
Deadline
20 sept. 2026

Mass-Media Architectures of Africa and the Colonial Worlds of the Twentieth Century

Call for Papers

Histories of telecommunications, radio, and television infrastructures
in colonised and decolonised territories,
1900–1980

Study day / colloquium

May 2027 - University of Lille, HARTIS Laboratory

Hybrid event - Languages: French / English

Contact: radioarchiafricaproject@gmail.com

www.colonialmediaarchi.com

Organised by:

Jared FANTASIA | Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto

Thomas LEYRIS | Université de Lille, Laboratoire HARTIS

Raphaël BOURDIER | ENSA Paris La Villette, LAVUE

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Following the logic of media critic Marshall McLuhan's statement that "the medium is the message," what can mass-media architectures¹ in colonial and postcolonial contexts teach us? Radio emerged as a medium at the moment when the European colonial empires founded in the nineteenth century were reaching their height. Radio therefore appeared as one of the "techniques of the occupier²," participating in the remodelling of societies and spaces according to the "civilising mission" claimed by the metropolitan powers. As with other colonial institutions, the architecture of radio stations and transmitters was a means of reinforcing the visibility of the colonial presence³. After the Second World War, television continued this policy, but the contexts of the Cold War and decolonisation gave rise to other instrumental uses: displays of power, cultural imperialism, and the assertion of identity and national sovereignty⁴. However, the link between the architecture of mass-media infrastructures and the imperial continuum, together with its transformations up to the end of the twentieth century, remains poorly understood.

Yet, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, radiotelephone stations punctuated colonial empires. During the interwar period, they were followed by broadcasting stations that developed in varied forms. However, it was at the end of the 1930s that the expansion of the medium became a more important concern for imperial powers, particularly the British, French, Portuguese and Belgian empires, but also for the white settler colonies of southern Africa, such as South Africa and the Rhodesias. Colonisers developed radio transmissions and introduced programmes in indigenous languages in order to strengthen their hold over public opinion, to support the war effort between 1939 and 1945, and to sustain the developmentalist policies of late empires⁵. The post-war years were therefore marked by the construction of radio facilities across the continent, with the British acting as pioneers in this field⁶. In the aftermath of independence, the young states of the Third World continued this momentum within the framework of development policies. Telecommunications infrastructures appeared both as essential signs of sovereignty and as visible instruments of the "modernisation" of societies⁷.

¹ As defined by Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Boston, MIT Press, 1964.

² Frantz Fanon, "This Is the Voice of Algeria," in *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965; originally published 1959).

³ Thomas Metcalf, *An imperial vision: Indian architecture and Britain's Raj* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989).

⁴ Friedrich Von Borries, Matthias Böttger, Florian Heilmeyer, *TV Towers - 8,559 Meters Politics and Architecture*. Berlin, Jovis, 2009 [2006].

⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶ Sisanda Nkoala et al., "100 Years of Radio in Africa: From Propaganda to People's Power," *The Conversation*, February 12, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAJ.wx6d6prqxc>.

⁷ Larkin, Brian. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

Thus, during these decades, broadcasting was never only a matter of content. It was also a question of architecture, infrastructure and landscape. Broadcasting and television houses, transmitting stations and relay chains, antenna landscapes, telecommunications cable networks and monumental television towers were all constructions that acquired political force as instruments of government and as visible affirmations of sovereignty. Such projects were part of the architectural currents of the period, especially tropical architecture, which made adaptation to climate a central problem of design while translating local conditions into a modernist technical language shaped by colonial power⁸. Broadcasting houses established themselves as a distinct architectural type, in which technical constraints, administrative requirements, and the production and transmission of information were coordinated through plan, circulation, acoustic conditions and control rooms⁹. Broadcasting infrastructure, in this sense, was not only the support system for media circulation; it formed part of a broader built environment through which modernity, authority and the State were staged in material form, as shown by the emblematic example of the Rádio Nacional de Angola (1963-67), formerly the Centro de Radiodifusão de Angola, which illustrates these dynamics as a work of Portuguese tropical modernism from late colonialism¹⁰.

