

Into architecture

House-building and acentred personhood in Maputo, Mozambique

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Introduction¹

After our late night conversations at the small bar attached to Sauden's grocery shop in the southern part of Mulwene, a peri-urban neighbourhood on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique, I walked slowly home with Daniel and Celso, my two good friends and neighbours, while admiring recently initiated construction projects and half-built houses. Although the lack of any street lighting made it virtually impossible to make out the particularities of individual houses, Daniel and Celso easily recalled the main characteristics of most of the buildings in the area, which were carefully evaluated and compared to other construction projects, not least their own. As we walked the short distance from Sauden's grocery shop to our houses while discussing the particular advantages of different construction strategies or the unavoidable failures of using inappropriate materials, my two interlocutors also made me aware of the crucial importance of house-building to people in Mulwene: building a house did not simply constitute a temporary process in a person's life that anticipated the proper constitution of a household. Rather, house-building was constitutive of the process of establishing social personhood as such. 'To construct is part of our culture', Daniel reminded me. 'If you don't have a house, you don't have anything. Then you're just pushed around by the wind (*anda a favor do vento*) and so you don't have any strength (*não tem força própria*).'² As we passed the last corner before reaching our destination, Celso grabbed my arm and pointed at the plot to our right. Without any street light, I could not make out the details but I remembered that it was a small two-room reed hut occupied by a family of four who had recently moved to the area. 'Look at that, Morten,' Celso lowered his voice. 'That is not even a house. They are completely exposed . . . The owner can't hide his head (*esconder a cabeça*) in there.' Celso resumed walking while continuing to talk. 'I can't tell you how grateful I am that my family is living in a cement house . . .'

This chapter focuses on the relationship between social personhood and the architecture of house-building projects in southern Mozambique. In particular, it explores the puzzling effects that half-built cement houses have on the house-builders' social identity and status among peers and state officials. While it could be imagined that house-building projects tie the house-builders to particular (physical and ideational) locations from where to engage in reciprocal relations with

significant others (such as relatives, neighbours and officials), in southern Mozambique, they allow for a certain elusiveness of individual positions. In Mulwene and many other peri-urban areas in Maputo, the official legitimacy of house-building projects is questionable (Anderson *et al.* 2015; Jenkins 2000; Nielsen 2011). Given the fragile functioning of formal administrative systems, it is rare that prospective house-builders manage to obtain building permits or official property rights. Instead, access to land is acquired through informal channels, such as illegal transactions with former land owners and community chiefs (Negrão 2004; Nielsen 2007),³ and houses are built from informal blueprints that are made by state architects hired by house-builders to imitate formal housing standards. In this unstable socio-political environment, then, informal house-building projects serve as apt vehicles for obscuring the status of the house-builder, say, when the architectural layout of an on-going building project appears to adhere to formal housing standards while, in fact, the occupancy of land is both informal and illegal. As I have documented elsewhere, it is through such house-building practices that the large majority of residents living on the fringes of the city manage to secure rights to the land (Nielsen 2010; 2011). Returning to Celso's apt description, to 'hide one's head' refers precisely to the effects of obfuscating the house-builder's status arising from his or her on-going house-building project. It is not a matter of exposing what (or where) you are but, rather, what you *might* be (say, a formal citizen) and, equally important, what you are *not* (say, an illegal squatter) (cf. Nielsen 2013b).

I take house-building to constitute a particularly salient material and ideational medium through which people interact and create individual personhood. Following Carsten and Hugh-Jones, house-building is understood here as an extension of the person (1995). According to these authors, the '(h)ouse, body and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within (and beyond) its bounds' (*ibid.*: 2). Similar to the ways in which material objects are absorbed in the process of constructing individual personhood, the distinction between buildings and people may ultimately become blurred. As Daniel reminded me above, a person's strength is frequently an effect of the gradually emerging house. In a nutshell, then, by building houses, residents in Mulwene are also building their personhood. Like the Baruyan single houses described by Strathern (1991: 213), the external socio-political world is, so to speak, folded back on to the individual as houses in Mulwene are gradually being built. In order to realize a house-building project, residents engage in reciprocal encounters with neighbours, local leaders and state agents in order to exchange what is, in fact, an 'everted inside', i.e. an 'interior state turned momentarily outside, subsequently to be folded back and concealed from view' (Strathern 1998: 140). A resident might thus agree to cede some of his hitherto unregistered plot to a local quarter chief⁴ (*chefe de quarteirão*) (who subsequently resells it to another client) in return for an assurance of continued secure occupancy, which is, so to speak, absorbed through the leader. Through these reciprocal encounters, where 'inside and outside turn about one another' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 264), the house-builder engages with and partially appropriates broader understandings of how to 'make a life' (*kuzama utomi* in xiChangana) in a peri-urban context, e.g. regarding ideas of proper (reciprocal) integration within the local community and, more broadly, Mozambican society. In a sense, the process of building a house thus becomes a particularly potent medium for balancing the 'visible and invisible elements of social life' (Corsín Jiménez 2008: 180). It allows the house-builder to oscillate between different potential (but not necessarily actualized) perspectives and positions separated both in time and in space. Personhood in this part of sub-Saharan Africa is thus to be considered as an outcome of skilfully moving around in the positional field that is made available, say, by commencing to build a cement house. In contrast to Melanesian social personhood, in which a person is always the effect of distinctly amalgamated dichotomies of male:female (Strathern

1988), personhood in Mozambique is fundamentally characterized by the elusiveness with which it asserts its positionality and inherent qualities.

