

## COMPOUND SPACE: A STUDY OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF LABOUR CONTROL IN THE CASE OF WALVIS BAY

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*'[E]very system of power is presented with the same problem...the ordering of human multiplicities.'*

The colonial realm has become fertile terrain for studying how specific types of built form and urban planning have been either developed in colonial contexts or transferred from western contexts and incorporated as key elements of apparatuses of power.<sup>1</sup> A source of inspiration for much of this has been Foucault's work on governmentality; a term more broadly encompassing the strategies, tactics and technologies used to conduct the conduct of specific populations.<sup>2</sup> For given historical moments, Foucault posits the assembling of specific networks of heterogeneous elements – discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, and philosophical propositions – to form apparatuses to respond to strategic urgencies. Leading off from Nietzsche's axiom that 'the cause of the genesis of a thing and its final usefulness, its actual employment and integration into a system of purposes, lie *toto caelo* apart',<sup>3</sup> my intention in what follows is to briefly examine what clues the changing spatiality and architecture of 'the compound' at Walvis Bay can reveal about changing strategic urgencies.<sup>4</sup>

The compound, the location and the reserve have been identified as the most important spatial institutions in the apparatus of power that attained its apogee under Verwoerd's tutelage. As I discuss below, this triad

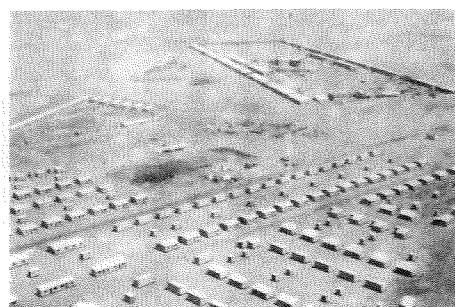


Image of the rising compound from the Namib Times, 20 November 1959

internalised a networked logic aimed at compartmentalising African populations according to a graduated scale of inclusion and a calibrated regulation of flows between compartments.

In 1959, on the sand flats north of Walvis Bay, the contours of an imposing Owambo migrant labour compound, several hostels and a new location began to take shape. The above images are read as a cartography of power designed to articulate an increasingly radical politics of racial exclusion with the necessary spatial inclusion of Africans in urban areas as labourers. The Walvis Bay compound – forecast to become a 'model for the whole of Southern Africa' – can arguably be understood as the high point in this endeavour of fusing systematic scientific method with power to penetrate, manage and guide African urban life under apartheid; a veritable urban machine to maximise the efficient use of flows of labour in the wider territorial infrastructure of the migrant labour system. But how did the compound evolve in complexity and functional utility during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and why, fifty years after its completion, has the compound reawakened emotions, this time around as it assumes the function of monument over authoritarian governmentality?

### The 'native question', the labour question and the compound

A fundamental element of the so-called 'Native Question', which preoccupied colonial administrators throughout Africa from the late-19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, was the question

of whether to actively promote or circumvent so-called detribalisation, particularly as this related to African labour and urbanisation.<sup>5</sup> But while it was a central trope in motivating policy, it was one that was frustratingly ambiguous to an administrative gaze that increasingly sought scientific precision; the prolific South African ethnologist Van Warmelo stating how 'no yardstick or barometer or scale has yet been devised on which the degree of detribalisation can be read off'.<sup>6</sup> Here planned detribalisation denotes governmental interventions intent upon 'disabling old forms of life by systematically breaking down their conditions, and constructing in their place new conditions so as to enable new forms of life to come into being'.<sup>7</sup> At the other end of the spectrum lay interventions intent on conserving so-called 'tribal' society. For a gamut of reasons, responses varied over time and across various colonial contexts, but at either end of the spectrum were two 'model' architectural forms: the African housing estate as educative space for controlled detribalisation and labour 'stabilisation', and the compound as disciplinary space for shielding African labour from what Crush terms 'the pernicious influence of detribalisation'.<sup>8</sup> The 'compound' – a term deriving from the Malay word *kampung* meaning village or hamlet – first developed as an enclosure for segregating/controlling African labour during the 1870s–80s at the De Beers Consolidated Diamond Mine at Kimberley.<sup>9</sup>

