

LEARNING FROM LAGOS

AFTER DECADES OF neglect, sub-Saharan Africa's largest metropolis has suddenly found itself under intense critical scrutiny. The new attention comes not so much from development specialists or Africa scholars but from a high-profile convergence of architectural and cultural theory and critical urban studies, often focused around major international art exhibitions. Once known as the 'Venice of West Africa', Nigeria's former capital—a smoky expanse of concrete and shanty-towns, sprawling for miles across the islands, waterways and onshore hinterland of the Lagos Lagoon—has become the subject of such mega-shows as *Century City* (2001) in London and *Africas: the Artist and the City* (2001) in Barcelona, and featured prominently in the 2002 Documenta 11 in Kassel. The Harvard School of Design's Project on the City, led by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, has announced its intention to produce a whole book devoted to Lagos.¹

In part this focus is the result of the initiatives, energy and imagination of a new generation of Nigerian intellectuals. Okwui Enwezor, curator of the 2002 Documenta quintennial, explained his decision to expand the already substantial Kassel exhibition by hosting a series of international 'Platforms' (conferences, workshops, public discussions, film and video projects) in the run-up to the show as having both political and aesthetic objectives in such 'tense times' as these, when 'incertitudes . . . make deeper demands on the sunny projections of globalist progress'. Platform 4, held in Lagos in 2002 in conjunction with the Goethe Institut, was entitled 'Under Siege: Four African Cities'. It brought together local advocates and a range of African and European researchers and writers to provide a week-long forum, a manifestation of Documenta 11's concern 'that the space of contemporary art, and the mechanisms that bring it to a wider public domain, require radical rethinking and enlargement'.² For Enwezor, the crisis-ridden African mega-cities are 'centres that still

hold great potential for human vitality, creativity and inventiveness.³ Lagos has become both the venue and focus for a radical urban agenda.

Model chaos

Yet the current flurry of interest in Lagos masks divergent modes of analysis and interpretation. Two approaches have dominated. The first is an eschatological evocation of urban apocalypse: poverty, violence, disease, political corruption, uncontrollable growth and manic religiosity; a city of between perhaps ten and fifteen million (the administrative means to take a reliable census do not exist), with minimal access to running water and sanitation, in which some 70 per cent are excluded from regular salaried employment. In this nightmare vision, the city is on the brink of a cataclysm brought about by civil strife and infrastructural collapse. Robert Kaplan's treatment of Lagos in *The Coming Anarchy* would be one example of this genre; Pep Subirós's 'Lagos: Surviving Hell' and much of the German press coverage of Documenta 11 another.⁴ In these and other contemporary accounts by Western commentators, Lagos takes on the allure of a 'new Bronx': a wild zone of the urban imagination, a realm of irrationality beyond the reach of human agency or any realistic prospects of improvement. An inverse of the globalization thesis is presented, in which certain regions are seen as totally excluded from the reconfigured world economic system.

¹ Other recent exhibitions devoted to Lagos include *Depth of Field* held at the South London Gallery in 2005 and *Lagos: STADTanSICHTen* held at the ifa Galleries in Berlin and Stuttgart during 2004/5. My thanks to Bayo Anatola, Tunde Atere, Suma Athreye, Laurent Fourchard, Maren Harnack, Hellen James, Koku Konu, Michael Müller-Verweyen, Gbenga Odele, Muyiwe Odele, Ayodeji Olukoju and Ben Page.

² Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya, eds, *Documenta11_Plattform4. Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos, Ostfildern-Ruit* 2003.

³ Enwezor cited in Okechukwu Uwaezuoke, 'The Siege, the Talk and the Solutions,' *Comet* (Lagos), 26 March 2002.

⁴ Pep Subirós, 'Lagos: Surviving Hell,' in Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, *Africas: the Artist and the City*, Barcelona 2001, 34-45. See also Robert Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy*, New York 2000, pp. 5-15; Peter Richter, 'Flirt mit dem Desaster: Was macht die 'documenta' in Nigeria?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 March 2002; Rudolf Schmitz, 'Im Strudel. Lagos überleben: Die vierte documenta-Plattform', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 March 2002. Exceptions would be AbdouMalik Simone, *For the City Yet to Come*, Durham, NC 2004 and Hanno Rauterberg's 'Die Kunst im Chaos', *Die Zeit*, 4 April 2002.

