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

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"Every system of power is presented with the same problem...the ordering of human multiplicity." 1

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. 2

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. 2

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 imperatives. Leaving 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 into its earlier part, 3 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 imperatives. 4

The compound, its location and the reserve have been identified as the most important social institutions in the apparatus of power that attuned to apposite under Verwoerd's state. As I discuss below, this trend of whether to actively promote or circumvent 5, 6 the process of "decolonisation"—partly because it is related to African labour and urbanisation. 7

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 question of what to do with labour was decided in the final stages of the planning and design. The Southern Labour Organisation (SLO), given some 'useful' enterprises, was required to recruit African labour from Namibia. 8

This further proved that the SLO would channel surplus labour 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. Contemporary with the 1920s conference, the compound and the location assumed increasing importance as vital elements of a solution to the second strategic critical urgency: putting in place the necessary legal and material infrastructure to monitor, regulate, and for some groups such as the Ovambo, circumvent domesticisation in urban areas. This included an array of legal measures, most importantly the 1933 Native Areas Act (implemented in S.W.A. in 1942), which compelled local authorities to plan specific urban areas for different categories of Africans and register Africans in urban areas. 9

Compound space in Walvis Bay

In the forty-year period following its inauguration by the British in 1918, Walvis Bay remained a 'Crownlands of Empire',10 predicted a glorious future as a world port but dignified by one and all. In 1961 the Acquiring Reserve Magistrate commented that "and desolate and withered looking country cannot be imagined;" while in 1922 the Argus described the Bay as South Africa's 'largest desert'.

Following the development of the port facilities and the rail sexway, the town of Walvis Bay was dominated economically, and for a time administratively, by South African Railways and Harbours (SAR & H) and its influence over most of the land acted to severely circumscribe planning. With the redevelopment of the port facilities in the early 1970s, the town rapidly improved, with 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 residential 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 Ovambo contingent of the labour force rarely surpassed 400 between 1924 and the mid-1940s. 11, 12

Developments in the late 1940s and early 1950s, both in S.W.A. and in South Africa, were to alter the situation dramatically. At Walvis Bay, the establishment of a shipyard and oil plant by Walvis Bay Carrier Co. in 1948 marked the start of a rapid expansion in the fishing, fish-processing and canning sectors, which greatly increased labour demand. 13

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 shoreline.14 As the fishing sector expanded, so more companies began to use the compound facilities, and total occupation reached 30 by 1956. 15

Contrasting with the wood-and-rubble barracks built in the 1920s and 1930s, the design and construction of these company compounds were bound by increasingly stringent regulations, including the stipulation that segregated structures were built up buildings. 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 locoence life took shape, consisting of compound managers, compound inspectors, etc.

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 S.W.A. As Iain Evans astutely shows, by 1954 South Africa's Native Affairs Department (NAAD) had gained control over the entire process of planning and constructing African housing areas. By 1951 new minimum standards of housing for non-Europeans were 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. 16 Thus, when Native Administration in S.W.A was taken over by South Africa in 1954, senior NAAD officials soon arrived and began to lay down the law, particularly so..."
in Walvis Bay, a town castigated for its `most chaotic and disorganised existence' and failure to enforce the Native (Urban Areas) Act.13 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 Owambo compound to the north of the town where all `native' accommodation was to be located.14 The compound – designed by Dixon & Associates – was based on the De Beers Wesselton Mine compound in South Africa and the Tsundam 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 multifaceted terms of ensuring `that the employer has a contended healthy employee', it was aimed at resolving two stratagems urgently to comply with the South African ambition to totally racialise space, and to maximise the efficiency of migrant labour.15 Compound tenants – as residents were specifically defined by NAD – lived 16 to 20 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.16 But the integration of innovative technology at strategic points throughout the compound testified 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 of 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 maximize 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 `deposits will definitely take at least a portion of their savings to their families'.17 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 man and things, arranged so as to lead to a convenient end'.18 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 this 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 SNA and the staff of Dixon Associates are certainly erecting a monument to the town',19 the compound is slated to fulfill 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 Kilino Kujundzic (a former Finnish MP).20 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 off Kujundzic'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."21