

# 'Lagos shows how a city can recover from a deep, deep pit': Rem Koolhaas talks to Kunlé Adeyemi

In 1997 two architects set out to rethink Lagos, an African megacity that had been largely abandoned by the state. Amid the apparent chaos and crime, they discovered remarkable patterns of organisation. Two decades later, **Rem Koolhaas** and **Kunlé Adeyemi** discuss the past, present and future of the city - and reveal why their own project never saw the light of day

**Chris Michael**

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*Guardian Cities: In the late 1990s, you worked in Lagos on a project that was never published. Why not, and what was the city like then?*

**Rem Koolhaas:** When we went in the late 1990s, Nigeria was still in a dictatorship. So we didn't go with a mission. It started really with a sort of blankness and open-endedness.

**Kunlé Adeyemi:** You have to put it in context. In 1997, Lagos was still very much under the radar; in the architectural world for sure, but in the wider world too.

**RK:** Nigeria was a blank on the map - there weren't even any maps. The US State Department, everyone said don't go there. It was courageous of Harvard University: the notion was that we would match Harvard students with Nigerian students, so that every student would have a guide, creating a guarantee of intimacy with the city. Kunlé was one of the students we recruited locally. But Lagos at that point was not very inviting even to Lagosians. It was considered a no-go zone, almost in its entirety.

**KA:** The security risk was a lot higher then. There was a lot of crime in several pockets, and it was a very difficult city to navigate. You needed to be a real cowboy to go to Lagos.

**RK:** And there were simply no maps. It was all rumour, an unbelievable amount of rumour - largely about crime and almost mythical manifestations of evil.

**KA:** [Laughs]

**RK:** It was a city that had been turned against itself. There was a bridge that became the perfect trap for crimes, which began with nails being scattered to cause flat tyres. If the driver stopped, the car would be dismantled in 20 minutes and the parts thrown overboard [to people waiting below]. The system had turned into a kind of destructive device that could be used against people. That was the narrative.

**KA:** But you took a lot of pride in that notion that you could actually survive in Lagos. This place that was very difficult to live in also offered up a lot of opportunities.

RK: It was a kind of narcissism of difficulty, so in that sense it was almost an emancipation machine.

GC: *How did it affect your work?*

RK: Kunlé's a Lagosian now [Adeyemi grew up in Kaduna in northern Nigeria] and he's building a career there. But Lagos has also had a particular effect on my career. I was there early, and although it was a courageous step to go there and invest on this scale - I went there maybe 20 times - it's also been also super-controversial. There's an old school of thought that somebody like me has no place to go there.

GC: *Because you're not Nigerian.*

RK: Yeah, because of colonialism and so on ... [The American journalist] George Packer saw our presence there as just kind of 'slumming it'. He described it as tourism by car, and then ultimately by helicopter. But it was not some kind of exotic excursion. It was a collaborative effort to clarify, understand and educate.

KA: I remember, for a long time you didn't actually want to intervene. The first project we did [the fourth mainland bridge proposal], it was through a lot of my interests that Rem agreed to it - there was never an intention to immediately intervene.

RK: Because of that innuendo, in the end we didn't publish. It was a book that was killed by the response of other people. Which sounds quite cowardly, perhaps, but it was the first manifestation of what is currently a really big issue: how political correctness defines the limits of what you can do. In that sense, it was super-exciting and maybe the most magical project we did, but at the same time fraught with mixed feelings.

GC: *Did you learn any lessons from Lagos that you could apply to other cities?*

RK: The real thing we tried to look at is what happens to a society when the state is absent. At that point, the state had really withdrawn from Lagos; the city was left to its own devices, both in terms of money and services. That, by definition, created an unbelievable proliferation of independent agency: each citizen needed to take, in any day, maybe 400 or 500 independent decisions on how to survive that extremely complex system. That was why the title [of the unpublished book] became Lagos: How it Works, because it was the ultimate dysfunctional city - but actually, in terms of all the initiatives and ingenuity, it mobilised an incredibly beautiful, almost utopian landscape of independence and agency.

KA: Self-organisation ...

RK: For example, there was this railroad [he draws]. Initially the trains drove with some frequency, but the frequency diminished to the point where there were only two trains a day. However, the line had created a lot of communities, and therefore density - so every time the train was not driving, this whole area became a marketplace. At some point the train would drive, but at such a pace that you could sell things to the passengers as it went along - so the slowness was very functional in terms of creating opportunity of interaction and trade.

