

Special Article

Alien and Distant: Rem Koolhaas on Film in Lagos, Nigeria

JOSEPH GODLEWSKI

This article seeks to evaluate Rem Koolhaas's investigations of the sub-Saharan megapolis of Lagos, Nigeria. The literature on Lagos produced by Koolhaas and the Harvard Project on the City has been both lauded and criticized by several sources. Less attention, however, has been paid to two documentary films chronicling their Lagos "research studio." The central component of this article is a close reading of these two films. It concludes that the research studio is a potentially effective method for learning about cities, though what Koolhaas produces is a seductive but ultimately myopic account of Lagos's urban dynamics.

Rem Koolhaas is a slippery character. Principal architect of the world-renowned Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), urban theorist, Harvard professor, and author of the influential texts *Delirious New York* (1978) and *S,M,L,XL* (1995), among others, his work is not easy to dismiss. That he has managed to transcend the tight boundaries of architectural academia to make his way in the larger field of pop cultural discourse makes it all the more necessary to engage with that which he produces. His theoretical polemics, like his buildings, have the ability to awe, inspire and challenge boundaries, yet at the same time to frustrate, perplex and inundate one with irony, cynicism and contradiction. The research he produced with the Harvard Project on the City (HPC) regarding the sub-Saharan megapolis of Lagos, Nigeria, is no exception. This article seeks to evaluate Koolhaas's work on Lagos, in particular two documentary films chronicling his and the HPC's "research studio" there.

Joseph Godlewski is a Ph.D. candidate in Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, with a designated emphasis in Global Metropolitan Studies.

The literature produced by Koolhaas and his team on Lagos has been widely discussed, but less attention has been paid to the films, directed by Dutch filmmaker Bregtje van der Haak. This article is therefore focused less on Lagos than on an architect's and a filmmaker's representation of a particular African city. What is one to make of Koolhaas's

Lagosian speculation that the West African metropolis is a “paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity”?¹ What can be learned about the developing and developed world from this work?

I argue here that the films clearly demonstrate the problems and contradictions evident in Koolhaas’s written work on Lagos. His inwardly focused imaginings of the city’s processes of “self-organization” cause him to overlook the more convincing economic and political forces shaping it. Similar to art critic and curator Okui Enwezor’s assessment, this article makes the case that unlike the bulk of Koolhaas’s impressive *oeuvre*, “the Lagos research tends to resist [his] complete mastery.”² Though my analysis is largely critical, my intention is to examine the films and their implications and to suggest alternative ways forward for architectural criticism.

DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION: EVIDENCE

The work produced in the HPC Lagos research studio was conducted between 1998 and 2001, and was initially intended to be a collaborative *design* effort between the HPC and the University of Lagos (UNILAG).³ But it remained a Koolhaas-Harvard effort, and subsequently formed the basis for articles in two books, *Mutations* (2001) and *Under Siege: Four African Cities — Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* (2002).

Mutations features an essay on Lagos and a section devoted to “Urban Africa” in its “photographic dossier.” After a few pages of fragmentary thoughts and images, Koolhaas speculates that the survival strategy of Lagos “might be better understood as a form of collective research, conducted by a team of eight-to-twenty-five million.”⁴ Visually bold, the 720-page book features large color photos, oversized fonts, and provocative, though characteristically short, essays on architecture and urbanism. *Mutations* is one of several products forged by the synergy of Koolhaas and Harvard’s Graduate School of Design.

The second result of the Harvard study is a short essay entitled “Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos,” taken from a

conference and workshop held in Lagos in 2002. The essay, along with other contributions from the conference, is part of the publication *Under Siege: Four African Cities — Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*. In the essay, Koolhaas contended that the “work is not inspired by the need to discover ever more exotic, violent, extreme urban thrills.” However, that initial critical impulse is undermined by statements regarding how degraded sites of urban conditions, “smoldering, as if it were a gigantic rubbish dump,” are “actually intense emancipatory zones.”⁵ Speaking of the reaction to the lecture at the conference, parts of which make it into the documentary films, Enwezor mentioned Koolhaas’s “enviable capacity of being able to generate wild admiration and opprobrium at the same time.”⁶

There is one additional work from the Lagos research — the forthcoming book *Lagos: How it Works*. However, in contrast to the machine-like efficiency of Koolhaas’s voluminous publishing career, it seems to be in a perpetual state of delay, and unfortunately will not serve as part of my analysis here.

