

# Harbouring Globalisations

Post-Colonial Projects of German Port Constructions and West African Hinterland Connections, 1950s–1970s

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This dissertation accounts for the crucial role of port constructions for West African histories of globalisation in the era of decolonisation between the 1950s and 1970s by analysing their material-spatial dimensions. Constructing ports was at the centre of a range of projects of globalisation pursued in late-colonial and independent West Africa by governments and international companies – from Portuguese colonial rule in Angola, over the extractive open-door policy in Liberia based on concessions, and the developmentalist model of post-colonial nation-building in Côte d’Ivoire, to the booming petrostate of Nigeria. At the same time, these port constructions were at the centre of the projects of globalisation of the (West) German construction companies contracted to build them. This dissertation has been developed within the framework of the Freigeist project “Conquering (with) Concrete. German Construction Companies as Global Players in Local Contexts.”

In analysing the material-spatial dimensions of globalisation co-shaped by these port constructions, this study grounds them in their hinterlands, their onshore connections, beyond the view on a maritime infrastructure. These dimensions of port constructions should be grasped through the conception of a networked landscape. This conceptual lens made it possible to consider the port constructions not delinked but independently of (West) German contractors and their construction projects as the main inlets into this study. As a networked landscape, port constructions integrate processes across different scales and over the long-term into one field. This field has a focus with the port, but it is only delimited through the extent of the range of connected activities. This perspective builds upon an understanding of port constructions as constellation of materialised practices and as continuous. It also serves as a lens to bring interactions between port constructions and the port constructions’ neighbours into view, apart from those of construction workers.

In order to account for the role of port constructions in such a way, this thesis analysed four case studies of port constructions in which the German contractors Grün&Bilfinger, Philipp Holzmann, and Julius Berger (as well as others) were involved: 1) The port constructions of Lobito in Angola (1930–1934/1950–1956), 2) of the Bong Mining Company in the port of Monrovia in Liberia (1960–1962), 3) of the new port and town of San Pedro in Côte d’Ivoire (1968–1972) and 4) of Tin Can Island in the port of Lagos in Nigeria (1976–1977). Around these four case studies, the thesis is structured by an introduction casting out the research problems from present observations on the port of Lomé, a brief chapter developing the conceptual framing of the case studies, and a conclusion that recapitulates the contribution of the thesis between global, economic, and architectural history.

In analysing the port constructions, it was necessary to work through company and public archives in Germany, in the focus countries and in the former colonial metropolises (Paris and Lisbon) as well as to grapple with the challenges of historical fieldwork. The research makes use of a range of visual sources, from construction site photographs, drawings published in travelogues, plans as well as maps, to construction site movies. The research contributed to work on a database of construction projects within the larger research project.

In the following, I will give an overview of the constellation of problems and goals of the thesis (page 2), the state of the art (page 3), the used methods (page 4), essential results (page 5), and prospects for further research (page 6)

## Constellation of Problems and Goals of the Thesis:

### *Interests in the contractors and in a convincing articulation for the port's material-spatial constellation*

The departure point for this thesis within the research project “Conquering (with) Concrete” was the question how a focus on the German construction companies contributes to a long-term history of German globalisation. I sought to pursue this question by focussing on interactions at construction projects with actors from the Global South. However, given the scarcity of respective source perspectives, I reoriented this interest towards using the construction companies as a lens, eventually of Seeing like a Contractor, into the constellations emerging from port constructions as one specific building task which had one of its geographical and temporal foci in West Africa between the 1950s and 1970s.

This focus appeared as a chance to still take the interactions into view, yet not only or predominantly for the actors at the construction site, but rather or complementary through the material-spatial constellations of the port over the longer term. The pursuit of these implications was grasped as the perspective of Seeing from the port.

