

Constellation

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In their recollections, architects from Maputo, Rome, and East Berlin, who worked in Mozambique in the first decades after independence in 1975, highlight the remarkable cosmopolitanism of the country's construction sector at that time (Brandes 2024). East German construction companies imported know-how for a prefabricated construction system, an American architect planned schools for the city administration of the capital, Soviet engineers founded a civil engineering magazine, Bulgarians occupied key positions in the nationalised architecture firms, and the Università La Sapienza di Roma sent staff to set up Mozambique's first architecture faculty. This was not a matter of course. After independence in 1975, which was more aptly described as a 'liberation without decolonisation' (Bragança 1985), the economically fragile country with its enormous urbanisation rate was thrown out of the global networks of the colonial era. Portuguese investors fled, South Africa, the most important trading partner, imposed embargoes, and Portuguese-Mozambican architects, who connected the country with the global networks around the avantgardist architectural group Team 10, largely left. A shortage of building materials and a devastating war in the country aggravated the situation. Despite – or because of – these blockades, however, unexpected and contradictory new networks quickly emerged.

In many ways, the integration of Mozambique's postcolonial construction sector with its hardships, specificities, and idiosyncrasies into global supply chains, professional networks, and transfers of ideas and expertise was closely intertwined with a series of what could be called 'dis:connective' movements. According to Balme, Dogramaci, and Wenzlhuemer, 'slumps, disruptions, detours, hiatuses [. . .] have always been integral elements of globalisation processes.' (→ **Introduction**) In fact, the very dynamics that slowed down, irritated, interrupted (→ **Interruptions**), or derailed the global integration of Mozambique's postcolonial manoeuvres in the field of architectural production and urban planning simultaneously opened up new rationales, forms, and levels of global interaction. This indeed suggests that dis:connective phenomena were not 'harbingers of deglobalisation but [. . .] part of all global entanglements' (→ **Introduction**).

The volatile situation described in the vignette above, with its critical reassessment of the colonial past, ideological transformations, and geopolitical realignments, is reminiscent of what curator and writer Okwui Enwezor (2003) described as the 'postcolonial constellation'. Enwezor uses this term to refer to 'a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalization after imperialism' (58). The concept

of the ‘constellation’ offers way to assess the dis:connective recalibration of global embeddings. In addition to Enwezor’s exploration of the term, the concept is widely used in the humanities in general, often with different conceptual implications. Generally speaking, it ‘defines a configuration of phenomena under specific spatial and temporal circumstances’ (Sahraoui and Sauter 2018, ix). Thus, what Enwezor and other theorists have in common is their interest in the complex, unstable interplay of ‘concepts, events, ideas, or any other kind of material’ (ix) or individual or collective social actors, which permanently creates new perspectives and contexts for interpretation through the relationality of its components. In the following, I will explore the concept in more detail with a focus on postcolonial contexts. I will take the example of architecture and urban planning to elaborate some preliminary suggestions of how the concept can be used to engage with dynamics of global dis:connectivity.

Beyond its etymological origins in astronomy, where it describes the relation of individual celestial elements to each other and to the observer at a given point in time (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.), the term ‘constellation’ serves various purposes in the humanities.¹ Heuristically, uses of the term could be assigned to several categories: One that is informed by Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history and certain exponents of the Frankfurt School; one that focuses on dynamics of social interaction; and one that draws on the term to describe the cultural conditions of a particular historical situation. However, many approaches to the term remain ambiguous and impede their localisation within these registers.

(1) In the humanities, the concept is arguably most commonly associated with the writings of Benjamin and, later, Adorno (Adorno 1966, Kaufmann 2000). It has been applied in disciplines such as visual arts, history, philosophy, and literature to understand ‘the relation of the individual objects to each other and to the viewer’ which ‘can be grasped only instantaneously and only from a specific viewer’s standpoint’ (Sahraoui and Sauter, x). Thus, constellations are understood here not just as an empirical matter, but also as a method of representing and ‘reading’ social and cultural phenomena. Especially the representation and analysis of history can be thought of in constellations. In this sense, history does not appear as a linear string of events but as an arrangement of moments past and present that constantly opens up new perspectives. In his text *On the concept of history*, Benjamin outlines the idea of a ‘historicist’ history, which presents itself as a linear, causally linked

¹ However, several seminal texts that contributed decisively to the popularity of the term ‘constellation’ in the humanities and expanded its possible applications in different disciplines do without an actual definition of the term.

narrative which makes the given circumstances of the present look inevitable. He contrasts this with a historiography in which historical events acquire their actual meaning when they are linked to the present. To this end, he argues for the study of the ‘constellation’ (*Konstellation*) into which one’s ‘own era entered, along with a very specific earlier one’ (Benjamin 2003, 397).

Looking at the decolonisation of Lusophone Africa, Branwen Jones (2019) demonstrates the potential of reading history as a constellation by analysing references to historical experiences of colonial oppression and anti-colonial resistance under the often-disenchanted conditions of the postcolonial present. According to a linear understanding of history, she argues, the current conditions of post-imperial capitalism might suggest that past experiences with the discourses and practices of anti-colonial liberation movements in Mozambique and other former Portuguese colonies could only be interpreted as a tragedy with no further significance for the present. However, these experiences take on a different meaning when read as a constellation. Jones argues for ‘anticolonial accounts of anticolonialism which can bring the past, colonial and anticolonial, into critical constellation with the present’ (612). In practical terms, this would allow a rediscovery of supposedly insignificant experiences of anti-colonial resistance during the colonial era, activating them for current political action and claims for the future – thereby letting obscured episodes of the past become historically operational (611).

