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URBICIDE /

LAGOS AND THE CRISIS OF THE MEGACITY

Descending upon Murtala Muhammed International Airport, one can see where the jungle ends and the city begins. Gradually, the green turns brown or blackened gray. For miles, the plane hovers above a seemingly endless urban expanse, whereby the city grid disappears into a chaotic matrix of informal settlements. From above, Lagos appears not so much a city as a leviathan, devouring the bush and spewing out an incessant expanse of smoky shantytowns.

Six hundred thousand people pour into Lagos from West Africa and the Nigerian countryside each year. In the second half of the twentieth century, the city grew at a rate of more than six percent annually, catapulting a modest seaport with a 1952 population of 252,000 to a colossal conurbation of over 17 million. (No one really knows exactly how many people are packed into Lagos.) Already the largest city in Africa, Lagos is widely recognized as the world's fastest growing *megacity* (a city with more than eight million people). Within the next 15 years, Lagos is predicted to rank among the three largest cities in the world.

As the financial epicenter of West Africa, Lagos attracts a daily influx of families and young entrepreneurs in search of “the good life” and the excitement of the big city. However, the streets of Lagos are not paved with gold. More often they are caked with refuse or simply not paved at all. Most newcomers are greeted by a deteriorating urban landscape and a minuscule margin for success. Formal employment is scarce, work is menial, and housing is substandard. Most residents are forced to live in informal slum settlements that often spill into dumpsites, floodplains, and swamps. Pollution is omnipresent. The surrounding lagoon, once the city's central source of social, commercial, and ecological nourishment, is now stagnant and polluted. Semiannual floods inundate more than half the city with swamp water. Everything slowly bakes under thick, low-lying smog. These filthy facets of everyday life in Lagos have prompted some to label it the dirtiest city in the world.

Despite the deteriorating quality of life, the city is undoubtedly alive. The streets throb. Tangled coils of electrical wires hang like vines from buildings, providing power for blaring street speakers. Every physical crevice and economic niche in the city has been divided and subdivided. Every space is used for something. Navigating the city requires a perpetual state of heightened awareness. “Area boys” — gangs of local youth — prowl the corners. Mosquitoes prey from garbage heaps. Commercial bus drivers bombard streets and highways with bright yellow vehicles that are known by names such as Moule (literal translation, “I go beat you”) and Bolekaja (“come down, we make fight”). Lagos roads are host to what is widely recognized as the most dangerous and congested traffic on the planet. Each day, Lagosian drivers dice with death.

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Throughout the city, the traces of implosion are evident. Collapsed buildings line the Lagos skyline. Many structures are sinking into swampy soil. In the center of the Lagos Island commercial district, a 21-story bank building sits with its top nine stories completely caved in. More ominous, perhaps, is the city's tendency, literally, to explode. In one recent event, an entire portion of the Abule Egba neighborhood was incinerated by a gas pipeline explosion that killed hundreds of people. Nevertheless, the city grows constantly.

Perhaps more so than any other city on earth, Lagos, Nigeria epitomizes the emerging face and challenges of global urbanization.

: [The New Urban Order / Southern Urbanization](#)

Urbanization is an enduring trend in history. As the world's single greatest global migration, humanity's steady march from rural to urban spaces has proceeded for centuries. In recent decades, however, the global deluge of people pouring into cities has accelerated considerably. A mere half-century ago, there were 86 cities in the world with more than one million people; by 2015, there will be approximately 550.¹ Although the exact moment will be impossible to pinpoint, most demographers watching urban trends believe that 2007 marked the first time in history when the global population scale shifted from a rural to urban majority.

Defining this epochal urban transition is the fact that the locus of intense urbanization has shifted south. The UN Center for Human Settlements (UN-Habitat) projects that rural populations will begin to decrease after 2015 as urban growth continues in Latin America and becomes more intense in Asia and Africa, two regions set to host the world's largest urban populations by 2030. It is estimated that cities of the developing world will account for 95 percent of urban growth in the next two decades and by 2030 will be home to almost four billion people.²

Although the majority of this growth will be absorbed by small towns and intermediate cities with populations of less than one million, the developing world will also host the majority of the world's largest cities. According to the

UN Urban Indicators Database, there are currently 23 megacities located in the Global South, the latest geographic designation for the world's poor and developing nations. By 2030, all but four of the world's largest cities will be in developing regions.³ As most of these megacities continue to expand, *metacities* — agglomerations of more than 20 million people — are steadily eating up rural areas, towns, and even other cities throughout the Global South.

Examples of this spectacular urban growth transcend continental boundaries. In Latin America, the Rio / Sao Paulo Extended Metropolitan Region (RSPER) is currently on the verge of engulfing a 500 kilometer transport corridor between Brazil's two largest metropolises. Similarly, the persistent growth of Mexico City (current population, 22 million) is creating a network of satellite cities and towns that will eventually engulf much of central Mexico. In Asia, the next 20 years could see the emergence of ten metacities, with Beijing, Manila, Jakarta, Dhaka, Karachi, Kolkata, Shanghai, Delhi, Seoul, and Mumbai all set to cross the 20 million threshold (with Mumbai estimated to peak at an unprecedented 33 million).⁴ In West Africa, Lagos, Nigeria (set to reach metacity status by 2015) is currently the center of explosive urban growth along the Gulf of Guinea. By 2020, an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study estimates that the 600 kilometer strip of land running between Accra and Benin City will have a population comparable to the U.S. east coast (60 million) and five cities with more than one million people.⁵

The world's largest-scale urban agglomeration is in China. The urban-industrial megalopolises along the Pearl River Delta, the Yangtze River Delta, and the Beijing-Tianjin corridor have been compared to the Lower Rhine or New York-Philadelphia. The Shanghai Economic Zone is widely recognized as the biggest sub-national planning entity in the world, and includes the metropolis and five adjoining provinces with a combined population almost as large as that of the United States.

However, whereas China's phenomenal urban growth will surely promote “global cities” competing with Tokyo, London, and New York in their control of global flows of capital and information, the majority of Southern megacities will

serve as “global slums,” with unprecedented scales of urban poverty and disparity.

The current high rates of urbanization are similar to those in Europe during the industrial revolution, and echoes of the past resound. As author and analyst Jeremy Seabrook explains, “The pressure on small and subsistence farmers in the South today is identical; the sorrowful departures from the home-place on migrations to towns and cities in search of livelihood which the landscapes of home can no longer supply.”⁶ The main difference, however, is the speed and size of the current transformation. When Britain began its progression nearly 250 years ago, there were only eight million people in the entire country. Today, many developing countries are experiencing a transformation similar to England’s in the span of only four or five decades, while carrying populations of 100, 200, or 300 million people. Not surprisingly, existing legal, political, and economic institutions have been quickly overwhelmed.