Illustrative of how specific compound designs were to circulate as 'models' for other contexts including Namibia in the following decades, the Kimberley model was adopted and modified for housing migrant mining labour on the Witwatersrand (Rand), following a visit by a private commission of Rand compound managers to Kimberley in 1903.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Namibia, the introduction and progressive development of the compound is implicitly related to policy concerning the incorporation of 'tribal' labour from areas lying north of the so-called 'police zone' ('European' zone), principally Ovamboland and Kavango.<sup>11</sup> In 1925 officials and major employers of mine

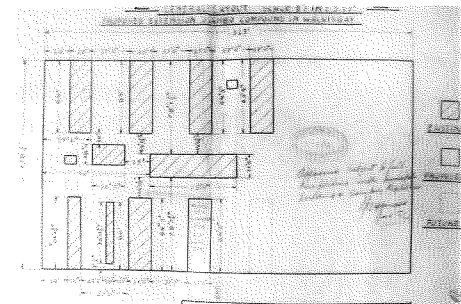
labour met to hammer out a strategy to resolve the most acute strategic urgency of the time: securing sufficient supplies of labour from within South West Africa (SWA). It was decided that two labour recruiting organisations would be formed; the Southern Labour Organisation (SLO), which gave the southern diamond mines the sole right to recruit Owambo labour, and the Northern Labour Organisation (NLO), giving northern mining enterprises sole rights to recruit labour from Kavango.<sup>12</sup> It was further agreed that the SLO would channel surplus recruits to the NLO and to farms.

In the ensuing years a network of infrastructure for recruitment, transport, medical control, feeding, and surveillance of migrant labour – albeit not without 'leakage' – began to be put into place. Contemporaneously with the 1925 conference, the compound and the location assumed increasing importance as vital elements of a solution to the second critical strategic urgency: putting in place the necessary legal and material infrastructure to monitor, regulate, and for some groups such as the Owambo, circumvent detribalisation in urban areas. This included an armoury of legal statutes, most importantly the 1923 Native (Urban Areas) Act (implemented in SWA in 1924), which impelled local authorities to plan specific urban areas for different categories of Africans and register Africans in urban areas.

### Compound space in Walvis Bay

In the forty-year period following its annexation by the British in 1878, Walvis Bay remained a 'Cinderella of Empire'<sup>13</sup>, predicted a glorious future as a world port but denigrated by one and all. In 1884 the Acting Resident Magistrate complained that '...a more desolate and wretched looking country cannot be imagined', while in 1922 the *Argus* described the Bay as 'South Africa's dreariest seaport' and the ongoing redevelopment of its port facilities as 'wasting £750 000 in the desert'.<sup>14</sup> Following the South African takeover of SWA in 1915, Walvis Bay was dominated economically, and for a time administratively, by South African Railways and Harbours (SAR & H), and its control of most of the land acted to severely circumscribe

Plan for extension of Tuna Corps compound 1952, uncatalogued, Walvis Bay Municipality Archive (0183)

