

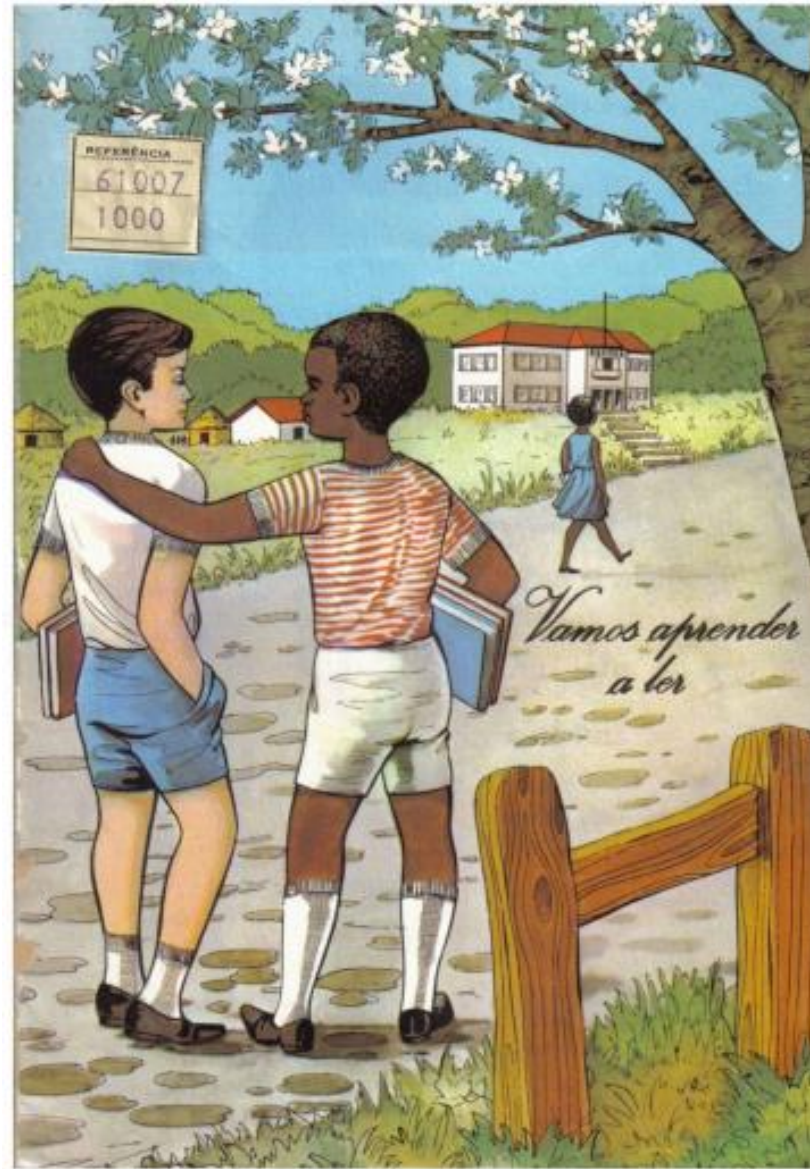
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Rui Aristides is an historian of spatial organization, design and planning, concerned with the articulation of modern identities and forms of government. He is an Invited Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture of the University of Coimbra, and a Postdoctoral Researcher at Coimbra's Centre for Social Studies. He holds a PhD in Architecture from Coimbra.

Garden of ruins: the urban production of colonial Bissau and the history of a dilapidated present

It is not uncommon to perceive African urbanity as incomplete. Decaying infrastructures, absent institutions and the persistence of abject poverty compose the image of a landscape that apparently missed the modern train. The image, however, is perfidious, hiding a past history of decay with a present of ruins. This paper addresses this history by showing how a present decay first emerged from the colonial production of deteriorated landscapes, and not from some sort of arrested development. To make this point, the paper will focus on the urban development of Bissau as an empire-city during Portuguese late colonial domination, from 1945 to 1973. Departing from original research on the design and development of infrastructure, urban policy, planning and housing in this city, the paper argues the colonial production of urbanity as a fabled ruin.

The Portuguese effort, after WWII, to keep its colonies was a ruined enterprise to being with, but more importantly, it relied on the production of a future past that could only exist as a ruin. Bearing in mind the distinct processes of colonization by European nations, this paper assumes the relative subaltern status of the Portuguese empire as a pertinent and usually forgotten vantage point on the colonial production of the African urban present. We argue that Portuguese ambitions to rescue themselves from their peripheral position in the imperial ladder offer key readings of the cracks and fissures of colonial government. Guinea Bissau, on its part, although not one of the bright and shiny possessions in the former empire, was a key laboratory for the Portuguese colonial art of government. Bissau concentrated many forms of creativity in producing the Portuguese imperial fable. We aim, thus, to bring to the fore a usually unnoticed colonial history, from a usually unnoticed empire, and through it discuss the terms, materials and pressures that commonly frame our understanding of post-colonial African landscapes.



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