Two historical source terms offer a possibility of starting to interrogate these constellations: those of “Erschließung” and the “Hinterland.” Both terms were helpful in exemplarily balancing the differentiation as well as the integration of the two research perspectives of Seeing like a contractor and Seeing from the port, but they did not replace a conceptual frame. “Erschließung” as a source term is closely linked to the perspective of German actors’ intellectual engagement with colonial African spaces to be unlocked or valorised.<sup>1</sup> “Erschließung” was a useful point of reference through its spatial perspective and by considering the agendas behind the German contractors’ activities and the agendas of their commissioners, yet it was arguably also too narrowly programmatic. “Hinterland” appeared as a flexible and relational term encapsulating the landward orientation of the port as well as emphasising the interest in the workings of the port following its initial construction. Yet, seldomly historically interrogated,<sup>2</sup> it still carries implications of its original meaning as the expansion of colonial rule and it remained unclear how it would bring in the perspective on the interactions which had equally been absent from the contractor’s perspective.

This constellation of problems therefore formulated the goal of the thesis to find a convincing articulation how port constructions appear in their material-spatial connections in order to understand the workings of post-colonial globalisation departing from the port and to find a possibility to account for the interactions between the German contractors, the port constructions and African actors beyond a close focus on the government commissioners.

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<sup>1</sup> van Laak, *Imperiale Infrastruktur: Deutsche Planungen für eine Erschließung Afrikas 1880 bis 1960* (2004); Beese, *Experten der Erschließung: Akteure der deutschen Kolonialtechnik in Afrika und Europa 1890–1943* (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions are Brahm and Rosenhaft, ed., *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850* (2016); Unangst, “Hinterland: The political history of a geographic category from the scramble for Africa to Afro-Asian solidarity” (2022).

## State of the Art:

### *Research on contractors, port constructions and landscape*

Different from the international activities and global-local exchanges in which specific groups of actors, such as architects, planners, or engineers engaged, construction companies have gathered comparatively little research interest, be it in global history, economic history, or architectural history.<sup>3</sup> The readily available literature on construction companies are either commissioned works by specific companies, studies from business history interrogating the commercial business success, or focus on a specific aspect of construction, such as labour.<sup>4</sup>

The research on port constructions should be seen as distinct from either historical research on port-city relations or the exchanges engendered by the ports' maritime connections. It rather relates to historical research on infrastructures, especially with regards to those of the era of decolonisation, which has so far mostly focused on different types of infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> A partial exception is a strand of research contemporary to the post-colonial port constructions from geography which has been recently updated by economic historians.<sup>6</sup> In colonial contexts, Plageman and Fivez have done research on port constructions taking the construction process into account.<sup>7</sup>

As stated above, I ultimately grasp the port constructions as a networked landscape, relating to a range of existing research perspectives. The first are perspectives on landscape from anthropology and its adaptations in architectural history.<sup>8</sup> Most important for this study was Tim Ingold's conceptualisation of the taskscape in its adaptations.<sup>9</sup> These are further operationalised in the case studies through the conceptual model of the portal of globalisation ranging from the territorial to the actor-centred.<sup>10</sup> This is complemented by global history perspectives on the structuration of networks.<sup>11</sup>

I take a long-term interest in the port constructions as continuous construction linking construction, expansion, and operation. This relates to literature which takes repair and maintenance into view.<sup>12</sup> Yet, my perspective diffuses different phases more explicitly.

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<sup>3</sup> Linder, *Projecting Capitalism: A History of the Internationalization of the Construction Industry* (1994).

<sup>4</sup> Respectively Stier and Krauß, *Drei Wurzeln – Ein Unternehmen: 125 Jahre Bilfinger Berger AG* (2005); Barjot, "Why was the world construction industry dominated by European leaders?" (2013); Kleinöder, "Skilled labour in colonial economies: Recruitment, education and employment in construction companies in German colonial West Africa, c. 1902–1912," (2022): 568–583.

<sup>5</sup> Miescher, *A Dam for Africa: Akosombo Stories from Ghana* (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Olukoju and Castillo Hidalgo, ed. *African Seaports and Maritime Economics...* (2020).

<sup>7</sup> Plageman, "Colonial Ambition, Common Sense Thinking, and the Making of Takoradi Harbor..." (2013); Fivez, *A Concrete State: Construction Materials and Building Ambitions in the Belgian Congo* (2023).

