

STORIES AND CRITICAL WRITING ABOUT THE CITY

PORTAL 9

SOUTH SUDAN'S NEW CAPITAL CITY · BAGHDAD VISIONARY: KAHTAN AL MADEAI
RECONSTRUCTING PORT-AU-PRINCE · CHINESE CITY IN THE FAST LANE
BEIRUT THROUGH THREE GENERATIONS



Issue #1

THE IMAGINED

AUTUMN 2012

ISSN 2305-5197



9 772305 519006



Centreville, the heart of the city, was the only zone in Port-au-Prince with a discernable history and orthogonal grid. It became an immediate focus for plans for post-quake renewal.

Photograph by Paolo Woods.

PORT-AU-PRINCE ASTRIDE THE FAULT LINE

Two years after the earthquake in Haiti, urban renewal staggers amid the ruins of catastrophe and a dysfunctional state.

Pooja Bhatia

بور - أو - برنس على فائق الصدع، البوابة التاسعة، صفحة 25

It takes an hour to drive up to Boutilliers, perched near the top of the mountains that ring Port-au-Prince. From this vista, the city lays out to the west, the houses and shanties decorating the hillsides down to Centreville, and stops only at the shimmering bay, where a cargo ship or two full of gas or rice usually anchors. To the north, one can see all the way to planes lifting off the runway at Toussaint Louverture Airport, the crews eager to ascend before dark so they don't have to over-night in Haiti. Once upon a time, Boutilliers was a mandatory stop for tourists, but there are few tourists now, and the mountain is peaceful. The city below looks unfamiliar – green, orderly, and beautiful – and whenever I go, I think of the Haitian painter Préfète Duffaut, whose idealized cityscapes are filled with trees and innocent of squalor and suffering.

Citizens rarely avail themselves of the Boutilliers view; like many landmarks, it's better known than visited. A haunting book by Haitian author Lyonel Trouillot, *Children of Heroes*, plays with this fact. Its narrator is about ten years old, and he and the older sister he adores live in a one-room hovel in the city. It's a miserable place, choked by cooking fires by day and unbreathable at night, when the children pull a little curtain to separate their mattress from that of their parents. These tiny cement structures pack their neighborhood, almost on top of each other, and until it turned from spectacle to depressing, the neighbors would gather at the entrance of their home to observe their father brutalizing their mother. At last, the children murder their father, and they're in serious trouble. Intuiting their last opportunity for a lark, they find their way up the mountain.

The narrator marvels at the mountain's salubrity. Houses stand far from each other, satellite dishes top slate roofs, and dogs wag their tails happily. He and his sister manage to make out a few landmarks downtown –

the cemetery, the cathedral, and the soccer stadium – but can't locate their own neighborhood, another slum indistinguishable from all the rest.

"From high up, it didn't look threatening," the narrator tells us. "On the contrary, you could imagine the sand mines that tunneled into the mountain's slopes sending it crashing down there one day. Crushing the city with the weight of its flowers."

I had to reread those sentences a few times to grasp their unsettling fantasy, the narrator's wish to obliterate the ugly, violent city with mountain flowers. Many years after Trouillot wrote that book, the city below was indeed crushed, though the January 2010 earthquake covered downtown with rubble and dust, not flowers. The hillside shanties cascaded into one another like dominoes, sliding down the mountains. Morne L'Hopital, the massif extending from Boutilliers and to the south of the city center, even appeared to have lost a few meters.

On the earthquake's eve, I had a romantic view of my own, up in a neighborhood not far from downtown. Boutilliers was cooler, but my apartment had a closer view. By then I had lived in Port-au-Prince for two-and-a-half years, but only recently had I begun to know Centreville, or downtown. It had a dangerous reputation – included in the "red zone" that aid workers were barred from after sunset – and had been bereft of economic power for decades. The better hotels, restaurants, and expat nightclubs had migrated east and planted themselves in the suburb Pétienville.

But as my reporting kept taking me downtown, I began to nurse an infatuation that grew into something like love.