Taking my cue from the writings of Gilles Deleuze, I approach this elusiveness as the production of 'acentred personhood' (1986; 1998; Deleuze and Guattari 1994). In *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005), Deleuze and Guattari explain how the primary characteristic of acentred systems is that 'local initiatives are coordinated independently of a central power, with the calculations made throughout the network (multiplicity)' (op. cit.: 519–520). In Deleuze's explorations of modern cinema, he consequently argues that cinematographic perception transcends the limitations of natural perception, which is grounded in a fixed and privileged point of view. Insofar as cinematographic perception 'lacks a centre of anchorage and of horizon' (1986: 58), it can be considered as *acentred*: in modern cinema, the human eye can be eliminated from cinematographic perception and the spectator is faced with perceptions 'in its *acentred* purity, in its primary regime of variation . . . while it is still untroubled by any centre of indetermination' (op. cit.: 66, italics added). Indeed, as recently argued by Marrati, the image of the world that arises through Deleuze's explorations of modern cinema is one of a 'radically acentred universe in which perception does not wait for the human gaze to emerge' (2003: 3).

I commence this chapter by describing how Amade, an entrepreneurial resident in Mulwene, initiated and managed to continue building what is still the largest house in the neighbourhood. The analysis of Amade's house-building project is then used as a catalyst for exploring the process of building houses in southern Mozambique. By returning again to 'Amade's palace', I unpack the intricate relationship between acentred personhood and the architecture of house-building projects and conclude by arguing that the acentring of personhood through architectural forms is what allows house-builders on the periphery of the city to engage in crucial but also potentially detrimental social relations with significant others, such as friends, neighbours and state officials.

Amade's palace

Amade Sítioe bought two plots (30 × 30 metres) from old Mphumo's wife in March 1999, and in December of that same year he built a two-room annex (*dependência*) right at the back of his parcel, thus leaving sufficient space in the middle for the main house, soon to be built, where Amade would live with Christina, his wife. Not long afterwards, Amade contracted local bricklayers who started laying the foundations to an impressive building. Whereas most houses in Mulwene had only two or three rooms, Amade was planning a seven-room house covering more than 300 m².

A few months prior to the purchase of the plots, Amade started working as a customs officer within a special branch⁵ funded by the British Embassy and focusing on large-scale smuggling and fraud among border guards. Apparently, his serious and creative style quickly impressed his British superiors, who made Amade responsible for interviewing smugglers immediately after their arrest. What they did not know, however, was the actual scope of Amade's creativity. 'My approach was first to work seriously, and then we can talk about it,' as Amade told me with an ironic smile.

It was the lucrative business of pressuring accused smugglers into offering him bribes that made it possible for Amade to buy the two plots in Mulwene. After discovering that an allegedly legal import of oil was a cover for a series of smugglings, Amade made the perpetrators pay a significant bribe. 'Do you know how much I got out of that case?' Amade eagerly asked me: '40 million MZM (1,666 USD)! I gave 15 million (625 USD) to my assistant to make him shut up. That's what made it possible for me to buy my land.'

In 2000, Amade's luck ran out when his illegal activities were exposed, leading to his immediate and forced dismissal and subsequent charges of fraud.⁶ At the time, his construction project in Mulwene was rapidly coming along. Cement walls had been erected with 'false ceilings' in all rooms. The skeleton for what was soon known among neighbours as 'Amade's palace' was thus in place and, as Amade later told me, had he been able to continue only a few more months as a customs officer, the construction process would have reached a successful conclusion. Things turned out differently, however. After his forced dismissal, Amade managed to continue briefly with his illicit activities as smugglers rewarded him for indicating customs officers who were prepared to accept bribes. As personnel were changed, however, this 'information service' gradually became obsolete, leaving Amade without the financial means to continue the construction process. After the abrupt termination of his career as a customs officer, he began to study at the Eduardo Mondlane University in the agrarian studies department. As a result, his household had to live off Christina's salary as a civil servant in the Ministry of War Veterans (approximately 3.5 million MZM (146 USD)). Once all expenses had been paid, nothing was left for further construction.