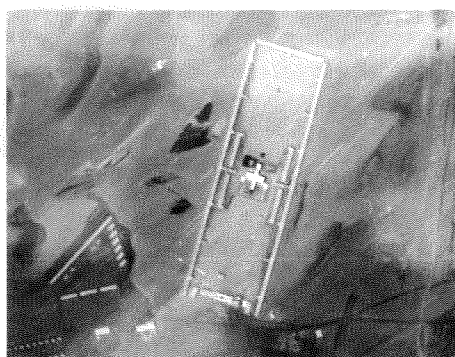


planning. With the redevelopment of the port facilities in the early 1920s, and following a reduction to the original SAR & H land awards, a major town-planning scheme was initiated which included the Lagoon Township (for whites) and the first 'properly planned location' laid out on the outskirts of the settlement. The SAR & H, which accommodated its labour in separate housing, was apportioned a site within the location for building a compound for railway and harbour 'boys' and quarters for married 'native' labour. Labour requirements at the Bay remained limited, however, and the Owambo contingent of the labour force rarely surpassed 400 between 1924 and the mid-1940s.<sup>15</sup> Developments in the late 1940s and early 1950s, both in SWA and in South Africa, were to alter the situation dramatically. At Walvis Bay, the establishment of a fishmeal and oil plant by Walvis Bay Canning Co in 1948 marked the start of a rapid expansion in the fishing, fish-processing and canning sectors, which greatly increased labour demand.

Existing policy stipulated that employers of more than 25 employees were required to provide compound accommodation. To cope with the impending industrial expansion, sites for ten industries and ten labour compounds were laid out along the foreshore.<sup>16</sup> As the fishing sector expanded, so more company compounds were built, totalling 30 by 1954. Contrasting with the wood-and-iron barrack

compounds built in the 1920s and 1930s, the design and construction of these company compounds were bound by increasingly stringent regulations, including the stipulation that registered architects draw up building plans. Furthermore, as closer links were forged between science and Native Administration – particularly relating to housing and conditions of urban life – a network of 'expert' institutions and clearing houses for documenting, managing and controlling compound and location life took shape, consisting of compound managers, compound inspectors, etcetera.

But even as company compounds were being established, reverberations from Verwoerd's overtly more segregationist and scientific apparatus of Native Administration were beginning to be felt in SWA. As Ivan Evans astutely shows, by 1954 South Africa's Native Affairs Department (NAD) had gained control over the entire process of planning and constructing African housing areas. By 1951 new minimum standards of housing for non-Europeans to be adopted by local municipalities had been established, and, in cases of non-compliance by local councils, the Native Resettlement Bill of 1954 empowered Government to carry out policy on their behalf and at their expense.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when Native Administration in SWA was taken over by South Africa in 1954, senior NAD officials soon arrived and began to lay down the law, particularly so



The new compound in 1960, Ministry of Works and Transport Archive, Windhoek



Workers inside the compound in the 1970s





Exterior view of the compound, ca. 1960s

in Walvis Bay, a town castigated for its 'most chaotic and disorganized existence' and failure to enforce the Native (Urban Areas) Act.<sup>18</sup>

A reluctant Walvis Bay Municipality was essentially ordered to turn down any new applications to erect new or extend existing company compounds in town, and to establish a new location (Kuisebmond) and one central municipal Ovambo compound to the north of the town where all 'native' accommodation was to be located.<sup>19</sup> The compound – designed by Dixon & Associates – was based on the De Beers Wesselton Mine compound in South Africa and the Tsumeb Corporation compound built in 1947, itself modelled on Rand compounds.

While the aim of the new 4 832-bed compound (later extended to 6 000) was framed by NAD in the munificent terms of ensuring 'that the employer has a contented healthy employee', it was aimed at resolving two strategic urgencies: to comply with the South African ambition to totally racialise space, and to maximise the efficiency of migrant labour.<sup>20</sup> Compound 'inmates' – as residents were tellingly defined by NAD – lived 16 to each room; the outer wall was designed to be 'impenetrable'; and the ground was macadamised to prevent the concealment of illicit goods, beer and weapons.<sup>21</sup> But the integration of innovative technology at strategic points throughout the compound testifies to the meticulous scientific calibration of the

compound as a machine not only for controlling residents but perhaps more so for maximising the efficiency of circulation at various scales of the migrant labour system.