We therefore propose the metaphor of the gilded cage in order to examine the contradictions of these media infrastructures in the twentieth century. Broadcasting systems were presented as modernising, but at the same time they were designed to direct a territory, shape publics and regulate speech. To embody this contradiction without simplifying it, we draw inspiration from Maya Angelou's reflection in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: the melody formed inside the cage can become more concentrated, more profound, than that of the bird in freedom¹¹. In the context of this call, the cage is the architecturo-technological apparatus: buildings and infrastructures, operational doctrines, personnel training, political control, schedules and routines. The bird's song is music, speech, culture and moving image produced and disseminated through stations, studios, schools and screens. The song may travel freely while remaining deeply shaped by the filtering and control of which radio buildings and infrastructures are the principal manifestation.

Thus, as Alfredo Thiermann has written in relation to Cold War Berlin, the role of architecture and architects in the design and implementation of radio infrastructures is of great importance. This role remains to be explored in relation to twentieth-century

⁸ Hannah Le Roux, "Building on the Boundary - Modern Architecture in the Tropics," *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 10, no. 4 (2004): 439-53.

⁹ Alfredo Riesco Thiermann, "The Broadcasting House," in *Radio-Activities: Architecture and Broadcasting in Cold-War Berlin* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024).

¹⁰ Marissa J. Moorman, *Powerful Frequencies: Radio, State Power, and the Cold War in Angola, 1931-2002* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019).

¹¹ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969).

Africa and other colonised territories. Paper proposals may fall within the following thematic fields:

- 1) **Infrastructure and power:** within this axis, we invite proposals that directly address buildings and broadcasting infrastructures (radio-television houses, monumental television towers, studios, transmitters, telecommunications cable networks, or listening and projection buildings). What practical, political or symbolic objectives did they pursue? What elements marked their integration into the colonial and/or postcolonial world? Was there a search for architectural syncretism between contributions from the metropole and those from the colony? What link was made between the form of the building and its function? How were these buildings perceived by the political forces in play? We also welcome work on adjacent and overlapping media architectures - cinemas, projection circuits, film units, mobile cinemas and exhibition infrastructures - when they intersect with broadcasting, state communication, cultural policy and the formation of publics.
- 2) **Design, labour and expertise:** Who designed, built and operated these systems (public works departments, architects, engineers, consultants, contractors, suppliers; technicians, producers, projectionists, administrators), and how were expertise and hierarchies transformed during decolonisation? What methods allow historians and architects today to decolonise and reread media archives and the archives of building designers?
- 3) **Networks of exchange:** How did networks of technological, political, architectural and musical exchange, as well as the circulation of actors, shape the broadcasting and television infrastructures of formerly colonised countries of the Global South (training, supply, standards, consultancy missions, cooperation)? What continuities or transformations did they produce between the age of colonial domination and that of independence and the Cold War?
- 4) **Contemporary legacies:** this axis also invites papers on the legacy of buildings. The notion of legacy does not refer only to processes of heritage-making, but also includes other trajectories, such as demolition, conversion or abandonment. At a time when there is increasing discussion about the restitution of works of art stolen during colonial conquest, how are radio buildings constructed during or after the colonial period perceived today by populations and States? What policies of valorisation or heritage recognition are being considered or implemented?

Although the call is open to all parts of the world that experienced the second colonisation, Africa is a field that seems particularly underexplored and deserves special attention.

Format

- Presentation: 20 minutes + discussion

Proposals

Please send your proposal in PDF format, following the instructions below:

- Title and proposal + abstract (250–350 words)
- Biographical note (max. 150 words)
- Email address for submitting proposals: radioarchiafricaproject@gmail.com
- File name: [SurnameFirstName]

Important dates:

- Proposal submission deadline: 20 September 2026
- Response to authors: 14 December 2026
- Study day: 13-14 or 20-21 May 2027

Event location:

University of Lille, HARTIS laboratory

Organisation and scientific committee:

Jared FANTASIA (Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto)

Thomas LEYRIS (University of Lille, HARTIS Laboratory)

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