Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos

Rem Koolhaas

For the past six years, I have been overseeing something called Project on the City with students from the Harvard Design School. We have been looking at a number of urban conditions, particularly when and where they change most intensely and most quickly. We have looked at the Pearl River Delta in China, which has witnessed the most rapid urbanization in the world. We have investigated the effects of shopping on the urban condition throughout the world, and, since 1999, we have been looking at Lagos. Taken together, these studies suggest that the notion of the city itself has mutated into something that is no longer Western.

This work is not inspired by the need to discover ever more exotic, violent, extreme urban thrills, but by the realization that the engrained vocabulary and values of architectural discourse are painfully inadequate to describe the current production of urban substance. They 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. Ours words cannot describe our cities with any precision or pleasure.

Four years ago, from outside of Nigeria, it was incredibly difficult to get access to information about Lagos. The idea of traveling to Lagos was severely discouraged, officially by the US State Department and unofficially by European governments. Lagos was considered, universally, the most dangerous city in the world. There was almost no satellite evidence of Lagos' presence. Anything beyond a vague, schematic representation was impossible to find. Nigeria itself was imagined as simply an abstract country with a single, notorious city.

The study of Lagos was inspired by two central intentions: to understand and describe how an African metropolis works, and by the knowledge that Lagos will, in fifteen years, be the third largest city in the world. The combination of its huge size and apparently distressed urban conditions became a compelling reason to go.

There is a remarkably intense network of urban rumors about Lagos, about the dangers that it presents. They begin at the airport, continue along the highway, the bridges, the buses, into every neighborhood.

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 preoccupied with the foreground, and, at that time, Lagos had an incredibly dense foreground. Viewed through the density of the foreground, the greater depth of the city took time to reveal itself.

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 smoldering, as if it were one gigantic rubbish dump.

At first sight — and focusing exclusively on the foreground — it was difficult to distinguish to what extent this was a real disaster or a representation of disaster, and where the foreground ended and the background began.

We were not convinced that our initial impressions told the entire story, so we began to look more closely. On our second and third visits, we ventured out of our cars and discovered that what seemed a completely random and improvised world included a number of very elaborate organizational networks. Some of the places that, at first sight, seemed to be tragic manifestations of degraded urban life were actually intensely emancipatory zones, where the recent arrivals from outside were „processed" as citizens of Lagos.

On closer inspection, the apparent randomness of the garbage revealed heaps of similar materials and colors. 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.

Certain elements were being picked out and designated for second lives as electronics and communication devices. It became clear that such apparently dilapidated zones were intensely used. In the end, we were able to precisely map all of the activities and performances that were taking place on what had seemed, at first sight, a prototype of the city-as-dump. Responsibilities were being distributed in areas that appeared to be abandoned, but were actually highly planned communities. We saw that an apparently chaotic city could organize incredibly efficient transformations of garbage in a highly structured way.

On our third visit, we were able to rent a helicopter, the helicopter of the President. We were finally able to go beyond the foreground and discover another Lagos, a much less improvised, much less chaotic Lagos. 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. Our preoccupation with the apparently „informal" had been premature, if not mistaken.

What was stunning, and visible only from above the city, was the fact that these processes were taking place at scales that were almost unimaginable in any other city. What seemed, on 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.

Lagos is a city of processes: unfolding on the ground, uncontained by buildings, but, for that reason, no less highly conceptualized or organized. Each of these entities (the garbage heaps, the railroad tracks, the connected cloverleafs, the burning village, etc.) was a self-administered enclave with strong rules and regulations that applied only within the parameter of those areas.

Flying over the city, Lagos reveals — at Oshodi Junction — the greatest density of both traffic and human beings ever known to man, literally unimaginable numbers of people. But here too what originally seemed to be simply a point of crisis, on closer inspection turned out to be a deliberately engineered situation.

It became obvious that the permanent „go-slow" of the traffic itself was functional in that it created a systematic interface between vendors — who filled every gap between stalled vehicles — and their captive cargos of consumers. A railway track that was still in occasional use was, after the train's passage, immediately inundated by a sea of human beings who resumed trading in a very efficient way. What seemed an improvisation proved to be a systematic layering where the enormous amount of minuscule transactions necessary to stay alive in Lagos — the endemic issue of poverty — were made possible through the arrangement, intersection, and mutual confrontation of people and

infrastructure. A traffic jam is a grid of static cars that comprise a momentary exchange mechanism between buyers, users, and sellers — an instant urbanism that emerges contrary to the intentions of its planners.

Apart from these large self-organized entities, Lagos is also a place of huge housing projects and architectural complexes of a scale rarely seen in the resistant West. They are the historical city's „gifts" from other states — Israel, Czechoslovakia — that donated entire city sectors as aid or to stake some kind of now-defunct claim on Nigeria's once fabled resources.

Misleadingly, Lagos presents a foreground of perpetual drama — product of a continuous friction between economy and politics — but beyond that exists large, coherent complexes that continue to function impassively, as characteristic of the city as the hysterical „friction zone." The first category, the urban donations, are silent reminders of Nigeria's potential just after independence, the second category of the waning of that original promise.

Nigeria became independent in 1960. We have to understand the 1960s and ,70s in general to understand the ,60s and ,70s in Nigeria. It was the first time that oil became a critical issue. Huge amounts of money came in unfamiliar hands, sponsoring frenzied speculation, by both visionaries (Doxiadis, Buckminster Fuller, etc.) and corporate engineers, on how to change the world for the better. A macro-engineering movement proposed a number of interventions on the globe itself that would, in a drastic way, address persistent problems, with the ultimate goal of benefiting humankind. That same speculative frenzy looked at Africa as one of its potential subjects. Nigeria's economy was stronger than that of South Korea; Lagos became a target, visited by U.N. commissions, invited experts, planners.

Some of their visions were realized through the activities of the construction and engineering firm Julius Berger Nigeria, a subsidiary of the German-based firm which strove to be viewed as an African rather than a colonial firm. Berger proposed enormous extensions of Lagos island, huge extensions of the business core. The firm then used these territories for infrastructural interventions and traffic improvements of unusual complexity and intricacy. It also built the bridges that connect Lagos island with the mainland, producing a false vernacular propaganda showing contemporary infrastructure as integral to African life.

In the end, when Berger had finished with Lagos, the entire city was caught in a network of highways, motorways, and incredibly complex intersections — a model of ,70s smoothness. It is no coincidence that the areas of Lagos' greatest „dysfunctionality" and greatest current density of informal exchange coincide exactly with that network.

In 1977, during the height of the speculative frenzy, the Festac festival was organized. It marked a shift in Lagos' perception, a moment in which the development of Lagos as a modern city began to take on political implications. A spontaneous, free-wheeling African modernity — that had developed its own ,70s glamour: scooters, Afros, birth-control — was marshaled into a political enterprise and confronted with „power." Through Festac, Lagos was turned into a representation of what an African city ought to be. The festival stands as one of the last moments of confident, deliberate modernity in Lagos.

The power systematically disappointed. A series of dictators plundered the country and the city. Lagos was left to its own devices, then abandoned. The city became ungovernable. From one day to the next, the government simply disappeared to Abuja.

The current status of Lagos is a hybrid — a patchwork of self-organization that has evaded the rigorous organization and certainties of ‚70s planners. Without their interventions, the current city could not exist or survive. Their own inadvertent contribution is perhaps the most anyone involved in the „professional" treatment of the city can hope for.

Rem Koolhaas. Fragments of a Lectue on Lagos, in: Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya (ed.): Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos. Documenta11_Platform4. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp.173-183.