As globalization has expanded the number of these journeys, the global migration to the growing cities of the South is contributing to a scale of poverty and decay unprecedented in human history. Whereas the growth and expansion of Northern cities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries typically went hand in hand with industrial advancement and economic development, Southern urbanization has generally proven quite the contrary. For the past half-century, urban growth rates throughout the developing world (excluding China) have continued to skyrocket in spite of stagnant urban employment, shrunken public sectors, and recessive urban economies. An explanation of the seemingly contradictory growth may well lie not in the factors pulling people to cities, but rather in the factors pushing people from the countryside.

Migration is, of course, the key factor in urban growth in most developing countries. The cause of migration, however, varies regionally. For the past half-century, countries throughout the developing world have been subject to a disproportionate number of wars, agricultural crises, failed agrarian reforms, debt-imposing structural adjustment programs, terrorist and guerilla movements, and foreign embargos on international trade. Thus, even while cities are suffering from underemployment and economic depres-

sion, political turmoil and rural poverty are literally forcing people into urban centers. The result has been extremely high urban population growth rates which far outstrip the existing coping capacity of legal and political institutions and socio-economic infrastructures. In other words, the stage is set for a global urban suicide.

Although studies demonstrate that highly urbanized countries tend to have “higher incomes, more stable economies, stronger institutions, and [be] better able to withstand the volatility of the global economy,” the megacities of the South carry with them grave political, socio-economic, and environmental implications.⁷ Evidence strongly suggests that the sprawling cities of the “new urban order” will not fulfill the possibility of economic advancement, but will instead serve as sites of growing inequality, underemployment, rising violence, social unrest, and environmental degradation.

The Growth of Illegality

As the endless tide of migrants from isolated communities flows into the ever more crowded centers of economic and intellectual exchange, unofficial forms of adaptation have been forced to evolve. This process of adaptation has accordingly led to the burgeoning of the Third World urban informal sector. In *The Mystery of Capital*, Hernando de Soto explains, “The failure of legal order to keep pace with this astonishing economic and social upheaval has forced the new migrants to invent extralegal substitutes for established law.”⁸ Thus, where shortages in the housing market render home ownership nearly impossible, squatters build shanties any place they can get a foothold. Likewise, where formal employment is unavailable, people start businesses and make a living in the informal economy. Excluded from the legal system, the migrants’ only guarantee of economic justice lies in their own hands.

Several main processes have led to the steady rise of urban informal activities. One is the failure of the formal sector to provide adequate jobs for rapidly growing populations. As explained, most Southern cities continue to grow in spite of stagnant urban employment bases. In many cities, the intense growth of the informal sector is spurred by the

reductions in public spending, declining real wages, and overall public sector retrenchments accompanying IMF-imposed structural adjustment programs. Further promoting this trend has been the fact that the formal sector is steadily forging links and contracting services to secondary labor markets which are mainly in the informal sector. Because the informal sector has swelled beyond the formal sector’s absorptive capacity, these links (which are often extremely exploitative) have provided the only means for enabling the formal sector to deal with the economic crisis. As a result of such processes, throughout the developing world there has been a steady trend towards the “informalization” of the urban economy, meaning that increasing shares of income are being earned in unregulated employment.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), informal employment accounts for one-half to two-thirds of non-agricultural employment in the developing world. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the informal economy accounts for an estimated 78 percent of non-agricultural activity. In Asia and Latin America, it is 65 percent and 51 percent, respectively.⁹ Essentially, because formal institutions have failed to keep up with population growth, the informal sector in Southern cities has been forced to absorb a ceaseless stream of migrants.

The Global Slum

As Mike Davis asserts in *Planet of Slums*, “Rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, cities of the future are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks and scrap wood.”¹⁰ Just as 2007 was expected to see the global scale shift from a rural to an urban majority, this year will also see the number of slum dwellers cross the one billion mark.¹¹ Currently, nearly one third of all city dwellers live in slums, and Southern urbanization has become almost indistinguishable from slum proliferation. In many cities, slums are no longer small, marginalized communities; they are in fact the dominant type of human settlement. Cities such as Mumbai, Mexico City, Dhaka, Cairo, Karachi, Lagos, Kinshasa, Sao Paulo, Shanghai, and Delhi all have *megaslums*, with over six million people (some with more than 12 million).¹² UN-Habitat predicts the global

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IN MOST DEVELOPING
COUNTRIES.

number of slum dwellers will double by 2030 if immediate action is not taken.¹³

Not all urban poor live in slums, nor are all slum-dwellers poor. However, the two categories do largely overlap, with slum prevalence serving as a reliable proxy for urban poverty. According to UN-Habitat, a slum is a contiguous settlement that combines to various extents the following characteristics: “inadequate access to safe water, inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure, poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding, insecure residential status.”¹⁴ Throughout the world, living conditions in slums are strikingly similar, reflecting scenes of entrenched poverty, disease, filth, crime, flooding, and the absence of basic social and economic infrastructure. Disparities in access to services, housing, land, education, health care, and employment opportunities reinforce the grim reality that slum dwellers “die earlier, experience more hunger, have fewer chances of employment in the formal sector and suffer more from ill-health than the rest of the urban population.”¹⁵

Although the specific economic and political trajectory promoting the growth of slums varies from city to city, the UN-Habitat-issued *Challenge of Slums* report cites failed policies, bad governance, corruption, inappropriate regulation, dysfunctional land markets, unresponsive financial systems, and a fundamental lack of political will as typical causes of slums throughout the South.¹⁶ In many cities, market and government failures render access to adequate and affordable housing limited, even for the middle classes. Housing distortions are further exacerbated by limited land supply, immense population densities, and entrenched systems of neglect and government corruption.

Most slums are informal settlements where the vast majority of residents lack legal rights to the land on which they live. Consequently, squatters trade access to municipal services and physical safety for security against eviction. Poor solid waste management and inadequate sanitation services often create mountains of refuse and excrement. Houses are often overcrowded and unsanitary, and access to clean, affordable water is limited. Social infrastructure (such as school and health care facilities) is severely lacking, and crime and prostitution are often prevalent. Compounding existing health hazards is the fact that slums are typically situated on the most environmentally unstable spaces in a city. Throughout the world, slum dwellers have been described as the “pioneer settlers of swamps, floodplains, volcano slopes, unstable hillsides, rubbish mountains, chemical dumps, railroad sidings and desert fringes.”¹⁷ Consequently, flooding, earthquakes, mudslides, and other natural disasters wipe out thousands of slum dwellings each year. In addition to biological and environmental hazards, slum dwellers are also subject to government-incited violence, whereby “the state intervenes regularly in the name of ‘progress,’ ‘beautification,’ and even ‘social justice for the poor’ to redraw spatial boundaries to the advantage of landowners, foreign investors, elite homeowners, and middle-class commuters.”¹⁸ Consequently, the global slum exists as an amalgam of permanent transients trapped in a kind of nomadic urban purgatory.