When I visited Amade for the first time in 2005, the bare construction was still the only indication that a 'palace' was underway. Although its sheer size continued to impress from afar, it was apparent that exposure to changing weather conditions had taken its toll on the building. Blocks were beginning to crumble, insulation paper on the ceilings was hanging loosely down, and vegetation was sprouting up in all the rooms. Without other viable alternatives, Amade, Christina and their two-year-old son Oscar continued to live in the small two-room annex initially intended only for temporary residence. Although they inhabited a plot double the size of most others in Mulwene, the skeleton for the 'palace' took up a large section of the available space, thus making it impossible to engage in other activities, such as growing vegetables and fruits.

Although Amade was well aware that he would be incapable of bringing the construction process to a successful conclusion in either the near or more distant future, he preserved the idea that eventually the house would be built. Countless times was I taken on guided tours through the half-built rooms, with Amade explaining in detail the precise interior arrangement: where the bar would be, the appropriate lighting for the hall, the wooden doors to be made by a carpenter in Chókwè and the expensive but essential window frames, without which the building would be nothing but a faint imitation of a house. Thus, although it was impossible to say with certainty whether the planned house would ever materialize, the image of its completion was constantly present in a relatively fixed form.

In a sense, then, Amade's projected house was already there as a temporal image made present by and through the physical materiality of its concrete, half-built structure. It was constantly necessary for Amade and Christina to relate to the house, not merely given its sheer size, but also as a temporal projection suggesting certain futures while rejecting others. Although Christina was frustrated about their continued residence in the small two-room annex and frequently suggested tearing down the 'palace', its final successful completion still served as an important temporal reference point. After Amade's graduation from the university, he began working with rural associations in Beira. When I visited Amade and Christina in 2006, he was on a short-term visit back home. Apparently uplifted by his current employment, Amade continued talking about saving enough money to continue the building project. Although, as Amade told me, his initial idea might not be realized, he was still determined to continue the building process whenever an opportunity to do so occurred.

To both his neighbours and local state officials, Amade's 'palace' was a source of incessant speculations, which primarily revolved around its seemingly dubious financial base. I would

regularly hang out with Amade and his friends during their afternoon sessions at local liquor stalls and oftentimes Amade's house-building project was a key topic to be scrutinized in detail. Beginning with a few cursory remarks on the magnitude of the project and the huge efforts it must have required, the conversation soon narrowed in on the building project's financial base and the unfortunate situation that Amade was currently in. Still, while the conversation would often get quite animated, Amade rarely (if ever!) revealed either how he had managed to commence the massive building project nor the scope of the financial predicament that he was currently in. When I spoke to state officials at the department for urban planning in the neighbourhood, they were as mystified as Amade's neighbours. During an interview with Rogério, the state official responsible for inspecting all house-building projects in the area, Amade's house was repeatedly mentioned as a particularly puzzling case. He even asked me if I knew about its background. 'How did he manage to build that house, Morten?' Rogério threw his hands into the air and looked at me while shaking his head in bewilderment.

I mean . . . Who builds a house like that? The house is a castle! He must know someone high up in the party's [i.e. the governing Frelimo party] ranks, that's for sure. How else would he have gotten a permit to build the house?

What I did not mention to Rogério, of course, was that Amade never applied for a building permit nor that he completely lacked personal ties with 'someone high up in the party'. What Amade did have, however, was an impressive house-building project whose architectural building style seemed to adhere to state-defined housing standards. Although I never asked Rogério directly about this, I was quite convinced that the material aesthetics of the house was the reason for not having questioned Amade about its legal base.

I did not visit Mulwene again until 2009 and, by then, things had changed significantly. With the regular salary as rural consultant, Amade managed to continue the building project and the bare skeleton that I had previously admired was beginning to look like a building project that might actually reach its successful completion. In 2010, wooden doors and window frames were installed and Amade contracted a local bricklayer to commence the complicated process of covering all outside walls with burnt stones imported from South Africa. In May 2011, three rooms were finally ready for habitation and Amade and his family moved into what is still the largest house in the southern part of Mulwene.

Building a house

The immediate impression I received from visiting Mulwene leaves little doubt of the importance of building projects (Nielsen 2008; 2011; 2014). Although interspersed by occasional reed huts, most houses were cement buildings in the process of being constructed. Some were still in the very early stage where only a cement foundation (the 'shoe' or *sapata*) and series of parallel iron pillars positioned at the corners indicated the gradual emergence of a home. Others were already inhabited, although the construction process was far from complete. If they had been living in a reed hut or a small annex (*dependência*) behind their future house, most residents preferred to move in when only a few rooms had been covered with corrugated iron sheets. As Angélica informed me, 'the building project (*a construção*) never stops. You die while constructing (*se morre construindo*)'. I had asked her when, in her estimate, she and her husband would finish building their house. Apparently, the moment of its final completion was still somewhat vaguely defined. Angélica's situation was, however, anything but rare. According to the household survey I made of all households in Quarter 20, 71 per cent (85 respondents) of residents were

currently working on their house. Indeed, house-building was a primary activity characterizing occupation in the neighbourhood.

