Colonies in Brussels and went on a worldwide trip in the tropics to “learn from others”.



Fig. 5. World map indicating the regions from where expertise was collected on plantation methods by the agents of the *Sucrierie de Moerbeke Kwilu*. Source: Deruyter & Vandepoele, Mapping a transforming colonial landscape, unpublished master dissertation, 2018, pp. 130-131.

Labourers continued to be recruited from close and far away regions, just as they had been during the construction of the first Matadi-Kinshasa railway line. Moments of conflict and tension documented in the archives provide an excellent lens to trace the existence of this heterogeneously composed labour force. In the 1922 strike, which erupted at the cement plant of Lukala, workers from Senegal and Ghana played a crucial role, showing a remarkable capacity for countering colonial dominance.<sup>77</sup> A more emblematic episode of such contestation was the major 1945 strike of dockworkers in the port city of Matadi. Paralyzing the port city for more than 3 days, the strikers brought economic activity to a complete standstill. It required an armed intervention to crush the strike, which colonial authorities experienced as a highly unsettling event of civil disobedience. An investigation of the colonial government concluded that the event had been caused by a small number of workers originally coming from *Manianga*, a small settlement near *Luozi*, situated some 200 kilometres upstream on the Congo river from Matadi. This did not come as a surprise as, according to official sources, this area was infested by “des theories mystico-religieuses à tendance xénophobes” triggered by *Kimbanduism*, an African-inspired evangelic movement that emerged in this specific part of the Lower Congo region in 1921, and quickly spread across the whole Congolese territory.<sup>78</sup> One of the recommendations of the report was, not surprisingly, to ban these agitators from Matadi and send them back to the hinterland of the port city. But, as in the past, some of the key players who initiated the strike would flee to Portuguese-ruled Angola or *l’Afrique Equatoriale Française* to escape harsh sentences.

77. Robby Fivez, “The rubble in the jungle: a fragmented biography of Lukala’s cementscape, DR Congo”, *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, n° 1, 2020, pp. 78-87.

78. On *Kimbanduism*, see Elikia M’Bokolo and Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu (eds.), *Simon Kimbangu. Le Prophète de la Libération de l’Homme noir*, 2 vols., Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014. For a discussion of this strike in a broader urban context of conflict, see Johan Lagae and Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu, “Policing the colonial city. Urban planning and the spatial politics of order in the port city of Matadi, DR Congo, 1928-1960”, paper presented at II International Conference African Urban Planning, Lisbon, 7-8 September 2017.

Mobility across borders remained a strong characteristic of the interwar period throughout the Lower Congo region. But it was also at this time that a shared urban culture emerged between Kinshasa and Brazzaville, as African workers often took the ferry across the Stanley Pool in search of moments of leisure and freedom in sports events, but also in bars and nightclubs which largely escaped the controlling gaze of the colonizer.<sup>79</sup> Paying attention to such moments that fall outside the strict regime of labour is, we contend, equally relevant and necessary when investigating and mapping a colonial taskscape.

#### THE ARCHITECTURE AND INFRASTRUCTURE OF A COLONIAL TASKSCAPE

All in all, the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line became a vector of intense interconnectedness on various scales, from S to XL. Much more than just being a blunt instrument of extractive economy, creating a direct and efficient connectivity between colony and metropole, it also triggered new patterns of flows of goods, people and ideas that replaced or complemented earlier trade routes and created corridors that often penetrated deep into the French territory of *l’Afrique Equatoriale Française* or Portuguese-ruled Angola. In doing so, the railroad fundamentally reshaped a precolonial landscape into a colonial taskscape, that came with its own settlement patterns and built environment. While much research has already been done on the architecture and urban landscapes of Matadi and Kinshasa, and, to a lesser extent, Mbanza Ngungu,<sup>80</sup> it is timely to pay attention to the built structures along the trajectory of the railway line, ranging from bridges, tunnels, and ramparts to storage facilities or workers’ camps, all of which were crucial infrastructural elements for the successful extractive colonization of Central Africa. In other words, we must, as architectural historians, also be willing to engage with the mundane and “grey architecture” of colonialism. But what is important in this respect is not to think in terms of isolated buildings, but rather of a collection of buildings that together make up an interconnected landscape, and of which each built element is, in itself, also part of larger dynamic flows or systems of movements of materials and of people. If we think of buildings from the perspective of material flows that constitute their coming into being, in line with what architectural historian Kiel Moe has invited us to do,<sup>81</sup> then our understanding of the quite remarkable late 19<sup>th</sup>-century edifices assembled out of prefabricated metal components that one comes across in various localities along the railway line, from Matadi to Mbanza Ngungu and Kinshasa, as well as some localities deeper inland, like Ngombe Matadi, shifts radically [Fig. 6].

79. Important studies in this respect remain Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and society in colonial Brazzaville*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 and Didier Gondola, *Villes miroirs: migrations et identités urbaines à Brazzaville et Kinshasa 1930-1970*, Paris: l’Harmattan, 1997.

80. See, for example, Yves Robert, “De la villégiature à Thysville au tourisme patrimonial à Mbanza-Ngungu: Des héritages culturels cosmopolites comme levier de développement urbain”, in Jean-Louis Genard and Judith le Maire (eds.), *Enjeux patrimoniaux en contexte postcolonial: Patrimoine et développement en République démocratique du Congo*, Paris: l’Harmattan, 2017, 139–163.

81. I’m referring here in particular to how Kiel Moe invites us in his book *Empire, State & Building* (Barcelona: Actar Publishers, 2017) to trace the origins of building materials in order to make an assessment of a building as a complex, interconnected assemblage. Admittedly, I’m reducing Moe’s argument here for the sake of brevity, leaving out his plea to study such assemblages over long periods of time.



Fig. 6. Hôtel ABC in Mbanza Ngungu, built between 1904 and 1908 out of prefabricated metal components imported from Belgium. Source: photograph Johan Lagae, 2009.