Downtown began at the wide green squares of the Champs de Mars, where statues of revolutionary leaders – Louverture, Dessalines, Christophe, and Pétion – gazed benevolently over students, families on outings, and flirting teenagers. On the park’s corners, vendors hawked used books to the clientele at the nearby State University. Headscarved ladies crouched on the curbs with baskets full of tiny plastic parcels filled with *labapen*, or boiled breadnuts, thick shards of spicy cashew brittle, sweet oranges already peeled. South of the Champs de Mars, the alabaster palace gleamed in the sunshine, set off by its golf-course green lawn. Government buildings stood on most corners, tall, white, and imposing even in their decrepitude. Here, the grimy public hospital whose doctors rarely came to work and whose nurses were often on strike. On one wall, a graffiti artist friend of mine had spray-painted a bandaged patient escaping from a window. Two blocks away was the Palais de Justice, where I had once watched a leftist leader defend himself against political persecution; leukemia, not the state, would claim him.

Farther west was Rue St. Nicholas, a one-block street crammed with dilapidated houses, a few haunted by lost grandeur. Some of Haiti’s best hip-hop artists grew up there, and the congested alleyways that filigreed off the street hid more than one sophisticated recording studio, tricked out with soundproof glass and Macintosh computers. Rue St. Nicholas dead-ended at the cemetery where, every November, celebrants in white robes gathered in homage to the dead and to Baron Samedi, the vodou spirit who guarded the crossroads between our world and the next. It’s a French-style cemetery, filled with mausoleums in pale blue, white, pink, and gray. I had seen it in a satellite image before I came to Haiti and wondered what it was. The structures were too small to be houses but too large to be anything else.

Half a kilometer from the cemetery, the Stade Sylvio Cator was the only proper arena, with proper lights for evening games, in a soccer-mad country. Farther west still, just a few blocks from the sea, was Boulevard Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Less than a generation ago, it was the city’s main artery, known better as the Grande Rue. Two generations ago cruise ships deposited tourists at the bay, and they strolled up the promenade to the nineteenth-century Iron Market to buy paintings and tchotchkes.

It had thrilled me to discover remnants of that era. Store signs with 1950s fonts jutted out at right angles over the sidewalk. Stepping around the streaming gutters, I could discern imprints of trolley tracks and imagined flâneurs strolling down the arcade of tall-windowed, multistory brick buildings.

Flâner remains a Haitian verb, a beloved activity in the late afternoon, when the sun has stopped broiling.

But when I first visited in 2009, the Grand Rue had become a difficult place to do it. Those vast sidewalks had been given over to *commerçantes*, the market ladies who set up shop under umbrellas. One couldn’t begrudge them: they worked hard. Anyway, the avenue accommodated them, as well as several rows of traffic from tap-taps, the buses painted with lovely, wild murals depicting music stars, famous athletes, half-dressed women with flowing hair, and images of the Savior – often in combination.

Two months later came the earthquake. For thirty-five seconds, it turned the city into a Tilt-a-Whirl from hell. I crouched under the dining room table, and when the floor steadied, I opened the side door and climbed over a mound of rocks that, minutes before, had been a wall. The security guard was uncharacteristically mute but not visibly harmed. I took him by the arm, and we walked toward open space, away from concrete that might fall in an aftershock. Rising dust and oncoming dusk obscured the deflated domes of the National Palace, the collapsed wing of the Iron Market, and the eviscerated National Cathedral. These we would see the next day from the balcony, and then up close, for months and years to come. We heard a few explosions, perhaps from gas stations, and for a few confounding minutes we believed Port-au-Prince was being bombed.

The earthquake had struck Centreville with particular force. It destroyed or damaged twenty-eight of twenty-nine government buildings and turned most of the Grande Rue into rubble. It had wiped out entire blocks of houses on little streets like Rue St. Nicholas. They were pancaked, smashed, knocked off their foundations. Portions of some houses dangled like a child’s loosened tooth and would stay that way for years.

Overnight, the Champs de Mars, the stadium, and other public plazas became camps for hundreds of thousands of people with no other place to go. It was as though the city had no room for leisure anymore.

The quake’s transformation of the city was not just physical, but political. Over the following months, downtown became almost too trenchant with meaning. Haitians of all political stripes saw something symbolic in the earthquake’s apparent targeting of government buildings; divine retribution, some said, for official crime and corruption. The deflated Palace became the icon of an absent state. Champs de Mars’s revolutionary heroes now watched over the tens of thousands of homeless. As the number of camp residents swelled to nearly 1.5 million, I had a hard time telling squares and lawns apart from the first images I saw of the cemetery. Tents and transitional shelters are just a little larger than mausoleums.