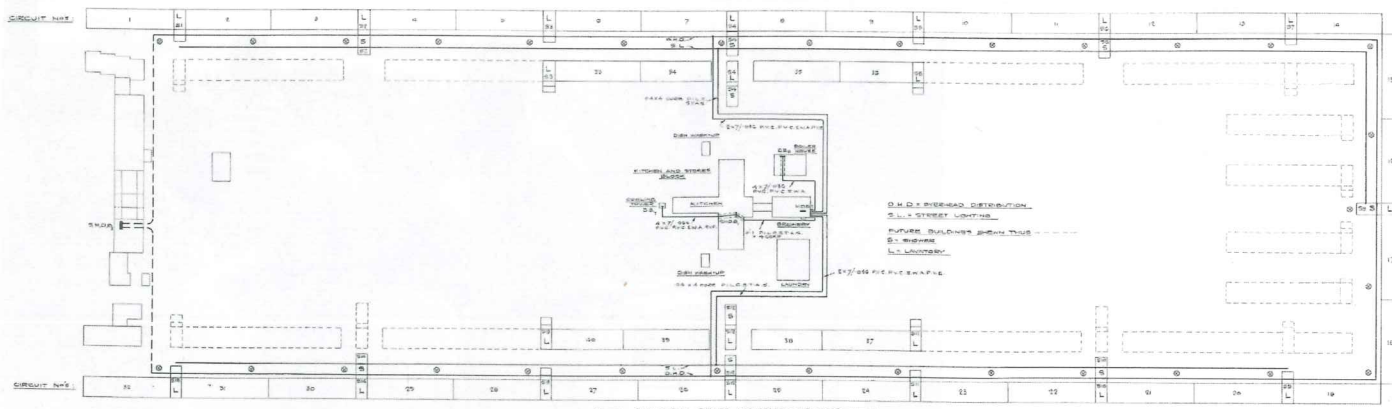
At the scale of the body, the compound included refined kitchen pressure cookers 'to increase the food value and promote the digestion of the compound boys'; at the scale of the compound, novel floor plans to maximise flows through the dining halls, ablution blocks, and, linked to the scale of the migrant labour system itself, innovations included banking services for compound residents to ensure that 'depositors will definitely take at least a portion of their earnings to their families'.<sup>22</sup>

The Walvis Bay Municipal Compound, opened on 24 May 1960, certainly lends itself to being read as a 'diagram' of the apartheid apparatus of power; a specific representation of 'the right disposition of men and things, arranged so as to lead to a convenient end'.<sup>23</sup> But for NAD, 'convenient ends' were not to be easily won. Space precludes any rendition here of the story of the compound narrated by migrant labour, but what can be said is that Nietzsche's axiom relating to the transmutability of 'things' holds true for the compound, which also generated unintended flows of information, practices and mobilisation among migrant labour.