House-building is first and foremost a temporal phenomenon in relation to which most other activities are measured (Nielsen 2013a; 2014). From my many conversations with present or future house-builders in Mulwene, I was constantly given the impression that building a house was, in a sense, a perpetual temporal movement whose recurrent rhythmic structure held its many micro-activities in a momentary equilibrium. In fact, to many residents in Mulwene, the process might never result in a finished house. Rather, house-building constituted a particular way of balancing competing forces in a socio-cultural universe built on a presumption of malice. Angélica's precise statement that 'the building project (*a construção*) never stops. You die while constructing (*se morre construindo*)' is an appropriate condensation of the building project as experienced by most future or current house-builders in Mulwene. During my second stay in the area in 2006, I made a small household survey of only 40 households in Quarter 20. Although lacking significant statistical validity, it still gives an illuminating image of the building process. Of the 85 per cent (34 respondents) currently working on their houses, the average time already spent was 4.8 years, with 58 per cent (23 respondents) of respondents being involved in the current building process for the last four to ten years. Hence, considering that house-building is anything but a passing phase, it is, I argue, perhaps best described as a particular temporal modality involving numerous heterogeneous micro-activities that are, to some extent, held together by the overall process of building a house.

My overall introduction to the building process occurred on my first night at Sauden's grocery shop. I had asked Celso, Tinga and Daniel to help me understand the complexities of the building process, and although the discussion often wandered off into other, less fundamental areas of human existence, one thing was made abundantly clear: a house is built in phases (*fases*).

Tinga: As it happens, the type of construction that we make depends more than anything else on our financial capacities. I may wish to make a *tipo 2* [i.e. a two-room house] but if I don't have the means to do so, I opt for a *tipo 1*. A lot of things depend on the financial capacities . . . and it's not right away that you erect a house.

Celso: It's not easy for us.

Tinga: We don't build right away. If I decide to construct a house, I do it gradually (*paulatinamente*). Perhaps I buy ten sacks [of cement] the first month; the second month I don't buy anything . . . then, perhaps two months without buying anything. During that time I attend to other matters of life (*outras questões da vida*), such as health problems and stuff like that. Then, the five coming months I might have enough money to make blocks out of five more sacks of cement. So, you see, it might take a long time.

Celso: It occurs in phases (*vai em fases*).

Very few people in Mulwene had the financial means to complete a building project in a single phase, and so the majority of the house-builders I knew preferred to do it little by little (*pouco a pouco*). In April 2005, a 50 kg sack of cement cost 190,000 MZM (8 USD) but the price had been drastically increasing for the last four to six years and still continued to fluctuate. Disregarding the few house-builders who bought fabricated blocks, the great majority had their blocks made in situ, either by themselves or, more likely, by a hired bricklayer. I was frequently told that, as a rule of thumb, three sacks of cement plus sand equalled approximately 100 blocks, and that with 2000 blocks it was possible to make a *tipo 2* or two-room house. Hence, the

costs of the cement alone amounted to at least 11.4 million MZM (475 USD). This number, however, says little of the overall expenses. Most house-builders hired a local bricklayer to construct their houses, and so, depending on the scale of the project and the status of the bricklayer, the cost of salaries might amount to 10 million MZM (416 USD) (i.e. more than three minimum salaries).⁷ Furthermore, throughout the process, additional expenses constantly arose, e.g. for nails, beams for the ceiling (*barrotes*), corrugated iron sheets for the roof (*chapas de zinco*) and iron pillars (*pilares*). Although it is virtually impossible to determine definitively the total amount that might be spent in building a two-room house, a rough estimate based on calculations made with present house-builders indicates a total of somewhere between 100 and 150 million MZM (between 4,164 and 6,247 USD). Given that 72.3 per cent (68 respondents) of all household heads in Quarter 20 earned less than 1.5 million MZM (62 USD) per month (plus additional income through infrequent odd jobs), Nelson's argument that 'as soon as there is an idea, we start on the house (*a gente começamos a casa*)' makes perfect sense. I visited Fernando Tembe shortly after he had gathered enough money to commence his long-desired building project, and, apparently, he agreed with Nelson:

When I saw that I had enough (money) to start the project, I began. So, whenever I managed to find some money, I bought building materials. When I began, I wasn't even sure that I would have enough money to complete it.