And yet downtown tended to thwart my attempts at interpretation, my tendency to obsess over the poignant. Residents of Port-au-Prince wear their city like skin. Good, bad, salubrious, filthy, it’s theirs. A few days after the quake, I took a walk on the Grand Rue. Though all of Port-au-Prince resembled a war zone at that point, the avenue looked particularly bombed out. Fires – from what, I am not sure – smoldered here and there amid the rubble and twisted rebar. Feet and hands I saw, too, half-buried in concrete. Men hauled wheelbarrows and bullock carts full of quake-deformed metal. A group of Haitians distributed giant blocks of vegetable shortening someone had retrieved from the rubble of a bakery. Outside the ruined Iron Market, hairdressers glued in twenty-five dollar weaves for a bizarrely loyal clientele. Across the street, a wizened lady sat on the ground with her produce – short pyramids of *chadeque*, floral-scented citrus – and complained to me that none of her customers were showing up. Up the block, half-a-dozen cobblers sewed sandals by hand and pedal-operated machines. A hot dog vendor chased after me with his wares: “*Saucisse! Saucisse! Achetez saucisse!*” he yelled. Supposedly André Breton said of Haiti, “Surrealism finally has a country.”

Though filthy and chaotic, Centreville was the city’s heart, the only zone with a discernable history and orthogonal grid. It was also the seat of the national government. Thus, and despite motions toward decentralization, Centreville became an immediate focus for plans for post-quake renewal. In the spring of 2010, the government designated a swath of it for public use, mandating an option to buy private land for US \$150 per square meter. (Property in Pétionville suburb was valued at three to four times that.) Residents and shopkeepers spent months wondering what would happen to their little buildings.

Over the summer of 2010, I met the preeminent force in reconstruction, Leslie Voltaire, over tuna tartare and limeade at a white-tablecloth restaurant in Pétionville called Quartier Latin. Leslie had an easy laugh and twinkling, vaguely Asiatic eyes that provided fodder for one of his nicknames: *Ti Chinwa*, or “Little Chinese.” Another nickname was Mr. Ten Percent, a reference to the kickbacks and commissions that people assumed Leslie took. Usually this was said with a modicum of affection: in Haiti, ten percent is not that much.

At the time we met, Leslie was Haiti’s Special Envoy to the United Nations, but he had held all sorts of government posts over the past twenty-five years: Minister of Education, Minister of Haitians Living Abroad, Chief of Staff, Member of the Conseil d’Etat. More significantly, he was one of three men

informally liaising between the government, non-governmental organizations, and property owners in the city’s early reconstruction plans. Of them, he was the most voluble, knowledgeable, and ambitious. He had trained as an architect and urban planner – the title of his 1983 masters thesis at Cornell was “Port-au-Prince: Growth of a Caribbean Guerrilla City” – and after the quake, he had taken to hobnobbing with Frank Gehry and Steven Holl and touring first-world architects around the destroyed city.

Leslie had big dreams for Port-au-Prince, a city whose population had swelled tenfold over his lifetime. The quake was tragic, but it also provided an opportunity to build a city wholly different from Port-au-Prince as

“The optimism was almost a reflex to the horrific disaster, to the corpses piled up on streets and the city sadly broken. People with power so wished for redemption, or at least a silver lining, that they made promises – to build back better, to create a new Port-au-Prince, to remake the city.”

currently constituted: simple and not extravagant, but elegant. His dream depended on decentralization. If a million of the three million residents of Port-au-Prince left for new “growth poles” in Haiti’s secondary cities, he could fill the spaces they left – “voids” he called them – with public gardens and performance spaces. He could widen streets, create sidewalks, and build a new port farther from the city. That would leave space to expand the city’s waterfront, long a no man’s land, into a pretty plaza for strolling. A light-rail system would run along the city’s north-south axis.