Instead of considering them exclusively as simple “tools of empire”, with their tropical bungalow typology having served to acclimatize the body of the white colonial to the demanding climate in the tropics,<sup>82</sup> such prefabricated edifices should also be seen as mobile commodities produced by Belgian industrial companies which were shipped from the metropole to the colony as part of an efficient exchange process, in which it made no sense to send boats arriving in Antwerp back to Congo completely empty. This counts as well for the wooden houses on metal stilts constructed already in the early 1880s for the members of the Baptist Missionary Society, as fieldwork observation reveals that these constructions were not locally manufactured but rather, at least in part, travelled as separate components along with their future inhabitants from the United Kingdom.<sup>83</sup> Through our ongoing research on some of the construction companies that were active in the region, we can now, similarly, start to begin and understand the changing skylines of Matadi and Kinshasa, as intimately connected to some of the nodes of production in the emerging colonial taskscape of the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line, such as the cement factory of Lukala or the quarry and crushing plant in Kiasi col. When the import of materials from the metropole gradually turned out to be too expensive and time consuming, this generated a discussion on the need to turn to durable “matériaux indigènes”. Locally produced cement, combined with local sand and gravel, became an ideal alternative solution, even if it required the introduction of different construction techniques and another division of labour.

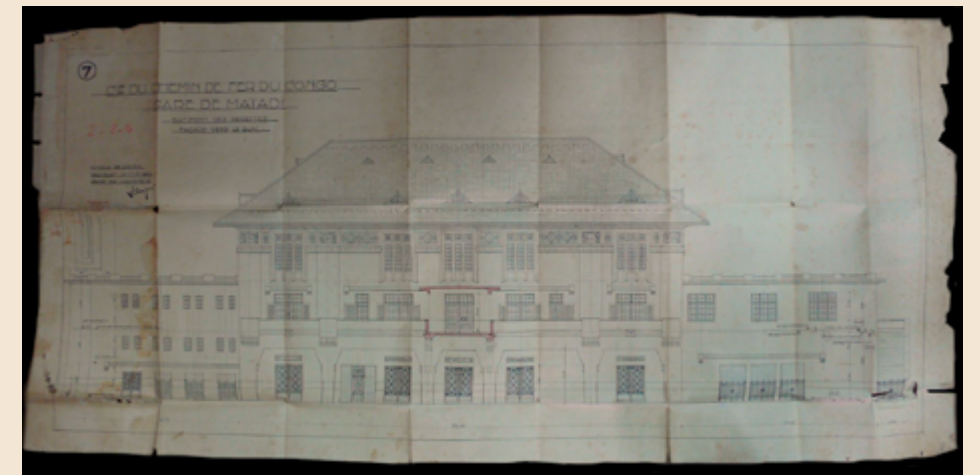
82. In previous research I have often presented such a perspective on these metal prefabricated structures, see a.o. Marc Gemoets & Johan Lagae, “Construire sous les tropiques. Quelques jalons de l’architecture climatique à Kinshasa”, in Lagae & Toulhier, *Kinshasa*, op. cit., pp. 132-137. The notion “tools of empire” refers, of course, to Daniel Headrick’s seminal 1981 study *The Tools of Empire* (op. cit.).

83. Lagae & Toulhier, *Kinshasa*, op. cit., p. 76.

Moreover, mapping the built environment of the colonial taskscape of the Lower Congo region, and following the flows of materials and knowledge informing it, forces us to go beyond clear distinctions between signature and grey architecture. In line with what Fanny Lopez has demonstrated for the architecture of electricity in France in her 2019 book *L’Ordre électrique*, we should consider all built elements in this colonial taskscape, large and small, and regardless of whether their appearance is dull or interesting in terms of architecture, as part of an interconnected system that forms the scaffolding of the colony as an economic enterprise.<sup>84</sup> This, inevitably, leads us away from the conventional approach in architectural historiography that takes the architect as the individual author of a building as its departure point. A large part of this built environment was indeed (co-)designed and (co-)produced by designers in aggregate offices such as Public Work Departments or the architectural services of colonial companies. Bureaucratic processes and a complex division of labour, implying that multiple parties had to sign off a project before it could go into implementation, governed the making and shaping of the colonial taskscape.<sup>85</sup>

To illustrate this, it is useful to zoom in for a moment on the built legacy of OTRACO, the *Office d’Exploitation des Transports Coloniaux*, a public body founded in 1935 to bring together the main actors involved in building, maintaining and exploiting railway and port infrastructure in the Belgian Congo. OTRACO was, in fact, one of the principal builders along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line, as well as in the urban centres that constitute its two extremities. The railway stations of Matadi and Kinshasa, both constructed in the 1930s, constitute prime examples of signature architecture in the Belgian colony, even if they never made it into the pages of professional magazines in the metropole as their designers were not prominent members of the metropolitan architectural milieu: in 1930 Brussels based architect Servais Mayne authored the imposing edifice in Matadi [Fig. 7] which in

Fig. 7. Façade drawing of the railway station in Matadi, designed by architect Servais Mayne, 1930. Source: Original drawing, ONATRA-archive, Kinshasa.



84. Fanny Lopez, *L’Ordre électrique. Infrastructures énergétiques et territoires*, Geneva: MetisPresses, 2019.

85. In this respect, the work on the cognitive principles at work in public work departments responsible for colonial architecture in Britain, done by Peter Scriver since the mid-1990s remains an important source of inspiration. See a.o. Peter Scriver, “Empire-Building and Thinking in the Public Works Department of British India”, in Peter Scriver, and Vikramaditya Prakash (eds.), *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon*, London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 69–92.

scale by far surpassed the railway station in Kinshasa, an edifice erected some years later, between 1936 and 1939, according to a project by René Schoentjes, an architect who was previously affiliated with the Ministry of Colonies.

In the mid-1950s, the rather obscure architect Jacques Delire, an employee of OTRACO, drew a project in modernist style for the *Gare Fluviale*, an imposing arrival and departure hall accommodating people and goods travelling on boats on the Congo stream from and to the immense hinterland of Central Africa [Fig. 8].



Fig. 8. Interior of the Gare Fluviale in Kinshasa, designed by architect Jacques Delire, 1956-1959. Source: photograph Johan Lagae, 2017.

