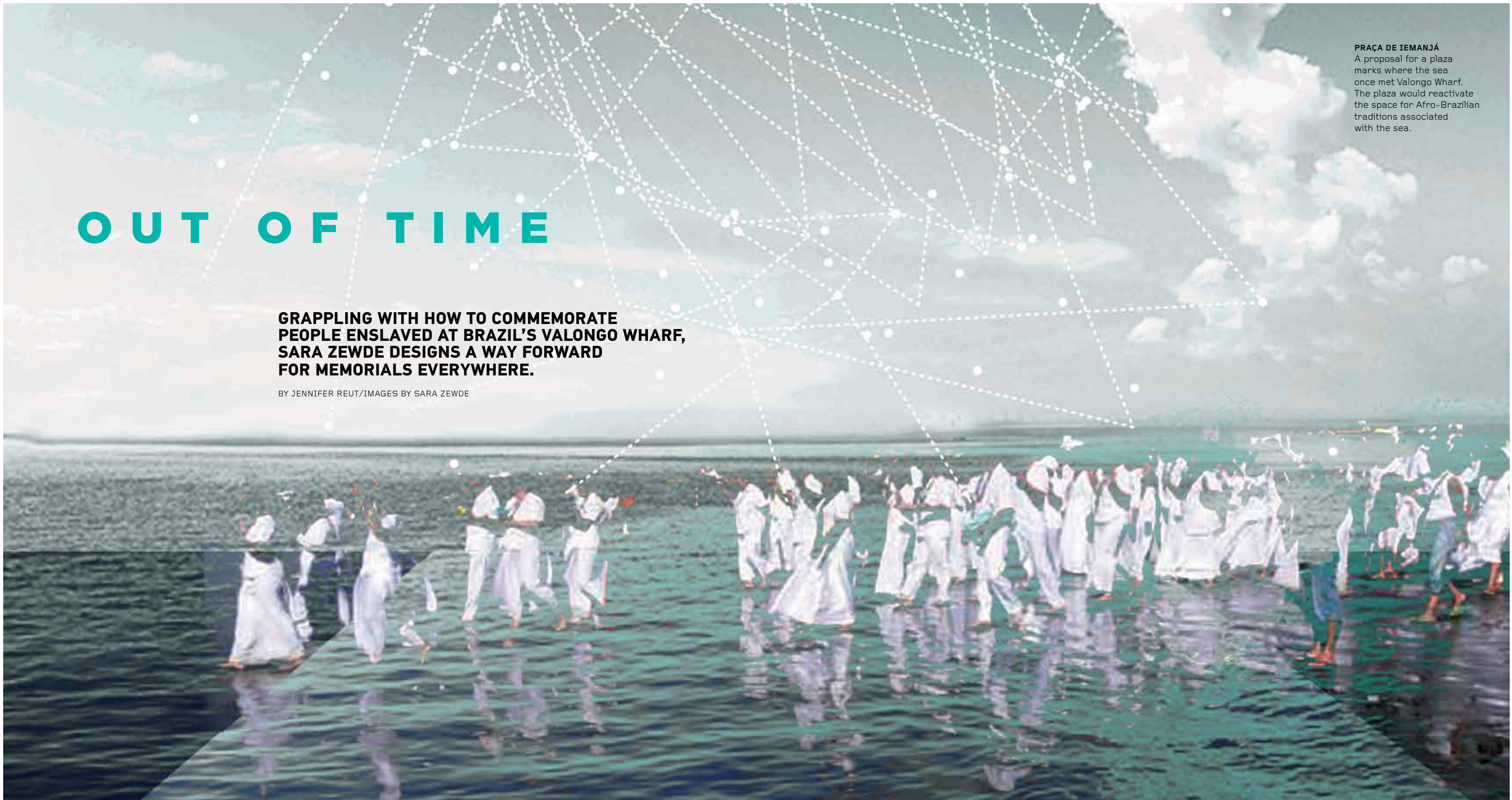


# OUT OF TIME

**GRAPPLING WITH HOW TO COMMEMORATE PEOPLE ENSLAVED AT BRAZIL'S VALONGO WHARF, SARA ZEWDE DESIGNS A WAY FORWARD FOR MEMORIALS EVERYWHERE.**

BY JENNIFER REUT/IMAGES BY SARA ZEWDE

**PRAÇA DE IEMANJÁ**  
A proposal for a plaza marks where the sea once met Valongo Wharf. The plaza would reactivate the space for Afro-Brazilian traditions associated with the sea.







**ABOVE** Sara Zewde talks with a Brazilian tourist at the Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site in Rio. The original wharf paving was laid directly on the beach and included a ramp and steps down to the sea.

**T**here are a number of arresting images in Sara Zewde's proposal for a memorial at Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, but my favorite is the one with the water. In it, ghostly figures in white are faded back over a scrim of water overlaid on the sea. Above their heads is a diagram of points and lines that ricochet out from a dense cluster triangulating across the sky. The palette is one of muted blues and grays. It feels both transcendent and somber.

The diagram comes from one of the spatial analyses that Zewde did on samba, the distinctly Brazilian musical form with African roots that lives in the city's streets and squares. It depicts the *roda de samba*, an informal dance circle of musicians and spectators who become musicians. The character of samba is both sad and happy, a shout of joy and a lamentation.



AP PHOTO/SILVIA ZOUJERDO

In July 2017, the Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site in Rio de Janeiro became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Zewde helped write the nomination, and her ideas are threaded through the descriptions. Recognized for "Outstanding Universal Value," for its material, spiritual, and cultural significance, the wharf was and is the central element in a landscape that profoundly shaped the history of the Western Hemisphere: the built environment of slavery.

Cais do Valongo, as it is known in Brazil, was a slave port of unimaginable scale. According to UNESCO, "Almost a quarter of all the Africans enslaved in the Americas arrived at Rio de Janeiro, so the city can be considered the entry point of the greatest number of enslaved Africans and the biggest slave port

in history." The port was active from 1811 until the trade was outlawed in Brazil in 1831 (though not the practice of slavery, which continued until 1888). Historians estimate that some four million enslaved Africans came through Valongo. The descendant community, Afro-Brazilians and those who identified as black or mixed race, are, for the first time, the majority of Brazil's population. This historic shift in demographics means that Brazil's slave port has direct and tangible connections to some 97 million people.