By the time we met, though, much of the initial energy following the earthquake was dissipating. That optimism was almost a reflex to the horrific disaster, to the corpses piled up on streets and the city sadly broken. People with power so wished for redemption, or at least a silver lining, that they made promises – to build back better, to create a new Haiti, to remake the city. But promises bumped up against social and political reality. For starters, none of the homeless were leaving the city. The fact that Port-au-Prince sat on a fault line didn’t

make life in the countryside any better: in Creole, the provinces were known simply as *andeyo*, or “outside,” and they were, indeed, defined by their lack of access to electricity, higher education, decent roads, and potable water. Leslie’s “voids” wouldn’t happen without services in the countryside.

Moreover, a general election was slated for less than a year after the quake. Postponing it would have been a sensible option, but the international community preferred to go ahead. Election season complicated reconstruction efforts. The administration focused its energy on campaigning rather than rebuilding, and donors were in wait-and-see mode: what was the point of helping a government that might soon be out of power?

Leslie ran for president. He received less than two percent of the vote, and when the new government took power, Leslie lost his official post. But he was not completely on the sidelines when I last saw him at a reconstruction conference in November 2011, a year after the election. Wearing a linen guayabera, effusive as ever, he kept apologizing for fielding calls on his Blackberry and iPhone. The latter displayed a picture of him shaking hands with Barack Obama. For the first time in almost thirty years, he was practicing as an architect again. He had won a \$50 million contract to design a conference center at the Central Bank headquarters.

Leslie’s imprint lingers. Before leaving office, he had arranged a contract for the redesign of Centreville with a Miami architecture firm renowned in New Urbanist circles, called Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company (DPZ). Attempting to avoid the appearance of impropriety, the government had awarded the \$300,000 contract to the Prince’s Foundation for the Built Environment, Prince Charles’s charity, which then hired the firm to come up with a plan. Journalists pointed out that it was a no-bid contract anyway. (The government asserted that the market rate for the work was closer to \$1 million.)

About a year after the quake, in January 2011, DPZ unveiled its plan at a reconstruction conference at the Karibe Hotel in Pétionville. The Karibe is a magnificent hotel, especially for Haiti. It has tennis courts and a resident tennis pro, a spa with uniformed attendants and plush robes, and trilingual waiters. It was a weird place, perhaps, to discuss a plan for revitalizing Centreville, seven miles and half a world away, but the Karibe has since become *de rigueur* for Haiti’s most prestigious conferences.

DPZ’s plan would turn each of the wide blocks of downtown Port-au-Prince into a self-contained entity, with apartments on the perimeter and parking and utilities in the interior. Like giant ships, each block would

have its own sewage disposal, power generation, and water, allowing it to bypass the dysfunctional state utility systems. There would be an esplanade at the port for tourists arriving on cruise ships. The total cost would approach half-a-billion dollars, but each block could be done individually, at a cost the firm estimated at about \$3.7 million each.

The DPZ plan covered less than a square mile of downtown Port-au-Prince, and it seemed expensive, given the limited funds on hand for Haiti’s reconstruction – as of January 2012, donors had disbursed just \$2.4 billion of the \$10 billion they had pledged after the quake. But the plan’s most controversial aspect was that the country’s tiny middle class was supposed to move downtown. DPZ reasoned that the poor couldn’t afford rents that would finance the construction of multistory, seismically resistant buildings with utilities. Although DPZ is famously New Urbanist, its plan conjured a bygone era, blithely ignoring decades of middle-class flight from Centreville and up the mountain. Reimagining Port-au-Prince had become a trip down memory lane.

It was obsolete almost as soon as it was presented. Port-au-Prince’s mayor, Jean Yves Jason, publicly derided the plan. He argued that Haitians, not foreigners, should design the new Haiti, and that anyway Port-au-Prince was under the jurisdiction of the municipal government, not the national one. Mayor Jason had designated another organization, the Centre Haitien de Recherche en Aménagement et Développement (known by the inelegant acronym CHRAD) to head the redesign of Port-au-Prince.

On the way to CHRAD’s Pétionville office one morning last winter, I dropped by Place St. Pierre, a nearby public square whose camp-dwellers had recently been evicted. Each household had received US \$500 in rental or repair subsidies. A couple of months before the camp was cleared, I had interviewed the vice president of the camp committee, a young man who was also a schoolteacher. He lambasted the relocation plan. The subsidies were too low, he said, and anyway, landlords would inflate their rents accordingly. The neighborhoods designated for camp dwellers were hillside slums whose land was already vulnerable to landslides and building collapses; everyone was frightened to return there. But what ate at him most was his sense that once the public parks were cleared, the poor would be forgotten again. “They just want to hide us, away from public view,” he said.