Research conducted in both Belgian and Congolese archives, as well as many fieldwork trips since 2003 for Kinshasa and 2009 for Matadi, enabled us to describe in some detail a number of other remarkable edifices which are directly related to the colonial taskscape triggered by the railway line: we can think, for instance, of the prefabricated metal *Hôtel ABC* in Kinshasa, erected in the 1910s, and its later counterpart in Matadi, the Art Deco *Hôtel Métropole* built in 1930 as the first multistorey building in the Belgian Congo; but also of the OTRACO-headquarters, a Stalinist-looking edifice constructed along Kinshasa's main urban boulevard between 1952 and 1955; or the offices of the *Agence Maritime Internationale* in Kinshasa and Matadi, authored in the immediate post-war years by the prominent Belgian architect-urbanist Georges Ricquier. By now, these edifices have been recognized as landmark architectural projects in Kinshasa and Matadi, and are widely considered a valuable part of Congo's architectural heritage.<sup>86</sup>

Yet, apart from these signature buildings we should also turn our

86. These buildings, as well as many others mentioned in this chapter, have been included in digital databases which were produced in the context of inventory projects of urban architectural heritage, and financed through foreign support: see <http://www.wikinshasa.org> and <http://www.urbacongo.info/>.

attention to more mundane infrastructures related to OTRACO's taskscape. The workers' camps, accommodating railway workers and laborers employed in the ports of Kinshasa and Matadi, are crucial elements of the urban landscapes of these cities and have much to tell us about urban policies of labour and racial segregation [Fig. 9].

Fig. 9. Aerial photograph of part of the "native town" in Kinshasa, showing the pentagonal footprint of the Camp Kauga, the workers' camp of the OTRACO, built in the 1950s. Source: aerial photograph, 1957, collection of the author.



Similar, but often more mundane infrastructures of workers' camps popped up all along the Matadi-Léopoldville railway line, as one fascinating document found in the OTRACO-archives in Kinshasa reveals. Entitled *Guide schématique de la ligne* and probably dating from around 1957, this accordion booklet, measuring eleven by twenty-six centimetres, but which can be unfolded into a lengthy plan of twenty-six centimetres by twenty metres, contains the footprint of every piece of infrastructure built by OTRACO along the railroad.<sup>87</sup> On the basis of this document and a wide array of ar-

87. We discovered this document during a fieldwork trip in September 2017. For some images and a nuanced analysis of this document as a 'living' archival source, see Robby Fizez, "The *Guide schématique de la ligne* [1957]. Tracing the infrastructure landscape along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line (DR Congo) through a living archive", *ABE Journal*, n° 14-15, 2019 (<https://journals.openedition.org/abe/3063>).

chitectural plans found in OTRACO’s archival collections, a comprehensive mapping exercise of the built environment of OTRACO’s taskscape in the Lower Congo region could be conducted.<sup>88</sup> It revealed the existence of a catalogue of type-designs for each kind of building needed, from railway stations (of which there are six categories, different in size and architectural detail), various types of villas to accommodate the white employees and houses for African labourers assembled according to a generic layout to form workers’ camps, including small sized collective sanitary facilities with toilets and showers. Redrawing carefully each node along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line demonstrated the way in which this catalogue and a limited set of building and planning guidelines served in the post-war period as a template for shaping OTRACO’s taskscape in the Lower Congo region. The overall layout of each node along the line followed a generic scheme which was adapted to the conditions set by the existing landscape, from topography to natural elements like rivers and streams [Fig. 10].<sup>89</sup>

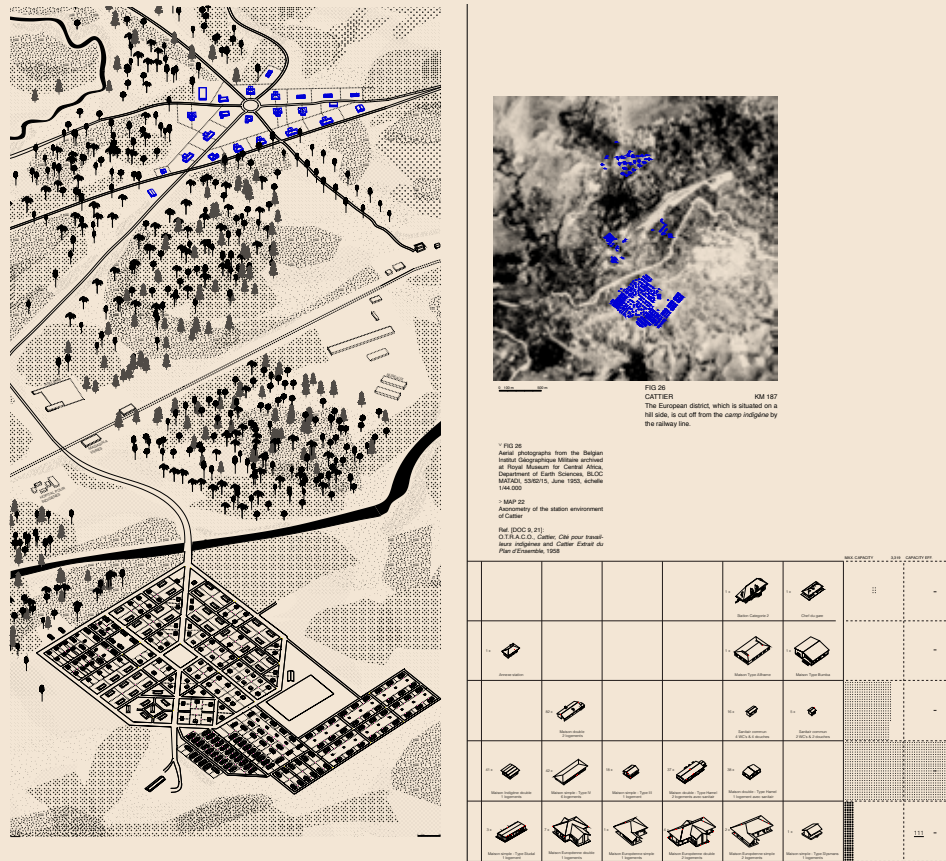


Fig. 10. Mapping of the OTRACO infrastructure in Cattier, situated on kilometre 187 along the new Matadi-Kinshasa railway line. Source: Deruyter & Vandepoele, Mapping a transforming colonial landscape, unpublished master’s dissertation, 2018, pp. 110-111.

88. Deruyter and Vandepoele, *Mapping*, op. cit., pp. 72-113 (Part 2 – Infrascape).  
89. For assessing this form of translation from a generic scheme to local conditions, use was made of the extensive coverage in 1953 of the Lower Congo region through aerial photography on a scale of 1/44,000. This collection is held in the Africa Museum of Tervuren.