<sup>8</sup> Lagae, "'S, M, L, XL': Mapping a colonial taskscape..." (2019); Hein, ed., *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global Networks* (2011); Hein, ed., *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape* (2022).

<sup>9</sup> The conception of landscape – as a materialisation of the taskscape as an array of connected activities of dwelling – links actors' practices and the material. Ingold, "The Temporality of Landscape" (1993)

<sup>10</sup> Respectively Middell, "Category of Spatial Formats. To What End?" (2019). Castryck, "From Railway Juncture to Portal of Globalization: Making Globalization work in African and South Asian Railway Towns" (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Conrad, *What is Global History?* (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Graham and Thrift, "Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance" (2007).

## Used Methods:

### *Archival research, a database, historical fieldwork, and visual sources*

The work for this thesis built upon the inspection of a range of commissioned historical studies and other publications by construction companies as well as a broad range of grey literature, such as technical journals.<sup>13</sup> These works were the basis for the compilation of a database of construction projects in which German contractors were involved.<sup>14</sup> This database informed the direction of archival research, which determined the selection of case studies.

Archival research was conducted in accessible company archives, whose respective state differs widely with the archival holding of Bilfinger SE in Mannheim as the most comprehensive. Additionally, I made use of the holdings of Holzmann in Frankfurt or the ones of a commissioner, such as the Bong Mining Company within the archives of ThyssenKrupp. I conducted research into commissioner records in the German Federal Archives as well as state archives in Paris, Lisbon, Monrovia, Abidjan, and Lagos-

Such wide-ranging literature and archival research was complemented by different research methods, in Germany as well as West Africa. These included interviews with contemporary witnesses from the construction sector as well as a range of other actors, neighbours to the constructions, but also experts and academics. Apart from these interviews, this thesis incorporates research gained from site inspections and the impressions between sites. In order to grasp this bundle of different site-focussed contributions to the research, I use the notion of historical fieldwork. One of its main aims is to be as explicit as possible in the discussion of the contributions that site inspections and impressions make to historical research. For this work, I underline how it co-shaped the main frames of interpretation in the different case studies. I link historical fieldwork as possible methodological contribution of the thesis to the call to conduct place-centred historical research.<sup>15</sup>

Complementing and relying on both the reading of archival and other text sources as well as grasping the impressions from historical fieldwork, I make use of images as opening and anchor sources for each chapter. These images take up a main theme of the respective case chapters, informed by fieldwork as well as archival research. These sources are construction site photographs, depictions from travelogues (apart from the travelogue writing), maps as well as plans, and construction site movies, each taking port constructions and their contexts into view. These sources were produced by actors connected to the contractor as part of their projects of globalisation. They are, however, read against the grain and interrogated for contributions to the case studies which transcend their authors' apparent intentions.

The specific archival constellation alongside the influence of historical fieldwork and specific anchor sources is reflected in the introduction of the thesis as well as the introductions and conclusions of the different case studies. The contribution of the database is equally addressed in the introduction to the thesis.

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<sup>13</sup> e.g. *Jahrbuch der Hafenbautechnischen Gesellschaft*.

<sup>14</sup> Database of the "Conquering (with) Concrete" project (Erkner: Leibniz-Institut für Raumbezogene Sozialforschung, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> This links to Ghaddar, "Provenance in Place: Crafting the Vienna Convention ...," 2023.

## Essential Results:

*From the projects of globalisation, over the portals of globalisation, landscape, and the network metaphor, towards the networked landscape*

In result of my research, I adopted an alternative grasp for the contractor to the one of Erschließung. As an alternative, I presented the more fractured projects of globalisation which encompass the possibility to see constructions as their own end. I apply the notion of the project of globalisation through port constructions for the commissioners as well, which helps to take the agendas of the West African governments into focus as well as the ways how the contractors aligned with these agendas as relatively weak and flexible actors. From this lens follows the conclusion that port constructions could be perceived as paradigmatic post-colonial building projects, casting out the tensions of this historical constellation.

As I have already mentioned with regards to the state of the art, I make use of the suggestions of the concept of the portal of globalisation, different takes on landscape and the network metaphor in order to complicate the notion of the hinterland. As an alternative I suggest the port constructions as a networked landscape. This follows a sequence of four steps throughout the different case studies.