Compared with two years ago, Place St. Pierre looked slightly worse for wear. The grass was spotty, and there was more trash than I remembered. I bought

my favorite Haitian breakfast: a sweet, zesty banana and boiled eggs drizzled with hot sauce. Despite my fears of cholera, I also indulged in a tin cup of hot chocolate, redolent of cinnamon. I sat on a bench to drink it, chatting with the vendor as he ladled the syrupy concoction into cups for customers. The vendor pointed out two new multi-tiered fountains, inlaid with blue mosaic tiles, on either side of the square. They weren’t running yet. “Now, that’s a funny thing,” he said. “A fountain in a country with no clean water.”

CHRAD’s headquarters were a few blocks away. The spacious building was filled with modular furniture like egg-shaped chairs and decorated with sleek blown-up renderings of their municipal plans: sailboats in the bay, a marina for pleasure boats, vast avenues and shiny cars, grassy traffic medians and glassy high-rises, a light rail. The renderings replaced Haiti’s famous tap-taps with plain, black, modern-looking buses. The organization had unveiled its plan in August last year, again at the Karibe Hotel, and said it would cost \$3.3 billion.

The director, Jean Lucien Ligondé, bustled in an hour late, apologizing – traffic coming down the mountain, he said. We moved inside to his office, which was kept so cold I had goose bumps throughout the interview. Having doffed his jacket and hung it on an imposing wooden valet, Lucien seemed accustomed to the violent air conditioning.

I asked him to tell me about CHRAD’s plan for Port-au-Prince. He launched into a preamble I considered odd at the time.

“I don’t like to talk about it,” Lucien said, “but I have five degrees. Five university degrees. I don’t like to talk about it because they have a tendency to say that I’m a showoff.”

I asked him what his degrees were in.

“I have a degree in engineering, I have a degree in theology, I have a degree in banking and financial services, I have a degree in financial economics, and I have a degree in public policy. I have five,” he said.

“Masters degrees?” I asked.

“I have two masters degrees,” he said. “The point is, though, that’s not what is important. What’s important is that when I started this project I wanted to show that a Haitian professional firm has the capacity to, in fact, compete and develop their city. And at the same time, no one would understand better the culture and the reality than a Haitian.”

The interview continued like this for more than an hour, my questions about the substance of CHRAD’s plan bumping up against Lucien’s assertions of CHRAD’s legitimacy. For him, its legitimacy stemmed from its nationality and its independence from the international community. “The UN comes here and steals the money – they come to steal, and they always steal.

So the only way to rebuild properly is for people like us to stand and say, okay, let’s start proposing something good. And when we started, the mayor liked it, and he gave us the mandate to do it. That’s how we dethroned Prince Charles!”

Relaying the episode at lunch later that day, it occurred to me that the substance of CHRAD’s plan – or any plan, really – didn’t actually matter. Planning was lucrative enough: the endless forums and conferences, with their catered lunches and glossy printed materials, salaries and per diems for planners, the promise of contracts that will never be finished; the Mr. Ten Percents and Ms. Fifteen Percents. “It’s a comedy,” said my companion, a French urbanist who has been working in a slum in Port-au-Prince for the past four years. Even if any of the plans for Centreville were implemented, she said, they would be challenged in court. Urban planning requires legal authority, and absent that – it is often absent in a dysfunctional state – it requires de facto authority won through long-term investment in the community.

My urbanist friend had called it a comedy, but I preferred the term “dream racket.” Haitians had better phrases, of course – they always do. One of my favorites is “*W ap pale, m ap travay*,” or “You’re talking, I’m working.”

A few days later, I visited Préfète Duffaut, the painter I think of when I visit Boutilliers. Duffaut lives on the outskirts of the city because he strongly dislikes Port-au-Prince. But he’s obsessed with city scenes and has been painting them for decades. His works are instantly recognizable, in part because they are distinctive and in part because they all look the same. All of them depict a city in celebration and joy, a geometrical redoubt framed by ocean and mountains. The cities are thronged by tourists and by celebrants in white robes.