Today, these infrastructural nodes with their characteristic regular compositions of type buildings remain highly visible in the landscape along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line [Fig. 11].

Fig. 11. The OTRACO workers’ camp in Kisantu. Source: photograph Johan Lagae, 2015.



This practice of building according to type designs is, of course, very common among colonial builders and it has a long pedigree. In the Belgian Congo, it came to full fruition during the era of the first Ten Year Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Belgian Congo (1949-1959). Very similar strategies were used, for instance, to implement the fine-grained infrastructural network of hospitals and health care facilities across the whole territory that was a key element of this policy plan.<sup>90</sup> Yet, housing the African workers occupied a particular place in this context. Post-1945, Belgian colonial authorities were confronted with a booming demographic growth in most of the urban centres, described in one contemporary source as a “marée humaine [qui] monte [...] à un rythme vraiment impressionnant”.<sup>91</sup> The colonial government understood all too well that this phenomenon required immediate action as it led to overpopulation in the native towns of colonial cities and even to the popping up of slum areas, creating challenging conditions that might trigger social unrest. The development of decent housing thus became a spearhead of the policy of several colonial actors, from the Ministry of Colonies and the various branches of the Public Work Departments in Brussels and in the colony, to colonial companies and parastatal

90. Simon De Nys-Ketels, Laurence Heindryckx, Johan Lagae & Luce Beeckmans, “Planning Belgian Congo’s network of medical infrastructure: type-plans as tools to construct a medical model-colony, 1949–1959”, *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 34, n° 5, 2019, pp. 757-778.  
91. M. Bruyère, *Contribution à l’Etude des Habitations pour Indigènes au Congo*, Brussels: Institut Royal Colonial belge, 1952, p. 5.

organizations such as the *Office des Cités Africaines*, founded in 1951 with the specific goal to plan, design and build new and decent residential neighbourhoods for Africans. The “maison pour indigène” or “house for natives” also became the object of a number of scientific investigations, some of which were presented in meetings of the *Institut Royal colonial belge* in Brussels, including M. Bruyère’s *Contribution à l’Etude des Habitations pour Indigènes au Congo* (1952) and Frans Deroep’s *Rationele Bouw in Belgisch Kongo* (1952). In a similar vein, the *Centre d’Etude des Problèmes sociaux indigènes* in Lubumbashi, or CEPSE, had already published in 1949 a catalogue of type houses to be used in the workers’ camps of the local railway company and in the city’s “native towns”.<sup>92</sup> The workers’ camps erected in several nodes along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line, like Kimpese and Cattier, just like the camp Thys in Matadi and the camp Nicolas Cito in Kinshasa, both erected by OTRACO in the immediate post-war years, thus served as instruments of social engineering, intended to bring labour policies in line with the developmental and welfare agenda of post-1945 colonial rule in the Belgian Congo. But there was still a clear economic agenda underlying this enterprise, which testifies to a continued focus on a “mise en valeur” agenda during the late colonial period. If no measures were urgently taken to provide the African population with decent housing, “the whole exploitation programme of the colony came under threat”, as Père Van Wing, a catholic missionary father and a prominent figure in Kinshasa, tellingly observed in the late 1940s.<sup>93</sup>

Browsing through the bibliography and references in such post-war studies of the “native house” in the Belgian Congo reveals that also in this domain Belgian colonial policies were informed by a practice of “selective borrowing” from experiences in other colonial territories.<sup>94</sup> Bruyère’s 1952 study *Contribution à l’Etude des Habitations pour Indigènes au Congo* is particularly interesting in this respect, as it indicates that he closely monitored what was happening in both francophone and anglophone colonies. The bibliography includes Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew’s *Village Housing in the Tropics with special reference to West Africa* of 1947, as well as a 1949 report on housing in Rhodesia of the Central African Council and Douglas H.K. Lee’s work on housing for the humid tropics.<sup>95</sup> Reference is also made to *l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*. One of the plates included presents the principle of a so-called “maison type-ballon (selon le principe des maisons construites à Dakar)”, a particular form of concrete construction originally invented by the American engineer Wallace Neff during the Second World War which was widely used around the world post-1945.<sup>96</sup> More work needs to be done to trace and

92. A. Débra and J. Quets (eds.), *Maisons indigènes au Congo. Fascicule 1. B.C.K. et C.E.C. Elisabethville*, Elisabethville: CEPSE, 1949.

93. This statement of Van Wing opens the introduction of Deroep’s *Rationele Bouw*, op. cit.

94. I have developed this argument on the practice of “selective borrowing”, a notion drawn from planning historian Stephen Ward, for the domain of architecture and building in Congo elsewhere in some detail. See Alex Bremner, Johan Lagae & Mercedes Volait, “Intersecting Interests: Developments in Networks and Flows of Information and Expertise in Architectural History”, *Fabrications*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2016), pp. 227-245.

95. Bruyère, *Contribution*, op. cit., p. 146.

96. Ibid., p. 174, Plate 23. See Jeffrey Head, *No Nails, No Lumber. The Bubble Houses of Wallace Neff*, New York: Princeton architectural press, 2011. Bernard Toullet has investigated the extensive use of this type of house in French colonial Dakar.

investigate in detail the “shared built culture” that seems to undergird housing design and related building practices in sub-Saharan African colonies in those post-war years. By now the transimperial conversation and exchange of knowledge taking place in the context of conferences on building in the tropics held in Lisbon in 1952 and at the Architectural Association School in London in 1953 have been acknowledged.<sup>97</sup> Lesser known is the work of some scholars who have started to investigate how international connections as well as geographic proximity stimulated such exchange and learning from other experiences, both in the domain of housing policy at large as in terms of construction materials and methods.<sup>98</sup>

#### SMALL INFRASTRUCTURES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES ALONG A COLONIAL RAILWAY LINE

Even if Deroep argued in his 1952 study *Rationele Bouw in Belgisch Kongo* that the problem of the “native house” needed to be considered in scientific as well as moral and psychological terms,<sup>99</sup> in most sources of the time the policy of social engineering through the provision of decent housing infrastructure was most often defined in quantitative terms. Guidelines issued within the technical services of OTRACO in 1949 and 1950, for instance, indicate that the following modifications to earlier type-designs were to be implemented:<sup>100</sup> “(1) Superficie du logement par habitant: 4m<sup>2</sup> au lieu de 3m<sup>2</sup>; (2) Dimension des portes: minimum 1,80m x 0,90m; (3) Surface d’éclairage (fenêtres) au moins 1/20 de la superficie de l’habitation”, adding that no more than four persons were to be accommodated in the same room, and only three if they were bachelors, while provision was to be made for separate rooms for boys and girls above the age of six. The question, of course, remains to what extent such modifications made a real and significant difference to the austere housing schemes of the interwar period. A 1953 project for type houses intended for railway personnel of the B.C.K. in Manganèse and designed by architect Jean De Rom provides a useful entry point in this respect [Fig. 12].<sup>101</sup>

97. See *Housing in Tropical Climates / L’Habitation dans les pays tropicaux*, Proceedings of the XXI International Congress for Housing and Planning, Lisbon 1952; *Conference on Tropical Architecture 1953*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1953.