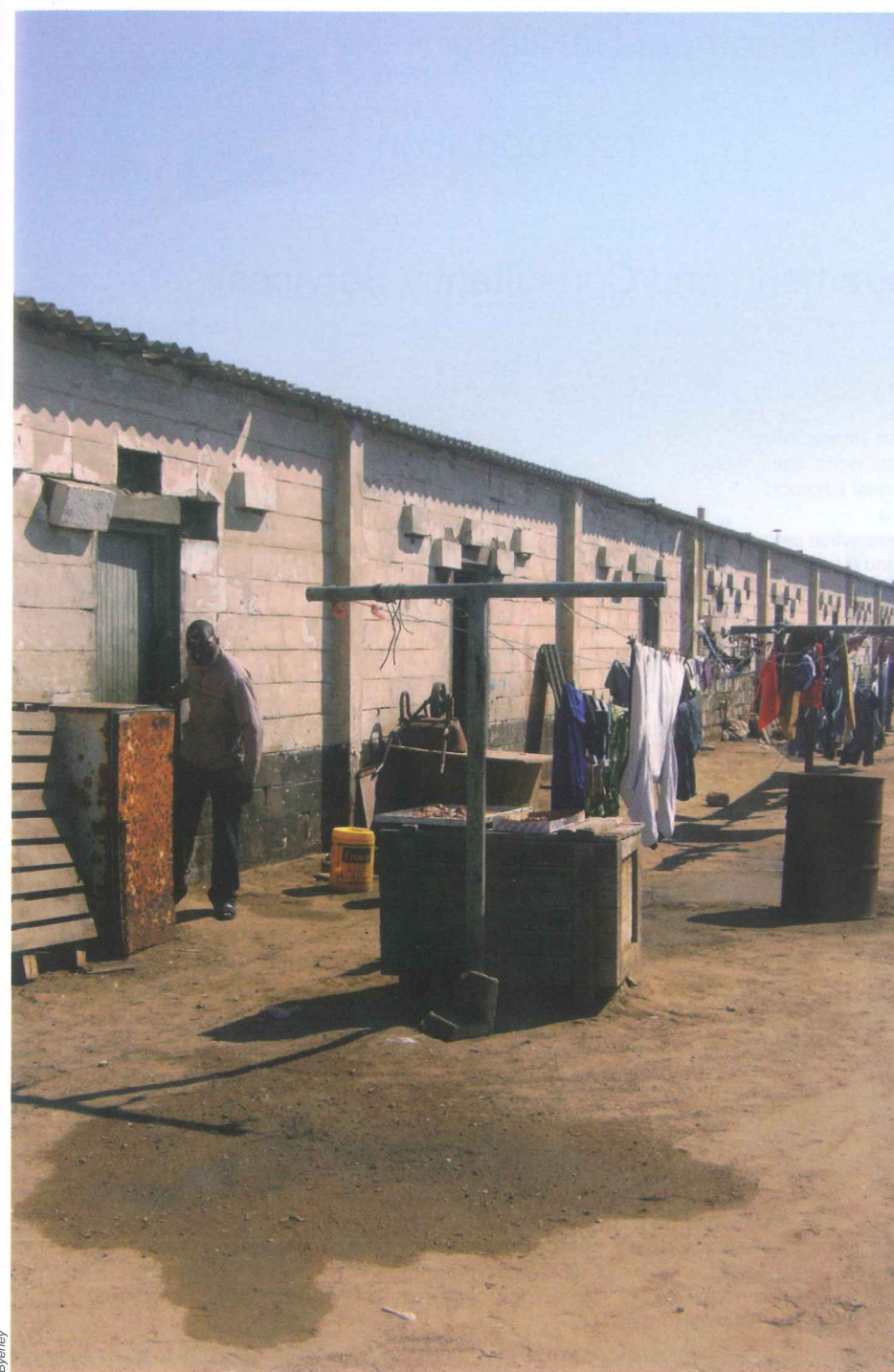
The notion of the compound as generative of flows holds true even today. With most of the original compound now demolished, remnants

– including the entrance, offices, and several of the dormitory units – were 'saved' by circuits of expert knowledge, heritage discourse and practice, capital and – although less evidently – those who spent time within its 'impenetrable' walls. Some sixty-five years after the Director of Non-European Affairs waxed lyrical over how 'Council, the Department of Native Affairs, the Administration for SWA and the staff of Dixon Associates are certainly erecting a monument to the town',<sup>24</sup> the compound is slated to fulfil a new monumental function as the Apartheid and Contract Labour Museum. The museum initiative was publicly launched in June 2008 with the Fortress Namibia exhibition at the Franco-Namibian Cultural Centre in Windhoek, which displayed photographs of the compound taken in the 1970s by Kimmo Kiljunen (a former Finnish MP).<sup>25</sup>

Four years later, however, the initial momentum seems to have ebbed out into the sand. While ambitious designs for the museum have been drawn up, little material progress has been made aside from fencing off the few remaining compound buildings. Although the reasons for the standstill are complex, I am reminded of Kiljunen's comments during a planning tour of the compound site in 2008: "If you demolish all of this, it won't look like a prison. Don't demolish anything until the museum idea is thought through, otherwise it will be too late."<sup>11</sup>