The second view, by contrast, is far more upbeat, focusing on the novelties of the city's morphology. Exemplified by Rem Koolhaas and the Harvard School of Design's Project on the City, this approach also emphasizes the seemingly chaotic aspects of Lagos's development, but does so in order to highlight the homeostatic complexity of newly evolving socio-economic structures, with the city conceived as a series of self-regulatory systems.⁵ In this perspective, Lagos is seen not as a threatening anomaly but as the precursor to a new kind of urbanism, hitherto ignored within the teleological discourses of Western modernity; one which may be perfectly adapted to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Koolhaas's contributions on Lagos—in the Documenta 11 *Under Siege* volume and in the Franco-Catalan *Mutations* collection—form part of the Project on the City's ongoing work on contemporary urbanism. Its mission, Fredric Jameson has argued, is 'to explore a new reality', rather than to propose solutions.⁶ The interest of Lagos for this project is threefold. Firstly, of the 33 megalopolises projected to exist by 2015, the vast majority will be in poor countries; Lagos is predicted to become one of the world's biggest cities, and may perhaps be taken as some sort of archetype for the urbanization process at work in the global South. Secondly, the intention is 'to understand and describe how an African city works', a goal driven by the realization that:

The engrained vocabulary and values of architectural discourse are painfully inadequate to describe the current production of urban substance. They

⁵ The approach may properly be described as neo-organicist, in comparison to the classic organicist texts of urban discourse. Whereas the latter famously drew on metaphors of human biology to illuminate the different functions of the city (heart, lungs, alimentary system), the neo-organicist view is informed rather by images from IT, mathematics and the biophysical sciences. Thus in their contribution on Lagos to the *Mutations* collection, Koolhaas and his colleagues draw on cybernetic metaphors of urban space as a multiplicity of networks 'rapidly expanding, transforming, and perfecting', while the functioning of the Lagos megalopolis 'illustrates the large-scale efficacy of systems and agents' considered informal or illegal; its survival strategy 'might be better understood as a form of collective research, conducted by a team of eight-to-twenty-five million'. Koolhaas here seems to echo Joseph Beuys's dictum, 'everyone can be an artist'. Rem Koolhaas/Harvard Project on the City, 'Lagos', in Francine Fort and Michel Jacques, eds, *Mutations*, Barcelona 2001, pp. 652, 719.

⁶ Jameson, 'Future City', *NLR* 21, May–June 2003, p. 66. The first two volumes in the Project on the City series are *Great Leap Forward*, on the development of the Pearl River Delta, and *Guide to Shopping* (both published Cologne 2002).

perpetuate an image of the city which is essentially Western, and subconsciously insist that all cities, wherever they are, be interpreted in that image; they systematically find wanting any urban form that does not conform. Our words cannot describe our cities with any precision or pleasure.⁷

But the fundamental conundrum of Lagos, as the Harvard Project sees it, is how it can continue to function as a city at all, given that it lacks all the basic amenities and public services deemed essential in traditional urban studies. Most Western planning experts have concurred that Lagos has 'none of the infrastructures, systems or even environmental resources' to support a population considerably below its current level.⁸

Koolhaas urges us not to 'anguish over its shortcomings' but instead to celebrate the 'continued, exuberant existence of Lagos and other cities like it', and the 'ingenious, alternative systems' which they generate.⁹ With perhaps disarming candour, Koolhaas explains how the Project on the City discovered these. First attempts by the Harvard team to penetrate Lagos were not propitious:

Our initial engagement with the city was from a mobile position. Partly out of fear, we stayed in the car. That meant, in essence, that we were pre-occupied with the foreground . . . Lagos seemed to be a city of burning edges. Hills, entire roads were paralleled with burning embankments. At first sight, the city had an aura of apocalyptic violence; entire sections of it seemed to be smouldering, as if it were one gigantic rubbish dump.¹⁰

On a later visit, 'we ventured out of our cars' and discovered that there were in fact 'a number of very elaborate organizational networks' at work on the garbage heaps:

The activity taking place was actually not a process of dumping, but more a process of sorting, dismantling, reassembling and potentially recycling. Underneath the viaducts there was a continuous effort to transform discarded garbage.

Finally, on the third visit, 'we were able to rent the helicopter of the President'. This allowed the team to swoop in comfort over the city's slums, marvelling at the swarm of human activity below:

⁷ Koolhaas, 'Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos,' in Enwezor et al, *Under Siege*, p. 175; see also *Mutations*, p. 6.

⁸ *Mutations*, p. 718.