98. See a.o. Nikolas Brandes, “A Society in which it is worth having a place. Modernisation through cooperativism in Lourenço Marques’ late colonial Bairro Da COOP”, in *Atas do congresso internacional sobre tropical em Moçambique: história, memória e ciência. Lisboa 24-26 October 2012*; Carl-Philipp Bodenstein, “Congo Housing is for Well-To-Do. Debates About the Application of the Elisabethville Housing Scheme in Northern Rhodesia as a Symptom of Colonial Uncertainty”, paper presented at the European Association for Urban History Conference, Rome, 29 August – 1 September 2018.

99. Deroep, *Rationele bouw*, p. 3.

100. “Ordonnance 21/134 of 19/4/1949 & 21/31 du 27/1/1950”, Internal Note on the accommodation of African Laborers of OTRACO sent by the general Director J. Devisscher and the director responsible for the Main d’œuvre Indigène (or “native workers”), E. Verhegge to the technical service. ONATRA Archives, Kinshasa. I’m indebted to Robby Fizez for having indicated this primary source to me.

101. The architectural drawings of this project are part of the collection of CIVA/AAM, Brussels.

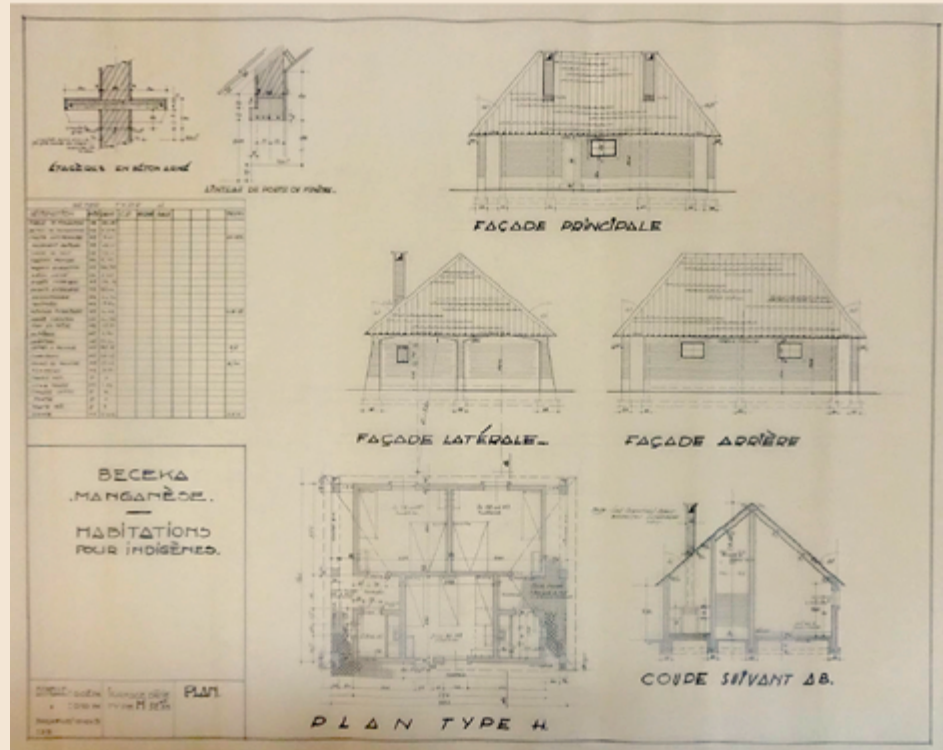


Fig. 12. Project for a house for railway workers of the B.C.K. in Manganèse, architect Jean De Rom, 1953. Note the detail of the étagère in the top left corner. Source: Original drawing. Collection CIVA/AAM Brussels, © CIVA.

The drawings indicate that each of these houses consisted of only three bedrooms, measuring 3-3 by 4 metres, and each intended to accommodate three persons (in one double and one single bed), with some types having small kitchens attached, but no toilet facilities. A small detail included in one of the drawings is telling. It depicts the section of what in the plan is indicated as an *étagère*. It consists of a small concrete tablet of 80 by 30 centimetres with three metal hooks underneath which serve to hang clothes. No doubt serving to store one's personal items, probably shoes and clothes, this *étagère* forms the unique *équipement* in these rooms of what looks, seen from the outside, as a decent brick house with hipped, tiled roof. This detail reminds us of the fact that despite the welfare discourse of colonial policy, in many cases post-war housing for Africans in the Belgian Congo, and of labourers especially, still very much was a question of an extreme *Existenzminimum*. But colonial Congo was not an exception here, as the striking examples of the workers' hostels built in apartheid South African in the late 1960s and 70s, for instance, demonstrate.<sup>102</sup>

The contrast with the accommodation for the white staff in the workers' camps of the OTRACO is telling: various types of large-sized villas were designed, their size depending on the rank and family status of the employee. Houses stood apart to allow for green gardens surrounding them. And in the large OTRACO-sites, facilities for leisure were included, as was the case in

<sup>102</sup>. Architect Clive Chipkin tellingly described the inhumane living environments of the Alexandra Hostels as "unité blocks of a sort designed by deranged disciples of Le Corbusier", Clive Chipkin, *Johannesburg Transition. Architecture & Society from 1950*, Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2008, pp. 240-241.

other "company towns". One small-scale yet remarkable piece of such leisure infrastructure is the bowling alley that forms part of the huge infrastructural complex of the immense *Sucrierie de Moerbeke Kwilu*, which comprised accommodation for the 40 members of its white staff, 12 large workers' camps to accommodate 2000 laborers, an extensive network of irrigation canals, and an internal railway line circuit of 40 kilometres [Fig. 13].<sup>103</sup>

Fig. 13. Bowling alley at the Sucrierie de Moerbeke Kwilu. Source: photograph Luce Beekmans, 2007. Courtesy of Luce Beekmans.