The archaeological remains are significant in their number and richness. Unearthed in 2011 during infrastructure upgrades for the Rio Olympics, the original stones from the 1811 wharf as well as the paving placed over them in 1843

were remarkably intact. In addition, there were the personal items—artifacts such as beads and small tools—that would eventually number in the thousands that were excavated from the site. Zewde saw them for the first time in 2011, the year they were discovered. She was in Rio when the wharf was uncovered, having finished her master's degree in city planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) the year before. She'd come to Brazil as a transportation fellow for the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, working on sustainable transportation projects around the redeveloping Porto Maravilha, or port zone.

**ABOVE** The city has made it possible to view both the rougher 1811 wharf stones and the more refined 1843 paving, but there is little in the way of interpretation other than signage.



RIO DE JANEIRO —  
HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY OVERLAY



**OPPOSITE**

Dozens of parcels were slated for redevelopment on both sides of the historic coastline owing to pressure from the 2016 Olympics and the 2014 World Cup.

It was not Zewde's first trip to Rio—she'd come in 2007 through an international honors program. "It really stayed with me," says Zewde, who is from New Orleans. "Rio de Janeiro reminded me of New Orleans a lot in that it was very African influenced." In both places, she recognized an intense "negotiation between urban space and cultural practices." At MIT, she had studied with Anne Whiston Spirn, FASLA, working toward a thesis on New Orleans's Claiborne Avenue. Zewde credits Spirn with helping to put together her interest in planning with design and culture. Zewde soon realized that she didn't want to just plan, she wanted to design. While in Rio, she tried to get her colleagues interested in the Valongo story, but there wasn't a transportation angle. By the end of her fellowship, she had been accepted into the MLA program at Harvard and returned to the United States. Still, she was haunted by what she'd seen and what she'd heard from the construction workers and people she'd met around the site.

Despite the modern development that filled in, covered over, and expanded the port, the area around the historic wharf had long been known for its associations with the slave trade. Zewde says that people knew the wharf was there, somewhere, but its presence was more evident in the way they behaved. "I really did get a sense of how people were ritualizing and memorializing it in everyday ways. Even before the excavation and the discovery, it was a hot spot." Earlier sites in the wharf area had been documented, including cemeteries, warehouses,





MARC FERRERZ/REIS-SOHNDE

*samba at salt rock*  
a quilombo & refuge for Africans, said to be the birthplace of samba

*sale*  
one of many points of sale in the area for the purchase and sale of Africans

*docks*  
designed by André Rebouças, an Afro-Brazilian designer, in 1871

*deposit*  
Africans held for 2-4 weeks for fattening and taming process

*slavery supply stores*  
retail shops selling slavery management supplies lined the deposit area

*Valongo Wharf*  
the point of landfall for millions of Africans

*warehousing*  
the buildings lining the circuit largely housed Africans and associated supplies

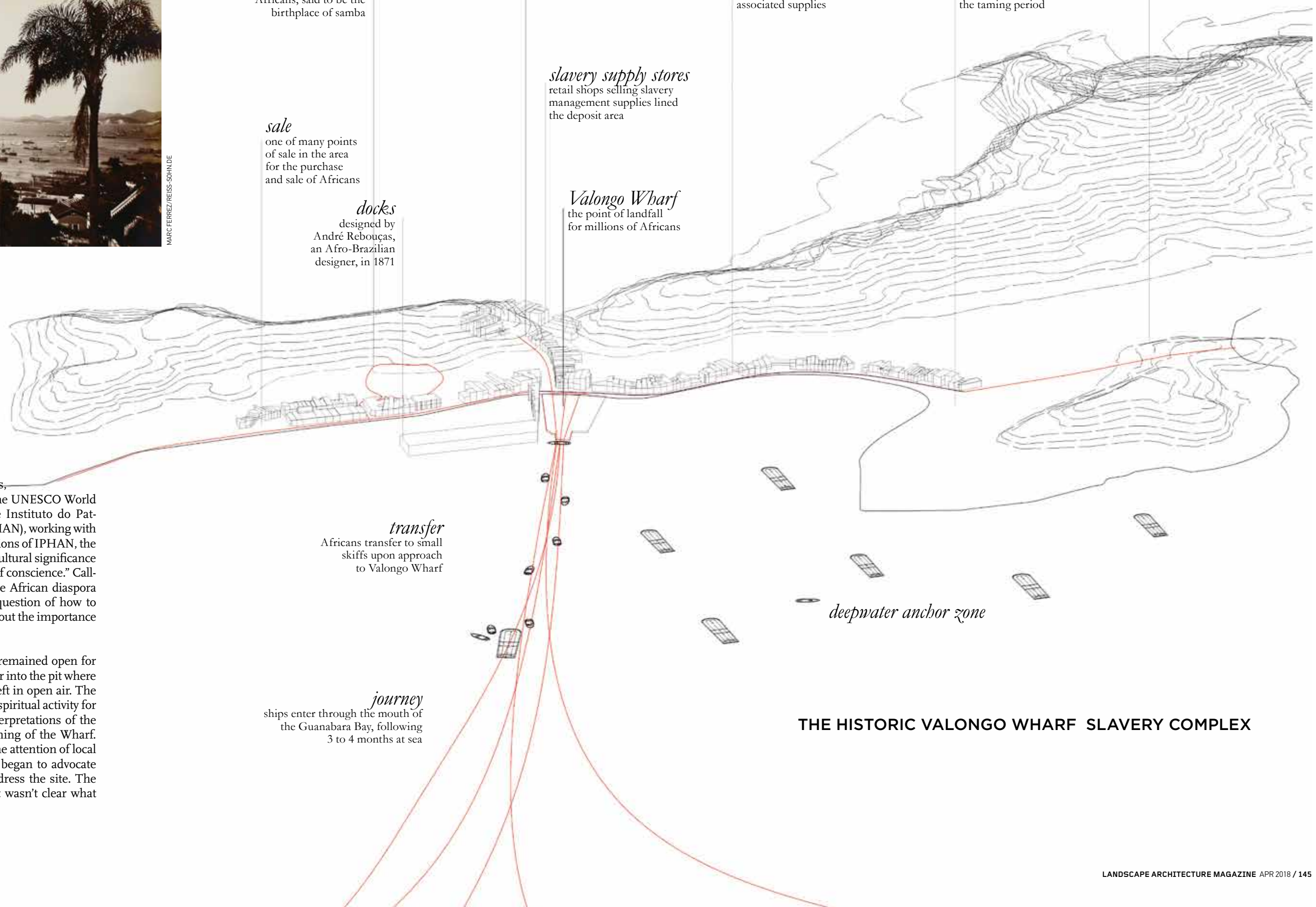
*open burial ground*  
open burial ground for Africans dead on arrival or who died during the taming period

*slave hospital*  
treating Africans who had fallen ill before their purchase

and areas like the Deposit, used for processing Africans for enslavement. But the discovery of the intact wharf was a breakthrough moment. It revealed the physical place of disembarkation, a threshold that brought all of these individual sites into what is arguably the largest and most important cultural landscape of slavery outside of Africa.