The building process can be divided into three consecutive and, to a certain extent, overlapping phases, i.e. (1) the walls (*paredes*); (2) the roofing (*cobrir*); and (3) plastering (*rebocar*).⁸ The initial phase commences by making a cement foundation (locally called the 'shoe' or *sapata*) and placing iron pillars at all corners. The foundations consist of five layers of 20 cm blocks (three below ground and two above). This is followed by five layers of 15 cm blocks for the walls below the window. Although the walls and foundations ought to be separated by transverse concrete girders or *vigas* to secure the building properly, due to the high costs involved, these are often used only on top of the windows, followed by three or four final layers of blocks. If possible, girders should also be placed in the foundations.

The objective of the second phase is basically to roof all the rooms. In 2005, it cost approximately 5.5 million MZM (229 USD) to roof a two-room house with corrugated iron sheets. Hence, as Celso reminded me, 'You easily spend a year just to roof (*cobrir*) a house.' Given the high costs, people usually preferred to roof the house too in phases in order to start using some of the rooms while still living in a reed hut or small annex behind the future house. The iron sheets are propped up by parallel series of beams or *barrotes* and, depending on the location of the house, blocks are positioned on top of them to prevent them from flying off in strong winds. It is also possible to make a cement roof with plates (*placas*), which, if made by a skilful bricklayer, stabilizes the house further. However, it increases the overall costs considerably, given the need for extra cement for both the roof and the walls, which have to be made with 25 cm blocks to carry the extra weight. The middle course preferred by house-builders who want a secure roof but are incapable of collecting enough money for a cement roof is the 'false roof' (*teto falso*), i.e. an exterior roof consisting of iron sheets with interior concrete ceilings.

During the final phase, the house is plastered with cement, and wooden doors and windows are inserted before the building process is concluded by painting all interior and exterior walls and securing all entries with iron gratings. This phase, however, is the most troublesome, and so residents frequently begin inhabiting their houses long before the building process reaches its conclusion.⁹ 'The door is another headache.' Daniel shook his head and sipped his beer before

continuing. 'Everything made of wood is expensive.' Indeed, the cost of a well-made wooden door plus frame easily mounted to 15 million MZM (625 USD).¹⁰ Usually, the only door in the house was the front door with pieces of cloth used to separate individual rooms from other parts of the house.

When possible, the last phase might be extended by building cement walls to encircle the plot. 'Walls (*muros*) are very important,' Fernando Tembe explained. 'They protect my family and prevent disputes with the neighbours because it will be impossible for their chickens to enter.'¹¹ Unable to muster the financial means necessary to erect cement walls, most plots in Mulwene were divided by *espinhosa*, which was easily obtained through neighbours donating a few cuttings. However, to most residents, cement walls were the ideal. '*Espinhosa* is a form of defence,' Beatrix told me; 'But with walls, you are more secure. Then, the neighbours can't rob you. And my children don't know the boundary lines between our land and the neighbour's. So walls are a form of guarantee.' Walls were increasingly perceived as the definitive signal of individual ownership. While we were passing a plot with only sparsely growing *espinhosa*, Nelson noted that 'They don't have a back yard (*quintal*) yet. It's not *espinhosa* that we want (*espinhosa não é o que nós desejamos*). We're calmer with walls because they're permanent (*definitivo*).'

This brief synthesis of an extremely complicated process is, indeed, an ideal that most people strive to achieve, but which is seldom executed. When a life trajectory changes, e.g. if a person loses his or her regular income or the family experiences severe illness, it becomes impossible to continue the on-going building process. Hence, rather than perceive the building process as a temporary and transitional phase, it is better understood as an overarching temporal modality through which agents attempt to proportion the different aspects of existence. As the house is built *pouco a pouco* (little by little), the house-builder also attempts to create a momentary but volatile equilibrium between the different components of their life, which are, in a sense, subordinated to the broader functional imperative of the building process. While discussing a particular house in Quarter 20, Alberto Manjate reflected on the house-building process. 'Constructing a house requires a lot of effort,' Manjate explained. 'It's *pouco a pouco*. This guy hasn't finished (the building process) yet. It's a lot of sacrifice. . . . The house is a wish (*desejo*). He is realizing his dream so that his children can be proud of him.'

The aesthetics of a house-building project

I never ceased to be amazed by the apparent homogeneity of the great majority of house-building projects in Mulwene. No matter where I went, a significant number of houses apparently exhibited similar characteristics, with size as the only differing factor. As I learned more about the different phases of the building process, it even seemed that general aesthetic ideals and the locations of houses within plots were widely shared. People were, so to speak, building the same house over and over again. When I carried out a small household survey in Quarter 20 of the neighbourhood, this led me to ask all household heads how they decided how and where to build their houses within the plot. Basically I was interested to know why so many house-builders apparently preferred precisely the same location: annexes located right at the back of the plot, and permanent houses 3 metres from the road, with a maximum of 3 metres being left at each side. While the responses were, indeed, quite varied, one particular response was reiterated: 13 per cent (six respondents) of the 45 household heads replied that the location had been determined by municipal regulations. Surely, the relatively small number of respondents claiming that the location of the house was determined by official regulations is not by itself significant. Still, when considering the overall status of this section

of the neighbourhood, the responses do require further explanation. Crucially, the quarter in which I carried out the survey had never been covered by formal urban plans. Similar to many other peri-urban areas in the city, the large majority of the house-building projects in this section of Mulwene were initiated by residents having accessed land through informal transactions with former owners and local architects trying to make a profit on the city's booming land market. During an extended interview with Luciano Sambane, a municipal land surveyor, I asked about the legal status of the house-building projects in this section of Mulwene.