⁹ *Mutations*, p. 652.

¹⁰ 'Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos', p. 177.

From the air, the apparently burning garbage heap turned out to be, in fact, a village, an urban phenomenon with a highly organized community living on its crust . . . What seemed, at ground level, an accumulation of dysfunctional movements, seemed from above an impressive performance, evidence of how well Lagos might perform if it were the third largest city in the world.¹¹

Viewed from above, Lagos's decrepit stretches of superhighway and crumbling cloverleaf intersections assume a new salience. The Harvard Project provides vivid documentation of the ways in which the margins, walls, supporting pillars and interstitial voids of these structures—as well as road embankments, railway tracks and the city's multiple shorelines—have been 'colonized by a host of secondary industries and services: cement block factories, vulcanizers, roadside mechanics, hairdressers, markets, and so on'. Near Jankara, Lagos's largest market, four cloverleaf exit ramps have been taken over as a recycling exchange. Beneath the flyover, groups of young men assemble lanterns, cooking pots and other metal wares and 'even the Lagos superhighway has bus stops on it, mosques under it, markets in it and buildingless factories throughout it.'¹²

Not only dysfunctional transport infrastructure but traffic congestion itself becomes a slow-moving market space, as line of hawkers work their way between the trapped cars of the interminable 'go-slows' and 'no-gos', offering motorists and their passengers plastic sachets of 'pure water', roast peanuts, fake designer sunglasses, mobile phone top-up cards, cheap jewellery. Much of the 'Lagos' chapter in *Mutations* is taken up with striking aerial photographs and elegant diagrams of the city's major congestion points as seen from above. There is a faint resemblance here to a giant Mandelbrot, or perhaps a Deleuzian genetic algorithm. Measurements are given for the tailbacks leading to the vast evangelical centres: Winner's Chapel, capacity 50,000, jam length 2km; Redemption Camp and Prayer City, capacity 400,000, jam length 2.4km.

Lagos's highway system is the work of the German macro-engineering firm Julius Berger, which won contracts to cover the city in a skein of flyovers, bridges and complex traffic intersections during the oil-rich 1970s: 'Nigeria's economy was stronger than that of South Korea; Lagos became a target'. But Koolhaas's structural explanations for the city's

¹¹ 'Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos', p. 177.

¹² *Mutations*, pp. 674, 686.

development peter out in 1980. What happened next? ‘Lagos was left to its own devices, then abandoned’.¹³ The quadrupling of the city’s population over the next two decades appears to be simply an act of nature.

With dubious logic, the Project on the City moves from the asymptotic nature of Lagos’s statistics—every graph (‘resource usage, “urban safety”’) either explodes vertically off the chart or else is almost horizontal, tending towards zero—to conclude that ‘Asymptotic behaviour seems to indicate a terminal condition, a steady state, suggesting that the Lagos condition might simply be twenty, fifty or a hundred years ahead of other cities.’ In other words, rather than Lagos catching up with the West, the West may be catching up with Lagos: ‘To write about the African city is to write about the terminal condition of Chicago, London or Los Angeles.’¹⁴ Yet this is to occlude the fact that the very extremity of Lagos’s deterioration over the past quarter century has been linked, in inverse proportion, to the capital accumulated in Chicago, London or Los Angeles. To treat the city as a living art installation, or compare it to the neutral space of a research laboratory, is both to de-historicize and to depoliticize its experience. The informal economy of poverty celebrated by the Harvard team is the result of a specific set of policies pursued by Nigeria’s military dictatorships over the last decades under IMF and World Bank guidance, which decimated the metropolitan economy.

Swamp city

As Enwezor notes, studies of the African city have long recognized the shift in the urban paradigm that took place when the old colonial spatial ordering—designed to exclude, to control, to occupy—became subordinated to the demands of postcolonial urban cultures.¹⁵ Nevertheless, some of the elements of the crisis confronting the Lagos metropolitan region can be traced back to the colonial era. The island principality of Oko, home to Yoruba fishermen and farmers, was developed into a busy slave-trade centre and gateway to Brazil by the Portuguese from the sixteenth century on, and renamed by them after its lagoon. British gunboats seized the island in 1861. Lagos was governed as a Crown Colony for several years, while George Goldie’s United African Company established a monopoly over the Niger Delta, trading palm oil for gin. In

¹³ ‘Fragments of a lecture on Lagos’, pp. 181, 183.

¹⁴ *Mutations*, pp. 719, 653.