In short, as UN-Habitat researchers clearly express, slums are not only the “manifestation of poor housing standards, lack of basic services and denial of human rights, but they are also a symptom of dysfunctional urban societies where inequalities are not only tolerated, but allowed to fester.”¹⁹

: [Nigerian Urbicide / The Curse of Oil](#)

Although megacities and megaslums are indeed global phenomena, in Sub-Saharan Africa their rate of growth is particularly rapid and their impact on society, especially dire. According to UN-Habitat, Sub-Saharan Africa has both the highest annual urban growth rate and the highest slum growth rate in the world (4.58 percent and 4.53 percent respectively — each more than twice the world average).²⁰ Likewise, Sub-Saharan Africa also has the highest prevalence of slums in the world, with nearly 72 percent of its urban population living in slums.²¹ A 2006 UN report indicates that since 1990, the population of Sub-Saharan Africa slum dwellers doubled from 100 million to 199 million. Current trends indicate that this number will again double in the next fifteen years.²²

A spectacular example of this growth, Lagos, is globally recognized as the epitome of the world’s “urbicidal” descent. The current Lagos megacity crisis can best be understood against the historical background in which its expansion took place. Originally a Yoruba settlement of Awori people, Lagos began as a modest village of farmers and fishermen who lived in simple accord with the surrounding creeks and lagoons. Over time, Eko Isle, as it was known to the original Awori settlers, was reinforced by Benin warriors, other Yoruba factions, and Portuguese traders. From 1704 to 1851, Lagos served as an important slave port

... what Koolhaas refers to as “self-organization” can perhaps more accurately be described as collective adaptation to extreme hardship.

The complex socio-economic organization in Lagos is simply a testament to a city that is growing without adequate social, economic, and legal institutions.

ruled by Yoruba kings. Formally annexed as a British colony in 1861, Lagos was a principal point for British control over trade in the region. The remainder of modern day Nigeria was seized by Britain in 1886, and when the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria was established in 1914, Lagos was declared the capital. Though Lagos has served as a pivotal trading port for more than three centuries, extreme population growth has been a recent phenomenon. Examining current challenges thus requires an in-depth look at the past 50 years of political and economic transformation in Africa’s most populated country.

The origins of the megacity crisis can be traced back to 1956 when oil was first discovered in the Niger Delta. Despite Lagos’ status as the economic epicenter of West Africa and its alluring (yet largely elusive) promise of a comfortable lifestyle, the most important factor in its supernova growth has undoubtedly been the reckless decimation of Nigeria’s agricultural sector caused by the discovery of oil. Prior to 1956, Nigeria had a largely agricultural-based economy, with cocoa, peanuts, rubber, and palm oil serving as the major export goods. The agricultural sector was not only a major provider of sustenance; it was also the nation’s largest employer. The discovery of oil, however, presented a dramatic new opportunity for wealth accumulation previously unknown to that portion of the world.

One consequence of the wealth generated from crude oil was that it created a largely perverse set of economic incentives that discouraged investment in non-oil sectors. The agricultural sector took the biggest hit. In 1970, oil accounted for 33 percent of Nigeria's trade stock, as opposed to a 67 percent non-oil trade stock.²³ In 2002, oil represented 94.95 percent of the country's export earnings, as opposed to 5.05 percent non-oil export earnings.²⁴ Lacking necessary agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation facilities, tractors, and other modern tools and machinery, many people who had been successfully employed in the agricultural sector were forced to abandon their occupations. Furthermore, as oil revenues built up, Nigeria's other exports became increasingly unprofitable. Exemplifying a process known as "Dutch Disease," Nigeria's dependence on one export commodity subsequently caused its currency to rise in value against other currencies, rendering other export activities uncompetitive. This economic pathology effectively sealed the casket on Nigeria's agricultural economy. Thus, in less than 30 years, Nigeria went from having an agriculture-based economy and being self-sufficient in staple food production to an entirely oil-dependent economy. Nigeria now has to import the majority of its food.

The untimely demise of Nigeria's agricultural economy, coupled with the emergence of a new class of oil merchants, speculators, and skilled and unskilled oil industry workers, set the stage for Nigeria's monumental rural to urban migration. Since 1970, Nigeria has maintained an urbanization rate of nearly 5.5 percent, one of the highest in the world.²⁵ Already the most urbanized country in Africa, in 2007 Nigeria crossed the 50 percent urban mark, making its urban population the second largest among low-income countries, after India's.²⁶

In the 1980s, Lagos grew at a rate twice as fast as the Nigerian national population, while its urban economy was in deep recession.²⁷ As previously mentioned, this was largely caused by the rise of an oil economy that effectively forced an immense surplus of rural labor into city centers across the country. However, this paradoxical trend was also a result of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank-enforced policies of financial austerity. Under the military dictatorship of General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria adopted IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs

in order to relieve its \$30 billion debt. In addition to slashing agricultural subsidies and rural infrastructure, the country deregulated finance, stripped education provision, and shut down or sold off all inefficient state-run enterprises. This included construction industries, port facilities, oil refineries, and textile and steel mills. Also, electricity, water, and telephone services were privatized. As a result, civil service jobs gradually disappeared and the profits of privatized services went directly to politicians. Remaining savings went directly to corrupt military regimes. Up until the mid-nineties, billions of dollars went unaccounted for each year. Additionally, in 1986, the world price of oil crashed, and Nigeria's Dutch Disease proved fatal. Although the World Bank hailed Nigeria as a "model African economy" at this time, the swing from big oil and borrowing to little oil and repayment reduced the standard of living by half. The country's levels of extreme poverty went from 28 percent in 1980 to 66 percent in 1996.²⁸ Consequently, this process has resulted in an enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of a small number of ruling elites and a growing chasm between rich and poor.

As trends from around the world indicate, intense urban growth in the face of structural adjustment and political turmoil has produced what Davis calls the perfect "recipe" for slum growth.²⁹ Nigeria currently has the largest slum population in Africa (42 million) and the fourth largest slum population in the world.³⁰ By 2030, more than 50 percent of Nigeria's poor (as defined by income) will live in cities. Accordingly, the Lagos megacity has emerged as the quintessential product of Nigeria's oil-driven, developmental trajectory.