While this infrastructural element, of course, speaks of a condition of inequality that governs the colonial encounter at the plantation, I would nevertheless like to suggest not taking it purely at face value, for does this bowling alley not also speak of a condition of boredom which, as we know from intimate sources such as diaries and oral testimonies in other contexts, was a key component of colonial life, especially in such remote sites as the *Sucrierie de Moerbeke Kwilu*?<sup>104</sup>

Such tiny infrastructural elements, we argue, can provide us with a glimpse of lived realities and help us to better grasp what the French Africanist Georges Balandier coined as living under *la situation coloniale*.<sup>105</sup> Our in-depth investigation of the urban history of the port city of Matadi, for instance, revealed that much is to be learned in terms of the everyday experience of colonial segregationist planning practices when investigating not only the development of its urban form at large, but also by focusing on

<sup>103</sup>. Deruyter and Vandepoele, *Mapping*, op. cit., pp. 138-139 & p. 143.

<sup>104</sup>. Little work has been done on imperial boredom, even if it pops up regularly in oral accounts and intimate sources such as diaries of formal colonials. For a rare discussion, see Jeffrey Auberbach, *Imperial Boredom: Monotony and the British Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>105</sup>. For an critical discussion of this notion, see Isabelle Merle, "La situation coloniale' chez Georges Balandier. Relecture historique", *Monde(s)*, vol. 2, n° 4, 2013, pp. 211-232.

the scale of small infrastructures such as public toilets.<sup>106</sup> Introduced from the late 1920s onwards, these tiny collective sanitary facilities – each one containing six toilets – proved much too limited throughout the colonial period to service in any satisfactory way the booming African population of the port city. That the “native towns” and workers’ camps were located in the hilly landscape of rock formations overlooking the existing urban centre and port installations, complicated matters significantly, leading to impossible sanitary conditions that stood in sharp contrast to the official discourse that presented colonization as a *mission civilisatrice*. If, as architectural historians, we tend to investigate – and imagine – colonial cities to large extent via visual sources such as plans and photographs, it remains useful to keep in mind other sensorial regimes such as the olfactory and the acoustic, which substantially shaped lived realities in these urban environments.<sup>107</sup>

Infrastructures, large and small, then are “integral and intimate parts of daily social life”, as many scholars have argued in the past years, and can hold “promise, albeit in multivalent ways”. This is especially true for colonial contexts, in which “differentiated access to infrastructure” exists which “refracts” class, gender and, above all, race.<sup>108</sup> Frantz Fanon already wrote as much in 1961 when famously describing the generic colonial city as being composed of two irreconcilable parts, each with its own, different infrastructural provision.<sup>109</sup> In his uninvited speech held on the occasion of the declaration of Congo’s independence on June 30, 1960, Patrice Lumumba also evoked in telling ways the suffering of the Congolese people under colonial rule, pointing, inter alia, to the different accommodation of blacks and whites, stating that “nous avons connu qu’il y avait dans les villes des maisons magnifiques pour les Blancs et des paillotes croulantes pour les Noirs”.<sup>110</sup> Yet, we should be careful not to read the colonial urban environments, nor the living conditions in the segregated colonial city exclusively through the binary framework suggested by Fanon and Lumumba. Urban landscapes and morphologies were more complex.

Through our research on urban history in various cities in colonial Congo, we became aware of how tracing mobility patterns of different actors living under *la situation coloniale*, both at the scale of the (urban) territory, of a specific site (a square, a camp, a workplace), and up to the individual building, is a

106. For an in-depth discussion of the challenges of urban sanitation in Matadi, including the toilet facilities, see Lagae, Sabakinu Kivilu & Beeckmans, “Pour Matadi la question [de la ségrégation] est encore plus grave qu’ailleurs”, art. cit.

107. Till this day, the sound of a siren calling employees of the port to work several times a day, significantly defines the rhythm of everyday city life in Matadi. The importance of several sensorial regimes counts, of course, for cities in general. See Zardini, M. (ed.). 2005. *Sense of the City. An Alternative Approach to Urbanism*. Baden/Montréal: Lars Müller Publishers/CCA.

108. “Introduction: Temporality, Politics and the Promise of Infrastructure” in Anand, Gupta & Appel (eds.), *The Promise of Infrastructure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018 (p. 6).

109. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, Paris: François Maspero, 1961, pp. 47-48.

110. See “Les discours prononcés par le Roi Baudouin Ier, le Président Joseph Kasa-Vubu et le Premier Ministre Patrice-Emery Lumumba lors de la cérémonie de l’indépendance du Congo (30 juin 1960) à Léopoldville (actuellement Kinshasa). Discours du Premier Ministre Patrice Emery Lumumba”. 1960, available at: [http://www.kongo-kinshasa.de/dokumente/lekture/disc\\_indep.pdf](http://www.kongo-kinshasa.de/dokumente/lekture/disc_indep.pdf).

powerful tool to detect cracks in the colonial order.<sup>111</sup> When investigating such mobility patterns in the port city of Matadi, we paid particular attention to the way *cheminots* and *dockeurs* went to work: leaving their houses high up in the hills of *la ville haute* of Matadi, most of them needed to cross a centrally located bridge over a natural cliff, leading them through the main square of the city before reaching the railway yard and port installations. Following this route on a map and confronting it with historical source material and oral accounts collected among former labourers not only made us aware of very different regimes of accessibility in the colonial city, but also of inconsistencies of such mobility patterns with the very idea of a segregated city.<sup>112</sup> It also permitted us to understand that the key infrastructure of colonial Matadi was precisely this centrally located bridge across the natural cliff, which acted from the late 1920s as the buffer zone between the white and black city. Intended by the authorities as a strategic and easy to police point of entrance into the white city, the bridge actually turned out to be the city’s Achilles heel when dockworkers went on strike in 1945. Blocking this passage allowed them to make the port city come to a complete standstill for several days, hitting the extractive economy of the colony in its heart. If most of today’s passers-by only think of this still existing bridge in terms of the traffic congestion it generates on a daily basis, or view it as an ideal spot to drop off their garbage in the stream flowing underneath it – in local parlance the stream’s name Kipoto translates not coincidentally, as “open sewer” – this rather mundane piece of infrastructure could, I would argue, constitute a powerful *lieu de mémoire* speaking of colonial resistance and the agency of all *Matadiens* living under colonial rule [Fig. 14].