¹⁵ Enwezor et al, Introduction, *Under Siege*, p. 13.

1884 the Berlin Conference conferred the protectorate of the region on Britain. By 1904, Frederick Lugard's military excursions up the Niger had subdued the 'middle belt' and the northern caliphate of Sokoto. Lugard established an administration based on indirect rule, organizing *darbars* to introduce the portrait of Queen Victoria to the local Hausa-Fulani emirs; he found their hierarchical forms of social organization better suited to indirect colonial rule than the more decentralized Yoruba and Igbo power structures of the coastal south. In 1914, Northern and Southern Protectorates were forcibly amalgamated to create the unified colony of 'Nigeria', a name supposedly selected by Flora Lugard, the colonial administrator's wife.

The disjuncture in living standards between colonial elites and the African majority in Lagos was always extreme. European villas with wide verandahs and sweeping gardens contrasted with the growing congestion of the 'African quarter', while the advanced gas, electricity and street lighting of the high-class commercial and residential districts compared favourably with the colonials' homelands. Profit margins from the palm oil and cotton trade increased the white demand for real estate, raising land prices and instituting a structural housing shortage that pushed most Africans into overcrowded conditions. Treasury dicta curbed spending on water supply, drainage and sanitation. Successive colonial administrations effectively absolved themselves of responsibility for urban improvements in working-class areas. It took an outbreak of bubonic plague in the city to spur the creation of the Lagos Executive Development Board in the 1920s. But housing shortages and acute water-supply and sanitation problems continued to worsen, and plague and other eradicable diseases persisted. By the 1950s the LEDB was widely derided as little more than a vehicle for land speculation on behalf of the colonial administration and became a focus of mobilizations by the nascent Nigerian independence movement.¹⁶

By the time of their departure in 1960 the British had installed the rudiments of a parliamentary and municipal system. But their more significant bequest was a large, Sandhurst-trained officer corps, dominated by the Muslim aristocrats of the north. In the early 1960s, Lagos was a bustling capital of just under a million, with one of the most vibrant

¹⁶ See Ayodeji Olukoju, *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos, 1861–2000*, IFRA, Ibadan 2003. Lagosians' critical responses to the LEDB appeared in the *Lagos Daily Service*.

cultural scenes in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet Independence-era optimism could not mask the latent economic and political tensions. Fast growth in conjunction with minimum social investment led to overcrowding, exorbitant rents and arduous commuting distances, worsened by a gradual deterioration in rail, tram and ferry services. A critical trend was the growing dislocation between employment opportunities and the availability of affordable housing. By the mid-1960s land values in central Lagos neared those of similarly sized US cities and the little space available for development was consistently allocated to elite low-density developments, in a continuation of colonial housing policies. The new ruling class and their generally Western-educated architects, engineers and planners favoured prestige projects that could attest to their vision of African modernity; Lagos soon boasted one of the continent's first skyscrapers.

Hungover Monday

In 1966 an attempt by junior Igbo officers to redress what they saw as the anti-southern bias of the military command structure resulted in a counter-coup by northern officers, who then reinforced their dominance by crushing the secession attempt by the Igbo of the Southeast in a 30-month civil war. By the time of the Biafran surrender in 1970, economic destabilization of the region had driven waves of migrants towards Lagos. The war also exacerbated social divisions in the capital, and contributed to a brutalization of everyday life as guns and other weaponry from the war zone circulated through the Lagos underworld.

To forestall further secession attempts the Supreme Military Council under General Gowon re-carved the tripartite federation into 12 new states. Lagos City was now administratively integrated with its growing onshore hinterland—and, with the rise in oil prices from 1973, increasingly physically integrated too, as old working-class areas were flattened to make way for the concrete network of bridges, viaducts, flyovers and cloverleaves. Their crumbling remains represent perhaps the most striking legacy of the oil boom, when government revenues suddenly multiplied sixty-fold. These dilapidated structures now encircle much of the inner core of the city, casting their shadows across the shacks and stalls that have colonized every available space.

For many Lagosians, the 1970s now seem like a halcyon age, when the naira was worth more than the dollar (its value is now less than a cent)

and middle-class Nigerians could fly to London for a weekend shopping spree. Fela Kuti's 1975 song, 'Monday morning in Lagos', with its vision of a hungover city waking up to find that its credit had vanished was highly prescient. As in Venezuela during the same decades, the combination of oil wealth and entrenched elite rule led to a hollowing out of the Nigerian economy, with extreme income polarization, hyperinflation, currency collapse and rising poverty and unemployment, as industrial and agricultural exports were devastated by the overvalued naira.¹⁷ Critically for Lagos, at the height of the oil-boom hubris the military oligarchs decided to build a new capital in the centre of the country, closer to their own northern base. Henceforth, hundreds of millions of dollars would be poured into the glittering towers and air-conditioned offices of Abuja.