A Cycle of Neglect

Although Lagos is one of the fastest growing cities in the world, it remains one of the least understood and certainly one of the least planned. As its growth persists, the Lagos megacity is steadily producing a social, political, and environmental crisis that has only begun to register within traditional governing structures. For some observers, however, the term "megacity crisis" is an inaccurately mild description. According to Felix Morka, Executive Director of the Lagos-based Social and Economic Rights Action Center,

"To say that Lagos is a city in crisis is to understate the severity and enormity of the challenges that confront its residents and managers."³¹ This is primarily due to the city's lack of planning and infrastructure and its history of bureaucratic inefficiency and systematic neglect.

Despite its dominant economic status in Nigeria's non-oil sector, Lagos is a "poor" city with an annual budget of only \$650 million. This is a very small sum relative to the resources necessary for adequate infrastructure and service delivery. It is also significantly lower than cities of comparable size (Delhi — \$2.6 billion; Mumbai — \$1.6 billion; Jakarta — \$1 billion).³² Due to the fact that most of the city exists outside the realm of formal taxation, Lagos's enormous slum population has also factored significantly into the city's overall lack of resources. But given the poor quality of almost all public services, taxation can hardly be justified. The city's financial deficiency is better explained in terms of entrenched corruption and neglect, which have successfully suppressed the city's capacity to adapt to its enormous population.

In the mid-seventies, at the height of the oil boom, military oligarchs decided to move the capital from Lagos to Abuja, closer to their northern political base. This diverted hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funds away from Lagos and into the construction of the "glittering towers and air-conditioned office buildings" of Abuja.³³ Even today, federal allocations, which are distributed according to population, reflect the incessant power struggle between northern and southern Nigeria. In January 2007, the federal government issued an "official" population census for the country. According to the federal census, the largest city in Northern Nigeria, Kano, stood at a population of 9.4 million whereas Lagos lagged behind with only 9.1 million.³⁴ This blatant act of disregard for the facts by the federal government was immediately countered by a parallel census taken by the Lagos State Government, the administrative body through which Lagos is governed, which placed the population of Lagos at more than 17.5 million.

Because Lagos' rate of population growth far outstrips the rate at which facilities and services can be provided to meet minimum needs, many residents simply go without. Morka explains, "The rapid population growth of Lagos has not been matched by the provision of social and economic in-

frastructure such as housing, healthcare facilities, schools, roads, transportation, water, solid waste disposal and drainage facilities."³⁵ Given the inadequate funds and management of Lagos, this has strained existing infrastructure to the point of near collapse.

Furthermore, "where plans or development initiatives have been launched, they have generally been haphazardly implemented or not at all."³⁶ Over the years, Lagos has witnessed the failure of successive state and federal governments to carry out large-scale development plans. In the late 1970s, the Lagos Master Plan was drafted with the intention of guiding the growth of the city into the twenty-first century. With the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Master Plan provided a framework for addressing challenges concerning the provision of housing, expansion of economic activity centers, improvement of transportation infrastructure, and upgrading of informal slum settlements. The growing city was to be divided into 35 self-sufficient districts, each with its own commercial, industrial, and residential zones, to disperse pressure and population concentration on existing city centers. However, in 1983, a bloodless coup overthrew civilian rule in Nigeria and the Lagos Master Plan was abandoned. For the next 16 years, military dictators from northern Nigeria used Lagos' commercial activity as a source of personal enrichment. Plans for investing in the infrastructure needed to absorb millions of migrants were subsequently abandoned.

This cycle of neglect and corruption set the stage for the increasing socio-economic disparities, deteriorating environmental and public health, and highly volatile political situation currently confronting the city.

Settling the Swamp

Although the majority of Lagos' problems stem directly from a lack of formal employment and infrastructure in the face of a vast population influx, the area's waterlogged natural terrain has also proven a significant factor in exacerbating the megacity's poor living conditions.

Encompassing a series of islands and adjacent mainland areas, Lagos sits on an extensive swamp basin along the

Atlantic coast. Swamps, lagoons, creeks, sand ridges and depressions constitute the four main landform types in the Lagos metropolitan region. The city's earliest settlements occurred on coastal sand ridges, which run parallel to each other and follow the same east-west trends as the creeks. With an average elevation of three to five meters, underlain by unconsolidated sands, the ridges have a very low load-carrying capacity and are extremely susceptible to flooding. The bottom layers of the sand depressions remain waterlogged throughout the year because drainage into the lagoon is very slow and the underground water level is high. Drainage is further slowed by semiannual flooding that occurs during the wet seasons. Although the poor drainage and pools of brackish water discouraged settlement by early area residents who used the depressions as dumps, drainage canals began to be constructed in the 1930s. As the demand for land increased, developers began to build on the sand depressions and across drainage canals, blocking the already poor drainage routes and subsequently increasing flooding.

Surrounding the sand ridges and depressions, the area's swamps form a flat terrain extending from the waterfronts. With high underground water levels and scattered pools of salinity, the swamps are generally inaccessible and extremely difficult to exploit for human needs. They are also a major

Because the majority of the city remains peripheral to the global economy...it is doubtful whether the world would feel the resonating effects of a Lagos implosion. However, Lagos is not singular. It is part of a global urban future that will be increasingly impossible to ignore.

breeding ground for mosquitoes. Nonetheless, as sand ridge land has become scarce, reclamation efforts have begun building into the swamps. This requires draining swamps and building on the highly compressible soil, often resulting in the cracking and collapse of structures as they sink into the unstable ground. In poorer areas, some use household waste for reclamation—a slow and unhygienic process that yields very poor results.

Lagoons also constitute a large portion of the metropolitan Lagos terrain. Deeper than swamps, lagoons are perhaps the least habitable landform in the area. However, with new hydraulic sand-filling technology, even the lagoons are no longer exempt from development. Also, in the most extreme efforts to carve out living spaces in this soggy environment, lagoon and swamp development often occurs through the creation of floating slum villages, which are informal establishments that actually perch on stilts in the water. Although dry land is clearly a limited commodity in Lagos, formal and informal efforts to reclaim swampland and expand inland have significantly extended the borders of the urbanized area. Today, metropolitan Lagos extends over an area of nearly 787 square kilometers.

While this makeshift physical growth has created some room for the influx of migrants, Lagos' continued expansion into such exceedingly inhospitable terrain has resulted in

further limiting the city's infrastructural capacity and exacerbating its flooding problem. The disadvantages of the water-saturated soil have hindered the development of many public services, especially in the areas of water management and sewage facilities. Efforts to create an efficient public transportation system have been impeded by the disjointed, unstable topography. As a result, Lagos has become world-renowned for its colossal traffic jams and, consequently, suffocating air pollution. Space limitations also prevent proper waste disposal, creating open dumps in residential communities and drainage canals. Every year during the wet seasons, flooding inundates more than half the city with refuse-filled water, destroying property, hampering transportation, and posing extreme health and sanitary risks.

