Finding the right words to explain a photographic work can be challenging. There is always a danger of giving away too much, of not allowing space for interpretation and of inhibiting the intellectual stimulation of piecing fragments together, an essential task to the attuning of the visual message.

But, sometimes, the abstracted nature of the photographic medium makes it necessary to frame it in some kind of context, so as to guide the observer, almost like a map would help a tourist to locate its position while still allowing enough freedom to choose from a multitude of directions. Similarly, this exploratory walk, made of fluid but interspersed observations, looks for support in a more systemic approach in order to orient the observer without necessarily prescribing a path or a final destination.

This skeletal assemblage, while hinting at some of the experiences and events that have shaped this registering of ideas, becomes an essential process in describing and deciphering this place of discovery where for every answer many more questions may arise.

Since I moved from Maputo to Cape Town 13 years ago, I’ve gone back at least once a year; it has become almost a pilgrimage. I do it on holidays to see family and friends, to expose my South African wife and son to this other world, so close but so distant, that is Mozambican society. But I’ve realized that I also do it for purely selfish reasons, a sub-conscious need to reconnect with my past and make up for the distance. As time passes and the city changes, I have felt increasingly estranged from its recent development. At first I tried to not give in to a kind of romantic idea of the city as a collection of memories, but then wouldn’t I be denying such an important part of who I am by pursuing a more clinical and less personal approach?

In Maputo’s streets... at its intersections, I still find the scent of bygone fleeting moments... hot humid nights where the walk home took three times longer than it should, on every wall an excuse to sit and talk, on every corner a dialogue between dream and reason, an almost schizophrenic ability to deal with the bizarre condition of one’s existence in a world that didn’t seem to make much sense but that we needed to endure. Resilience was found by laughing at adversity and putting our imagination to good use.

The end of an era had come with the death of Samora Machel... three years later the Berlin Wall fell and we were all together in the same life raft, left at the mercy of the tides of global politics and the end of a regime, oppressive, dictatorial and totalitarian but also benevolent in the way that had managed to keep true to its ideology while forging a strong national identity. All we had left were the remains of a conviction that being Mozambican meant embracing a non racial, non tribal and non regional society, all speaking one official language, all fighting together for survival.

It was successful social engineering that lasted as long as it could but soon enough started showing some strain as the roots of free market capitalism branched out finding the crevices and cracks in this fantasy, it didn’t take long for an emerging bourgeoisie and elite to sprout, leading to an ever increasing stratification of society. The former Marxist political elite quickly changed from army uniforms, Cuban balalaikas and cigars into designer suits, pipes and single malt whisky. Government and business became intermingled; corruption and cronyism entrenched into everyday life, the informal taking over the order and progress, revolutionary graffiti giving way to publicity billboards.
The looting went on for years; surprise gave way to resignation and anecdote. There were no more sacred values, not even a person’s life... the journalist Carlos Cardoso and the economist Siba Siba Macuácu’a’s graves and traumatized families remain testimony to the brutality and irrationality of greed.

In shock, we all thought that the raft had sunk and we had hit rock bottom but we were wrong... suddenly, one of the poorest countries in the world was found to be rich in minerals and natural gas, even oil maybe... the depths of business gave way to a political abyss, nicknamed Guebusiness in honour of its master mind, the former president Armando Guebuza.

After two presidential terms of abuse, 2016 started with shocking news that hidden loans in excess of 2 billion American dollars had been incurred by public companies with State guarantees, unconstitutionally and without parliament’s approval. A forensic audit by Kroll has identified several possible culprits including the state security agency, SISE, which controls the three companies that took the loans.

Some of these loans were used to buy a fleet of tuna fishing boats at inflated prices which are still moored at the harbour due to the absence of staff to operate them. The IMF suspended all financial aid to the country, a decision soon replicated by other members of the Group of 14. Maputo lost a quarter of its budget which was dependent on donors.

After a six year economic bubble that had brought a construction boom to the Mozambican capital, the country faced one of its worst recessions, food prices started going up on a weekly basis, investment dropped to more than half the projections and some businesses scaled down while some even closed their operations.

At the end of 2017 with the presidential elections around the corner and the worse of the crisis still to come, the finance department has just approved the acquisition of new official luxury cars to the value of approximately 28 million rand. The official government’s response: “although we’re in a crisis our leaders need dignity”.

It’s not difficult to see that there is something wrong with the scenario present in the streets of Maputo: the fantasy being played out of luxury cars driving on pot holed roads, ridiculous high rises and luxury villas for expats shut off from their context and completely oblivious to the surrounding poverty and inequality.

Any attempt by its citizens to express their dissatisfaction has been met with police brutality, intimidation and murder. In 2010, riots against the government after a threat of bread price increase (a main staple food to the majority of the population), left at least 12 people dead and 400 injured after the police used live ammunition on unarmed civilians. In 2015, Gilles Cistac, a constitutional lawyer was gunned down in the middle of the day at a cafe with dozens of witnesses. No detailed investigation and arrests have been made on the brutal deaths of these 13 people.

The corners of my memory have become blunt; reason has given way to nightmare and all I smell now is the faint aroma of what it was and what it could have been. A city like no other, with an architecture and post colonial appropriation without equal, being transformed and taken over by a new rich obsession with decadent, distorted and out of place lifestyle models from Miami, Dubai and Shenzhen...

The words on the streets are fear, intimidation, despondence, frustration and disappointment... The future is ambiguous and the only certainty is that there is no limit to the greed and abuse of the ruling elite.

But, surprisingly, Maputo’s life goes on, maybe in a slower rhythm, with dropped shoulders but in the same resilient way, a survivor’s guide to urban poverty...