In 1979, the us Federal Reserve's interest-rate hikes brought the decade of cheap loans and high oil rents shuddering to a halt. Nigeria, with other Third World borrowers, was plunged into a spiral of rising debt repayments. The onset of global recession in 1981 and the collapse in oil prices threw the imbalances of the Nigerian economy into stark relief. Through the build-up of arrears and penalties for missed payments, the country's external debt rose from \$13bn to \$30bn between 1981 and 1989. Many of the infrastructure programmes of the 1970s—ports, airports, roads, bridges, oil refineries, steel mills—were abandoned incomplete, or left to deteriorate beyond repair. Between 1979 and 1983 the civilian government of Shehu Shagari, a millionaire crony of the military elite, presided over an 8 per cent contraction of GDP, large-scale capital flight and high inflation. Growing protests against the Shagari government's wage freeze were crushed with the return of military rule in 1983 under General Buhari, who imprisoned scores of trade unionists, journalists, human-rights lawyers and activists in a two-year reign of terror. Among the casualties of the military dictatorship was a strategic plan for Lagos, completed in 1980 but torn up by the generals as a sign of contempt for civilian government.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Terry Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States*, Berkeley 1997, ch. 9; Ike Okonta and Orono Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil*, London 2003.

¹⁸ Paul Okunlola, *Guardian* urban and environmental correspondent for Lagos, interview with the author, 1 May 2003. See the extraordinary two-volume *Master Plan for Metropolitan Lagos* prepared between 1974 and 1980 by Wilbur Smith and Associates in collaboration with the UNDP Project Staff and the Lagos State Government.

The accession of General Babangida, who replaced Buhari in an inter-military coup in 1986, was warmly welcomed in Western capitals. Babangida has generally been hailed as a 'liberal general', in contrast to the unveiled brutality of Buhari and of Abacha, Babangida's notoriously paranoid second-in-command and eventual successor. Arguably, however, as one high-ranking official would put it at the end of the 1990s:

Babangida was even worse than Abacha. Babangida went all out to corrupt society. Abacha intimidated people with fear. With him gone now, you can recover. But the corruption remains, and it is very corrosive to society.¹⁹

Under IMF tutelage, Babangida immediately embarked on a full-spectrum Structural Adjustment Programme 'with Nigerian characteristics'—slashing tariffs and agricultural subsidies, devaluing the naira, stripping out what remained of public education provision, deregulating finance, selling off state-owned industries and indulging in narco-profiteering on a massive scale. Nigeria was hailed as a model African economy by the World Bank, and Babangida banqueted at Buckingham Palace. Meanwhile, 'extreme poverty' figures for the country rose from 28 per cent in 1980 to 66 per cent in 1996. The small-farming sector, still Nigeria's largest employer, was decimated. The population of Lagos doubled over the same period as migrants from the countryside flocked to the city, settling where they could get a foothold in the spreading shanty towns on the margins of railway tracks or highways, or in shacks precariously extended over the filthy canals, ditches and waterways.

Debt space

These are the living conditions that underpin the development of Lagos's vast informal economy. With the high prices of imported food, clothing and other essential goods, and average earnings of less than a dollar a day, the day-to-day survival strategies of many households depend upon barter and improvisation. Neighbourhood networks of families and friends co-operate to build shelters and share amenities; these can overlap with micro-trading networks, producing rivalries over resources or turf, and co-exist with more menacing chains of exploitation and control. The result is a volatile mixture that can easily explode into inter-communal violence, especially in zones of intensive interaction such as market spaces. Like other admirers of the informal economy, Koolhaas seems to ignore

¹⁹ M. D. Yusufu, former Inspector General of Police, cited in Karl Maier, *This House has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*, London 2002, p. 45.

its highly hierarchical, often coercive structures, and does not differentiate between the mini (or even major) entrepreneurs and traders on its summits and the mass of those barely surviving at its base.²⁰