In addition to this written work the Lagos research incorporates van der Haak’s two films documenting Koolhaas and his photographer Edgar Cleijne’s time in Lagos (FIG. 1). *Lagos/Koolhaas* charts the architect’s tourist-like fascination as he travels around the city. The same can be said for the film *Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City*, produced in 2005. Though there’s been a fair amount of discussion about the written work, surprisingly little has been said about the films. My primary focus on the filmic representations is therefore intended to fill a gap in the existing literature. In general, it is intriguing that two films were produced from the Lagos project, whereas the rest of Koolhaas’s *oeuvre* has largely been confined to the (albeit profuse) print medium. Why was it necessary to put the Lagos research on film? Why were there two films made?

Beyond their informational content, the films may also be analyzed as cinematic representations of Lagos and the iconic architect within it. Indeed, I argue that it is precisely in the films that the performative quality of Koolhaas’s processes of theorization are most clearly articulated.



FIGURE 1. Discursive production on Lagos by Rem Koolhaas: articles in the volumes *Mutations* (2001) and *Under Siege: Four African Cities — Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* (2002); the films *Lagos/Koolhaas* (2002) and *Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City* (2004); and the forthcoming *Lagos: How it Works*.

Certainly no stranger to contradictions, it is within them that he can most audaciously act these out. Rather than seeking to understand how or why Lagos is the way it is, he instead looks at Lagos “as is.” Together, Koolhaas and van der Haak blend sound and image to create, at times, unexpected cinematic tensions. And the final products have much more in common with music videos or television commercials, in that they serve to entertain rather than provide a critical understanding of the environments they ostensibly document. Morever, it is in the films that Koolhaas can more thoroughly develop his fraught conception of “foreground” and “background,” or “wide and close.” This binary conceptualization of depth allows him to view Lagos as a detached observer, understanding the city’s morphology as a “self-regulating system.” Koolhaas is thus able to overlook the sticky complexities he confronts on the ground in favor of the seeming elegance he detects from above.

Both the documentary films are assembled from material shot during three trips to Nigeria by van der Haak. Though there is significant overlap between them, each has a unique form and distinct elements, many of which are problematic. Though the language in the films is perhaps less grandiloquent than in Koolhaas’s writings on the city, the combination of audio and visual material with his theoretical performance make for a provocative filmic engagement.

The HPC was started with the explicit intention to “identify which cities were changing most quickly and understand how they were changing.”⁷ Though the stated aims of the project seem commendable, the way material gathered by it is presented is problematic for several reasons. By looking at the books and films, I intend to clarify these problems.

Though garnering significant acclaim from the popular press and the design community, both *Mutations* and *Under Siege: Four African Cities* have been critiqued by a range of commentators for their numerous weaknesses.⁸ Geographer Matthew Gandy delivered perhaps the harshest and most precise blow in his essay “Learning from Lagos,” in which he systematically picked apart Koolhaas’s writings as aestheticized urban fantasies disconnected from history and politics.⁹ Unlike Koolhaas, Gandy took a historical perspective, writing, “The informal economy of poverty celebrated by the Harvard team is the result of a specific set of policies pursued by Nigeria’s military dictatorships over the last decades under IMF and World Bank guidance, which decimated the metropolitan economy.”¹⁰ Elsewhere, Gandy has pointed to the “African exceptionalism” such research entails, and warned of the “categories of ontological difference” it reinforces.¹¹

Other academics have been less thorough regarding Koolhaas’s work on Lagos, but equally dismissive. Anthropologist James Ferguson correctly paired the work with that of economist Hernando de Soto, who sees the informal economy as the result of “micro-entrepreneurs” using their inventive creativity, optimistically reconceptualizing the notion of the urban poor.¹² A different critique is

advanced by art historian Jean-Loup Amselle, who has argued Koolhaas sees African cities as “reservoirs of primitivism that provide an alternative to old cities in the North.”¹³ In the end, the critiques see Koolhaas’s research studio producing work which not only ignores historical and political concerns, but promotes an essentialist reading of the city that undermines its purported desire to invent a new vocabulary for speaking about cities. The authority afforded Koolhaas in the design community seems to dissolve when his work is held up to the lens of academic review outside the confines of the architectural discipline.