We also discovered a person who had a fish stall, and within a single square metre she carried two children all the way to Harvard. She supported an unbelievable escape of her children into education. In that sense it was a city completely pixillated, and every pixel contained amazing stories.

KA: Lagos is a city that's very anxious - probably back then a lot more than it is now. Everyone is always in a hurry. Everyone needs to get ahead of the other.

GC: *Is it a kind of capitalist utopia?*

RK: I don't think so. It's all about survival.

KA: The key thing was: that's the organisation; that's the birth of a growing city. Lagos back then was 10-12 million people.

RK: It looks like total chaos, but after a while you learn to recognise that it's not total chaos, because here are green things together, here are rusty things together, here are plastic things together. There's a constant ordering going on, and a constant disordering at the same time.

KA: If you just look at this image of the market [pictured below] without the lines drawn on, you get a sense that nothing's happening, there's no order. But then you see people selling tomatoes on one line, and everyone is organised across their little paths ...

GC: *Yet with no one actually ordering it?*

KA: There are some local regulators, let's say. Like the market women, the head of the markets, the local collectors. Actually this entire space is also taxed: they are local taxes, not taxes that are going to the government, but there's someone who maintains order here; there's some degree of law enforcement.

GC: *Is that corruption?*

KA: It's self-regulation at a time when, as Rem said, there was no state, or it couldn't manage a growing population - nothing could. The politics, the development, they couldn't catch up. It was really moving very fast. It's only now that Lagos is getting to a point where the state has been able to implement a degree of order. The institutions are working better now, the banks are much more functional. At this time, 1997, there were no mobile phones! It's a whole different thing now with mobile phones: technology has created a form of regulation, because people can actually talk to each other a lot more.

GC: *Has it changed the city's informal patterns?*

RK: It has normalised them, in a way.

KA: And it has increased the activities. You might imagine that now we have phones, we're not going to move around so much - but the opposite is true, it's that you know where to go. Trading is different, the economy has grown substantially.

RK: That has been another interesting discovery: that basically a city could recover from a really deep, deep, deep pit.

KA: And in a very short time. We're only talking 20 years ago, here. Fast forward 15 years - and especially in the last five years, Lagos has seen so many changes, so many improvements.

RK: At that time, if you drove through the city, you drove through a foreground that always seemed to be incredibly dramatic and incredibly agonised - smoking, burning, incredible compression. In the first year we stayed on the ground and went everywhere. But then in order to discover whether this was the whole story, we rented a helicopter. And we began to

understand that this is not chaos but a highly modern system that had been abandoned, then at some point went into reversal, then slowly came out of it.

*GC: What's changed recently?*

KA: In the last five years the economy improved, the government became more stable, the security improved. When there's more security in an environment, people are able to invest more. And even more interesting is the cultural scene: there's a huge music industry, the arts are thriving ... These are signs of a healthier environment, socially and culturally.

In Lagos, a lot more infrastructure is being put in place, roads are being built, the highways are improved. Not to say that you wouldn't see some remnants of this [indicates the market pictured above]; there are large parts of Lagos that remain this way. But there is now a semblance of a healthier and livable society. People actually now think about coming to Lagos on holiday. [laughs]

*GC: What about the Eko-Atlantic development? Isn't that the opposite of the informal market?*

KA: To me, Eko-Atlantic is a project that tried to address the second challenge Lagos faces - one is urbanisation, and the other is climate change. Eko-Atlantic was meant to be a project that reclaimed the shoreline and protected Victoria Island, one of the city's most expensive pieces of real estate, to the south-east. The idea in itself is really great - but there have been a lot of questions around its implementation, and the impact on the rest of the city.

Of course if you simply just push water back, it will find other ways - so there have been areas that have been impacted by it negatively. And when you're densifying an area that's already super-dense, there's a question as to whether the city's infrastructure can cope. We're hoping that as the project develops, it's being modified to address these problems.

RK: Yet even this is part of a process of the normalisation of Lagos, in that nobody in their right minds would have thought a second about ecology before - everything was a question of totally myopic (but smart) preoccupation with the next second.

*GC: Is Eko-Atlantic a form of social or climate apartheid?*

RK: It's typical of our contemporary kind of world. I think that inequality was probably smaller [when we were there]. You need to look at inequality as a typical condition of modern society.