Plan of the Walvis Bay Municipal Ovambo Compound, completed 1960. NAN. MWB 1/358



The last line of compound houses still occupied, June 2010

## Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Avermaete, T. ed. *Colonial Modern: Aesthetics of the Past, Rebellions of the Future* (black dog publishing, 2010).
- 2 Foucault, M. 1978. *Governmentality*. Re-published in Faubion, J.D. (ed.) 1994. *Power. Michel Foucault, essential works of Foucault 1954–1984. Vol. 3*. London: Penguin Books. p. 210.
- 3 Nietzsche, F. 1998 [1887]. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Hackett Publishing Co. Inc Indianapolis/Cambridge. p.50
- 4 For earlier work in this vein see for example Crush, J. *Scripting the Compound: Power and Space in the South African Mining Industry*. In: *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. June 1994. Vol. 12 (3), pp. 301–324.
- 5 See Byerley, A. *Mind the Gap! Seeking Stability beyond the Tribal Threshold in Late-Colonial Uganda: The Role of Urban Housing Policy, 1945–1960*. *African Studies* 68, No. 3 (2009): 429–64.
- 6 NAN. Archival Group A.591 Storage Unit 18. See 2/45. Van Warmelo Accession. Vol 391 (419) Memo: detribalisation. N.J. van Warmelo 27-11-64.
- 7 Scott, D. 1999. *Refashioning Futures*. Princeton University Press. p.25.
- 8 Crush (1994:312)
- 9 Home, R. 2000. *From barrack compounds to the single-family house: planning worker housing in colonial Natal and Northern Rhodesia*. *Planning Perspectives*, 15 (2000) pp. 327–347.
- 10 Turrell, R. *Kimberley's Model Compounds*. In: *Journal of African Studies*. Vol. 25, No. 1 (1984)
- 11 Moorsom, R. 1977 *Underdevelopment, Contract Labour and Worker Consciousness in Namibia, 1915–72*. *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Vol.4, No.1. 52–87.
- 12 Ibid. footnote ix. *The Ovambo and Okavango areas were delineated as lying either side of 17.5 longitude east*
- 13 MacDonald, W. 1915. *The Destiny of Walvis Bay*. Johannesburg: The Transvaal Leader.
- 14 NAN. 1WLB 5/1/1/2. (J.S. Simpson). NAN. A. 102.
- 15 NAN SWAA 315.
- 16 Walvis Bay Town Clerk. September 1948. NAN. SGL 8 1/8.
- 17 Evans, I. 1997. *Bureaucracy and Race: Native Administration in South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 18 NAN. BAO 1018/313
- 19 NAN. BAO1018/313, 5615.
- 20 See Memorandum. Walvis Bay Municipal 'Ovambo' Compound. BAO. 1018/313 5615.
- 21 NAN. MWB 1/357.
- 22 NAN. MWB 1/357.
- 23 Ibid. footnote ii.
- 24 Director of Non-European Affairs. NAN. BAO 1018. 313. 5615. File 1114/313.
- 25 The museum initiative was started by Kimmo Kiljunen and Libolly Haufiku.
- 26 This paper is based on ongoing fieldwork on the history of the compound at Walvis Bay. Fieldwork has taken place between 2007–2012. Financing of this project has been made possible by generous funding from SIDA, and from the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala. Andrew Byerley is works as researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden, and the Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, Sweden. Fortress Namibia Exhibition. French Cultural Centre. Windhoek. June 2008. The compound 'plugged into' a wider circuit of circulation and control. Photo Byerley. Inside Walvis Bay Municipal Compound. Archive of The Namibian. 1-14-19. The Walvis Bay Municipal Compound. Archive of The Namibian. 1-14-19.