Recognition was rapid. In just six years, Valongo Wharf had entered the canon—the UNESCO World Heritage list—primarily ushered by the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN), working with the city of Rio. Adopting the recommendations of IPHAN, the World Heritage listing acknowledged the cultural significance of Valongo Wharf and its status as a “site of conscience.” Calling it “the most powerful memorial of the African diaspora outside Africa,” the report left open the question of how to interpret that memorial, though it singled out the importance of intangible heritage.

In the meantime, the archaeological site remained open for viewing, allowing locals and tourists to peer into the pit where the wharf stones had been revealed and left in open air. The exposed wharf became a center of intense spiritual activity for Brazilians, who had begun their own interpretations of the site, performing rituals such as the Washing of the Wharf. Plans and debates over the site attracted the attention of local activists and community members, who began to advocate for some form of commemoration to address the site. The city was talking about a memorial. But it wasn't clear what the right thing would be.



**THE HISTORIC VALONGO WHARF SLAVERY COMPLEX**

**ABOVE**  
A 19th-century view of the port in Rio from the Saúde neighborhood illustrates the density of commerce at the port.

**OPPOSITE**  
Zewde's axonometric reconstructed plan of the time when Valongo was an active slave port shows the extent of Rio's industrial landscape of slavery.



## SCENES FROM THE CIRCUIT OF AFRICAN HERITAGE



**LEFT**  
Members of the Centro Cultural Pequena África (Little Africa) meet near Largo de São Francisco da Prainha, an unmarked plaza that was once an auction and whipping block.

**RIGHT**  
A street near the Quilombo Pedra do Sal, or salt rock.



At Harvard, Zewde had written a proposal to do a site analysis and interview people. By the winter of her first year, she'd landed a grant to return to Rio and begin interviewing activists and locals. She had six weeks. She had gotten the contact of Washington Fajardo, an architect who was then the Secretary of Cultural Preservation for the city, and started to develop ideas about the cultural practices around the site.

Zewde describes her ongoing engagement with the activist community in Brazil in vivid if considered terms. "These are sensitive conversations to have in your own country, in your own language," she says, having taught herself Portuguese in a few months to pass the language exams required by her transportation fellowship. "So you can imagine I tried to be as careful as possible in these conversations, but listened more than anything."

A mix of academics, religious and spiritual leaders, professionals, and others with direct connections to what she says roughly translates as the "black movement" in Brazil, the activists took up Valongo as an important cause. She began to meet and talk with people, including Giovanni Harvey, a long-time local activist for racial justice in Brazil, with a deep investment not just in Valongo but in the national fight for racial justice. "We had a meeting, and they were just very passionate and articulate about what they thought this place could be, should be, in Brazilian history. And I mean, it was a really powerful, really power-

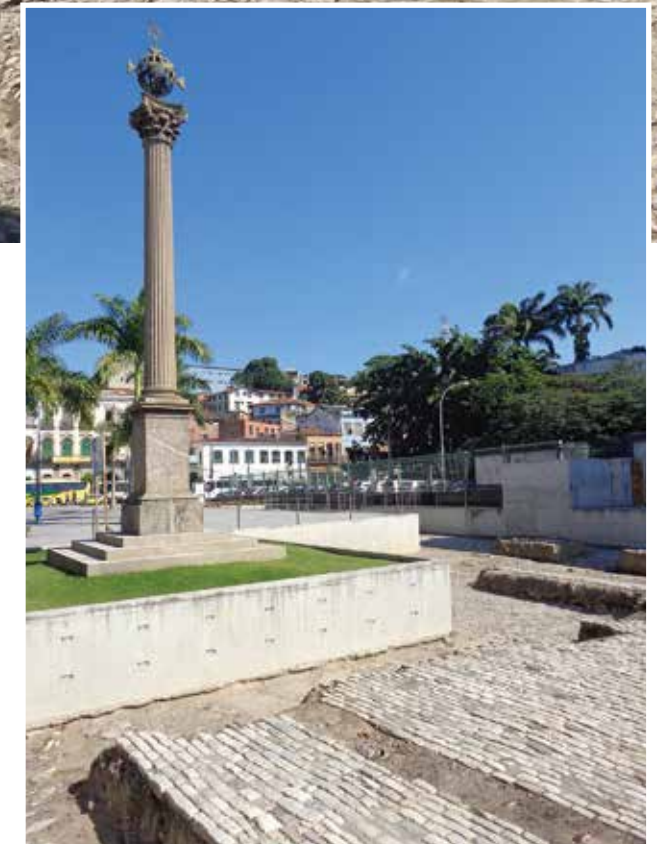
ful moment." The conversations were a turning point. "I was coming at it from a research perspective, but when they were speaking so strongly about next steps, and they're like, 'We really need you to be involved,' that was really the first time it crossed my mind that I could have a role in this beyond just writing a report or making a drawing."

According to Harvey, Zewde's identity as an outsider was not an issue for the local community connected to the site. "Zewde's black nationality did not represent, for the activists of the Brazilian black movement, a challenge that had to be overcome," wrote Harvey through a translator. "The main obstacle was, from my perspective, the recognition of her professional abilities (as an architect and/or urban planner) by the white people who were in charge of the government agencies and technical institutions overseeing the process." He says that Valongo Wharf's human relevance was global, not just Brazilian. "The fact that Sara Zewde was a 'diaspora' citizen was, and continues to be, perceived as a positive trait, and not a negative one."

The architectural language for memorials to trauma, loss, and grief have traditionally come out of Western architectural traditions—they distill the collective experiences into individual representations (equestrian statues, bronze reliefs) or derive from funerary traditions that are rooted in Judeo-Christian expressions (obelisks, swaths of granite with names inscribed). They mark time in a particular way that fixes the event hard in the past. The push for a memorial caused some frustration from the local community around what they perceived to be an unresolved gap between architecture and the expression of African and Afro-Brazilian culture. Zewde told them, "I know what that's like. I can relate to that. I see that in architecture. It is real—what you're describing is real." ↘



**CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE**  
The Docas Dom Pedro is a large brick dock warehouse designed by André Rebouças, a black Brazilian, in 1871; preserved fragments from the 1843 wharf that was repaved to present a more appealing face to a newly arrived Bourbon princess; the vacant shell of the Afoxé Filhos de Gandhi, once a samba school.