Duffaut is a paunchy eighty-nine-year-old who presents at least three decades younger. He began his career making miniature sailboats. Painting was just a hobby. But in the 1950s, a well-connected art dealer spotted a few canvases that depicted a dream city and informed him his métier was the “ville imaginaire.” Since then, Duffaut has been churning out thousands of similar canvases by the decade. His monomania is part artistic, I’m sure, but it’s also economic: as the dealer sold Duffaut’s cityscapes, they became a brand and a sure seller.

We sat on the floor, and Duffaut unrolled a work in progress. In its center was the trunk of a giant mango tree – he hadn’t yet painted the leaves – topped by a Haitian flag. Spokes extended from its branches over a

bay, like bridges. “Once upon a time, Haiti had bridges like that,” Duffaut noted. Mountains sat in the background. He would paint in the celebrants later. The rectangular buildings were intact, colorful. I asked him what inspired it.

“Haiti will very soon become a paradise for the whole world,” he responded and repeated the sentence a few times for good measure.

“But how do you know that?” I asked.

“I imagine it all the time,” he said. “It comes to me at night, when I sleep. It’s a vision that God gave me, that Lourdes gave me,” he said. “When it happens, there will be no more sin. Everything will be consecrated to God.”

“This came to you in a dream?” I asked.

“Yes, a dream, a beautiful dream. But a vision, too,” he said, tapping his head. He smiled a big smile, a smile of grace and sweetness and a touch of delusion, and said, “I believe in my vision.”