Fig. 14. The Kiamfu bridge in Matadi. Source: photograph Johan Lagae, 2009.



111. For the case of Lubumbashi, see Johan Lagae, Sofie Boonen & Maarten Liefooghe, “Fissures dans le ‘cordon sanitaire’. Architecture hospitalière et ségrégation urbaine à Lubumbashi, 1920-1960”, in Maurice Amuri Mpala-Lutebele (ed.), *Lubumbashi. Cent d’ans d’histoire*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013, pp. 247-261. Hospital sites provide a very relevant lens to research such frictions. See Simon De Nys-Ketels, Johan Lagae, Kristien Geenen, Luce Beeckmans & Trésor Lumfuankenda Bungiena, “Spatial governmentality and everyday hospital life in colonial and postcolonial DR Congo”, in Daniel Cosslet (ed.), *Neocolonialism and Built Heritage. Echoes of Empire in Africa, Asia and Europe*, Routledge, London, 2019, pp. 147-167.

112. Lagae, Sabakinu Kivilu & Beeckmans, “Pour Matadi la question [de la ségrégation] est encore plus grave qu’ailleurs”, art. cit. We are currently preparing an atlas presenting a chronological spatial analysis of this port city under the title *Atlas Matadi. Radioscopie d’une ville portuaire au Congo belge*.

What those few examples of small infrastructures suggest is that we need more careful investigations of how colonial infrastructures operated and were used, as well as of how they were appropriated but also imagined over time by those they were supposed to serve.

#### THINKING COLONIAL INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH TIME, PAST AND PRESENT

Infrastructure, as anthropologists have shown, becomes visible at that particular moment when it fails. In postcolonial contexts, failure is, however, often the default regime of infrastructure. Railways in Congo are no exception, as hardly any trains are currently running. My first visit in 2009 to the “railway graveyard” of the large-scale maintenance workshop at Mbanza Ngungu (formerly Thysville), once a site of pride along the first Matadi-Léopoldville railway line, inevitably instilled in me a profound sense of loss and absence [Fig. 15].



Fig. 15. The “railway graveyard” in Mbanza Ngungu. Source: photograph Johan Lagae, 2009.

It was a more than memorable experience, then, when I was able to take the train along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line with some colleagues after a fieldwork trip to the port city of Matadi in September 2015, only a couple of weeks after the service had resumed, albeit offering only one trip a week.<sup>113</sup> That the train left punctually as planned, at 7:15 am in the morning, and arrived almost on schedule around 3 pm in the capital city, made the trip

<sup>113</sup>. The service on the Matadi-Kinshasa resumed on the 25th of August, 2015 after 15 years of interruption. See <https://www.radiookapi.net/2015/08/24/actualite/economie/la-reprise-du-train-kinshasa-matadi-augure-des-perspectives>. However, because of financial difficulties of the Société commerciale des transports et des ports, or SCTP, as the former ONATRA is called today, the service has been irregular ever since.

somewhat surreal, as did the fact that the train included one coach, emptied of its seats, that acted, despite the early hour of the day, as a Kinshasa-like nightclub, providing food, drinks and opportunities for dancing. Yet, most railway lines and stations in today’s DRC are, like many public institutions, characterized by a seemingly eternal condition of waiting, as depicted by filmmaker Kristof Bilsen in his 2014 award-winning documentary *Elephant’s Dream*, which some critics have described as a “surprisingly poetic and empathic look at a State in decline”.<sup>114</sup> Such absence of material infrastructure that typifies cities in the Global South is what led AbdouMaliq Simone to develop his by now famous concept of “people as infrastructure” and triggered anthropologist Filip de Boeck to write his acclaimed book *Kinshasa. Tales of the invisible city*.<sup>115</sup>

Yet, how can we think the material remains of colonial infrastructure differently, that is, in their materiality rather than primarily through their imaginary? Ann Laura Stoler has provided us with a promising line of thought, calling on us to think in terms not of ruins but of the ongoing processes of ruination, as well as of the “rot that remains” and of “active imperial debris”.<sup>116</sup> Following her line of thought, it makes sense to investigate not just what is “left”, but rather what people are “left with”, and how, “what remains”, for instance, “blocks livelihoods and health”. From that perspective, Stoler invites us to focus not on monumental “leftovers” or relics, but rather on “the corroded hollows of landscapes”, or on “the gutted infrastructures of segregated cityscapes.”<sup>117</sup> For architectural historians interested in things colonial, Stoler’s work on “imperial debris” and “duress” can serve as a stimulating invitation to broaden the gaze from signature buildings and remarkable urban planning projects to more mundane infrastructural and urban landscapes and to grey architecture, in order to rethink the contentious notion of “shared built heritage” which has dominated official heritage discourse on former colonial territories for more than two decades now.<sup>118</sup> More recently, artist and scholar Ruth Sacks developed a situated analysis of the Hotels ABC in Mbanza Ngungu and Kinshasa, both early 20<sup>th</sup>-century prefabricated iron structures, whose histories are intricately bound to the construction of the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line.<sup>119</sup> Her text, articulated around the notion of “lived remainders”, offers another promising venue to think of infrastructural relics differently by investigating not only the historical origin of these edifices, but, first and foremost, their current “corporeal conditions”. In this

<sup>114</sup>. See website <http://www.elephantsdream-film.com/>

<sup>115</sup>. AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg”, *Public Culture*, 16(3), pp. 407-429; Filip De Boeck & Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kinshasa. Tales of the invisible city*, Ghent: Ludion, 2004.

<sup>116</sup>. Ann Laura Stoler (ed.), *Imperial Debris. On Ruins and Ruination*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013; Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress. Imperial Durabilities in our Times*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. Recently, anthropologist Christine Schwenkel has drawn on notions like “ruination” and “obsolescence” to analyse in novel and stimulating ways the material and affective dimensions of GDR-designed buildings and urban landscapes in northern Vietnam. Christina Schwenkel, *Building Socialism. The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

<sup>117</sup>. Stoler, *Duress*, p. 348.