: [The Lagos Megacity / Amorphous Urbanism](#)³⁷

Lagos is chaotic. Its boundaries are unclear, its activity is frenetic, and its elements appear to function independently, not only from one another but also from the efforts of city planners. Urbanist Matthew Gandy uses the term "amorphous urbanism" to describe the sprawling urban conundrum. In his essay, "Learning From Lagos," Gandy writes, "Lagos is a city that is simultaneously growing, dividing, polarizing and decaying."³⁸ With so many people, Lagos indeed harbors all types: corrupt politicians, wealthy businessmen, movie stars, honest workers, opportunistic entrepreneurs, area boys, con men, students, gangsters, trash pickers, the hopeful, the hopeless, the rich, the poor, the hardworking, the lazy, the intelligent, the dejected, the walking corpses. Because of Lagos' status as the financial center of Western Africa, most major Nigerian companies have their headquarters there. As one of the most culturally vibrant cities in Africa, Lagos nightlife flourishes seven days a week. The world's third largest movie industry, Nollywood, is also located in Lagos. Lagos commands the most sought after markets for everything in Nigeria. Many businesses do thrive. Additionally, Lagos is home to one of the world's largest and most aggressive informal economic sectors, which accounts for more than 70 percent of the city's business activity, employment, markets, settlements, and neighborhoods.³⁹

Young men selling stolen oil from plastic containers line the Mushin thoroughfare. Residents of Olusosun, the largest dump in Nigeria, sort through garbage for recyclable materials. Weaving in and out of traffic, women sell water from buckets balanced on their heads. Shepherds graze herds of sheep between freeways, and businessmen set up operations within highway cloverleaves. Squatters settle even the most perilous interstices, creating shantytowns that edge up to train tracks, sit in swamp marshes, and perch precariously over the lagoon. Every inch of the city is used for something. Lagosians have learned to embrace the chaos.

In many ways, Lagos fulfills the apocalyptic forecast of the developing megacity: a swampy agglomeration of crowded, substandard housing, flooding, and disease, with no facilities or sanitation, receiving an incessant stream of migrants from depressed rural areas who expect little and receive less. While it is true that Lagos is a city in crisis, the everyday reality

is more complex. Despite the crippling effects of congestion, pollution, and crime, Lagos remains a vivacious, dynamic place, inhabited by socially mobile individuals pursuing the hope of a better life. Slums are often a starting ground for people moving to the city, a place where people can live cheaply until they establish themselves. Most slum dwellers have a long-term aim to make money and move on to a better place. Some succeed. Most do not.

Begging in Lagos is rare. Without a formal employment base, Lagos has become home to millions of small-time entrepreneurs who are forced to engage in a ruthless day-to-day struggle of improvisation and adaptation. Commercial activity aggressively springs forth upon both public and private spaces. Informal markets line nearly every street. After each of the frequent floods, people rush to set up booths for washing muddy feet. Even the immense “go slow” traffic jams have become thriving commercial centers, where children as young as eight dodge cars and buses to sell everything from sunglasses to kitchenware, cell phones, and soccer balls. As testament to its burgeoning black market, Lagos is also the world’s hotbed for con men, fraud, and Internet scams.

There is not a dull street in Lagos. The entire city pulsates with the frenzied activity of millions trying to make ends meet. However, what appears to be anarchic activity is actually governed by what journalist George Packer describes as “a set of informal and ironclad rules.” In his essay, “The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos,” Packer describes the informal economy as a hierarchical system of patronage and obligation. He explains, “Although the vast majority of people in the city are small time entrepreneurs, almost no one works for himself. Everyone occupies a place in the economic hierarchy and owes fealty, as well as cash, to the person above him — known as the *oga*, who in turn provides help or protection.”⁴⁰ Thus, most of the money collected by the people selling merchandise on the street is transferred up through a hierarchy of *ogas*, eventually reaching the wholesaler who receives the largest portion. Accordingly, “wealth accrues not to the most imaginative or industrious, but to those who rise up through the chain of patronage.”⁴¹

Although this system has allowed the megacity to absorb the constant influx of migrants for who the formal economy has no room or use, the informal economy rarely results in wealth accumulation. Essentially, as UN-Habitat’s *The Challenge of Slums* concludes, “Instead of being a focus for growth and prosperity, the cities have become a dumping ground for a surplus population working in unskilled, unprotected and low-wage informal service industries and trade.”⁴² The average Lagosian earns less than a dollar a day. In the daily struggle to make ends meet, many neighborhoods rely on networks of families and friends who cooperate in building shelters, maintaining basic amenities, and managing markets. Given the intense competition for space, these neighborhood networks often overlap, creating rivalries over turf and resources that can easily erupt in violence.

The Megaslum

As a prototypical example of Sub-Saharan urbanization, the expansion of Lagos was simultaneously a process of intense slum production. A recent study carried out by the

World Bank estimates that 70 percent of the population of Lagos lives in informal slum settlements. Currently, out of an estimated 200 distinct slum districts, 100 have been identified as severely blighted.⁴³ Whereas the growth of many Southern cities, such as Sao Paulo and Manila, has spawned distinct satellite cities to house the urban destitute, the whole of Lagos is permeated by their presence. Consequently, almost the entire city functions as a megaslum.

As previously noted, the astounding slum population in Lagos can be understood as a direct result of the economic and political conditions under which the city grew. However, current slum growth can also be attributed largely to market and government failure. Distortions in the housing market in Lagos limit access to adequate and affordable housing, even for the middle class. As explained in the provisional document for the Lagos Metropolitan Development and Governance Project, “Housing prices are due to the non-availability of long-term finance, high transaction costs for obtaining land titles and / or certificates of occupancy, regulatory and planning controls for building and construction that constrain the efficient utilization of the land, as well as high inflation rates in the Nigerian economy.”⁴⁴ These distortions are further exacerbated in Lagos by the city’s limited land supply and immense population density.

However, as Morka argues, the most important factor in Nigeria’s housing crisis has been the “gross misapplication of the Land Use Act of 1978, and the resulting denial of access to land to the poor.”⁴⁵ Implemented primarily to open land for new development, the Land Use Act vests the power of eminent domain over rural and urban lands in Nigeria in the government. The Act provides that “all lands in the urban areas shall be under the control and management of the Governor of that State and such land shall be held in trust and administered for the use and common benefit of all Nigerians in accordance with the provisions of this Act.”⁴⁶ The Act grants immense powers to the State Governor and local government to determine, regulate, and manage lands and to compulsorily acquire lands and revoke any right of occupancy.