Not a stranger to film, Koolhaas made an independent film in the 1970s and wrote an unused script for exploitation film director Russ Meyer.¹⁴ The striking candor of Koolhaas in the interviews woven throughout the films is more revealing than the complex prose exhibited in the two Lagos publications. Perhaps most importantly, though, the films contain interviews with the city’s inhabitants, who have a tendency to undercut Koolhaas’s distanced narration and otherwise harmonious conceptualization of the city.

LAGOS/KOOLHAAS (2002)

In short, *Lagos/Koolhaas* is a film about first contact. Produced in 2002, it is told as a story of architectural discovery, an “encounter” between Koolhaas and something, he says, “I didn’t know anything about: Africa.” It opens with a split screen featuring a close-up of Koolhaas’s eyes hovering above the slums of Lagos, with the sounds of a city in the background (FIG. 2).

The visual display of this binaric opposition sets the stage for the later development of the plot. Koolhaas’s eyes are those of masculine Western modernity, whereas Lagos, tellingly situated under his gaze, stands in for Third World



FIGURE 2. Binaric opposition: the architect and the city. Image from *Lagos/Koolhaas* courtesy of Icarus Films.

urban dysfunction, disconnected from “normal” civilization. The film is a tale of this confrontation. Much like the travel writing critiqued in Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, the site of the film is this “contact zone” or space of encounter. Koolhaas’s detached tone throughout the film emphasizes the “anti-conquest” strategies of representation that Pratt noted in the writings of bourgeois travelers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In these accounts, there was a consistent attempt to distance the writer from the violence and subjugation of earlier missions of conquest. The alibi in these narratives was that the writer was always just “collecting data” or surveying the land.¹⁵ There’s a similar distancing in Koolhaas’s words.

The opening sequence concludes with a helicopter perspective over the city center, accompanied by an interview between the film’s director and the architect. Van der Haak asks, “Why Lagos, Nigeria?” To which Koolhaas replies:

When I started the Harvard Project on the City, I wanted to understand how cities were changing and which cities were changing most quickly. At that point it became really interesting to look at the city that was almost disconnected from the global system. So, it became incredibly exciting to learn to capture what was so alien, so distant.

The film compiles footage from interviews with Koolhaas and the director, scenes from Koolhaas’s appearances on a local television show, interviews with inhabitants of the city, and clips from a lecture Koolhaas gave in Lagos in 2002 as part of the *Documenta* series. It is loosely organized around a simplified narrative of the world-renowned architect visiting a city that at first seemed dysfunctional and chaotic, but improves during the short period of time that he’s there. By the end of the film, Koolhaas has learned to appreciate the city as a “self-organizing system.” He concludes by remarking that Lagos is an “extreme form of modernization, not some kind of African model.” And he returns to his earlier thinking about the inexorable socio-technical forces of modernization expounded in *Delirious New York* — Manhattanism exported to an African context. The open-ended fantasy world of Coney Island is superimposed onto Lagos’s informal marketplace.

While being interviewed on the Lagos talk show *New Dawn at Ten*, Koolhaas rather dryly explains how he “wanted to be the first to understand how [Lagos] works.”¹⁶ Again ignoring the fact that several Nigerian scholars have in fact already attempted to “understand how Lagos works,” he goes on to remark:

Lagos is a city of huge contrasts. It has elements of a modern city — skyscrapers, roads — but also a strong presence of the informal. We are fascinated by the self-organizing entities of Lagos, like the Alaba International Electronics Market. . . . Because of the deficiencies in the public sector, there are enormous initiatives taken by private organizations.¹⁷

Here Koolhaas rather seamlessly shifts from the traditional talking points of an architect to those of a neoliberal populist such as C.K. Prahalad seeking to entrepreneurially empower the world’s poor. Proponents of populist notions of eliminating poverty through profit see enormous potential in the vast population of marginalized laborers in the world’s informal economies. They celebrate the people’s economy and emphasize the incredible potential for wealth generation. Though Koolhaas’s research isn’t seeking to eradicate poverty, the language he uses to theorize Lagos is strikingly similar to that displayed in Prahalad’s *Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*. There, Prahalad wrote admiringly of initiatives offered as “a framework for the active engagement of the private sector at the BOP [Bottom of the Pyramid].”¹⁸ Similar to Koolhaas’s observation of the “deficiencies of the public sector,” Prahalad wrote of ways the BOP “can transform the poverty alleviation task from one of constant struggle with subsidies and aid to entrepreneurship and the generation of wealth. When the poor at the BOP are treated as consumers, they can reap the benefits of respect, choice, and self-esteem and have an opportunity to climb out of the poverty trap.”¹⁹ And what Prahalad characterized as “profitable win-win engagements” Koolhaas similarly characterizes as “total self-help effort[s].”²⁰ It is this optimistic casting of the entrepreneurial self and relentless faith in market mechanisms which animate both Prahalad’s and Koolhaas’s work.