Sambane: All the houses in that area are illegal from the municipality's point of view. They (the house-builders) did not apply for building permits because they're afraid of paying for the permit. Consequently, people built their houses during the weekends.

Morten: So, this area is all illegal?

Sambane: It's illegal because the houses are illegal. . . . They didn't send us any sketch (*croqui*) explaining the type of house they were going to erect. All the houses in that neighbourhood are made that way. It's true that people don't have the capacities to erect everything at once. First, they make one room (*quarto*), and then they make the second and then the third (i.e. in phases). And look . . . in the end, they all look the same . . . ! [laughs].

Indeed, most residents in Mulwene generally preferred individual houses to display a certain degree of homogeneity, as was clearly manifest from the uniform façades and the locations of the houses within the plots. Although lacking any legal basis, residents related these aesthetic considerations to municipal regulations allegedly conditioning the principles for house-building. I asked Daniel, my neighbour, if all house-builders are initially intending to build houses that conform to state-defined architectural standards. 'Well, that's how I started,' Daniel explained:

But it also has to do with the location. It has to be close to the road. It has to be allocated a formal number, and therefore it can't be too far away from the road. It's a question about order.

Celso intervened: 'It's also about aesthetics. . . .' Daniel agreed. 'Yeah, the rule is three metres from the plot's boundaries.'

In sum, to initiate and successfully complete a house-building project on the outskirts of Maputo is an immense effort that often requires the house-builder to exceed his or her physical and, indeed, financial capabilities. What is gradually being built is an architectural structure that seems to replicate itself throughout the area. Despite its lacking legal basis, it is a material form that potentially allows the house-builders to acquire a legitimate status within the urban domain and ultimately secure rights to the plot that they are already occupying. In the next section, I thus return to the discussion of 'Amade's palace' in order to flesh out in detail the puzzling effects that half-built cement houses have on the house-builders' position among peers and state officials.

Acentred personhood

In June 2011, I sat down with Amade to discuss the bumpy ride towards building the house of his dreams. Being both relieved and proud of having turned a dilapidated cement structure

into his family's future home, Amade happily shared his thoughts with me over a couple of cold beers in the shade outside his impressive house. While Amade never questioned the probability of completing the ambitious building project, it was apparent that his neighbours and friends began to think otherwise as soon as he was fired as a customs officer. 'It was hard for me to act as a proper person (*pessoa*), Morten. If I didn't have a house, anyone could eat¹² my things (*comer as minhas coisas*) and I wouldn't be able to do anything about it.' As Amade told me, it was often difficult to engage in productive reciprocal exchanges with friends and neighbours while the building project was suspended. Without the house, he was, in a sense, too exposed to the intrusive acts of others, such as neighbours, local-level officials and envious relatives, who would undoubtedly attempt to 'eat (his) things'. Hence, although a seemingly counter-intuitive assumption, being a 'proper person' required an acentring of one's position in relation to those significant others who were both fundamental but also potentially detrimental to one's social existence. And, as I will argue, house-building projects afford precisely this acentring of one's social position. Not unlike the cinematic montage examined by Deleuze, the architecture of a half-built cement house essentially eliminates the house-builder as the 'centre of anchorage' (Deleuze 1986: 58) by obfuscating the qualities of his or her status.¹³ It disconnects the house-builder from an otherwise fixed position and, by so doing, opens up an acented positional field that, by itself, generates movements and new social perspectives (Deleuze 1995). For Amade, this was clearly apparent in his interactions with state officials, such as Rogério, the state official working in Mulwene. Although Rogério would often visit Amade to confirm that the building process was not violating state-defined housing standards, he never asked Amade whether he did, in fact, have a building permit for the house.

