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# Rewriting Congo's Colonial Past: History, Memory, and Colonial Built Heritage in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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## Lubumbashi, a cosmopolitan city in the former Belgian Congo

- <sup>1</sup> Lubumbashi was created ex nihilo in 1910 in the context of promising mining expeditions undertaken in the region since the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> At first sight, it looks very much a prototype colonial city. Already the very first urban plan shows separate European native settlements, and this racial segregation would become more explicit in later schemes. The visual representation of Lubumbashi in colonial propaganda further more highlighted the triad power structure underscoring the Belgian colonial project, by depicting the major buildings associated with the colonial government, the missionary congregations, and colonial companies, such as the imposing infrastructure of the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK). But Lubumbashi was not just another Belgian colonial city. Because of its very particular geographical location, situated on the crossroads of Central and Southern Africa, it had been from the very beginning a cosmopolitan urban enclave, in terms of both the European and the African population.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the immigration triggered by the arrival of the first railroad coming from Zambia (the former Northern Rhodesia) in 1910 immediately countered the geopolitical strategy of locating Lubumbashi as a Belgian enclave close to the border in order to block the British influx from the south. The British were not the only non-Belgian Europeans in Lubumbashi.<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning, a significant Italian presence was noticeable and the city further more had inhabitants from Greece, Russia, Germany, Turkey, Switzerland, Portugal, etc. An

important Jewish community, a large part of which came from Rhodes (Italy) in the 1920s, resided in Lubumbashi. The African population of Lubumbashi also had different origins, which largely resulted from the policy of several colonial companies recruiting their labor force from often far away regions. It made Lubumbashi into a melting pot of African cultures, with the presence of people coming from various regions in the Congo, Southern Africa, Rwanda, Burundi or even Senegal. Social differences ran all across Lubumbashi's urban society and structured relationships within as well as between the white and black urban communities. Most non-Belgian Europeans were active in (small) trade or craftsmanship-like activities. Portuguese, Greek, or Jewish traders were reputed for entertaining a more direct contact with the African population as did Belgian colonial agents, giving the former a status of so-called "Blancs du second rang" in the eyes of the latter. Missionary education, both Catholic and Protestant, created a community of "intermediary" Africans, positioned between a large illiterate black population and the white community.

## The built fabric of a segregated city

- 2 This multiplicity of agents and the transnational spheres of influence are clearly reflected in the built fabric of colonial Lubumbashi. The general scheme of the first urban plan, designed by the Swiss engineer Itten around 1911, for instance, was modeled on South African and Rhodesian cities such as Bulawayo. The railroad moreover created a quick and efficient means for importing building materials from those regions, such as cast iron building parts. The Belgian architectural magazine *Tekhné*, immediately critiqued this copying of "horrible" foreign models and lamented the invasion of Congo's booming building market by "people from elsewhere."<sup>4</sup> Not before the mid-1920s did Belgian architects arrive, introducing a more metropolitan design practice, as can be seen from some Art Deco and Modernist public buildings, even if their formal language and ornamentation sometimes was "Africanized." At the same time, new villa-type houses inspired by the residential architecture in Belgian garden-city enclaves were erected for colonial agents, replacing the earlier bungalow typology, which itself had been imported from English and Dutch tropical colonies.<sup>5</sup> As such, in only a couple of years the urban realm of Lubumbashi changed from a "Far West"-environment into a city "pervaded by the kind of European atmosphere one only found in a previous century in South African cities." as architect Raymond Cloquet declared in 1931.<sup>6</sup> Primarily an interwar city, some remarkable constructions in Lubumbashi date from the 1950s: the monumental classicist *Athénée Royal* or the cultural center comprising a theater, museum, and music school, designed by the local architectural office Yenga in a poetic, sculptural version of postwar tropical modernism. That transnational influences continued in the postwar period, however, is demonstrated by a highly acclaimed housing complex of the late 1950s, co-authored by the South African architect Julian Elliot.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until the mid-1950s that architectural considerations underscored the construction of native towns in Lubumbashi. The colorful, modernist aesthetic of the 1950s housing units designed by the *Office des Cités Africaines* was highly acclaimed by the international professional milieu, yet received with modest enthusiasm by the African community. The building of previous native towns had almost completely been governed by a highly rationalized design approach, while the construction of the workers' camps of the UMHK was a radical project of social engineering carried out by

doctors and engineers and exclusively based on considerations of hygiene, cost-efficiency, and control.<sup>8</sup> The South African compound counted as a major source of inspiration in this context, while the major 1920s urban operation of erasing and rebuilding Lubumbashi's first African settlement also was influenced by South African experiences of Belgian colonial officials.<sup>9</sup> It induced a neat physical separation between the European town and the native town by means of a zone neutre or cordon sanitaire that, as in other colonial territories in sub-Saharan Africa, was complemented by numerous laws enforcing racial segregation and restricting mobility. Daily life in colonial Lubumbashi was undeniably pervaded by a "color bar."<sup>10</sup> Yet, the colonial encounter was a complex one that surpasses a purely antagonistic scheme, as is evidenced by the continuous presence of domestic servants in Lubumbashi's European neighborhood. In fact, this induced intense moments of "living apart together," that are still informing the urban memories of the city's [former] inhabitants.

