

Afterword. Learning from Research by Design Approaches for a WEF-Sensitive Planning Culture



Gabriele Pasqui

This book represents a stage in the long-established cooperation between the Politecnico di Milano—and, in particular, the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU)—and different Mozambican stakeholders.

Many projects and collaborations promoted in the last 5 years have created the conditions for a stable collaboration between DAStU and the Faculty of Architecture and Physical Planning (Faculdade de Arquitectura e Planeamento Físico—FAPF) of the Eduardo Mondlane University. This fertile interaction resulted in our collaboration with the *Integrated and Multisectoral Research Program: Study for the Promotion of Integrated Territorial Development in the Region of Boane, Moamba and Namaacha* (*Programa de Investigação Multisectorial Integrada: Estudo para a Promoção do Desenvolvimento Territorial Integrado da Região de Boane, Moamba and Namaacha*—PIMI), a program financed by the Italian cooperation and especially by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) in Maputo. For all these reasons, the research presented in this book, among which the Polisocial Award “Boa_Ma_Nhã-Maputo!” represents a meaningful example, is both a resume of a work done in many years and a new starting point.

These characteristics of the research narrated in this book help us understand why social engagement by European universities in the African context is both necessary and difficult. I was able to reflect more directly on these difficulties thanks to the visits to Maputo I have been involved in during the past 4 years.

The first time I visited Maputo, in February 2018, I understood something about the city, about Mozambique more in general, and about sub-Saharan Africa at large. Not much, actually, because to understand places and territories it takes patience, time, and a capability to listen and watch that requires training and determination.

G. Pasqui (✉)

Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Milano, Italy

e-mail: gabriele.pasqui@polimi.it

Among the things I understood on that first trip, also confirmed by the other two periods I spent in Mozambique between 2018 and 2019, is that by encountering worlds, places, and spaces that are very different from ours, we are called to respond to a challenge. The challenge concerns the way in which we expose ourselves, with our history, language, culture, and tradition to contexts and people that, at a first glance, seem very different to us and question our forms of rationality.

Time, space, rhythms of the city seem very far from those we inhabit in European cities, and the temptation to impose rationalization logics is very strong.

To respond to the challenge, however, we must never forget that Maputo and its region, and Mozambique more in general, are also the result of processes of anthropization and urbanization that are profoundly marked by the culture and knowledge of the Western culture, in this case by Portuguese colonialism, but also by the English one. How can we forget the rigorous grid of the Portuguese city? On the other side, we cannot ignore a sense of *otherness*, which is anthropological, social, and economic, but also material: the red soil; the unknown and gigantic plants that grow even in the city; and forms of human and non-human life that sometimes leave us amazed and that coexist with the artifacts, products, and objects of globalization.

The link between human beings and natural conditions, which is at the center of the reflections proposed by this volume, assumes shapes and dimensions in Mozambique that are different from those we are used to, even in areas with the strongest urbanization such as that of Maputo.

Without forgetting the perception of injustice and poverty, which I experienced personally during my first visit to the informal settlements of the city. Poverty and injustice should not leave us indifferent and should oblige us to a responsibility that is not (only) personal, but also collective, and must be linked to our skills and our work as planners and researchers.

Never as in recent months, in the midst of the global pandemic crisis in which the news on the spread of the virus in Africa remains uncertain, we understand how the ecological issues addressed in this book are strongly political. The Water-Energy-Food Nexus is an opportunity to rethink the development model of the urban region of Maputo, and to promote an ecological transition that can affect radically the dynamics and the power relations governing the processes of urbanization. The issues addressed in this book are, therefore, closely intertwined with the need to deeply rethink the urban and socio-economic development strategies in the context of Maputo and throughout Mozambique, promoting socio-spatial equality as well as sustainable development trajectories.

As it is extensively explained in this beautiful book, also the experience of the project “Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!” starts in the context of the cooperation framework of the PIMI project, although it also presents an autonomous research path, enriched by the interdepartmental cooperation characterizing the projects financed by Politecnico through the Polisocial Awards program.

“Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!” has been carried with passion, competences, managerial skills, and it represents a significant example of academic social engagement in the context of development cooperation for several reasons.

First of all, the research tries to make knowledge, skills, and passion available to different actors and stakeholders in a very complex but exceptionally interesting context such as that of Mozambique. It does so by assuming a partially unprecedented design perspective in the Mozambican context, building the conditions for a fruitful cultural exchange.

Secondly, this research has been carried out with full awareness of the risks involved in knowledge transfer in a context such as the sub-Saharan African one. Precisely for this reason, the research was based on a very thorough work of direct knowledge, exploration of places, and dialogue with local actors. Days and weeks spent in Maputo and in Boane, Moamba e Namaacha districts have been a crucial part of the research tools and a condition of realism of the conclusions reached during the research.

Thirdly, it is a research initiative that aims to open new ways of co-design and collaboration, through the consolidation of a promising policy network open to institutional actors and NGOs. “Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!” is an example of a research project in the field of development cooperation deeply rooted in its context and based on a strong interaction with the relevant local actors.