Similarly, it is remarkable Koolhaas doesn’t mention the work of Hernando de Soto — considered the prime advocate of the informal sector’s “entrepreneurial spirit.” De Soto believes that it is through private property that assets can begin to take on a “parallel life as capital outside the physical world.”²¹ His ideas have been advocated by a range of economists and political leaders from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton to Nigeria’s Olesegun Obasanjo, who appears as a sort of administrative hero in Koolhaas’s Lagos films.²² Koolhaas’s disengaged position in regard to existing “entrepreneurial” literature can be read as either a scholarly oversight or a concerted effort to cast himself as an innovative theoretician of emergent conditions. Again, this question lies beyond the scope of this investigation. However, it is interesting to speculate whether Koolhaas is genuine in his intentions, or if the films indeed are a stage-set for a kind of ironic performance.

Koolhaas’s self-proclaimed fascination with the “self-organizing” entities at the informal Alaba International Market provides one of the more memorable and contradictory scenes from *Lagos/Koolhaas*. Koolhaas claims that his work is not “inspired by the need to discover ever more exotic, violent, extreme, urban thrills.”²³ However, the Alaba sequence seeks to provide an exciting representation of the power of informal markets, and it can easily be read as an ode to the “invisible hand,” and evidence for William Easterly’s belief that “the poor help themselves.”²⁴

In the film, Koolhaas comments that the research team’s first discovery was that of the “self-organizing processes of

Lagos: the ability of the population to take its fate into its own hands, and to survive on its own wits.” Paradoxically, Koolhaas’s observations fetishize economic activities, yet the subjects he studies seemingly have no means to meaningful political action. Instead, they’re diminished to simple economic actors in a city conceived as a giant “teeming marketplace.” He further casts this kind of activity as a bizarre never-before-seen phenomenon, further buttressing the false sense of novelty and African exceptionalism that undergirds many of his speculations. When speaking of Alaba to the television interviewer, Koolhaas comments that “those kinds of initiatives don’t exist in any other situation in which I’m aware of.” Urban informality certainly is not a new or localized phenomenon. This fact again calls into question whether Koolhaas is serious or simply trying to provoke his audience.

The Alaba scene depicts traders unloading unboxed electronics wrapped in plastic. Consumers carry off VCRs, stacked ten high, on their heads. A crowd gathers to take part in the excitement of the informal marketplace. Koolhaas comments that the market operates on “the sheer intelligence of the self-organizing system.” And the layered sequence ultimately builds to a rapid-fire display of images triumphantly set to the music of Carmina Burana, accompanying the video introduction to Michael Jackson’s 1992 Dangerous Tour displayed on a black-market television set. What is one to take away from such an ecstatic “unplanned” spectacle?

An interview with a manager of the market reveals that most of the electronics sold there are imported. He lists the countries — Japan, Singapore, Italy and Spain, among others — suggesting a vast transnational network of underground electronics trading (FIG. 3). A diagram in the *Mutations* essay refers to this same informal web as the “Alaba Pangea.”²⁵ But doesn’t this undermine Koolhaas’s characterization of Lagos as a city “disconnected from the global system”? What exactly is Koolhaas’s attitude toward planning?



FIGURE 3. *The Alaba Electronics Market has gained international recognition.* Image from *Lagos/Koolhaas* courtesy of Icarus Films.