## Affirming identities within a segregated urban environment

- 3 If major differences characterize Lubumbashi's European town and native towns in terms of building materials, comfort, space occupation, or mobility, on closer analysis, these were not homogeneous urban entities in themselves. While this holds true for Lubumbashi's African neighborhoods, I will focus here only on a few examples in the European town to demonstrate how the urban tissue reflects the heterogeneity of Lubumbashi's European community.

The grid structure of Lubumbashi's European town, before all the product of real estate policies, was not completely uniform, but differentiated by means of a hierarchy of avenues, while one diagonally running boulevard and the inclusion of squares and green spaces allowed for a certain articulation in residential, commercial, and administrative zones (fig. 1).

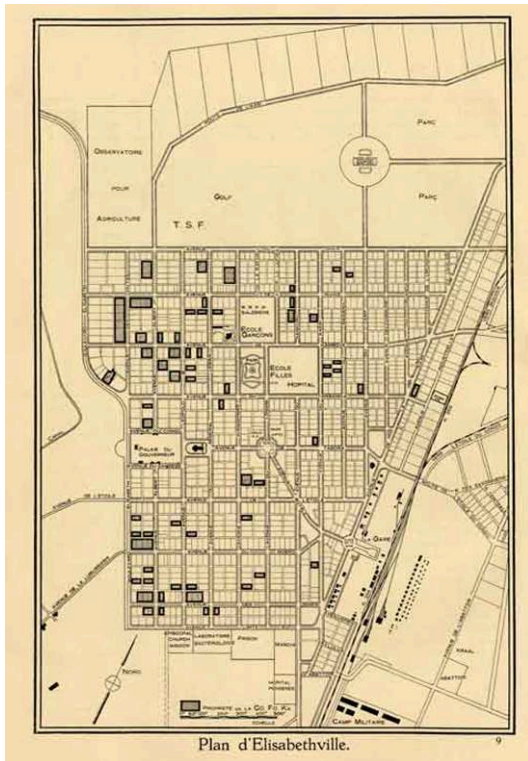


Fig. 1: Urban plan of Lubumbashi's European town, 1929 (Brochure COMPAGNIE FONCIÈRE DU KATANGA, La Maison au Katanga, Bruxelles, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1930)

- 4 In this urban landscape, each group within the white community sought to mark and affirm its identity by erecting distinctive buildings, such as the Italian consulate, the Greek Orthodox Church (fig. 2), or the synagogue, one of Lubumbashi's most striking architectural artifacts (fig. 3).



Fig. 2: Greek Orthodox Church, Lubumbashi, 1956, © Johan Lagae, 2005.



Fig. 3: Synagogue, Lubumbashi, 1929, © Johan Lagae, 2005.

- 5 A part from their formal distinctiveness, the peculiar sites of some of the city's main public buildings unveil particular relationships and even tensions within the white community. Facing a major crossroads close to the railway station, the synagogue, for



instance, stands at one of the extremities of the main boulevard, the so-called Avenue de Tabora,<sup>11</sup> along which are situated all public buildings representing Belgian colonial power: on the Place Royale in the middle are located the palace of justice, the commissariat de district and the meeting place of the colonial elite, the Cercle Albert-Elisabeth. Ending the vista of this boulevard on the other side is the cathedral, a building in a Neo-Roman style conceived in 1921 as a monument representing the triumph of Christianity in Katanga. The cathedral blocks the view of the park and the governor's residence from the city center (fig. 4), yet the physical proximity of these two buildings clearly marked a strong symbolic site of Belgian colonial power for the city's inhabitants.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 4: Cathedral, Lubumbashi, 1921, ©Johan Lagae, 2000.

- 6 The cathedral, however, also hints at internal conflicts within Lubumbashi's white community as the choice of its location was subject of difficult and long-lasting negotiations between the colonial government and the two Catholic congregations active in the region.<sup>13</sup> Such conflicts also underscored the choice of site of the 1928 Methodist church, built in Neo-Gothic style. Even if it closes the vista of the avenue running between the cathedral and the governor's park, it is in fact situated in the zone neutre, as the Belgian government, no doubt at the request of the Catholic missionaries, had not granted the Protestants permission to build within the confines of the European town.