The informal market enables a complex redistribution of resources among those locked out of the formal sector, but it does not necessarily lead to any wider process of accumulation and growth. Nor can it be abstracted from the broader economic and political context: the virtual disappearance of the manufacturing sector, the devastation of rural smallholdings, the plundering of oil rents by the military elites. According to an official report issued shortly after his fall, some \$12bn from public funds went missing under Babangida.²¹ Thatcher, a warm admirer, urged him to swap his military uniform for a business suit on her 1988 visit, but the general preferred to groom his long-time crony Moshood Abiola, a millionaire press magnate whose papers had given Babangida unconditional backing, as his successor in elections eventually held in 1993. Even as Abiola's landslide was being tallied, however, Babangida changed his mind and annulled the vote in the name of 'Nigerian unity'; a move widely interpreted in the south as a refusal by the northern elite to allow even a Muslim Yoruba to take office. Protests erupted across Lagos and throughout the Delta region, forcing Babangida from power.

Taking over from his old friend Babangida in November 1993, General Abacha clamped down on the pro-democracy movement, targeting the oil workers' union and the Lagos-based Oodua People's Congress with particular ferocity. In the years that followed hundreds of demonstrators were shot dead. In prison, Abiola became an unlikely martyr, refusing to renounce his claim that he was Nigeria's duly elected president despite pressure from the UN Secretary-General and US State Department, right up to his sudden death in 1998. When Abacha presided over the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists, who had called for

²⁰ Retrenched white-collar workers have been absorbed into the informal economy, working in waste recycling, transport, security services, artisanal production and trade. See Babatunde Ahonsi, 'Popular Shaping of Metropolitan Forms and Processes in Nigeria: Glimpses and Interpretations from an Informed Lagosian', in Enwezor et al, *Under Siege*, p. 140. In general, the scholarly literature has yet to catch up with the realities of life in the city; for a literary evocation, see Helon Habila, *Waiting for an Angel*, London 2002.

²¹ 'Panel on the Reorganization and Reform of the Central Bank of Nigeria', Okigbo Panel Report, September 1994.

more compensation for the hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of oil siphoned out of the Delta by Nigerian generals and Royal Dutch/Shell, the Clinton Administration dismissed calls for oil sanctions against the regime as 'unrealistic'. In a thieves' bargain, Shell and the other companies blamed the corrupt local elite, and the Nigerian government the multinational corporations, for the ecological and social devastation of the oil-rich regions. Meanwhile, the squandering of oil revenue has left Nigeria's four ageing refineries barely functional. As a consequence, the country faces incessant fuel shortages and has become reliant on expensive imports of petrochemical products despite its resources.

By the end of the decade Nigeria's foreign debt had risen to \$36bn, equivalent to some 75 per cent of GDP and nearly 200 per cent of export earnings. The government is now spending more than three times as much on servicing its debt as on education, and fifteen times as much as on health—in a nation facing resurgent malaria, meningitis, TB and the spread of HIV. An estimated 40 per cent of the total debt arises from loans to successive military dictators that were diverted into British, Swiss and US bank accounts. Before his death in 1998 in the arms of two Indian prostitutes—officially of a heart attack; some called it a 'coup from heaven'—Abacha himself is thought to have pocketed more than \$4bn, of which only a fraction has been recovered.²²

The election of former General Olusegun Obasanjo as the country's civilian president in 1999 was greeted by the international press as a step towards legitimacy on the part of the Nigerian oligarchs, although the military remain close to power. Obasanjo's Vice President is General Abubakar, head of the military under Abacha; his campaign manager in 1999, Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, was the former chief of Military Intelligence and Babangida was the largest single donor to his campaign. Though himself a born-again Yoruba Christian, Obasanjo has done little to alienate the old Muslim elite. Despite proclamations about clean-ups and transparency, corruption has continued unabated. The Oputa Panel, established on the model of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was denied powers of subpoena. The World Bank's recommended method for ameliorating Lagos's sanitation and

²² Barclays, Citibank, HSBC, Merrill Lynch and nearly a dozen other banks have been implicated in handling money stolen by the Abacha regime and their international accomplices: Kwesi Owusu, *Drops of Oil in a Sea of Poverty: the Case for a New Debt Deal for Nigeria*, London 2001. See also Maier, *This House Has Fallen*, pp. 4–5.

water-supply crisis was to offer increased incentives to private-sector contractors, who would supposedly install meters throughout the city to effect 'full economic cost recovery'.²³ Social conditions have continued to deteriorate: according to the Central Bank's figures, the provision of hospital beds sank from one per 1,564 people in 1999 to 2,342 in 2003. School teachers and university lecturers have seen their socio-economic status severely downgraded in the last decades; their meagre salaries, often owed in arrears, are so insufficient that many are obliged to make them up by other means. In the circumstances, the proliferation of NGOs under Obasanjo, who was re-elected in 2003, is scarcely likely to produce any substantial alleviation in living conditions for the urban poor.

