Lagos

(Harvard Project on the City)

mamental conundrum of Lagos, considered as paradigm and pathological extreme of the West city, is its continued existence and productivity of a near-complete absence of those infrastructural systems, organizations, and amenities that define “city” in terms of Western planning methodologies, as an icon of West African urbanity, inverts essential characteristic of the so-called modern city, it is still—for lack of a better word—a city, that works.

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

over its shortcomings in traditional urban systems the reasons for the continued, exuberance of Lagos and other megacities like it. These shortcomings have generated ingenious, critical alterntatives, which demand a redefinition of ideas such as capacity, stability, and even order, canonicals in the fields of urban planning and related sciences. The operation of the Lagos megalopolis as the large-scale efficacy of systems and considered marginal, liminal, informal, or illegal to traditional understandings of the city.

ject 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.
PROPERTY

"Africans are constantly rearranging their social, economic, religious, and domestic lives in the process of consuming more than they produce... Shifting designations creates a seemingly permanent state of political ambiguity."\(^1\)

Despite the presence of both land-use data collected at the regional scale and the national grid system, a boundary for Lagos has never been drawn or agreed upon. The lack of clear spatial boundaries has left open and unresolved the question of where authority over the land areas resides, leading to disputes in legal and political administration and the practice of census enumeration. Lagos Island is the only area in the city which maintained a fixed boundary between 1911 and 1962, at 155 square miles (while its population, according to written sources, multiplied threefold).\(^2\) For censuses taken between 1901 and 1962, the national area covered increased from 18 square miles to 27.22 square miles. The discipline of geography has failed to grasp the single fact that the nature of accuracy and measure in Lagos is negotiable. Geography and the settlement of property in Lagos cannot be assessed and measured according to the fixed definitions of the census and the aerial photograph. Property lines are continually being reassessed and renegotiated in accordance with intersecting land laws, taxes, claims, and interests. This structural skein camouflages its ordering system, but recognizes that one’s right to reside and work in the city is flexible and mutable. The negotiability of property lines means that there is no fixed typology in Lagos. Different types may be introduced or develop, but they are invariably subject to reassessment and reconfiguration.

PLOT

"The unit of property in Lagos derives from the Yoruba compound. The compound is a collective property and consists of an assembly of dwellings arranged in physical proximity. It is not strictly a typology, representing instead a loosely bounded space wherein a group of interests coexist side by side and in agreement. Its collective ownership as understood by customary law was hence not communal in the sense of being communally built, managed, and used. Individual rights were protected, and once an individual’s land had been settled and built on it was ‘divested’ of its communal use. Thus, under customary law, land could be transferable as an individual saw fit."\(^3\)

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his original flexibility, the compound has urbanized in Lagos as a bounded by a perimeter wall and arranged around a courtyard and a l alley. The compound develops through provisional occupation within f boundaries, or as the proliferation of a single-cell compound.
is, means, and labor permit, the compound develops incrementally y of ways. The residential base is often supported by small-scale s that operate adjacent to or in front of the dwelling, the profits is of which are gradually transferred to residential additions and is. The physical result is a high heterogeneity of use and function e of the compound, homogeneous and porous space at the scale hborhood.
and has modernized into a lucrative form of rental property. oms can easily be built to accommodate a family or a few people. eased wealth and a new desire for individuality, the fission of the row contributes to a process of compounding. Compounding occurs instruction of new rooms, and 2) the making of new surfaces, horizontal planes, gratings, fences, and metal sheets in ever more layers. Compounding thus increases the amount of building new rooms collect more rent and new surfaces support new or functions. Like fission in physics, this process diversifies therogrammatically, minimizes exterior space, and densifies existing pounding demands a constant reassessment of urban and property nditions and of socially constructed space.

The construction of walls and security gates throughout the city has sparked an entire industry: steel reinforcing bars are regularly used to construct gates and entry doors, while architecturally designed gates are sought after by wealthier home owners.
The property line, originally a conceptual and abstract legal division designed to divide, enclose, and exclude, has materialized into a vertical wall whose surface has become an attractor for use, contamination, and the establishment of new economies. The wall has come to be taken for granted as an infrastructure that supports and serves a host of economies and small-scale industries. The wall itself can be used as the support for carpets, or security gates; in conjunction with a drain, it forms a thickened swath of space between the plot/compound and the street. This space is occupied by vulcanizers, petty traders, and can even accommodate sleeping in its width. The wall can also become a three-dimensional barrier, with a depth of 3 to 4 feet, that can be used as a marketable space.