## A shared heritage?

- 7 By arguing that Lubumbashi's building history forces us to reconsider the binary analytical framework of "colonizer" and "colonized" when re-reading Congo's colonial past, this text is mainly historiographical in scope. Lubumbashi's built legacy, however, also triggers a reflection on heritage issues. If these colonial buildings constitute an important architectural legacy, as was evidenced in September 2005 by the first Journées du Patrimoine organized by the French Cultural Center in Lubumbashi,<sup>14</sup> they

also, as products of a cosmopolitan colonial society, confront us with a key question of the contemporary heritage debate that Stuart Hall poignantly formulated as “whose heritage?”<sup>15</sup> In future studies, we aim to elaborate further on Pierre Nora’s notion of “realm of memory” and investigate this built heritage in both its tangible and intangible aspects.<sup>16</sup> For Lubumbashi’s multiple sites of memory reveal complex, dynamic, and often divergent memories of its various former inhabitants that ask for a critical assessment of the notion “shared heritage” as it is currently applied to former colonial territories.<sup>17</sup>

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## NOTES DE FIN

1. Bruce FETTER, *The Creation of Elisabethville*, Stanford, 1976.
2. For a late 1940s survey of Lubumbashi’s population, see MINISTÈRE DES COLONIES, *Urbanisme au Congo belge*, Bruxelles, [1950]. For a first historical analysis, see Nicolas ESGAIN, *La vie quotidienne à Elisabethville (1912-1932) : émergence d’une culture urbaine*, unpublished dissertation, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1997.
3. On colonial architecture in the Belgian Congo and information on the architects discussed here, see various entries by Johan LAGAE in Anne VAN LOO, *Dictionnaire de l’architecture en Belgique de 1839 à nos jours*, Antwerp, 2003. On the urbanism of Lubumbashi, see Bruno DE MEULDER, *Kuvuande Mbote*, Antwerp, 2000, pp. 71–92.
4. A. DE HERTOIGH, “Pour commencer...,” *Tekhné*, no. 1 (1911), pp. 10–11.
5. See JOHAN LAGAE, “In search of a ‘comme chez soi’. The ideal colonial house in Congo (1885–1960),” in Jean-Luc VELLUT, *Itinéraires croisés de la modernité. Congo belge (1920-1950)*, Tervuren/Paris, 2000, pp. 239–281.
6. Raymond CLOQUET, “L’Art de bâtir au Katanga,” *Le Matériel Colonial*, no. 104 (1932), pp. 57–74.
7. Udo KULTERMANN, ed., *World Architecture. A Critical Mosaic 1900–2000. Vol. 6. Central and Southern Africa*, Vienna, 2000, p. xxiv, p. xxviii, and pp. 50–51.
8. Bruno DE MEULDER, *De kampen van Kongo*, Louvain, 1996.
9. Fernand GRÉVISSE, *Le Centre Extra-Coutumier d’Elisabethville. Quelques aspects de la politique indigène du Haut-Katanga industriel*, Brussels, 1951.
10. Georges BRAUSCH, *Belgian Administration in the Congo*, London, 1961; Nicolas ESGAIN, “Scènes de la vie quotidienne à Elisabethville dans les années vingt,” in VELLUT, *Itinéraires croisés*, pp. 57–70.
11. This denomination refers to the highly symbolic Belgian victory over German troops in East Africa in 1916.
12. Till today, one of the “urban myths” has it that the cathedral and the residence are linked by means of a (nonexistent) underground tunnel.
13. Nicolas ESGAIN, *La vie quotidienne*.
14. See <http://lubumculture.site.voila.fr/patriarchi.htm>.
15. Stuart HALL, “Whose Heritage? Un-settling ‘The Heritage’, RE-imagining the Post-Nation,” in Ziauddin Sarder et al., eds., *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory*, London, 2002, pp. 72–84.
16. The work on Congolese colonial memories by scholars such as Johannes FABIAN, Bogumil JEWSIEWICKI, and Donatien DIBWE forms an important starting point in this respect.



17. The notion “shared heritage” is used, among others, by ICOMOS to deal with colonial built legacy.

## RÉSUMÉS

By focusing on the colonial architecture and urbanism of Lubumbashi, the second major city in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this text aims to illustrate that the built environment in colonial Congo took shape not only through architectural ideas and models imported from the métropole or according to the common guidelines of Belgian colonial policies, but also via a complex process in which many diverse spheres of influence were at play. The urban form of Lubumbashi, which since its foundation was a cosmopolitan enclave, was shaped by a multiplicity of actors testifying of the presence of a variety of groups and identities within both the city's white and black communities. By constructing a historical narrative that goes beyond a mere binary analytical framework of “colonizer” versus “colonized,” this text also aims to form the starting point for a critical assessment of the notion “shared heritage” as applied to the built legacy in former colonial territories.

## INDEX

**Index chronologique** : XXe siècle, Époque contemporaine

**Index géographique** : Europe, Afrique, Lubumbashi, Belgique, République du Congo, Afrique du Sud

**Mots-clés** : architecture coloniale, urbanisme

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Johan Lagae holds a PhD in architectural history from the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ghent University. His work focuses on colonial architecture in Central Africa (mainly the former Belgian Congo) and the architecture of 1930s World's Fairs. He contributed to numerous books, exhibitions, and journals (Journal of Architecture, Third Text). He is one of the editors of OASE.