Lagos provides ample evidence for Mike Davis's contention that rapid urban growth in the context of structural adjustment, currency devaluation and state retrenchment has been a 'recipe for the mass production of slums'.²⁴ Through the late 1980s and 1990s, civil war—often triggered by competition over scarce resources—and economic dislocation, exacerbated by Western agrobusiness dumping products on local farmers' markets, sent millions migrating across West Africa towards cities already groaning beneath populations that they had neither the infrastructure nor the environmental means to bear. Vast areas of intense poverty developed around districts of Lagos such as Ajegunle, Ojota and Mushin. By the end of the decade there were over 200 distinct slum settlements spread across the metropolitan region. Rapidly growing shanty-towns along the Lekki peninsula shelter refugees from other West African states, Liberia and Sierra Leone in particular, who are entirely disenfranchised from the city's political processes. These marginal communities, where settlers must self-organize every aspect of their needs from water to housing, are in constant danger from gangs of 'area boys', racketeers and criminal networks who seek to exploit their vulnerability.²⁵ They also face the threat of state violence—their fragile moorings bulldozed in 'clearances' on the whim of the military authorities. Whole

²³ The Lagos State Water Corporation, however, broke off negotiations in 2002, having closely observed the outcomes of privatization debacles in Buenos Aires, Manila and elsewhere. Olumuyima Coker, Chief Executive Officer, Lagos State Water Corporation, interview with the author, 6 May 2003.

²⁴ Mike Davis, 'Planet of Slums', *NLR* 26, March–April 2004, pp. 10–11

²⁵ Residents in the Ikota estate on the Lekki peninsula, for instance, reported that the Lagos State Water Corporation had attempted to extend water-pipes into the area, but that these were vandalized during the night by thugs acting on behalf of private water-traders: interviews with the author, May 2003.

districts of Lagos have been forcibly erased, most notably in Maroko—adjacent to the wealthy neighbourhoods of Victoria Island—where under Babangida the homes of some 300,000 people were destroyed to make way for lucrative real-estate speculation.²⁶

Fewer than one in twenty Lagos households are directly connected to the municipal water supply, leaving the majority reliant on a combination of boreholes, stand pipes, illegal connections (controlled by local gangs) or exorbitantly priced water from private vendors. Waste water is disposed of through the open drains that traverse the city with their foul-smelling soup. In many areas, buckets or pits are the only latrines, and contaminated water is a major cause of the gastro-intestinal diseases that kill untold numbers of infants every year. Much of the low-lying and poorly drained city is subject to flooding. The city's mains electricity is notoriously erratic; private household generators supply most of the power. Kerosene lamps light the shelters and market stalls where the blare of music contends with the generators' roar. Extremes of private wealth and public squalor co-exist. Most of the public street lights were stolen or destroyed years ago and at night the streets are eerily deserted, enveloped in darkness, save where illuminated billboards cast a faint glow across unmarked intersections, scattered with the debris of old car crashes. During heavy rain, the almost impassable roads leading to speculative office developments can be temporarily cut off from the rest of the city by huge potholes, which quickly fill with water and become small lakes. Smoke from burning rubbish drifts across the city, a pungent fog that can limit visibility to a few metres. The highways are punctuated by informal roadblocks, where heavily armed policemen extort money from hapless drivers and their passengers.

Bereft of state or municipal support, the crumbling concrete forms of the dilapidated cityscape have been complemented by elaborate defensive structures. It is no surprise that in the affluent enclaves of Victoria Island, Ikoyi or Victoria Garden City on the Lekki Peninsula, colourful carpets of bougainvillea should conceal spiked gates; permanently staffed sentry boxes provide a human shield of cheap labour that operates in tandem with the underpaid security services of the state. But even the poorest communities have attempted to protect themselves

²⁶ Tunde Agbola and A. M. Jinadu, 'Forced eviction and forced relocation in Nigeria: the experience of those evicted from Maroko in 1990', *Environment and Urbanization* 9, 1997, pp. 271–88.