In a separate interview with van der Haak, Koolhaas seems to suggest another contradiction, a counter-position to the market euphoria and skepticism about planning suggested in the HPC research, particularly that on display in the Alaba scene. He claims, “by the end of the nineties, the endless idolatry of the market had become irritating.”²⁶ This position directly contradicts the scene at Alaba and the earlier interview in which he marveled at the market’s ability to “organize itself” and create its “own system of law and order.” Van der Haak asks, “I thought that your starting point for looking at Lagos was your interest in a city that is not planned, a self-organizing network city?” Koolhaas responds at length:

In the early nineties, I was very skeptical about the value of planning — about what it could do. Lagos was a confrontation with that skepticism. Initially, I thought: yes, this shows planning makes no sense — it’s irrelevant. But now I’ve begun to see the subtleties in Lagos — that self-organization is inscribed upon an organized model of the city. There’s a weird interdependence between the planned and unplanned. . . . If you extrapolate current trends, there are many signs that show the world is going to be a horrible place. There are many reasons to believe laissez-faire is not the answer. So planning is becoming more interesting to me. It represents a cycle from skepticism to an awareness that we have to try to assume the role of planners, perhaps in a new way.²⁷

Koolhaas’s response is deeply contradictory. He seems to want it both ways: planning is both relevant and irrelevant. Koolhaas restates his faith in planning, yet fetishizes everything unplanned like the Alaba Market. One might reason that this contradiction relates to an unfair characterization of Koolhaas’s ideas by the film’s director; however, the distaste for planning that colors much of the written work continues into the documentary films. By the end of *Lagos/Koolhaas*, Koolhaas arrives at a new, perhaps hybrid understanding of Lagos. He puts forth a new “universal” theory of modernism, speculating that the future of all cities will have “a combination of the rigid and free.” He qualifies his exuberance for the market, remarking, “self-organization is inscribed upon an organized model of the city.”

In his book *The Architecture of Fear*, Nigerian planner Tunde Agbola (another scholar overlooked by Koolhaas) attempted to come to terms with another side of Lagos’s unfettered urban informality — violence. Unlike Koolhaas’s euphoric optimism, Agbola depicted hostile city residents fending for themselves and relying on survivalist mechanisms. Agbola wrote of “the social discord created by huge contrasts in economic well-being, that is abject poverty in close juxtaposition with great wealth.”²⁸ Other than mentioning his mobile position in relation to the “dangerous” city, Koolhaas avoids engaging the social reality of the city he’s

theorizing about. The physical manifestations of this violence are conspicuously absent in the analysis he arrives at from the cockpit of a helicopter or hanging out the side of a car. In contrast, Agbola conducted a thorough survey of households to investigate how urban residents cope with urban violence. What emerges is not a pretty picture:

The general appearance of most buildings in the low to medium density areas of Lagos is like that of fortress/strongholds. . . . In the areas around the house, strong assertions of territoriality were made through the building of fences of various types.²⁹

Though at times wearisome, the methodical fieldwork and documentation contained in Agbola's book provide evidence of an uneven urban geography constructed in response to patterns of violence. Its findings are consistent with historical antecedents, and it moves beyond a purely market-focused analysis. In short, it attempts to explain phenomenon, rather than uncritically accepting them at face value.

An alternative imagining of African urbanism can be found in the work of AbdouMaliq Simone. In contrast to the seeming pessimism of Agbola and the bizarre sanguinity of Koolhaas, Simone has developed the concept of "people as infrastructure."³⁰ This is a more nuanced, perhaps less dichotomizing, view of informality, one that balances a critique of structural socio-political and economic contributors to urban injustice with recognition of the improvisational creativity of the temporal social networks of African urban informality. As he has argued, "Seeing African cities only in terms of their colonial and post-colonial relationships, however, often makes them difficult to see how 'modern,' 'innovative,' and 'resourceful' they may actually be."³¹ He has also stressed the "ways in which African cities are productive," and operate under "a broad range of tactical abilities aimed at maximizing economic opportunities through transversal engagements across territories and disparate arrangements of power."³² Understanding these relationships, he has argued, is crucial in remaking Africa itself.

In contrast to Agbola's surveys or Simone's ethnographic perspective, Koolhaas's method of analysis can best be described as improvisational and impressionistic. He began his career as a journalist, and in many ways he seems to be returning to this as he develops a method for looking at Lagos. In an interview with van der Haak, Koolhaas explains, "We invented the method as we went along. . . . Of course, I have a method and a certain amount of objectivity. But in the end, I look at Lagos as a writer, and with the freedoms of a writer."³³

Koolhaas graphically summarizes this improvement in an absurd diagram displayed during the *Documenta* lecture featured in both films (FIG. 4). He goes on to explain the parabolic graph: "So for me, this is really the curve of our arrival. . . . We didn't know we were witnessing a rock-bottom moment. . . . And then what we are looking at since is a