Finally, the transdisciplinary dimension of the work carried out in Maputo is very well highlighted in the volume. The cultures of urban planning and urban design, environmental and energy engineering, and ICTs converge not only to provide an original interpretation of the metropolization processes of the Maputo area, but also to highlight possible strategies and guidelines for the main Mozambican urban region.

The book edited by Laura Montedoro, Alice Buoli, and Alessandro Frigerio sets out clearly the intentions and objectives, process, and results of the research path, which I consider very significant not only for the operational contribution offered to the PIMI program and more generally to the action of territorial planning in the Maputo area, but also for what “Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!” teaches us, planners and urban designers trained and active mainly in western academic contexts.

I would like, therefore, to try identifying seven lessons that, in my opinion, the project and this book give us, for further reflection.

1. To work in contexts such as that of the Maputo Region we need time. Time to observe, map, and analyze the territory and its characters. As very well shown in the book, we need different kinds of data: physical and socio-economic. And we must try to construct representations that allow us to read and interpret them together. This is not an easy task: gathering information is very hard work, and at the same time necessary. Never as in this case, it is essential to start from quantitative evidence, from an approach that is as analytical as possible. Not because design choices can mechanically derive from information. Rather, because the production of information is not only an output of the research process, but also a crucial tool for building an active dialogue with our interlocutors, a means of creating a common ground among institutions, academics, social actors, and citizens. For these reasons, in this research and in this book, data should be considered also as policy tools and mechanisms.

2. We need technical knowledge. Therefore, the collaboration between architects, urban planners, energy and hydraulic engineering experts, and scholars in ICT modeling takes on such an important role. The transdisciplinary dimension of “Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!” project constitutes not only an opportunity to build a robust framework to address the decisive issue of the Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus, but also a legitimizing device for planning choices, in a context in which the acquisition of technical skills represents a decisive step to give strength to any prospect of change. In this perspective, the use of technical knowledge, the connection with the *usable knowledge* produced in the research process, and the mechanisms of its production are far more important than the specific analyses.
3. We should use and practice a multiplicity of views. We must be able to observe from far above, grasping the relationships on a transnational scale (the connections between the development of the Maputo area and the infrastructure of the Maputo-Johannesburg corridor is extensively treated in the volume), but we must also be able to recognize the specificities and variety at the scale of the urban region: Boane, Moamba, and Namaacha have very different trajectories and characteristics, which this research has recognized and enhanced. This transcalarity of the research perspective also requires different tools, which must be able to communicate effectively with each other.
4. We must be able to deliver to our interlocutors not top-down plans (often very defined, rarely effective), but operational tools. In fact, the authors defined their work as a “research by design project”. The scenarios, the recommendations, the guidelines, and the illustrative actions constitute a form of outcome and communication of the results of the design research that avoids the rigidity of plans and programs that are often disregarded. These different outcomes try to build the conditions for a change that is, first of all, made of innovations in representations, imaginaries, technical cultures, and political strategies. From this point of view, “Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!” has been an attempt to experiment a new planning style in a context characterized by radical environmental, institutional, and political uncertainty, where top-down approaches have demonstrated to be often completely ineffective.
5. We must plan and test our hypotheses and our readings by concretely experimenting, in specific places, what we have learned, also assuming a perspective capable of offering concrete examples of how a territory can effectively change. For this reason, images are crucial, and data are not enough: we need to show the consequences of our strategies and actions on everyday life. It is not always easy to take daily life as a privileged point of view. In fact, this implies a culture of planning that takes as a perspective that of effects and not of (good) intentions. A culture of this type also assumes that our activity must always be commensurate with the populations who inhabit, live, and move around the territory, for example, in the Maputo Region.
6. We must be aware of the need to address governance issues. Without actors, there are no public policies. For this reason, we must map not only places and resources, but also institutional and non-institutional actors, interests (even in conflict with each other), and potential alliances between local and non-local

actors. That is, we must be aware that the work produced is delivered to a field of multi-actor social interaction and can be used in many ways. For this reason, we must not imagine that what we have produced can be immediately used: it will produce effects, if it does, only over time and based on processes that are only in our hands to a small extent.

7. Finally, we need to know very well how difficult this task is. “Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo” and PIMI have been proposed, above all, as an empowerment device for public administrations, as an opportunity to promote public discussion, as a terrain for potential enrichment of networks between actors. In this book too, awareness of the difficulties emerges clearly, showing the importance of an attitude that knows how to be both modest and visionary, realistic, and open to possibilities.

When, between August and September 2020, in full pandemic and therefore using a distance learning setting, I carried out my Strategic Spatial Planning module as part of the PIMI program, working with a class of about 10 Ph.D. students and 20 students of Masters from Mondlane University, I have found that many of the results of the work done with “Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!” and the other research contributions presented in this volume can become a common basis for reflection for a new generation of Mozambican planners and urban designers. On the other hand, in contact with these young people, I understood how much we can learn from their experience, from their knowledge, and from their closer look.