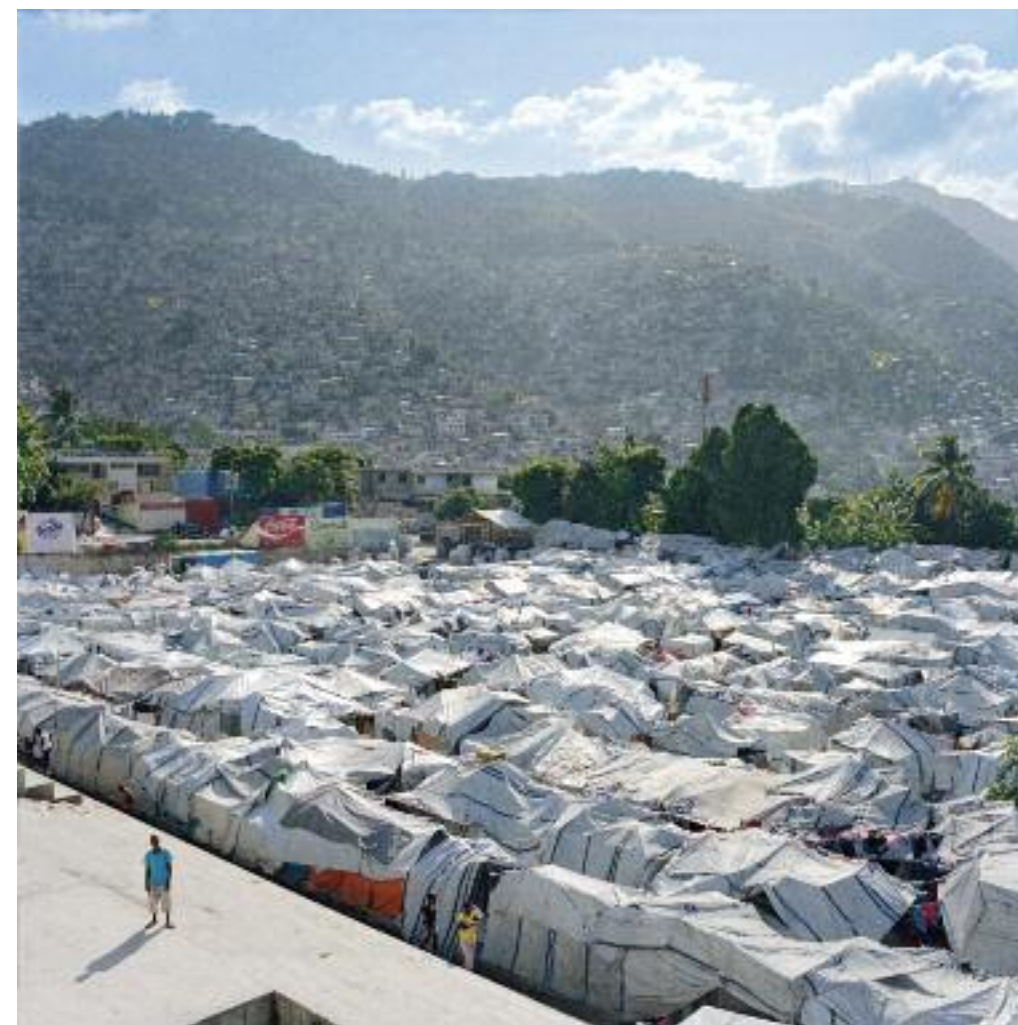


Haitians of all political stripes saw something symbolic in the earthquake’s apparent targeting of government buildings. The deflated National Palace (above, in background) became the icon of an absent state.

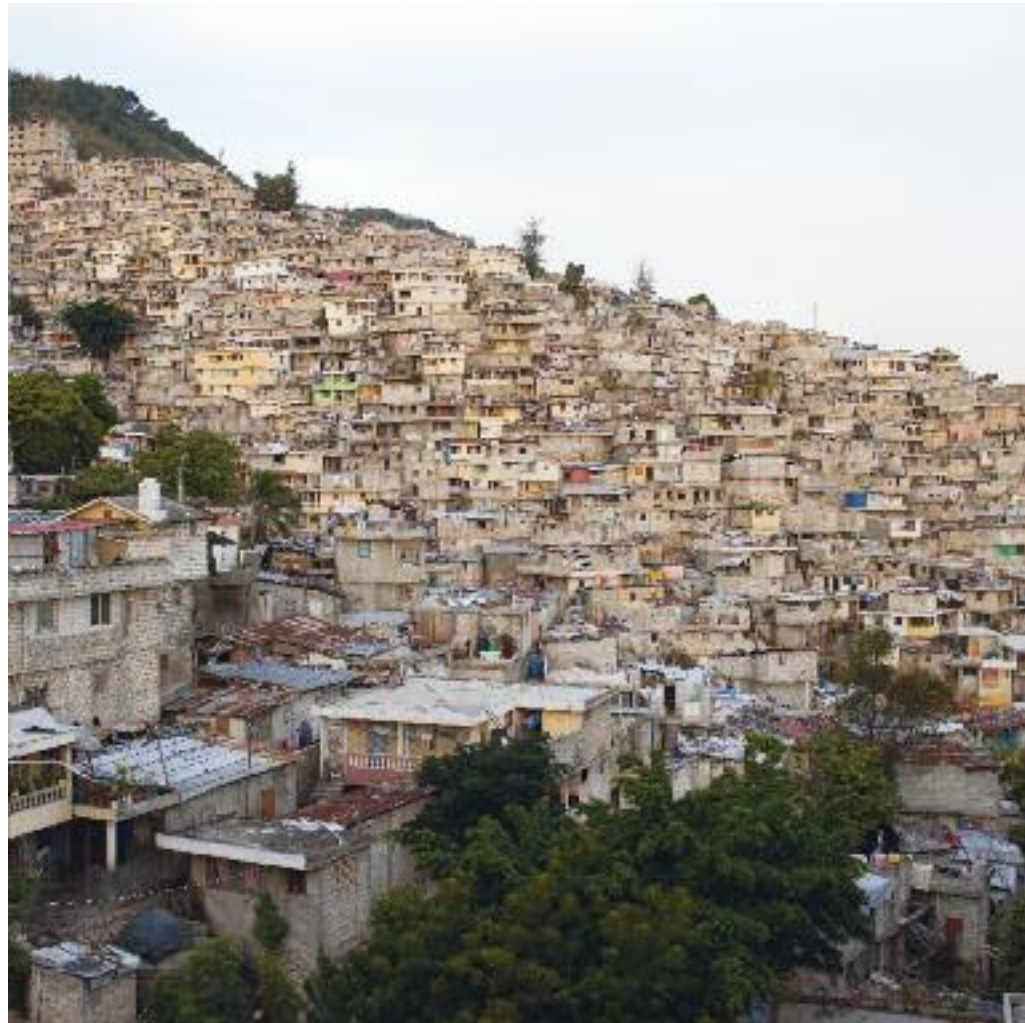
Photograph by Paolo Woods.