Enacted “in the public interest [so that] the rights of all Nigerians to the land of Nigeria [could] be asserted and preserved by law,” the Act has further excluded the poor and other marginalized groups by the discriminatory application of its provisions, which allow preferential treatment to the government and affluent private developers.⁴⁷ The housing dilemma in Lagos is thus defined by a combination of constraint on existing land supply and the giving of high priority in land acquisition to an elite. Because planning officials do little to prevent illegal developments or to provide low-income residents with legal alternatives, the growing poor segment of Lagos finds refuge as squatters in slum settlements.

By definition, squatting is the possession of land without official sale or title. However, nothing in Lagos comes without a fee. Corrupt policemen arbitrarily hold up traffic until small remittances are paid. Local *ogas* collect market earnings. “Area boys” will quickly resort to violence against people seeking to work, live, or even pass through their blocks without paying. Likewise, squatting in Lagos seldom comes without up-front costs. Politicians, gangsters, and police often coerce squatters into paying considerable bribes to gain

access to sites. Many are forced to continue paying informal “rents” for years. Much of the city operates under a system in which slumlords, racketeers, and other corrupt or criminal networks exploit marginalized people and communities through informal systems of obligation and implied threat.

In addition to being subject to these informal codes of coercion, slum dwellers face the constant threat of government violence. For decades, the Lagos State Government’s primary method for “dealing” with slums has been through forced evictions, and the plight of the Lagos slum dwellers has frequently been punctuated by instances of extreme government malfeasance. In 1990, 300,000 people were forcibly evicted from Maroko, a swampy slum settlement on the Lekki Peninsula of Lagos Island. After only a seven day warning, the entire community was demolished as residents frantically rushed out from under the Lagos State Government bulldozers. Several people were killed and many were injured in the process. Maroko residents were not granted compensation, and the multitudes left homeless were forced to find housing on their own. Since 1995, in Lagos alone, more than 500,000 people have been forcibly removed from their homes.⁴⁸

Urban Laboratory

After decades of neglect, Lagos has recently become the focal point of intense scholarly interest — attracting not only African scholars and development specialists, but also Western intellectuals, for who Lagos provides a fascinating case study of alternative urban organization. Lagos has also been a featured subject at several international art shows, such as *Century City* (2001) in London, *Africas: the Artist and the City* (2001) in Barcelona, and *Documenta 11* (2002) in Kassel, Germany. The Harvard School of Design’s Project on the City, led by Dutch architect and urban theorist Rem Koolhaas, is currently producing a book entirely devoted to Lagos.

Given its overall lack of basic amenities and public services, most Western planners would agree that Lagos hardly has the infrastructure needed even to support a much smaller population than its current one. Yet somehow the city still “functions.” As an ongoing work on modern urbanism, the Project on the City has a mission of understanding contemporary developments in global urbanization. Lagos has served as the latest installment of this study, in which it represents the growing number of cities with huge populations and severely underperforming urban systems.

Instead of being a focus for growth and prosperity, the cities have become a dumping ground for a surplus population working in unskilled, unprotected and low-wage informal service industries and trade. / UN Habitat’s *The Challenge of Slums*

Instead of dwelling on the city’s shortcomings, however, Koolhaas celebrates the “continued, exuberant existence of Lagos and other cities like it... [and the] ingenious, alternative systems which they generate.”⁴⁹ For Koolhaas, Lagos is not a pending disaster, but rather an exciting “announcement” of the future’s new urban form. In an interview, he explains :

— What is now fascinating is how, with some level of self-organization, there is a strange combination of extreme underdevelopment and development.... What particularly amazes me is how the kinds of infrastructure of modernity in the city trigger off all sorts of unpredictable improvised conditions, so there is a kind of mutual dependency that I’ve never seen anywhere else.⁵⁰

Koolhaas and his team of students visited the city several times. Upon their first visit, Koolhaas explains, “partly out of fear, we stayed in our cars.... Lagos seemed to be a city of burning edges.... At first sight the city had an aura of apocalyptic violence; entire sections seemed to be smoldering as if it were one gigantic rubbish heap.”⁵¹ On their second visit, they ventured out of their cars to find that “the activity taking place was not actually a process of dumping, but more a process of sorting, dismantling, reassembling and potentially recycling.”⁵² By their third visit, they rented a helicopter which allowed them to swoop in comfort over the swarming activity of the city’s slums. From this vantage point, Koolhaas explains :

— The apparently burning heap of garbage 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.⁵³

With striking aerial photography and elegant diagrams, the Project on the City team presents severe traffic congestion in terms of “elaborate organizational networks” and burn-

ing garbage dumps as sites of “an impressive performance” of organized community. Though such theories are perhaps interesting in abstract terms, what Koolhaas refers to as “self-organization” can perhaps more accurately be described as collective adaptation to extreme hardship. The complex socio-economic organization in Lagos is simply a testament to a city that is growing without adequate social, economic, and legal institutions. Likewise, the vivacity of the squatters is merely the desperate activity of people excluded from the global economy, with no safety net and tenuous hopes of moving up.

Gandy levels a scathing rebuke to Koolhaas saying, “Like other admirers of the informal economy, Koolhaas seems to ignore its highly hierarchical, often coercive structures and does not differentiate between mini entrepreneurs and traders on its summits and the mass of those barely surviving.”⁵⁴ For although the informal sector does serve as a source of employment and income for the poor, it is simultaneously an anomaly, often subjecting people to severe health risks, insecurity, and exploitation. Also, although the informal economy does have the capacity to redistribute resources among those excluded from the formal sector, rarely does it lead to any wider process of accumulation and growth. Essentially, as Gandy further argues, “to treat a city as a living art installation, or to compare it to the neutral space of a research, is both to dehistoricize and to depoliticize its experience.”⁵⁵

To this can be added the fact that the informal economy celebrated by the Project on the City reflects the results of the policies of military dictatorships which, under the auspices of the IMF and World Bank, decimated the urban economy and ushered in widespread poverty. Hovering over the city, one may claim that the frenetic mass of traders crammed beneath the flyover is proof that the city “works”. However, the scale of the city and its extreme poverty signal growing social and environmental crises that have only begun to materialize.

Slum Ecology⁵⁶

Throughout the world, natural hazards are severely magnified at the intersection of poverty and the environment.

Additionally, largely artificial environmental problems are created as urban poverty interacts with deficient and corroding infrastructure. Without the financial means to address environmental risks and manage waste, poor cities are both more vulnerable to natural hazards and more prone to environmentally destructive behaviors. As one of the world's poorest megacities, Lagos is susceptible to both.