Consider again the widely held assumption that a cement house allows the resident to 'hide one's head'. Shortly before leaving, I had a last dinner with Amade and Christina on their veranda. Christina had cooked a wonderful meal of *matapa* in coconut sauce and rice, which was elegantly served on a white ironed tablecloth. It was late afternoon, and as the sun was slowly vanishing beneath the horizon, we discussed the advantages of having a cement house. 'You know why I really wanted a house, Morten?' Amade put down the fork that he had been holding in his hand and made a sweeping gesture towards the house behind him. 'I knew that it would improve my situation because nothing I do inside can be seen from the outside.' Amade fell back in the chair and nodded several times before continuing. 'Yeah, no one will know what kind of life we're living here in the house.'¹⁴

As I was often told by residents in Mulwene, it is crucial to have a place to 'hide one's head' (*esconder a cabeça*), which in all practical matters is represented by the house. People in the area generally agreed that a reed hut did not offer a sufficient degree of privacy. Not only was it possible for neighbours to hear what was going on inside; the lack of cement foundations also indicated relative exposure to the acts of malevolent others, e.g. envious neighbours or enterprising civil servants. Moreover, in Mulwene, reed huts were frequent targets for burglars, who easily found their way in by cutting through the compressed but vulnerable reeds. As Amade suggested during our last meal together, the cement house allowed for him and his family to 'hide their heads' and thereby acquire a much needed distance to their peers in the neighbourhood. Its fundamental opacity enabled a fundamental acentring of Amade's position and thus gave him a certain advantage when engaging in reciprocal encounters with friends, neighbours and state officials operating in the area. Crucially, very few of his peers in the area knew exactly how he had accessed the huge plot – let alone how he had managed to gather the money to commence the impressive building project. Did he know a centrally placed official in the municipal system? Had he managed to skilfully navigate the dysfunctional administrative system and acquire a formal construction permit? Or was he perhaps connected to the local

mafia? Given that no one really knew the genealogy of Amade's house-building project, his capacities were (at least virtually) limitless. When the house-building project was suspended, however, Amade experienced a gradual limitation of his scope for manoeuvring. Whereas the on-going building project had, in a sense, enveloped him in a cloud of productive ambiguity, the unwanted interruption following his dismissal as customs officer seemed to suddenly reveal his position as well as exposing his lacking capacities for completing what was then considered as an excessive undertaking that had been predestined for failure.

Finally, the question remains how the acentring of social personhood analytically affects the relationship between house-builder and building project. While the architecture of a half-built house on the outskirts of Maputo might serve as an *index* of acented personhood (cf. Gell 1998), it does not lend itself to a straightforward tracing of social agency. The problem is, one might argue, that the effect of agency (i.e. the materiality of the house-building project) disturbs its 'origin' to such an extent that it becomes impossible to establish a viable 'causal sequence' (op. cit.: 16). To be sure, the building of a cement house does indicate that someone or something has acted as an agent. As Gell argues, 'the attribution of agency rests on the detection of the effects of agency . . .' (op. cit.: 20) and, in this regard, the cement house indexes the capacities or intentions of the agent capable of initiating the building project. Still, the question remains who or what that agent might be. In an unstable socio-political milieu imprinted by the failures of a dysfunctional administrative system, the regular aesthetics of a cement house might indicate the intervention of an agent who is capable of enforcing his or her will upon a recalcitrant environment. Or, equally likely, it might suggest the gradual upgrading of an area that is still struggling with weak infrastructure and lacking social services. As I have argued in this chapter, it is this elusiveness that potentially allows house-builders to secure viable positions on the fringes of the city.

Conclusion

In southern Mozambique, the source of people's agency was essentially located outside themselves in their relationships to other residents and things in the surrounding world (Nielsen 2012). Residents in the area were not distinct from these relations. Basically, people were what their relations to others made them be, whether the counterpart was a close relative, a malevolent neighbour, an inefficient state official or a deceased ancestor still asserting a certain form of dominance. Crucially, the relational composition of personhood also signalled a perennial incompleteness, as people made themselves available to others. A premise for engaging in reciprocal encounters was the exposure of one's composite constitution, which signalled the potential extractability of valuable items, such as plots of land, daughters or favours. Notwithstanding its decisive operational function, however, the overt manifestation of incompleteness was a general concern for most people in Mulwene, who were constantly worried about being intruded upon by malevolent others taking advantage of their momentarily exposed positions. Like the 'world of witches' so vividly described by Ashforth (2001; 2005), life in Mulwene was essentially built on a 'presumption of malice', where the individual agent had to assume that anyone with the motive to cause harm *would* cause harm. Not everything was known, and what was known was that power worked in hidden and capricious ways. What seemed to be a mutually beneficial exchange might turn out to be harmful to one or both of the interacting agents, who momentarily everted their inside in order for reciprocal exchanges to occur.