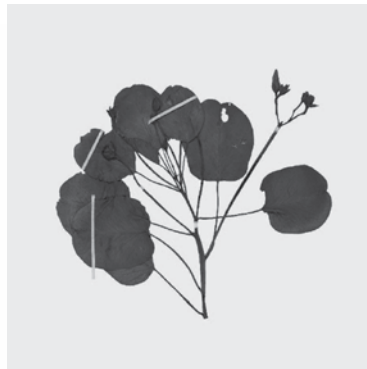
SOILS, PLANTS, AND CULTURE

- trans-Atlantic slave routes
  - warm ocean currents
  - cooler ocean currents
  - water bodies traveled by slave traders selling Africans to Rio de Janeiro
  - latosolic tropical red soils
  - the Valongo Wharf site, over 300 million years
- Umbanda
  - Candomblé
  - Maria Lionza
  - Hoodoo
  - Other

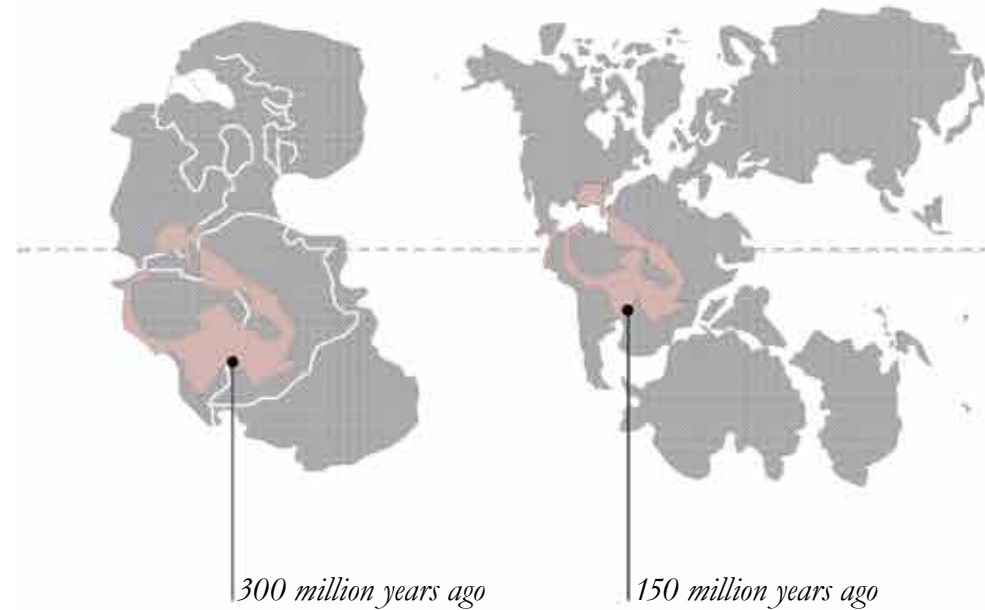
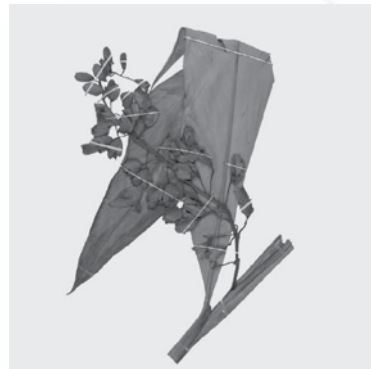
*Ficus lepreurii*  
Figueira triangular



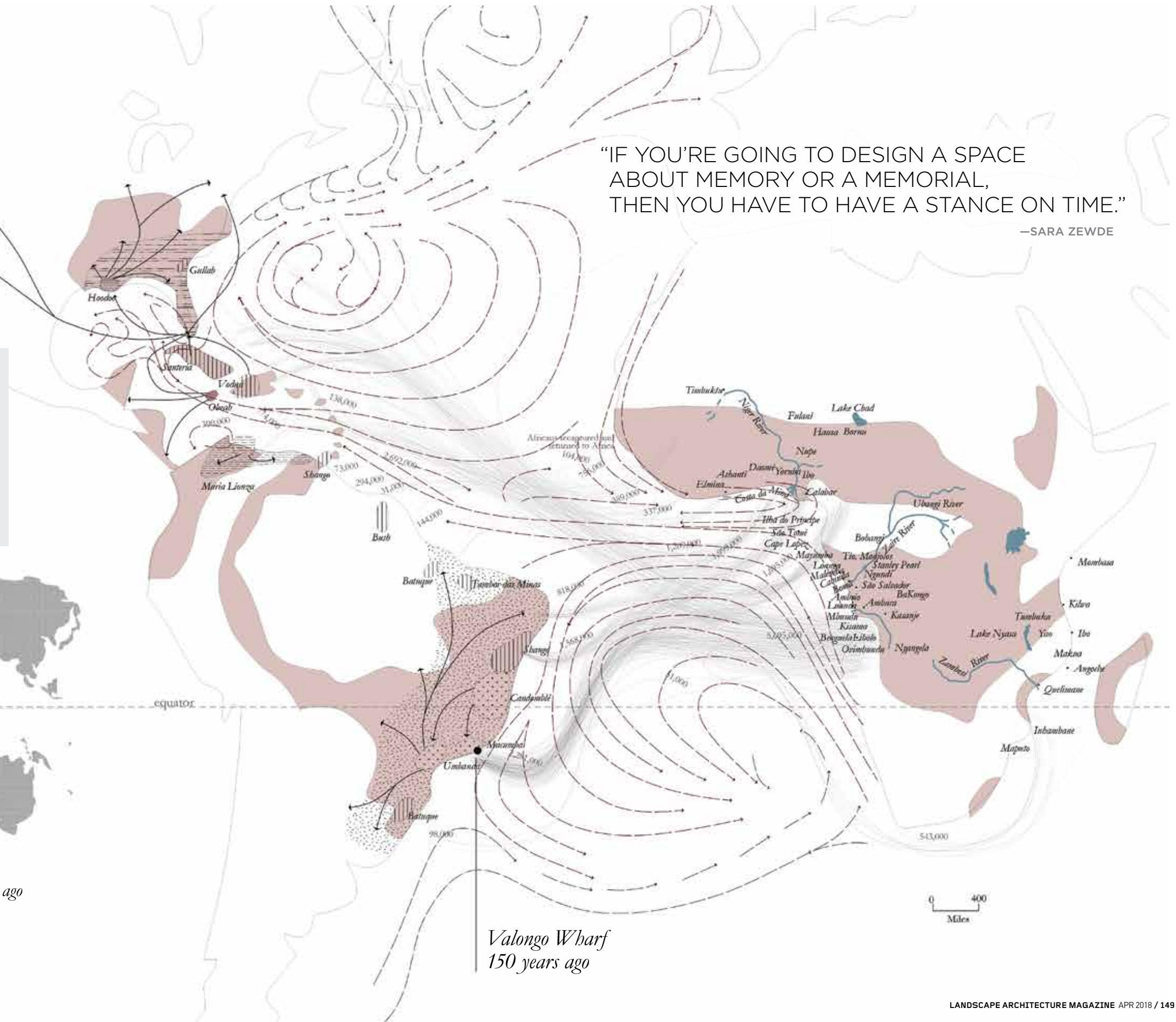
*Ipomoea pes-caprae*  
Beach Morning Glory



*Terminalia cattapa*  
Colônia



ABOVE  
Research into the migration of soils and plants from the period during which the African and South American continents were joined informed the material palette for the proposal.



