

LAGOS

AFRICA'S URBAN DEFIANCE

"I am convinced that the kind of settlement now being designed and built all around the globe can no longer be called 'city,' it is another condition," Rem Koolhaas

Today's metropolises are meticulously designed. Even if they are not thoroughly planned out before any construction is done. This urban design (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_design) has become an integral part of modern society, one without which our megacities would not be able to function.

Intrigued by this ludicrous method of urban design, or lack thereof, critically acclaimed Dutch architect (<http://www.oma.nl>) **Rem Koolhaas** (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rem_Koolhaas) / (<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,402949,00.html>) agreed to helm the Harvard financed study program "Harvard Project on the City" (http://www.hna.harvard.edu/gazette/1996/06_06/CSD/Koolhaas-fea.htm). In which he and his students would examine, among other things, these metropolitan areas. They would attempt to redefine the profession of architecture for our globalising world.

"What seemed a completely random and improvised world actually included a number of very elaborate organizational networks."

Starting in the Chinese Pearl River Delta area, where Third World city booming is happening on a large scale, Koolhaas and several students started analysing the phenomena. A couple of years onward, they turned to Lagos (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagos>) / (<http://www.ifa.de/galerien/lagos/index.htm>) former capital of Nigeria. Lagos was chosen because it is considered one of the least livable cities and estimated to be the **third biggest city in the world by 2020**. (http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/urban_intro.htm)

Or so we thought. With third world countries experiencing accelerated massive agglomeration, western architects and landscape artists alike are baffled by the speed and apparent lack of planning featured in the expansion of these cities. With relatively 50 times the architects they have, we are merely a third as productive. This led western architects to believe these cities are little more than poorly constructed heaps of human desperation.

Koolhaas set out to discover what makes Lagos able to exist. As an apparent total contradiction to western cities, it should in theory not be able to function. Yet, in a way, it is flourishing. As they visit the city, Koolhaas and his students gradually come to realise that Lagos is a lot more organized than it appears at first glance. Although he first thought this realisation proved city planning to be redundant, Koolhaas later concluded the city's original typical 70's type design to be a crucial part of their own unique structure of life.

Amazed by what they found, Koolhaas and his students kept coming back to Lagos researching what he believes to be an example of the city of the future. A book 8 years in the making, **"Lagos: How It Works"** (http://www.oma.eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=76&Itemid=2), contains an in-depth analysis of this Third World urbanisation

and is due this year (2007). Other earlier published findings can be found in **"Mutations"** (<http://www.booshlounge.com/content/view/full/1348>) and the DVD: **Lagos / Koolhaas** (<http://www.pvffilm.nl/documentaires/lagos-synopsis-UK.html>) and **Lagos: Wide & Close** (<http://www.submarinechannel.com/shop/index.jsp?theme=products&u=12033&t=preview>) in which Koolhaas is followed around and comments on the city.

Many people are sceptic about Koolhaas' statements of Lagos being a model for the terminal state of western cities, as you would expect them to be. Living situations are abysmal for most people in Lagos and poverty is all around. Yet Koolhaas refers to the inhabitants potential to react to and work around the problems they encounter every day. The inventiveness, energy and individualism these people portray. Such an organic, adaptive way of life might be an interesting and helpful element for our western culture. The emphasis is on the potential, and Koolhaas is keen to point out that the necessary steps taken for city improvements are becoming more evident each year.

Finally, when compared an interesting similarity can be drawn between 1940's overcrowded **Coney Island** (New York) and today's buzzing **Oshodi Market** (Lagos). Only a century ago living in Manhattan, mother of extremely planned cities, was by no means pleasant either, putting the troubles of Lagos into perspective. In his book on New York **"Delirious New York"**

(http://www.oma.eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=2),

Koolhaas talks about **"the modern intellectual's dilemma"**, **"subliminating their disgust, by identifying external exploitation and consumption as the reason for the masses' aberrations."** The same reaction can be seen in the critics of Lagos. People only see an unsanitary, savage way of life. They mostly turn a blind eye to the inventiveness and positive energy that the people in this supposedly uninhabitable city seem to carry about them.

Despite the fact that there is not even an overall city administration, Lagos is a functioning, mutating, rapidly expanding city, and in a less obvious way, a success story. And will be even more so in the future, Koolhaas suspects. Whether he is right only time can tell.

But Lagos certainly defies and perhaps destroys our contemporary vision on city life and planning.

Other sites containing relevant information are:

http://www.taobaiusman.nl/00-Flie_ongeduld_van_Rem_Koolhaas.html - on Koolhaas and his architecture
<http://www.megacities.uni-koeln.de/frame.htm?http://www.megacities.uni-koeln.de/documentation/lagos/pictures.htm> - images of Lagos
<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/people/faculty/koolhaas/research.html> - more information on Harvard Project on the City and Koolhaas
<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2006/koolhaas-122.html> - Koolhaas discusses the future of cities