In the first case study of Lobito, I interrogate the extent to which a perspective on the construction project and the construction site of Lobito should be opened towards a materialised constellation of different dimensions to understand the port construction, encompassing, inter alia, materials, machinery, and labour. With the second case study of the BMC port, I further open the perspective spatially and temporally from the port construction towards connected constructions and the operation of the iron ore mining concession which the port served. I focus on the port as part of a network in which different paths have the role of lifelines. After taking up the long-term and networked dimension of port constructions in this way, I seek to understand how the port construction of San Pedro transformed the landscape at specific places in relation to the port. In this context, I consider the cleft between the visible and mapped claims for these places from the port construction and its unmapped and invisible dynamics. In the last case study, I develop the networked landscape of port construction to the fullest extent. First, I focus on the building process and the German contractor's role in it as a networked landscape of construction placing itself in Nigeria with connections to Germany. Second, I use the wider activities of the German contractor as well as the focus on certain building materials as lens in order to develop a wider perspective on the networked landscape of different Nigerian ports as the portscape which linked to the government's project of post-war nation-building and hinterland industrialisation.

The conception of a networked landscape allows to account for a range of activities as connected to the port, which would remain out of sight in a narrower focus. These include participations in the port construction beyond construction labour as a focus bound more directly to the port construction, namely land claims made by the neighbours of the BMC port-railroad complex as well as the dwelling of the construction workers in the case of San Pedro and the ways how their living constellations shaped the new port town over the long term. Lastly, I refer to Nigerian motorists as a group of participants in such a view of port constructions as networked landscape.

## Prospects for Further Research:

### *Prospects for different disciplines of the lenses of the contractor and the networked landscape*

This study formulates its prospects for further research through its contributions between global, economic, and architectural history. While it is crucially important not to disentangle practices of actors from their materialisations for my overall perspective, the focus on the contractor makes its independent contribution to further research to be presented here.

With different emphases, the contractor appears as an interesting actor for further research for all three literatures. For global history, the emphasis lies on the possibilities of researching business actors to establish unlikely connections between constellations like development and extractivism and to investigate (post-)colonial continuities. For economic history, contractors also offer a possibility to link usually separately discussed phenomena across space and time. More importantly, however, contractors suggest to further research in the materialities and spatialities of economic activity through, taking up my focus on the organisation of material constellations. Such a perspective could specifically be useful to place the research interests of post-colonial business history and decentre it from the company. Finally, in architectural history, the lens of the contractor suggests balancing histories of the built environment in post-colonial Africa around infrastructural typologies, for example, as the clear emphasis of the German contractors' works. Moreover, the research through the contractor suggests to construction history and architectural history to continue diffusing the central categories of the construction project and construction site as central categories. This would include considerations of the long-term focus on continuous construction.

Considering the suggestions of the networked landscape to these literatures, I would first point to notions of landscape generally as a contribution to global history: landscape responds well to a range of methodological choices and problems in the field, especially regarding the discussion of multiscalarity. Using the frame of landscape also suggests making use of historical fieldwork, as cast out above, in order to identify certain activities as historically connected which do not necessarily appear in the archive. I would suggest the methodological bundle of historical fieldwork for further exploration in history just as well because it can help to integrate disparate impressions from research sites explicitly into historical studies.

From the perspective of economic history and architectural history, the networked landscape makes complementary suggestions for further research. To prevalent macro takes of global economic history, it suggests a possibility to frame its case studies. The networked landscapes of port constructions could link structural economic processes and actors' perspectives to the built environment in a way which could be exemplary in focussing the grasp of studies in global economic history. Conversely, port constructions as networked landscape could make a complementary contribution to architectural history, accounting for broader political and economic processes while not loosening the focus on its expression in the built environment.

Finally, I assume that this research could be a suggestion to test out alternative inlets into the networked landscape. The participations of the neighbours of the port constructions would be a starting point. This would introduce a research perspective of Seeing from the hinterland as a counter perspective which would further interrogations of this problematic colonial conception.