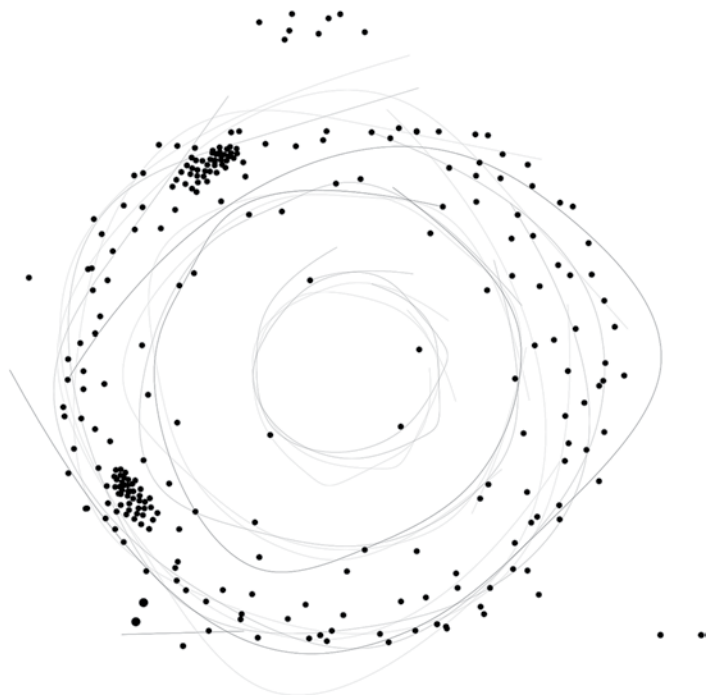
“IF YOU’RE GOING TO DESIGN A SPACE ABOUT MEMORY OR A MEMORIAL, THEN YOU HAVE TO HAVE A STANCE ON TIME.”