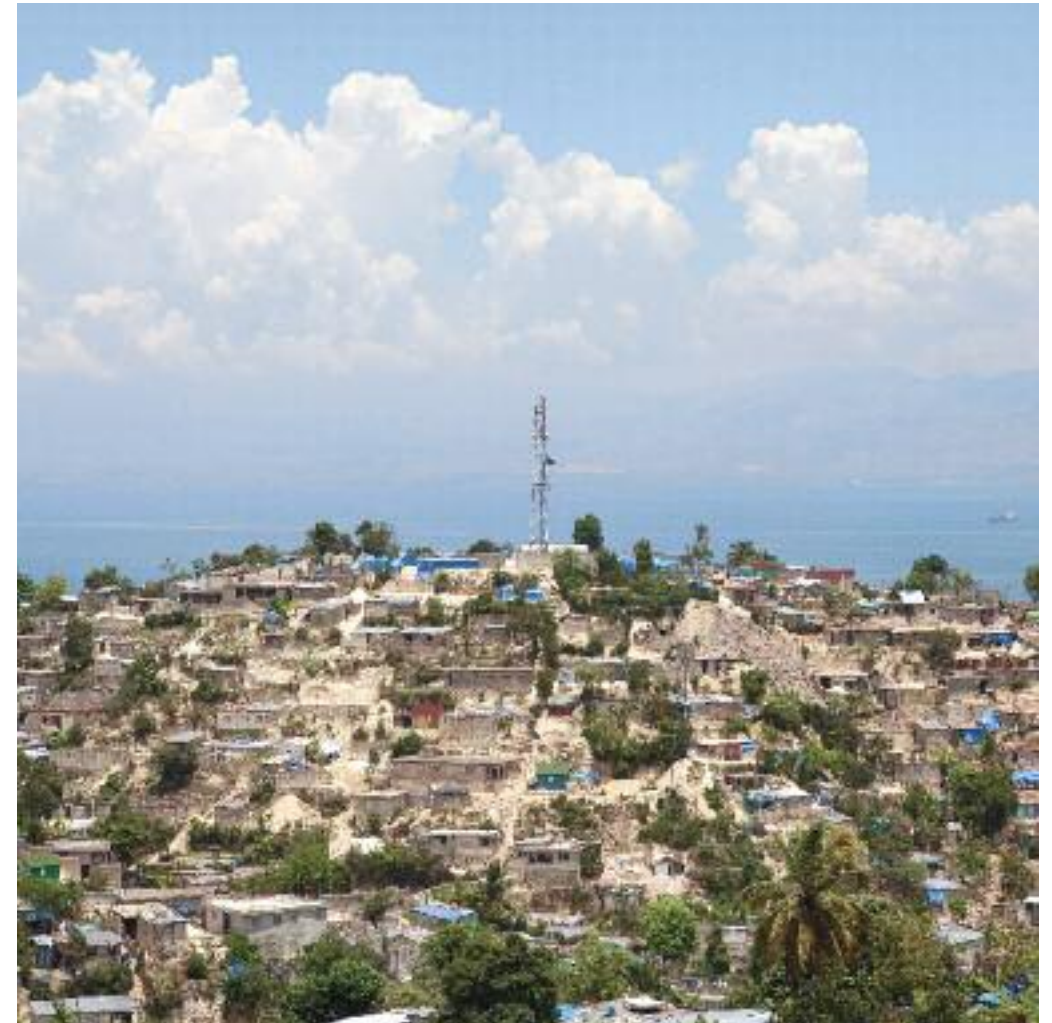
Rue St. Nicholas dead-ended at the cemetery where, every November, celebrants in white robes gathered in homage to the dead and to Baron Samedi, the vodou spirit who guarded the crossroads between our world and the next.
Photograph by Paolo Woods.



Overnight, the Champs de Mars, the stadium, and other public plazas became camps for hundreds of thousands of people with no other place to go.
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Everyone was frightened to return to the hillside slums whose land was already vulnerable to landslides and building collapses.
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The hillside shanties cascaded into one another like dominoes, sliding down the mountains. Morne L'Hopital, the massif extending from Boutilliers and to the south of the city center, even appeared to have lost a few meters.
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