from the threat of violence: walls of breeze-blocks, barbed wire and broken glass dissect and fragment urban space into individual plots, streets and districts, reminiscent of the 'fortress-cities' of Brazil.²⁷ The cellular pattern of the traditional Yoruba compound is combined with a contemporary architecture of fear.²⁸

God's town

Since the early 1990s there has been an explosion of religiosity in Nigeria. While in the north this has taken the form of support for the *shari'a* against the corrupt and semi-defunct judicial system of the Muslim elite, in Lagos it has been dominated by charismatic and Pentecostal strands of Christianity. Symbols of fervent evangelicalism dominate the city: billboards advertise salvation, bumper stickers proclaim 'Only God can save Nigeria', a zone of vast new churches is under construction at the urban fringe. The young novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has drawn attention to the link between the new brand of get-rich-quick evangelical religion, which has conquered large sections of the middle class, and the suppression of political alternatives since 1994:

Amid the trauma of an annulled democratic election, in the face of a brutal government and an effete civil society, Nigerians turned to a new brand of Christianity. It was vibrant; it was intensely focused on material progress, with pastors quoting scripture that portrayed wealth as a spiritual virtue; and it was loud . . . Religion has become our answer to a failed economy. Christian and business self-help books sell because they sustain the status quo: the former affirm that God wants you to make money while the latter teach you how to go about it.²⁹

The Lagos architect Koku Konu has argued that this upsurge in religiosity has worked against social solutions to the city's problems by fostering 'religious-ethnic mistrust'.³⁰ Organizations such as the Oodua People's Congress, outlawed under Abacha, have since taken an increasingly

²⁷ Teresa Caldeira, *City of walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paolo*, Berkeley 2000.

²⁸ Tunde Agbola, *The Architecture of Fear*, Ibadan 1997.

²⁹ Adichie, 'Blinded by God's business', *Guardian*, 19 February 2005.

³⁰ Koku Konu, architect and director of dkr associates, interview with the author, 21 February 2003. On the meaning and impact of contemporary religiosity see also Ogbu Kalu, 'Harsh flutes: the religious dimension of legitimacy crisis in Nigeria, 1993-1998', in T. Falola, ed., *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century*, Durham, NC 2002; and Jeff Haynes, *Religion and Politics in Africa*, London 1996.

ethno-nationalist turn, promoting Yoruba supremacy and organizing violent attacks against Muslims and other perceived ‘enemies’ within the community.

Amorphous urbanism

Lagos is a city that is simultaneously growing, dividing, polarizing and decaying. For the most part, the metropolitan area has developed independently of the efforts of city planners, in a process that we might call ‘amorphous urbanism’. Public services such as road repairs, waste collection and water supply are so poor that municipal taxes can scarcely be justified. Eroded modes of service provision persist as a ghostly palimpsest of structures: rusted postboxes, the twisted remains of parking meters and other accoutrements of an abandoned modernity litter the urban landscape. Lagos is dominated by forbidding concrete structures, devoid of the classic motifs of urban beautification or traces of nature. In fact, those aspects of nature most intimately connected with the everyday life of the city are largely iniquitous—such as the hazardous mosquito that breeds in its ditches and open drains.

The scale of the city, its extreme poverty and ethnic polarization now present real obstacles to rebuilding its social and physical fabric. Though informal networks and settlements may meet immediate needs for some, and determined forms of community organizing may produce measurable improvements, grassroots responses alone cannot coordinate the structural dimensions of urban development. If Koolhaas and his colleagues, soaring over the city, can claim that the sight of the traders crammed beneath the Oshodi flyover is ‘proof and evidence’ that Lagos urbanism is ‘one that works’, the conclusion is inescapable: in their perspective, it is the city’s ability to sustain a market that is the sole signifier of its health. In a final passage in *Mutations*, Koolhaas and his colleagues cite with approval Robert Kaplan’s call in *The Coming Anarchy* for ‘a new round of postcolonial “exploration” of West Africa, with ‘different intentions and a more intensive methodology’ than those of the 19th century.³¹ But what intentions? In the 19th century, colonial campaigns aimed to impose new forms of power relations; is the goal of 21st century exploration nothing more than to celebrate the outcome of existing ones?

³¹ *Mutations*, pp. 694, 718.

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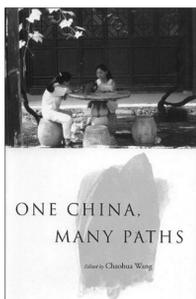
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