—SARA ZEWDE

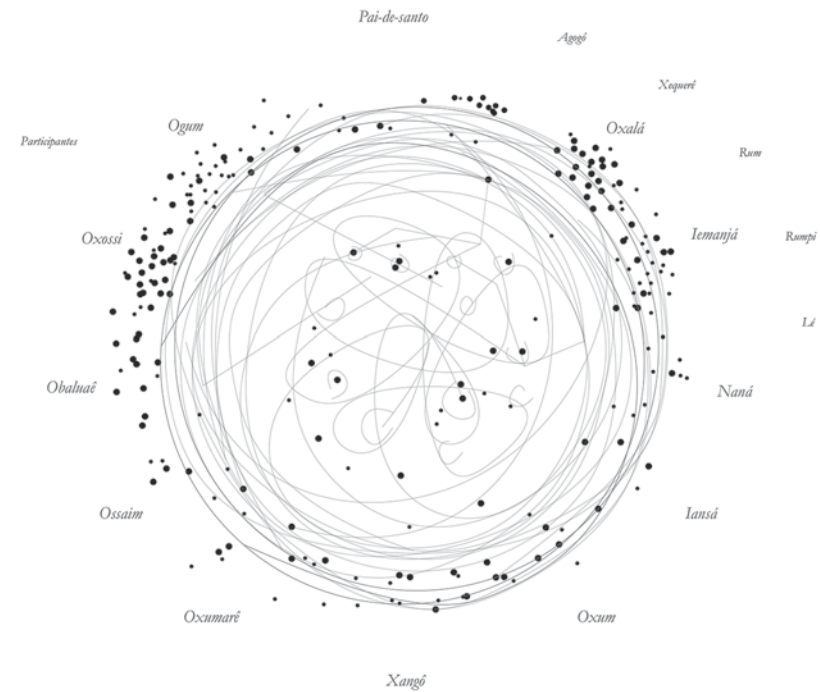
*Valongo Wharf*  
150 years ago

0 400  
Miles

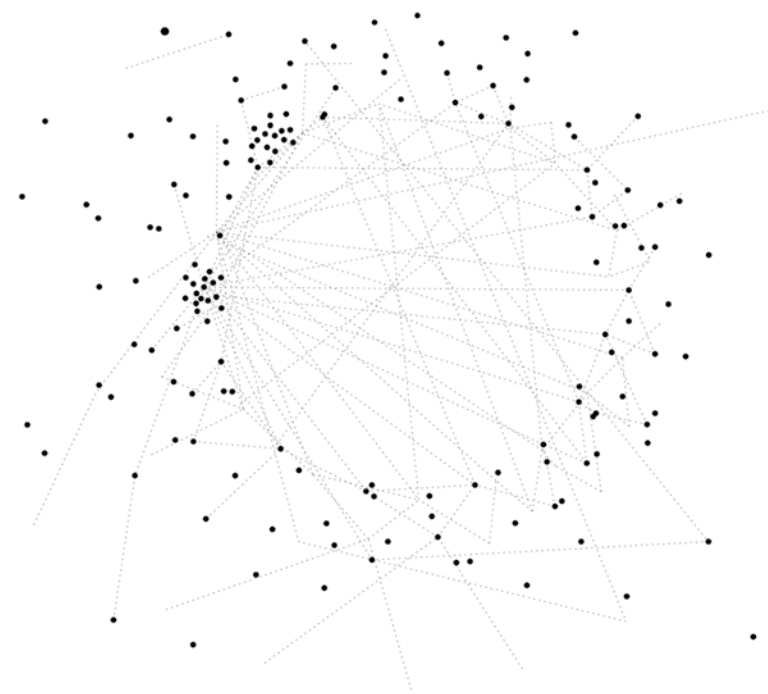
## Samba de Roda



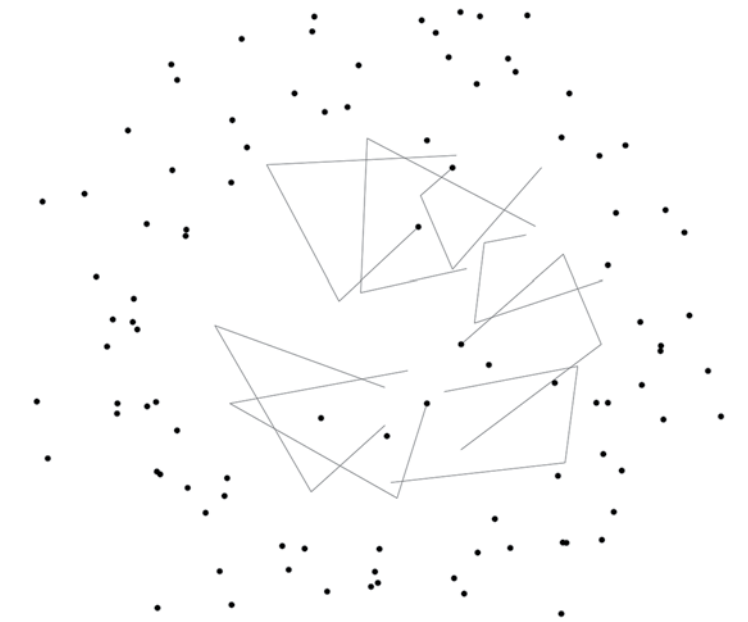
## Cosmology



## Roda de Samba



## Capoeira



**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE**  
Spatial diagrams of cultural practices that blend sound, movement, and cosmology informed Zewde's design proposal.

→ The day before she returned to the States, the meeting with Fajardo finally came through. It was another pivotal moment, Zewde says, that confirmed what she'd been thinking and hearing. Traditional Western architectural paradigms for memorials would not work in this context. It was the wrong language, the wrong expression, for sites like Valongo Wharf.

She returned to Harvard and worked on her MLA thesis with Anita Berrizbeitia, ASLA, while simultaneously pursuing funding to work on the Valongo site, an experience she describes as "very intense." Zewde credits Berrizbeitia with pushing her to expand the proposal beyond the limits of the site from a single public space to the city scale. "Slavery was this industry that provoked, prompted, and required the construction of the city to support it because it was about housing, shipping, and storing millions of people until you need a city to do that," she says.

Berrizbeitia, who is the chair of landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, says that Zewde had very specific ideas about what she wanted to include and what she wanted to leave out. The move from a proposal for a single object to one that was "distributed, didactic, and would have

a dimension of memory and social space" was a very challenging one. "She did not want to do a monument that only talked about the horrors of slavery. She wanted to include that, and at the same time speak about moving forward," Berrizbeitia says. Finding the language, finding the right expression, was a difficult journey. "When she found the parallel in samba, this duality of high energy and happiness and, at the same time, a sense of longing, a sense of sadness, it was very productive for her."

Zewde continued to look for funding to return to Rio and work on a design proposal. It did not happen quickly. "Most of the story is unanswered e-mails," she says. Discouraged, she nearly gave up, but then, finally, in 2014, an Olmsted Scholar fellowship from the Landscape Architecture Foundation came through. She was back in the summer, working on a design proposal. It had taken two years.

The city had already begun to plan for the Circuit of African Heritage after the Valongo Wharf was uncovered. A project of Rio's municipal government and the Instituto Rio Patrimônio da Humanidade (IRPH), proposals for the circuit were developed in collaboration with a working group made up of activists, spiritual leaders, and other community members, and eventually, Zewde. During that summer, Zewde worked at a desk in the city government offices in conjunction with Fajardo and Aline Xavier, an architect with the agency implementing the project, and met with the working group on a proposal for the circuit.

The Circuit of African Heritage links 20 sites around the port zone. Some of the sites predate the port renovation and the discovery of the wharf ruins, such as the Instituto dos Pretos Novos—a house converted to a museum after renovations revealed an open burial ground beneath it that held the remains of enslaved Africans. Others, such as Laboratório Aberto de Arqueologia Urbana, an open laboratory for urban archaeology that allows the public to view the artifacts and ongoing archaeological research at Valongo, were developed in response to archaeological discoveries made during the port redevelopment. Still others on the circuit were sites of everyday use by descendants—the Central do Brasil transit hub, and the Morro da Providência, the oldest favela in Rio. They were linked by their connection to the enslaved and descendant community.

"They were already working with this idea of a Circuit of African Heritage when I came along," Zewde says. "What they thought was that there would be a memorial in the circuit." Instead, Zewde's contribution was to reframe the idea behind the circuit entirely, evolving it from a sequence of disparate sites connected through the African experience in Brazil to an idea of a living cultural landscape punctuated by what she calls a "constellation of sites." It was a reversal of the figure-ground relationship, but at the scale of the human network. "The circuit is the memorial as opposed to a memorial in the circuit," she says.

Zewde's design concept linked western Africa and Brazil through an expanded field of movement, time, and materials. She researched and identified soils and plants of Africa that had once been native to Brazil when the two continents had been connected, 300 million years ago, some of which would have been recognized by Africans who landed at Valongo. These shared soils, seeds, and plants became the material palette of the design.

Spatial analyses of cultural practices such as the roda de samba, but also of dance, spiritual, and social practices that Zewde observed happening around the port area, shaped the formal architecture of movement around the circuit and became a way of understanding how the past and present are simultaneously occurring. "People perceive time differently, and if you're going to design a space about memory or a memorial, then you have to have a stance on time," Zewde says.

At seven points along the circuit, Zewde proposed design interventions that incorporated cultural practices, plants, and forms that would be recognized by both the enslaved and their descendants, illuminating and dissolving the boundaries between the past and present. At



**CONSTELLATION OF SITES**



**OPPOSITE**

Zewde's proposal for the Circuit of African Heritage includes designs for seven of the 20 sites.

each intervention, the design logic is clear and the connections are legible to descendants who live in, above, and around these sites. Though there are places for interpretation and narrative signage, the design concept is not built around the need to tell the story to outsiders. It provokes questions; it does not promise answers. "I got challenged for sure, especially the first couple of presentations," Zewde recalls. "People were like, 'So, where's the memorial?'"

One of the things that makes Zewde's approach at Valongo instructive is that its visual, physical, and auditory vocabulary comes from the perspective of the enslaved. It is relatively agnostic as to the concerns of the white society that fed off this economy and its human capital. They simply aren't addressed. Although the logic of this elision might seem evident, there are very few such monuments to the enslaved or commemorations of the achievements or sacrifices of enslaved people in the United States—Louisiana's Whitney Plantation Museum is one exception. Instead, we have a commemorative landscape of slaveholding. Up until now, there has been a general unwillingness to tell the story of the African Americans as distinct from their relationships to white people.

