LEARNING FROM LAGOS
The fundamental conundrum of Lagos, considered as both paradigm and pathological extreme of the West African city, is its continued existence and productivity in spite of a near-complete absence of those infrastructures, systems, organizations, and amenities that define the word “city” in terms of Western planning methodology. Lagos, as an icon of West African urbanity, inverts every essential characteristic of the so-called modern city. Yet, it is still—for lack of a better word—a city; and one that works.

Rapidly expanding, transforming, and perfecting, the Lagos urban condition allows for the survival of up to fifteen million people.

Anguish over its shortcomings in traditional urban systems obscures the reasons for the continued, exuberant existence of Lagos and other megacities like it. These shortcomings have generated ingenious, critical alternative systems, which demand a redefinition of ideas such as carrying capacity, stability, and even order, canonical concepts in the fields of urban planning and related social sciences. The operation of the Lagos megalopolis illustrates the large-scale efficacy of systems and agents considered marginal, liminal, informal, or illegal according to traditional understandings of the city. This project is as much a study of Lagos as it is a study of more radical possibilities in the discipline of urban planning, and a proposal of new ways to examine the modern city. While the conditions identified in Lagos are extreme cases, such extremity is generally a very rational response to a dysfunctional scenario.

The material logic of Lagos is convincing. We are resisting the notion that Lagos represents an African city en route to becoming modern. Or, in a more politically correct idiom, that it is becoming modern in a valid, “African” way. Rather, we think it possible to argue that Lagos represents a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity.

This is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos. The African city forces the reconceptualization of the city itself. The fact that many of the trends of modern, Western cities can be seen in hyperbolic guise in Lagos suggests that to write about the African city is to write about the terminal condition of Chicago, London, or Los Angeles. It is to examine the city elsewhere, in the developing world. It is to reconsider the modern city and to suggest a paradigm for its future. In short, we would argue, it is to do away with the inherited notion of “city” once and for all.
LAGOS!

"Venice of West Africa"

Lagos: STADTANSICHTen
South London Gallery, 2005

Lagos: SURVIVING HELL
Pep Subiràs

poverty, violence, disease, political corruption, uncontrollable growth and manic religiosity

- limited access to sanitation and running water
- 70% "unemployment"

"the city is on the brink of a cataclysm"

"a realm of irrationality beyond the reach of human agency or any realistic prospects of improvement."

"the precursor to a new kind of urbanism"

"homeostatic complexity of newly evolving socioeconomic structures"

"to explore a new reality, rather than to propose solutions"

Depth of Field
South London Gallery, 2005

Lagos: STADTANSICHTen
Berlin/ Stuttgart, 2004/2005

URBAN APOCALYPSE

URBANIZATION ARCHETYPE

School of Thought 1:
School of Thought 2:

documenta XI
Kassel exhibition 2002
Platform 4: "Under Siege: Four African Cities"
Held in Lagos

"Africas: the artist and the city"

Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona 2001

TATE MODERN

Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis
TATE MODERN

Held in Lagos

"to explore a new reality, rather than to propose solutions"
MISSION: “‘to explore a new reality’
(not to propose solutions)

- witness an archetype for the urbanization process at work in the global south
- to understand and describe how new megacities work
- learn how Lagos can exist at all, without resources or infrastructure

“The engrained vocabulary and values of architectural discourse are painfully inadequate to describe the current production of urban substance” - Rem

“Our words cannot describe our cities with any precision or pleasure” - Rem
3 trips:

1] witnessed from the car

“a city of burning edges”

2] ventured on foot

very elaborate organizational networks

3] helicopter

“What seemed, at ground level, an accumulation of dysfunctional movements, seemed from above an impressive performance

the **margins, interstitial voids, embankments** have been ‘colonized by a host of secondary industries and services’
traffic congestion itself becomes a slow-moving market space
After the 70’s “Lagos was left to its own devices, then abandoned” -Rem

‘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’
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.
Extremes of private wealth and public squalor co-exist. Contaminated water is a major cause of the gastro-intestinal diseases that kill untold numbers of infants every year.
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 highly hierarchical, often coercive structures.
“Nigerians turned to a new brand of Christianity. It was vibrant; it was intensely focused on material progress, with pastures quoting scripture that portrays wealth as a spiritual virtue”

-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
AMORPHOUS URBANISM

“Lagos is a city that is simultaneously growing, dividing, polarizing and decaying.”
-Gandy

The scale of the city, its extreme poverty and ethnic polarization now present real obstacles to rebuilding its social and physical fabric.
“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” -Rem

If Koolhaas seeing traders in dumps and traffic jams is ‘proof and evidence’ that Lagos urbanism is ‘one that works’, then to him “it is the city’s ability to sustain a market that is the sole signifier of its health.”

Is the goal of 21st century exploration nothing more than to celebrate the outcome of existing [power relations]?