While the average population density for Lagos as a whole is 260 people per hectare, population densities in the slums range between 790 and 1,240 people per hectare.⁵⁷ Because the vast majority of slum dwellers lack the legal right to the land on which they live, in order to gain security against eviction, squatter settlements tend to colonize the most environmentally volatile spaces in a city. Consequently, much of Lagos remains literally mired in an ecology of poverty and disease. In Ajegunle, Lagos' largest slum (estimated to be the fifth largest slum in the world),⁵⁸ 1.5 million people are contained in ten square kilometers of swampland, where drainage canals are often so caked with sludge that even light rainfall quickly inundates entire communities, sweeping raw sewage into homes. In Badia, shacks edge up to highways and active train tracks. Although communities such as Ajegunle and Badia are subject to official municipal neglect, some slums are situated in areas where services simply cannot reach. Makoko, a slum of between 150,000 and 200,000 residents, has expanded nearly a quarter mile into the polluted waters of the Lagos Lagoon, spawning an entire city of huts perched precariously on stilts.

One element where the fusion of infrastructural deficiencies, environmental limitations, and urban poverty has been particularly destructive is water. Of the many problems associated with the Lagos metropolitan area, water contamination ranks as perhaps the most ecologically damaging and biologically precarious.

As a result of inadequate waste management infrastructure and poor drainage systems, many of the surrounding lagoons, swamps, coastal seawaters, and ground water supplies of Lagos are now highly contaminated. This contamination not only severely limits water availability for domestic, industrial, and commercial use, it also presents a vast array of health, sanitation, and aesthetic problems. It has been extremely detrimental to the surrounding aquatic environment

and biota, resulting in significant ecological disturbances and many species die-offs.

Fewer than five percent of households have direct access to municipal water supplies.⁵⁹ This leaves the majority reliant on boreholes, stand pipes, and illegal connections which are typically controlled by gangs. Private vendors also sell water at exorbitant prices. Currently, municipal services providing drainage, solid waste removal, and wastewater collection and treatment struggle to meet the needs of as little as 40 percent of the city's population (an extremely liberal estimate).⁶⁰

The collection, treatment, and disposal of sewage and wastewater remain primary concerns. Few residential areas in Lagos have access to traditional pit latrines and water closet septic tanks. Human excreta, along with other commercial and industrial wastewater, are usually discharged directly into open drains or directly into the Lagos lagoon system. The Sewage and Water Department of the State Ministry of Environment has yet to organize an efficient system for disposing of the seepage from septic tanks. Because the underground water table is very high and near the surface in many areas, the risk of wastewater infiltrating the porous soil and polluting groundwater and well water is great. Increased urbanization has also increased flood run-off by adding more impervious surfaces to land already subject to poor infiltration.

Further degrading the city's wastewater infrastructure are the woefully inadequate facilities available for proper disposal. Formal landfill sites are scarce and regular collection is virtually nonexistent in many areas. As a result, mountainous garbage heaps have spontaneously emerged throughout the city, often in dangerously close proximity to residential neighborhoods. Many residents simply throw waste into the Lagos lagoon system. In and around designated landfill sites, leachate — the polluted liquid that drains from a dumpsite — presents a major problem. Many Nigerian landfills lack the proper technology to collect leachate. As a result, in many landfills near the city, leachate from the decomposition of biodegradable matters in the waste eventually infiltrates the soil, contaminating groundwater.

The health and environmental implications of the unhealthy

OH ME A WATER-O
NO GO FIGHT AM, UNLESS
YOU WAN DIE
I SAY WATER NO GET ENEMY
NO GO FIGHT AM, UNLESS
YOU WAN DIE
O ME A WATER-O. / FELA KUTI

water situation are grave. Water contaminated by human excreta contains vectors of water-related diseases. Likewise, industrial wastewater contains chemical pollutants that destroy marine life, disrupt ecosystems, and kill off valuable aquatic food sources. Fish that do not die contain chemicals that bioaccumulate when eaten by humans. As a result of contamination, water resources for domestic, industrial, and commercial use are becoming increasingly scarce. Furthermore, open garbage dumps draw rodents and stagnant drainage canals breed mosquitoes and a whole host of disease-carrying animals. In short, water pollution in Lagos has created a colossal breeding ground for new and reemerging diseases. Every year untold numbers of infants, children, and adults are killed by illnesses caused by Lagos' tainted water.

In his legendary 1975 recording, "Water No Get Enemy," Lagosian Afro-beat superstar Fela Kuti uses water metaphorically in a warning to the military government. He sings:

Oh me a water-o
No go fight am, unless you wan die
I say water no get enemy
No go fight am, unless you wan die
O me a water-o.⁶¹

Written during a time of severe corruption and human rights violations at the hands of an oppressive military regime, Kuti uses water as a metaphor for the common people of Nigeria. Just as nothing exists without water, Nigeria does not exist without its people. Thus, he cautions the government, it is dangerous to make enemies with a country's most essential resources. If you "fight" (i.e. contaminate) the water, you will die. Likewise, if you renounce the people, they will turn on you. More than three decades after its release, this song still serves as an urgent warning about Nigeria's volatile political climate. However, today, the song can also be heard for its literal meaning. As Lagos continues to fight its water with inadequate treatment technology, unsanitary management practices, and insufficient drainage infrastructure, the health and environmental situation is becoming increasingly perilous.

[A City on Fire](#)

— LAGOS, Nigeria (CNN) — At least 200 people were killed in Lagos, Nigeria, in a massive explosion and fire that ignited as crowds carried away buckets of refined fuel from a tapped oil pipeline.... Extreme heat has prevented rescue workers

from recovering bodies, and they fear the death toll could rise significantly. — *CNN.com, 26 December 2006*

As a poor African nation endowed with enormous natural wealth, Nigeria has the potential makings of an uplifting success story. However, on almost every level, Nigeria's oil has subverted its progress and development. As the distortions created by the oil boom were worsened by widespread "corruption and patronage, political arbitrariness and lawlessness, and human rights violations,"⁶² the catastrophic consequences for the economy and the Nigerian people only increased. In 2006, corruption siphoned off an estimated 70 percent of annual oil revenues, and Nigeria falls behind every major oil nation in alleviating poverty.⁶³ Since 1990, Nigeria's per capita income and life expectancy have fallen. Currently, Nigeria's annual per capita income is \$1,400 and most Nigerians live on one dollar a day.⁶⁴ Poverty, armed conflict, disease, and failed governance continue to plague the nation.