KA: The notion is to create a city to increase the economic opportunities, but I think that the real-estate values of a place like Eko-Atlantic is just really, really high. It's a very ambitious project, and I think Lagos thinks to itself - or some of its leaders - oh, we deserve a place like Dubai.

*GC: Would you say Lagos is a resilient city?*

RK: It's super-resilient in the old way, but not in the contemporary definition.

KA: Absolutely super-resilient. The capacity for survival on an individual level and collectively is just amazing, and that's perhaps the reason Lagos is where it is today: because people are innovative, they are ready to adapt, they are ready to fight, they are ready to live in different kinds of conditions. There's just this notion, there's a pride - everyone believes that things will be better.

You can also see a polarity in the city - you see your next-door neighbour doing a lot better - and that diversity creates a tension to survive. It's a city that is very mixed - the rich have to be working with the poor. The middle class was almost non-existent a long time ago, but now you find a lot more people going to museums, watching movies, going to parks - it's becoming a more liveable city.

RK: There's something really interesting about current urbanism: the only model is the universal model, and there is increasingly incapacity to consider the virtues and the qualities that are there, and then to build on them. The only thing is complete transformation.

But in Lagos there's a really strong case to resurrect strong parts. Embedded in all of it are some amazing pieces of planning, amazing pieces of engineering and interaction. For instance, the campus of Lagos University is stunningly beautiful, efficient and generous, and that needs to be recognised and preserved.

KA: Yeah, there are clusters of communities, outdoor living, market spaces ... When you're thinking about new shopping environments in a place like Lagos, well it's fun to be in a mall sometimes, but can we rethink it much greater? Maybe there's a hybrid: the market-mall?

RK: Why I talked about political correctness: the colonial is now such a major taboo that any achievement of the colonial period, or any generosity implied in colonialism, is again fundamentally neglected or fundamentally not recognised. That's crazy, because history is a series of layers, and you cannot say, "This layer I support and this layer I cancel." History is history and you cannot retrospectively manipulate it.

KA: Certainly in the remnants and fragments of the infrastructure produced in the colonial era, one can really see how they've been useful in taking the city to a certain extent. Now, maybe the transformation has not been thought out carefully, but it's been very instrumental for the development of the city and it's not something we can completely erase.

RK: I studied in London in 1968. Our school had a separate department of tropical architecture. Of course it was totally unfashionable, partly because nobody wanted to think about colonialism, but basically what you learned there was that, OK, the sun is here, so you should create natural ventilation here - an unbelievable amount of really sound principles that have been completely abandoned, so now everything is air conditioned with big machines.

Everyone is talking about sustainability and resilience, yet all that knowledge is thrown in the bin. [Lagos is] a unique case, but also a test case. It's unbelievably unique, but also it's now considered with a number of really generic opinions, generic solution, generic expectations.

KA: That's so true. My father was one of the first modernist architects who also worked with the colonial or post-colonial architects. He started his practice in the early 1960s. I grew up understanding architecture by understanding the environment: cross-ventilation was very important - the sun, the orientation of the building, the garden, the space, everything was completely thought out.

RK: Coherent and mutually reinforcing.

KA: He did large-scale buildings and still they needed to be naturally ventilated. So there's a

lot in the history - whether it's local history, or histories that have been imported, international practices - that have been very useful, and that we are forgetting.

*GC: You can see that in your Makoko Floating School. What else would you do now to positively support the transformation of Lagos?*

KA: Because the city has become more stable, there's now a greater drive even for things that were previously unimaginable, like tourism. The minister of tourism is really working hard to change the perception of Lagos, and actually use the attributes of Lagos as an attraction point. I really admire that.

One of the things he says is that Lagos is such an energetic city: whether in terms of culture or other activities, people like to go out. So let Lagos have big huge parties and celebrate! I think that's great.

Another friend of mine says there are two types of people who come to Lagos: the intellectuals, who really want to understand it, really want to solve it; and the cowboys, the entrepreneurs, who want to make money. So it's a place of opportunity for both intellectuals and cowboys, and I think that's such a great idea.

*GC: What could other cities learn from Lagos?*

RK: They could learn not to panic. We live in a society where risk is systematically reduced. Where risk is replaced by comfort. So I think if people could learn anything, it's that risk remains crucial to an animated and intelligent society.

KA: When you think that in only 20 years, there's been such a change in Lagos ... cities actually grow faster than humans now. You can develop a whole city in less than 20 years. And in 20 years, Lagos has almost completely transformed itself. Why panic?

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