According to my interlocutors in Mulwene, a cement house offered the house-owner the possibility to (at least momentarily) transcend the limitations of these fundamental but also capricious social relations. The gradual emergence of a seemingly standardized architectural

form afforded the house-builder a particular kind of 'acentred' perspective (Deleuze and Guattari 2005; Zourabichvili 2000; cf. Nielsen and Pedersen 2015) that was not entirely limited to that of an always already positioned interlocutor in an on-going series of reciprocal exchanges. Without ignoring the importance of making oneself available to others, local house-builders were 'unhinged', as it were, from otherwise stable positions (say, as donor and recipient) through the architecture of a half-built house-building project. Indeed, as Amade precisely summed up, by building a cement house, 'nothing I do inside can be seen from the outside'. In that sense, the architecture of the cement house obfuscates the otherwise clearly decipherable relationship between house and house-builder and slightly decentres the status of the latter. To paraphrase a recent Woody Allen movie, the house-builder is, truly, 'out of focus'. Disengaged from a stable and easily identifiable position, the house-builder is positioned within an acentred field that is established through the architecture of the house-building project.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2004 and 2012 in Mulwene, a peri-urban neighbourhood on the northern outskirts of Maputo, the capital of Mozambique.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are between Portuguese and English.
- 3 In Mozambique, it has been illegal to make transactions in land since Independence in 1975 when the ruling Frelimo party initiated a comprehensive nationalization campaign.
- 4 Mulwene is organized as 56 quarters (*quarteirões*), each having approximately 120 households and governed by individual quarter chiefs.
- 5 Amade was working with the Department of the National Investigation Service, General Customs Management (*Departamento do Serviço Nacional de Investigação (SNI) da Direcção Geral das Alfândegas*).
- 6 Accusation Account: National Customs Administration, the Ministry of Planning and Finance, 26 October 2000 (*Nota de Acusação: Direcção Nacional das Alfândegas, Ministério do Plano e Finanças*).
- 7 Of the 91 per cent (38 respondents) who had hired a bricklayer, 62.2 per cent (23 respondents) had hired one living in Mulwene.
- 8 Although house-building as described here relates to the process of constructing a cement house and not a reed hut, this does not mean that people do not live in reed huts in Mulwene. Indeed, from the survey of all households in Quarter 20, it appears that although 55.8 per cent (63 respondents) currently live in cement houses, 36.3 per cent (41 respondents) have reed huts. However, given the status of cement house-building and its temporality, this process is privileged here. Building a reed hut is fundamentally a less comprehensive process. Whereas it easily costs more than 100 million MZM to build a cement house, the costs of erecting a reed hut rarely exceed 10 million MZM. Furthermore, the majority of residents living in reed huts imagine that their permanent residence is somewhere else and preferably in a cement house. Hence, when discussing house-building with residents living in reed huts, this also included block housing.
- 9 Fernando Tembe thus estimated that he needed 17 sacks of cement at a total price of 3.2 million MZM just to plaster all the exterior walls. In his current position as a truck-driver, this amount constituted more than a month's pay, and so plastering was being postponed until he had purchased the immediately necessary items, such as wooden doors and, if possible, windows.
- 10 However, at the wood market in Benfica, a nearby neighbourhood, it was possible to buy doors for approximately 1.5 million MZM, which is what the great majority of people in Mulwene opted for.
- 11 Many families kept livestock in their homes, and this frequently caused disputes among neighbours. Once, while visiting Angélica, one of her children came running from the other side of the house, crying that their neighbour's duck had bitten her. Angélica became upset, arguing that the neighbour was responsible for the attack by failing to fix a hole in the hedge separating the two plots.
- 12 Here, 'eating' refers to any wrongful appropriation of Amade's (material as well as immaterial) belongings, such as money, electronic devices, daughters, important relations with significant others, etc. See also note 3.
- 13 Here, we might consider again my discussion with Rogério, the local state official, about Amade's house-building project. It was clear that the aesthetics of the impressive house made it virtually impossible for Rogério to determine the position from which Amade was engaging with his surroundings.

- 14 Interestingly, the cloud of ambiguity that enveloped the house might be further strengthened using spirit media. Generally, a household is protected by its family spirits resting under the *gândzèlò* (the ancestors' altar), which was usually the largest tree on the plot. As Salvador Guambe told me, 'When those spirits causing harm approach, they will fight the spirits by the tree. They (the malevolent spirits) won't even make it to our bedroom.' In several instances, however, additional measures were put in place, as the malevolent spirits might be stronger than the ancestral spirits protecting the house. A sorcerer is then called to perform *kubiamúnti*, i.e. a ceremonial act intended to protect the household from harmful intrusions (cf. Ashforth 2001: 213). Ideally, *kubiamúnti* occurs before people move into the house, but as it is a costly ceremony (approximately 6 million MZM (250 USD)), it is usually performed only when the house owners discover that they are being attacked by malevolent spirits. In these instances, the ceremony has two phases. First, the sorcerer locates and extracts the evil spirits from the victims' bodies. The few times I witnessed *kubiamúnti* ceremonies, the sorcerer thus physically 'eats off' the victims' bodies until the harmful forces are removed. During the second phase, the house is shielded by burying magical items treated by a secret mixture of herbs in all corners of the plot. Whereas an unprotected household is visible to harmful spirits, irrespective of whether it is occupied by ancestral spirits, after the *kubiamúnti* ceremony it will be completely invisible to them.

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