To some extent, that blindness was partly because we hadn't done the work. Archaeology, bolstered by many new technologies, has expanded in both scope and commitment to nonwhite historical actors. At places such as Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, historians equipped with new tools have begun to interpret the lives of enslaved people who



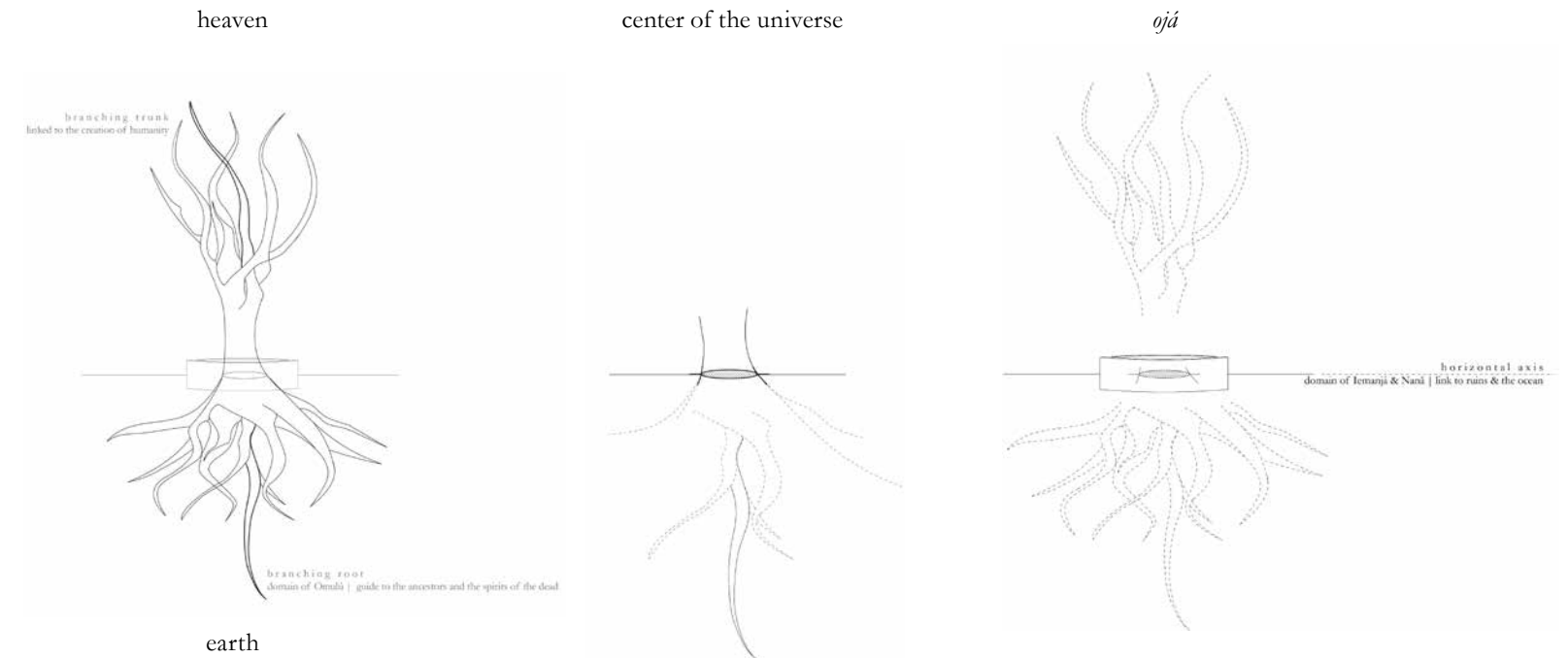


**CONCEPT FOR VALONGO WHARF  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE**  
At the Valongo site, Zewde proposed relocating a building to expand access and public space and connect it to the Providência favela. The curved wrapping platform takes its form from the Afro-Brazilian practice of wrapping a white cloth around the base of a *Ficus* tree to mark where the ancestors gather. Circular plazas encourage capoeira and other cultural expressions.

lived and worked on Mulberry Row. Plantations and gentlemen's farms are now the places where the interpretation of slave landscapes has the most depth and breadth, but they are still framed in relation to the white families who lived there. Underground Railroad stations, slave cemeteries, and historic slave market sites are preserved in some places, but often as single notes—markers rather than narratives—to describe discreet moments in which lives were saved or destroyed.

Zewde's proposal for Rio has both conceptual and practical analogues for slave memorials in the United States, where slavery has largely been erased from the built environment, and particularly for memorials that are deeply connected to place.

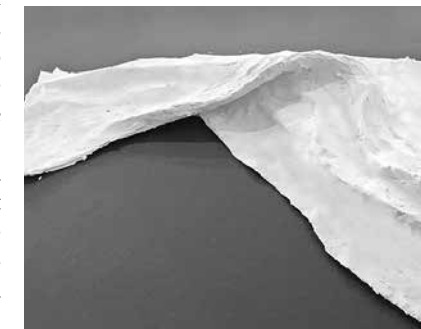
One such place is Shockoe Bottom in Richmond, Virginia. The site of what was once the largest slave market in the United States outside New Orleans, Shockoe Bottom is under intense development pressure as its waterfront becomes more desirable real estate. Currently, the city has offered to preserve and



interpret the Lumpkin's Jail site—named after the white property owner rather than the Devil's Half Acre, as it was and is known to local African Americans—while community members and activists have pushed for a multisite, nine-acre Shockoe Bottom memorial park.



Rob Nieweg, a senior field director and attorney for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, saw Zewde present her project in Charlottesville in March 2017, just a few months before a white nationalist protest over the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee ended in fatal violence. Nieweg says there are some direct parallels between Valongo Wharf and sites like Shockoe in the United States, “in terms of buried history, difficult history, that’s on the one hand been forgotten and on the other hand is essential to the full understanding of the place and culture.” Though most of the Shockoe site is under a parking lot, “Archaeologists were able to find really extraordinary resources that make us think that if there ever were more investigation and more excavation, there’d be an even deeper and richer story told there.”