WALL

The explosive growth that Lagos has witnessed in the last two decades—the population rises by an estimated 1,000/day—has assigned to the wall a new challenge. Today the wall is a machine for guarding land against occupation by the poor, the masses. It has become more a way of controlling surface than a mechanism against violence.
In Lagos, public space is continuously being occupied in new ways. Pavements have become crowded with hawkers, food merchants, mechanics, tailors, hairdressers, and all kinds of entrepreneurs. People jostle anachronically for turf, while “life” seems to thrive in the congestion of the streets. It is not clear which comes first: the rather extravagant and perhaps greedy delimiting of land in order to exclude and construct one’s own interior “world,” or the density of Lagos street life.
The interior that the wall defines does not necessarily remain static. Compounds regenerate and occasionally reinvent themselves, but, as with the large tracts of walled-in land that abound in Lagos, re-emerge as suburbia. In Lagos, suburbia is not confined to the periphery of the city, as is often the norm; it implodes in the city.
Is Lagos staged? Could it be that Lagos’s urbaneity is artificially induced, rather ironically by the same forces that seek to diffuse it? Could it be that Lagos’s highly urban street life owes its existence to an implosion of suburbia?
E OCCUPATION OF LAND

of clear zoning for industrial uses beyond the compounds of the
ional companies, and the incessant compounding of the entire city,
ed the labor market to occupy the boundaries of private property and
rastructure. Road embankments, the underside of flyovers, railway
ind the city’s multiple shorelines have been colonized by a host of
ry industries and services—cement block factories, vulcanizers, roadside
ces, hairdressers, roadside markets, and so on. This lining of the road
most evident in the filling of the circular voids of cloverleaves,
ates the basics of space-planning; highway columns are used as spatial
foundation pads as workable surfaces, and open areas serve for the
or the collection and storage of materials. The undersides of flyovers
for a range of purposes from industry, to storage, to car parks which
veniently fenced off between road columns. These land pieces belong
the federal military government of Nigeria or to state government.

of territorialization of space represents a temporary but legal
on of land without ownership, a general lining of the urban fabric.
ara, Lagos’s largest market, four cloverleaves have been taken over as
exchange. The recycling market has been located on the land since
, except for temporarily displacement by the Federal government
construction of the highway (1973–78); the government has
its land rights in exchange for a tax. The market has adapted the new
rastructure to its highest use potential. The order of the highway is
the production processes that take place there: small assembly
is take place beneath the flyover, where groups of young men assemble
cooking pots, and other metal wares. Others work as scavengers
et the city, collecting scrap metal and plastics and assorting them into
iles. Storage and warehousing of these scraps takes place in the open
 interchange. From scrap collection to sorting to design to assembly,
the entire chain of commodity production occurs within the highway
ge. The Jankara interchange services various corporations—Universal
regular purchaser of scrap metal, and major plastic manufacturers are
ar customers—suggesting that the transactions between lower and
als of the economy are converging on temporarily settled federal land.
E gradual institutionalization of facilities such as Jankara suggests
banization of capital in Lagos follows a different and more efficient
that of the redundant and inefficient highway construction.
BOTTLENECKED

The terms “go-slow” and “no-go” are part of a popular lexicon replete with nomenclature that expands the scope of traffic and movement to the level of urban consciousness. Go-slow describes the ubiquitous traffic jam: lulled in congestion, captive to the road’s breadth, and thriving with entrepreneurial activity. The go-slow is a transient condition, swelling diurnally with the usual peaks of urban movement. The no-go, on the other hand, is less a condition than a place. Defined by failed planning, bankrupted initiative, regular banditry, or physical collapse, the no-go stalls circulation in a space of maximum vulnerability. As such, the incomplete road or constricted intersection is in a way recuperated, becoming controllable—and extremely valuable—real estate. Jam-space, the totally negotiable, usually illegal and hugely productive space of the traffic jam, is not something to fix, solve, or even rationalize. Jam-space cannot be controlled or short-circuited, only bypassed. Rampant entrepreneurialism charges the bottleneck’s enormous physical friction with an even greater social traction.

As roads jam, their traffic spills into surrounding areas, expanding motorable terrain by default. The road hemorrhages at points of maximum inutility, subjecting neighboring communities and adjacent landscapes to the perils and opportunities of dispersed road traffic. Bottlenecks encourage detouring, turning “neighborhoods”—the white and gray space on the map between thickly drawn expressways—into an infinity of potential routes. Any road can be a feeder road, a collector, or an arterial. The detour is an inverse of positive proximity theory: rather than relying on proximity to fixed infrastructure for residual economic benefits, the detour redirects the infrastructure’s patrons to under-served areas. Jams and detours allow more of the city to be accessed more of the time.

Groups normally neglected by road traffic sometimes take advantage of the detour. Area boys, for example, purposefully destroy road surfaces to redirect road traffic into “ambush areas” or under-patronized commercial districts. In 1996, the 600 km Onitsha/Owerri road East of Lagos “caved in on several spots, making motorists detour in selected places, driving through farmlands and remote villages, crisscrossing abandoned terrain to reconnect to the highway. Many lives were lost in the process, vehicles endangered and many lost their way in far flung communities. Drivers drifted across the
pe like in the olden days." Lagos's detours are usually subtle, 
dramatic, but never merely coincidental. Sometimes the detour is 
forced by an expressway under construction. Sometimes the diversion might be a roadway fire. At other 
points, the drivers stop in traffic so that jammed passenger cars can be 
cleared to roadway hawker stalls.

