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Retour à l’authenticité in the City: A Photo Essay

Ruth Sacks *

Abstract
These photographs were taken as part of a larger research project tracing Mobutu Sese Seko’s construction projects in Kinshasa in the late 1960s and 1970s. The sites were part of a drive initially taking place under Mobutu’s cultural policy of retour à l’authenticité, instigated in 1967 as a means of taking recourse in pre-colonial Congolese traditions. This gave rise to a wide variety of architectural styles, adorned by artworks largely commissioned from a group called the avant-gardists. The selection of photos seen here presents glimpses of some of the sites and their artworks.

Résumé
Ces photographies ont été prises dans le cadre d’un projet de recherche retraçant les projets de construction de Mobutu Sese Seko à Kinshasa de la fin des années 1960 à la fin des années 1970. Ces sites s’inscrivaient dans le cadre de la politique culturelle de retour à l’authenticité initiée par Mobutu en 1967, et pensée comme un retour aux traditions congolaises précoloniales. Cette politique a donné lieu à une grande diversité de styles architecturaux, décorés d’œuvres d’art commandées pour la plupart à un groupe d’artistes surnommés les avant-gardistes. La sélection de photos présente ici un aperçu de ces sites et de leurs œuvres d’art.

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FIKIN in Limete was originally established by the Mobutu regime in 1969 as a global trade fair. The foot in the foreground belongs to Wumba’s sculpture Tam-Tam.

Figure 1. View of Monument Patrice-Emery Lumumba from Foire Internationale de Kinshasa (FIKIN) Grounds, 2015.
Originally intended as a museum, the site still referred to as *Tour de l’échangeur de Limite* was never fully completed. It was constructed by Franco-Tunisian architect Olivier-Clement Cacoub between 1970 and 1974.

**Figure 2.** Monument Patrice-Emery Lumumba, 2014.
Figure 3. Lower Deck of the Tour de la Radio-Télévision Nationale du Congo (RTNC), 2014.
The site of the national broadcasting company, formerly known as Cité de la Voix du Zaïre, was built by French architects A. Arsac and M. Dougnac between 1974 and 1975. Its 22-story high tower was the tallest structure in Kinshasa.
Figure 4. Messagers Sculpture overlooking RTNC Front Gardens, 2014.
Alfred Liyolo’s sculpture overlooks what were once ornamental gardens that border on the busy traffic artery Avenue 24 Novembre.
Figure 5. Remains of an Artwork at N’sele, 2014.
The shapes seen here once housed relief artworks at the Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution (MPR) site at N’Sele, outside of Kinshasa.
Figure 6. *Office de la Gestion de la Dette Publique (OGDEP) Entrance, 2014.*
Located in Gombe, OGDEP was designed by the Congolese architect Magema and completed in 1976.