(2) A more sociological or anthropological understanding of constellations uses the term to analyse the interplay of individuals and their interactions in, and impact on, societal contexts. The term ‘constellation’ is often used here following Max Weber, who interested a broad current of sociology in analysing social life both in its individually shaped constellations and in its emergence from preceding cultural conditions (Gostmann 2016, 9). In German-speaking academia in particular, several unrelated sociological approaches have been established under the homonymous collective term of *Konstellationsanalyse* (1) or constellation research (Heidegren 2023), which address these questions.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) developed her concept of ‘constellations of coresistance’ against the background of her own experiences with the development of resistant Indigenous networks in Canada. She uses it to refer to the normative project of building relationships between different oppressed communities, which she depicts as an essential component of political mobilisation. For her, relationships that arise in these constellations have greater transformative political power than, for example, confrontational demands for recognition and rights vis-à-vis the state. ‘Constellations’, Simpson emphasizes, ‘exist only in the context of relationships; otherwise, they are just individual stars’ (215). Thus, Simpson suggests seeing ‘the constellation as an organizing value in resurgent movement building’ that helps ‘create

or hold Indigenous presence that in some way was disruptive to settler colonialism' (216). On the far-reaching effects of such a practice on a global level, Simpson writes: 'When these constellations work in international relationship to other constellations, the fabric of the night sky changes; movements are built, particularly if constellations of coresistance create mechanisms for communication, strategic movement, accountability to each other, and shared decisionmaking practices' (217–218).

(3) The use of the concept of constellation to characterise specific historical situations can be found in exemplary form in the work of Jürgen Habermas. In his essays on the 'post-national constellation' (Habermas 2001), Habermas dispenses with a conceptual definition of 'constellations' *per se*. Instead, he uses the term to critically introduce the then emerging research on globalisation to the German public.² For Habermas, the post-national constellation essentially describes a challenge to democracy because, from the 1970s onwards, the solution to problems that arise within a national framework could no longer adequately be solved within this framework due to the intensified globalisation of the economy and politics. Habermas argues for new forms of transnational civic solidarity and highlights 'the artificial conditions in which national consciousness arose', which, according to him, oppose the idea that 'solidarity among strangers can only be generated within the confines of a nation' (Habermas 2001, 102).

Enwezor (2003), whose essay on the 'postcolonial constellation' does not mention Habermas (but mirrors the author's title), deals with the problems of a global capitalist art market.³ He focuses on how globalisation in the field of art has on the one hand made ideas of a polyphonic, hybrid modernity possible, but on the other hand continues to be structured around unequal geopolitical frameworks. At the turn of the millennium, Enwezor observes the persistence of a Western, academic understanding of modernity (including ideas of a linear history, a dichotomy of centre and margin, and obscure civilisational claims), which despite the compressing economic and political effects of globalisation have not been abolished.

In the field of architectural research, the concept of constellation has only found fragmentary resonance. While some authors refer to Benjamin's terminology to develop their readings of the built environment (Lipton 2016; Gupta 2021), others use the term to focus on transnational learning processes of professional architects (Faulconbridge 2010). However, both approaches might be productive for analysing architectural production under dis:connective conditions in the 'majority

² Today, the text is surprising both because of its detachment from the earlier conceptual groundwork at Habermas' workplace in Frankfurt and because of its limited resonance in current historical globalisation research.

³ Around 2000, a whole range of topics were placed in relation to globalisation under the catchword of constellation. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib's (1999) reflections on feminism.

world' (Alam 2008). Against the backdrop of Mozambique's dis:connective globalisation, the concept of the 'postcolonial constellation', to use Enwezor's words, can be used to gain new perspectives on various levels. The decoupling from Portugal, its NATO allies, and South Africa and the abrupt end of investment in Mozambican real estate suddenly called the linear narrative of a continuous 'modernisation' of Mozambican architecture into question. The present was no longer the present of a white colonial middle class whose reality had inevitably resulted from colonial modernisation driven by growth and venture capital. Rather, the challenges posed by the precarious living conditions of the majority and the increasing awareness of environmental pollution and resource scarcity shed an unexpected new light on colonial urbanism, identifying it as a problem for environmental protection as early as in the 1980s. Equally giving contours to Benjamin's idea of the constellation, regional experiences with resource-efficient construction methods that had long been neglected became points of reference for more sustainable construction in the future (Forjaz 2023). This knowledge in turn became fundamental in the realisation of construction projects with new international partners. When realising their projects in Mozambique, architects from the GDR regularly sought contact with craftsmen who were trained in traditional building techniques (Brandes 2024).

The idea of building constellations as relationships with other resistance movements as emphasised by Simpson (2017), has a long tradition in the global history of Mozambican anti-colonialism. In the professional environment of postcolonial architectural production and its close ties to state structures, however, 'constellations of resistance' can only be found to a limited extent. Still, building relationships of solidarity was a key motivation for actors from Mozambique's construction industry, even though this endeavour was often characterised by disadvantageous contracts and other disappointing experiences. While intergovernmental agreements in the construction industry with Bulgaria or the GDR in all but a name (if at all) proclaimed international solidarity, new relationships were established at the same time, for example with ecological research centres in Scandinavia or Black American architects who themselves faced limited work opportunities in their country.

And finally, the situation in Maputo underlines how the architecture industry was forced to defend itself against a dichotomous perception of architectural practices as 'modern' or 'traditional', especially in the course of an increasing integration into closer and nominally more equal economic and political international relationships after liberation. *Between Adobe and Stainless Steel* (Forjaz 2023), the manifesto of the country's leading architect of the 1980s, aims to interrupt such understandings of architecture and exemplifies what Enwezor is aiming for with his idea of a post-colonial constellation, namely the criticism of a narrative of modernisation that has been perpetuated in the art and culture industry and that sets Western experience as the norm.

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