Slowness has hardened. The expressways, originally dumped on the 
unforeseen landscape shaped by rapid urbanization, are now almost completely 
visible to the planner's eye. On a map they still look like they 
are the city. The view from above seems to make sense—"the city is 
smeared." But at each of the plan's intersections this omniscience 
is inadequate. The Lagos "street" is inadequately described by throwaway terms 
"street," "communications artifact," "flow space," or "arena for social 
ion." Lagos has no streets; instead, it has curbs and gates, barriers 
tiers that control separate landscapes. Some areas might look like 
they might even look like superhighways. But even the Lagos 
expressway has bus stops on it, mosques under it, markets in it and 
less factories throughout it.

As much a system of circulation as it is any particular place, 
expressions of the city are popularly described in terms of stoppages, 
breaks, storage, stalling, overcompensations, and material depositions. 
These are not plan lines between points, but perhaps its most elastic and 
surfaces, made more enabling by local modifications which deny the 
sistent linearity—guardrails are removed, jersey barriers put aside. 
Toll platoons, the road is converted to allow movement in a maximum 
of directions.

If the Onitsha Expressway," in The Vanguard, Lagos, 9/1/99.
OSHODI

Everybody seems to agree, albeit for different reasons, that Oshodi embodies Lagos's identity. Despite having escaped historical accounts, today Oshodi is the most intense marketplace in all of Lagos, and perhaps in all of Nigeria. Located at the intersection of the Apapa Oworonsoki ring road and the city's north–south spine, Agege road, it has transformed existing sites of the city's transport infrastructure—an incomplete on-ramp and an almost defunct railway.

At the precise point in the metropolitan diagram where the northern half of the ring road meets the railway spine, the micro-scale of the plan hemorrhages. The two ends don't quite snap together. Oshodi is a failure of construction mechanisms to connect closing segments, a cloverleaf intersection with only two-and-a-half leaves. The aborted Oshodi cloverleaf system respects the right of way of the Nigerian Railway Corporation but ignores the logic of the flow of vehicular traffic between perpendicular axes. The dysfunctional off-ramps, otherwise impediments to circulation, have been recuperated as programmed cul-de-sacs. But Oshodi somehow works.

Tentative and even officially temporary, Oshodi's "incomplete" layout in many ways increases the number of things it can do. Taking advantage of the interplay between the two different traffic patterns—a fast-moving upper-level overpass, and the slow-moving pedestrian along the rail line—many services and amenities have colonized the off-ramps and roundabouts. Taken together these form a complex overlap of programs: a train station, urban and suburban bus stations, hauling stations, several different markets, auto garages, a school, at least one church, and hundreds if not thousands of service stalls. Left incomplete, the intersection has a deleterious effect on metropolitan traffic "ride-times." But when measured in terms of efficiencies other than speed, the intersection is enormously functional: its no-go turns congestion into destination.

Oshodi is probably—who really knows?—the longest continuous ribbon of private/public property in Lagos. All along its length, the roadsides have been annexed and overrun with trading activities. An independent consulting

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MetroBusiness, reports that almost half of the roads at Oshodi have
taken over in this fashion. Oshodi’s traders and transport businesses
were annexed the transport infrastructure, the rail-line and Agege
have even taken measures to construct new roads and new right-
. They have turned infrastructure into a marketplace, non-place into
ility. Claimed by multiple interests, traders, councils, hawkers, and
(area boys), as well as the NRC, Oshodi effectively belongs to no one.
ally interrupted by the train, Oshodi sustains itself in a state of flux.
ent-four-hour cycle, it continually remakes and replenishes itself
the accumulated exchanges of naira and goods and by the
nts of its individual mobile traders. The swath of territorialized land
n divided into anywhere from twenty to thirty parallel strips, each
ving degrees of temporariness, permanence, and flow. Book-ended by
manent concrete markets—on the west the electronics market, on :
: the distribution point—the market becomes more temporary as it
es towards the center. Though its typology is visible in other Lagos
, the linear organization at Oshodi makes it particularly succinct.
he instability surrounding ownership or claims on the land, the degree
ance of trading infrastructure corresponds to degrees of mobility.
ious accounts by planners and geographers, Oshodi has symbolized
’functional city—the aura of the last remaining but dying colonial
on, the railway. Today, however, Oshodi provides further proof and
for the city’s collective resistance. Targeted for “public
ment” (read Operation Sweep) by LAWMA, blacklisted by
ists (read enforcement), and recently in the process of being
ssed by the Nigerian Railways Corporation, Oshodi persists in spite
ese regulatory incentives, transforming defunct railway bars into the
ost productive market.