The horrific oil explosion that engulfed the Lagos neighborhood of Abule Egbe the day after Christmas 2006 exemplifies the Nigerian paradox of poverty and plenty. Despite its ranking as the world's eighth largest oil exporter and Africa's top producer, fuel for everyday usage remains one of the country's scarcest commodities. The constant breakdown of Nigeria's dysfunctional refineries has forced the country to import most of its fuel. Frequent fuel shortages throughout the country leave gas stations dry for days. Placed in the context of abject poverty and inadequate fuel infrastructure, such shortages explain the frequent (and often deadly) illegal tapping of gas lines throughout the country. Since 1998, over 2000 Nigerians have been killed in explosions caused by the illegal tapping of gas lines.⁶⁵ In Lagos alone, three major explosions have killed an estimated 600 people since 2004.⁶⁶

In his aptly titled essay, "Oil Inferno," Michael Watts, Director of the Center for African Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, asserts that such terrifying explosions say "less about vandals who hot-tap the exposed pipelines running through the city's slum world than the venality, waste and corruption of a Nigerian petro-capitalism fuelled by windfall profits and modernity's addiction to the automobile."⁶⁷ Nothing emphasizes the consequences of poverty,

neglect, and resource mismanagement quite like the complete incineration of an impoverished residential community. The fact that the very substance fueling the pipeline fire is also fueling Nigeria's national decline only adds to the irony. It is no wonder that Bola Tinubu, governor of Lagos State, referred to the Abule Egbe catastrophe as the "shame of our nation." Although scenes from the explosion quite literally display the devastating effects of oil on Nigeria, Lagos pipeline explosions evoke yet another telling metaphor: a city on fire.

In Lagos, one can look directly at the sun throughout the day without squinting. Even at high noon, the thick, low-lying blanket of smog hovering over the city protects the eyes from the glare. Yet the heat remains, trapped in the haze. Within this urban incubator, the city slowly bakes. Refuse slowly smolders in open dumps. Dilapidated vehicles wheeze out dirty, black exhaust. The slums burn with thousands of cooking fires. At night, the whole of Lagos glows with candlelight. The city is coated with layers of black dust and soot.

However, the consequences of a slowly burning city are not solely ecological. The notion of a city on fire conjures up increasingly foreboding social and political visions. Despite its prominence in Nigeria's non-oil sector, Lagos' economic success is enjoyed only by a handful. The few available jobs "pay less than they did twenty-five years ago, they are less likely to be salaried and they are more likely to be menial."⁶⁸ Without an established industrial base, the poor have generally been denied the opportunity of regular employment. Simultaneously, the cost of food, housing, and fuel has soared. Though parts of Lagos are prone occasionally to explode, the majority of the city steadily simmers in the mire of poverty and neglect.

As *The Challenge of Slums* reveals, the new urban population will be almost completely cut off from industrial growth and the supply of formal jobs. Although studies have shown the informal urban economy to be an extraordinary renewable resource with the capacity to absorb millions excluded from the formal labor force, the fact remains that millions of Lagosians are forced to "further subdivide the peripheral economic niches of personal service, casual labor, street vending, rag picking, begging, and crime."⁶⁹ Subsequently,

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the conditions within the Lagos megaslum are becoming increasingly isolated from the global economic order. As Mike Davis, the noted urban theorist, explains in his essay, "The Urbanization of Empire: Megacities and the Laws of Chaos," "This outcast proletariat... is the fastest-growing and most novel social class on the planet...a mass of humanity structurally and biologically redundant to global accumulation and the corporate matrix."⁷⁰ In terms of globalization, the destitute poor of Lagos are indeed peripheral and, as the Abule Egbe pipeline explosion grimly indicates, expendable.

Yet the population is steadily growing. Throughout the global slum, issues of social violence and political control are becoming ever more problematic. In his essay, "War and the City," geographer Stephen Graham describes how the burgeoning cities of the South — especially their slum outskirts — are now imagined as the distinctive battle space of the future. Pentagon doctrine is being reshaped accordingly to support a low-intensity global war of unlimited duration against criminalized segments of the urban poor. He explains, "Western military strategy was long premised on the avoidance of urban combat, with air strikes the preferred method of subduing large conurbations...but today cityscapes of the global South have emerged as the paradigmatic conflict zones."⁷¹ Whereas the centralized infrastructures of Northern cities such as Belgrade or Manhattan were easily crippled by air strikes and terrorist attacks, rapid urbanization in developing countries "results in a battlespace environment that is decreasingly knowable since it is increasingly unplanned."⁷² In *Aerospace Power Journal*, Air Force theorist Captain Troy Thomas specifically cites the slum peripheries of Lagos as a "potential nightmare battlefield" where :

"Restless young men fight over limited resources and control of the government. Desperation and anger are core motivators, and they are alarmingly persistent and resilient.

What will become of this new urban order? Will its members achieve solidarity and carve a collective path to justice and economic progress? Or will they continue in cesspools of neglect and squalor, ultimately to explode in ways we cannot imagine?

Airmen who enter to fight in a clan-based urban system will find it difficult to distinguish friend from foe or to identify patterns of activity and points of leverage to manipulate.”⁷³

Although some have come to describe this forecast as signaling a “clash of civilizations,” perhaps this potential battle is best described by Davis as “an oblique clash between the American imperium and the labor-power it has expelled from the formal world economy.”⁷⁴

In any case, violent crime plagues much of Lagos. Throughout the city, the rule of law holds little sway. Without effective forms of social control, roving gangs of armed robbers frequently terrorize neighborhoods and markets. Often police only perform their duties if they are paid off. Many communities have resorted to vigilante justice. Perhaps the notion of Lagos as the host of an apocalyptic global clash is extreme, but the city’s pending fate will continue to look acutely bleak if current levels of social and environmental degradation persist.

Urban Suicide

Lagos is certainly a leviathan, an urban monstrosity. To describe the city only in this way does injustice to its cultural vivacity, and to the millions of Lagosians who persevere day by day to preserve themselves and their families. Yet the realities cannot be ignored. Within the corridors of the Lagos slum world you know the belly of the beast. In areas like Badia,

you hear the city moan. You smell the mix of human refuse and rotting goat meat. You see the sludge coated mounds of garbage and the stagnant black water where hordes of mosquitoes hatch. You hear the pulsating bass beat as passing trains graze shanties. All the while, the city bakes under smoky grey clouds and, like zombies, countless silhouettes sway back and forth to the pounding rhythms of Gehenna.

Bola Disu, Managing Director of the Sino-Nigerian Lekki Free Trade Zone, describes Lagos as a mouse cage. With only a few mice and plenty of cheese, the cage stays clean and the mice stay healthy. However, as more mice are added and the cheese is taken away, the mice are soon forced into cannibalization.

In this same way, Lagos’ social, political, and environmental trajectories point toward various modes of “urban suicide,” where the city might be “tamed” by the Malthusian means of epidemic disease, natural disaster, and endemic violence. Because the majority of the city remains peripheral to the global economy, if not excluded entirely, it is doubtful whether the world would feel the resonating effects of a Lagos implosion. However, Lagos is not singular. It is part of a global urban future that will be increasingly impossible to ignore.

What will become of this new urban order? Will its members achieve solidarity and carve a collective path to justice and economic progress? Or will they continue in cesspools of neglect and squalor, ultimately to explode in ways we cannot imagine?

/ END