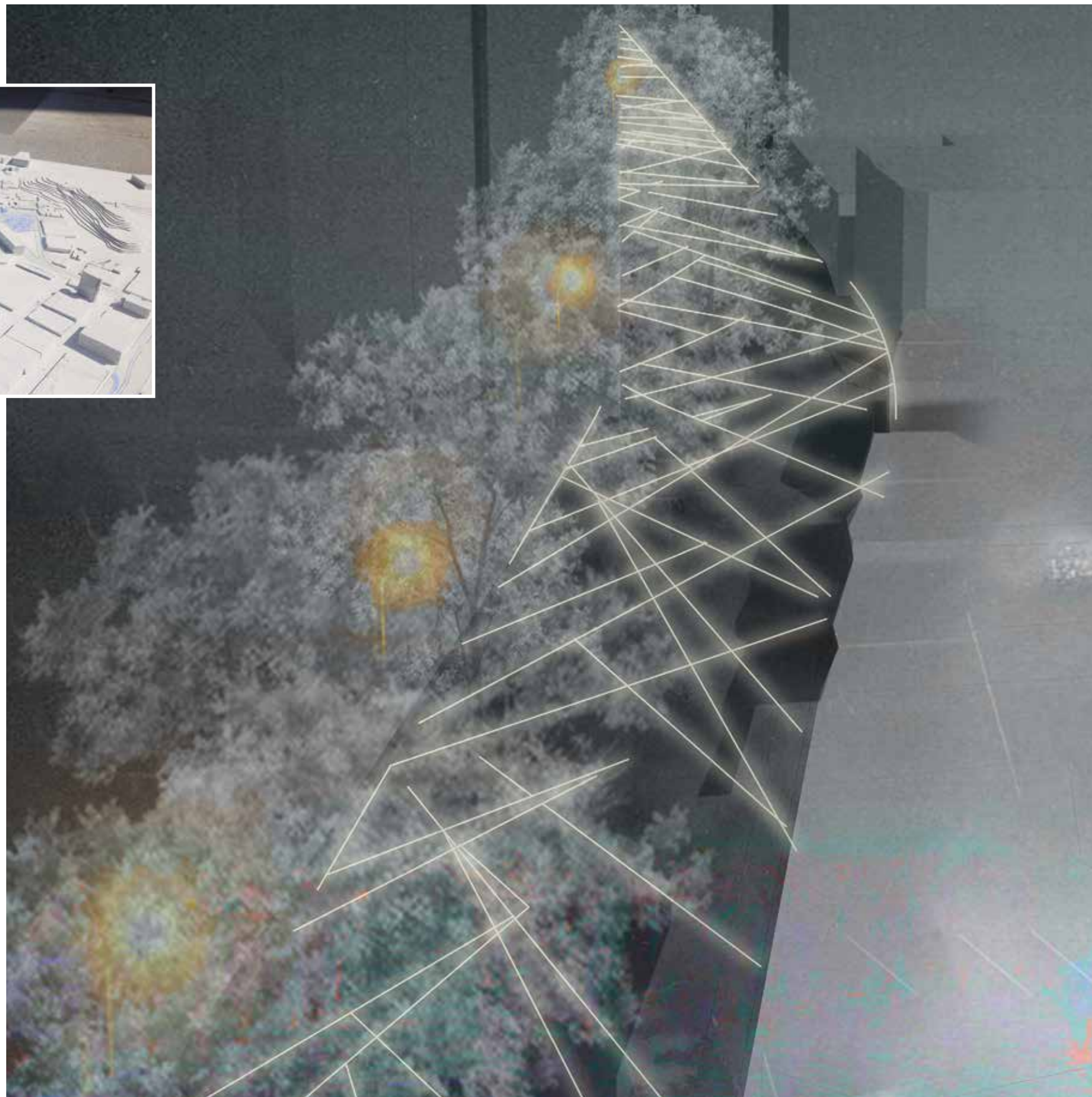
Nieweg says that in Richmond, part of what the community is asking for is an interpretation that goes beyond the archaeology and integrates current issues and cultural practices. The park might, for example, incorporate some of the rituals to honor ancestors that are spontaneously occurring on the current Richmond Slave Trail. Nieweg says the responsibility of white people and their instruments of land use is to cede the space, not to shape interpretation of these places. “If historic preservation does something right, then it’s preserving, conserving, and retaining the authentic place. And then, over time, there’s space, there’s room for interpretation to shift,” Nieweg says.

**TOP**  
The *Ficus* tree represents a threshold between the past and the present.

**ABOVE**  
The wrapping form shapes the base of a bench and planter for the Praça da Harmonia.

**LEFT**  
A plaster model of the wrapping form that appears in many of Zewde’s interventions.





In 2015, Zewde went back to Rio to present the project during Brazil's National Day of Black Consciousness. That same year she took a job at GGN in Seattle, where she works on public space projects. Her commitment to the intangible over the formal in her proposal ensures there will be continuing dialogues as she helps to move the project forward with governments, nonprofits, activists, and locals. In 2016, Fajardo, who has moved on from his position with the city and is now a consultant, was the curator of the Brazilian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and included Zewde's proposal.

Recently, the city planted *Adansonia digitata* (baobab) trees near the Valongo Wharf site, despite the fact that they're nonnative species and ordinarily not permitted. According to Zewde, in Afro-Brazilian culture, the baobab is a tree whose roots are said to spread underneath the ocean, and whose trunk contained the ages. Zewde says the city made an exception in recognition of the tree's historical and cultural significance, which is documented in the mapping and other arguments in her proposal. The appointment of Valongo Wharf to the World Heritage list means the site will have some tourist traffic as well as some protections from the area's voracious development.

The notion that lived experience might offer an interpretive model, that the past and present can be simultaneously integrated in design, or that cultural practices can be seen as the center of the

**LEFT**

A design for marking the Rua Sacadura Cabral, the historic coastline, would remove traffic to the north side of the street and create more space for pedestrians; graphics, trees, and paving represent the continents separating and joining together.

**OPPOSITE**

A detail of the site model with the coastline intervention visible.

design process is a provocative one, but it's not one that's easily written into design regulations or requests for proposals. The kind of investment that Zewde has made in Valongo doesn't fit common development models, either, and the time and commitment necessary to develop a project as nuanced and responsive as the one for Valongo Wharf requires something beyond tenacity, venturing into passion.

Through some eight trips (and counting), Zewde has spent considerable time over the years thinking about the nature of memorials, the commemoration of suffering, and the problems of centering "the trauma of enslavement as the dominant theme in black memory" over other modes and narratives of black life. In the memorial landscapes of the United States, as Berrizbeitia points out, the question in Rio is the same as the question in the United States in places like Shockoe Bottom. "Who gets to decide? Who gets to speak? Whose voice is the one that's going to be heard?"

When I asked her recently about where the project is now, Zewde outlined the complex nature of Brazilian politics and the shifting agendas and alliances that are always threatening to scuttle the proposal. But she seems undaunted, and is ready with ideas big and small for pushing it forward even if the current environment isn't supportive. "This project will always be about the long view." ●