<sup>118</sup>. For my own critical take on this concept, see Johan Lagae, “From “Patrimoine partagé” to “Whose Heritage”? Critical reflections on colonial built heritage in the city of Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo”, *Afrika Focus*, vol. 21, nr. 1, 2008, pp. 11-30.

<sup>119</sup>. Ruth Sacks, “Lived Remainders: The Contemporary Lives of Iron Hotels in the Congo”, *Architectural Theory Review*, vol. 22, n°1, 2018, pp. 64-82.

respect, she unconditionally acknowledges the importance of the accumulation over time of dust and the emergence of rust, of cracked and buckling surfaces, of damp stains and all kinds of later additions, up to washing lines attached today to their verandahs, as a way of looking “through” rather than merely “at” these edifices.<sup>120</sup> In doing so, Sacks provides a model of how to approach buildings as “active agents which are part of complex sites that change over time”.<sup>121</sup>

However stimulating it was for me to read Sacks’ revisiting of these two buildings which I knew quite well from my own research, I still feel we approach these structures from fundamentally different perspectives on the colonial past. While I, to some extent, agree with Sacks that “our knowledge of history is ‘fundamentally relational’ and only able to be grasped through the lens of the present context”,<sup>122</sup> my take on colonial infrastructural landscapes, of which I provided a broad sketch in this chapter, is, first and foremost, about the way we understand and write the colonial past, rather than about the way we view the postcolonial present. I have argued here that we should assess the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line as a layered infrastructural element that requires a multi-scalar analysis, from S to XL, in order to understand how it reshaped existing landscapes and how it produced a colonial taskscape with complex levels of interconnectedness, both local and global. As such, this chapter has at its core a double historiographical agenda. Ultimately I want, first, to make a plea for shifting our attention as architectural historians from signature edifices and urban sites to mundane urban landscapes and grey architecture when researching colonial territories, and, second, to present a claim that in doing so from a transimperial/transcolonial perspective we might actually make a significant contribution to a more nuanced rewriting of colonial – and global – history itself.<sup>123</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The analysis presented here draws on almost two decades of research on architecture, planning and urbanization in colonial and postcolonial DR Congo, conducted at Ghent University, together with a series of PhD and postdoc researchers, as well as master’s students in Ghent and often in close collaboration with a number of Congolese historians and artists. This research is informed by extensive archival research in a large number of collections, as well as by a significant number of fieldwork trips to DR Congo since 2000. This work was conducted in the context of a series of projects funded by FWO, in particular FWO-projects n° G.0786.09N, n° G045015N and n° G053215N. An overview of part of this work is presented in Johan

120. In her text, Ruth Sacks explicitly takes another position on these buildings as does, for instance, architect and heritage expert Yves Robert in “De la villégiature à Thysville au tourisme patrimonial à Mbanza-Ngungu: Des héritages culturels cosmopolites comme levier de développement urbain”, art. cit.

121. Ibid., p. 65. There are some parallels here with how a group of scholars (anthropologists and historians mainly) have investigated the remains of medical research institutes in Africa, see Paul Wenzel Geissler, Guillaume Lachenal, John Manton, and Noémi Tousignant (eds.), *Traces of the future: an archaeology of medical science in Africa*, Bristol: Intellect, 2016.

122. Ibid., p. 66.

123. In this respect, this chapter is in tune with some arguments forwarded in Peter H. Christensen, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure*, New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2017.

Lagae & Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu, “Producing new Spatial(ized) (Hi)stories on Congolese cities: Reflections on Ten Years of Collaboration between UGent and UNIKIN”, *Afrika Focus*, vol. 31, n° 2, (2018), pp. 87-106 [available online]. For the writing of this particular chapter, I benefitted in particular from the ongoing PhD research entitled *A Concrete State. Building ambitions in the (Belgian) Congo, 1908-1964*, conducted by Robby Fivez, as well as from a master’s dissertation entitled *Mapping a transforming colonial landscape. An Atlas of the Bas-Congo region along the Matadi-Leopoldville railway line* submitted by Fien Deruyter and Jana Vandepoele in the academic year 2017-2018.

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**FILIPA FIÚZA****Researcher in session**

SESSION: *Projecting Power in Colonial and Post-Colonial Angola and Mozambique: Architecture, Urban Design, Public Art and Monuments*  
CHAIRS: Jeremy Ball and Gerbert Verheij

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**BEATRIZ SERRAZINA****Researcher in session**

SESSION: *The spatialization of population control in late colonialism: contexts, modalities, dynamics*  
CHAIR: Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo

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in Lisbon, in 2019, the participation in national and international meetings, and research publications on the interplay between private companies, the production of space, and population control during late Portuguese colonialism.

**ANA SILVA FERNANDES****Researcher in session**

SESSION: *The spatialization of population control in late colonialism: contexts, modalities, dynamics*  
CHAIR: Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo

Architect and researcher, with postgraduate studies on architectural heritage, and a PhD on policies for improvement of self-produced areas, focusing on African territories. She has been undertaking applied research on urban policies, spatial justice, informality, self-produced settlements, participation and heritage. She is nowadays a postdoctoral researcher on the socio-spatial impacts of the infrastructural network in Mozambique, and on participatory policies for overcoming social asymmetries in its access, in a research hosted by ISCTE-IUL (Lisbon, PT) and FAPP-UEM (Maputo, MZ). She is also an Invited Lecturer at FAUP (Porto, PT), having multiple publications, supervisions and conference participations.

**ANTÓNIO DEUS****Researcher in session**

PANEL 6: *Peripheral Infrastructures in Late Colonial Cities*  
MODERADOR: Tiago Castela

PhD student at CES-UC in the doctoral programme at «Heritages of Portuguese Influence». The research project focuses on the design of the urban network in Angola, in the main cities founded in the Highlands, along the railway lines, in a key period of its definition, and of its relationship with other centralities, such as the Catholic Missions. Research fellow (2017-2019) in the project "Coast to Coast - Late Infrastructure Development in Ancient Portuguese Africa" (ISCTE-UL), coordinated by Ana Vaz Milheiro.

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