FIGURE 4. The history of Lagos in a singular diagram. Image from Lagos/Koolhaas courtesy of Icarus Films.

degree of improvement in Lagos's fortunes."³⁴ By sheer historical coincidence, Koolhaas and his Harvard research team seem to have arrived at the precise nadir of Nigerian history. As he explains during a television interview:

Lagos is becoming more normal, more like other cities, much less dramatic. You can see it in certain areas, particularly on Victoria Island, that there is an attempt to make Lagos more like a typical city. Some of the extreme conditions have diminished; the traffic is flowing now, the airport is working. There are a number of recognizable urban conditions that are typical of other cities.

Again, Lagos is constantly referred to not by what it is, but what it is not. Though it isn't indicative of the Orientalist tendency to set the "other" apart in a timeless and exotic space, Koolhaas manages to maintain the positional superiority of the "normal" Western city by suggesting that the continuing development of Lagos is leading toward its possible future status as a "typical" city. He reasons with the interviewer that "there's a definite sense of improvement." Cleijne, Koolhaas's photographer, confirms this conception of an urban trickle-down effect: "There's proof that Lagos is changing. Not everywhere; it's spreading out from Victoria Island. Victoria Island now has pavement, the drainage system has been renovated." The concentration of these technical improvements in affluent areas such as on Victoria Island, of course, repeats a familiar colonial pattern. Gandy, for one, has described at length how colonial administrators operating under a "hygienist" discourse disproportionately concentrated infrastructure improvements in wealthy enclaves "to produce a cultural dualism between modernity and 'tradition.'"³⁵ I point this out not to belittle the progress discerned by Koolhaas, but to situate it in a larger historical legacy — a point which the HPC consistently neglects to do.

Another striking oversight in Koolhaas's pseudo-historical approach is the discussion of the relationship between Lagos and other cities, particularly Nigeria's seat of parliamentary power — Abuja. As Lawrence Vale pointed out in *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, Nigeria elected to shift its capital north from Lagos to Abuja in 1975.³⁶ The politics behind this move and its effects on Lagosian conurbation cannot be understated. The selection of Abuja was not just an ambitious creation of a new capital, but implied a denial of the existing one, which was deemed unacceptable by Nigeria's military rulers of the 1970s. Indeed, Vale argued that the northern elite “deliberately increased the problems of Lagos in order to marginalize the city and make inevitable the decision to move the capital.”³⁷ With the move there also occurred a shift in the flow of the nation's petroleum revenues from Lagos to Abuja. Without the resources to maintain its vast infrastructure, Lagos was, in effect, left to its own devices. Koolhaas's urban analysis, however, theorizes Lagos in isolation rather than as a relational product of a complex struggle for power and identity between Nigeria's “heterogeneous and fractious” population.³⁸

But the HPC's sparse use of history overlooks more than the effects of Nigeria's colonial administration and the post-independence decision to move the nation's capital. A particularly uncomfortable silence occurs during a scene at a football match sponsored by the oil company Royal Dutch Shell, at which a banner looms in the distance proclaiming “Shell Cup: Football and Education Hand in Hand.” Another factor triggering the “exploding city” Koolhaas set out to analyze is the massive influx of people dispossessed from their land in the Niger Delta by the ecological disaster wrought by the extraction of oil there. Indeed, David Harvey has called this process “accumulation by dispossession.”³⁹ All of this, however, fails to be indicated in the HPC work, and it is eventually subsumed in Koolhaas's zealous pronouncement of Lagos's projected population numbers: “Every hour, more than 50 people start their new lives in the African city of Lagos” is the opening graphic in *Lagos Wide & Close*. Never mentioned by Koolhaas is the fact that between 1975 and 2000, Nigeria earned almost \$250 billion in oil revenues. Yet during that time the number of people living on less than a dollar a day more than quadrupled from 19 million to nearly 90 million, and per-capita income declined by more than 15 percent.⁴⁰ An account of Royal Dutch Shell's role in this process of dispossession is beyond the scope of this discussion, but it has been thoroughly documented by other sources.

During the split-screen scene of the Shell-funded football match, television interviewer Funmi Iyanda talks about the necessity of making friends with a “big man” for protection in a city which lacks a “system which operates by the letter” (FIG. 5). As if oblivious to these stories of lived adversity, Koolhaas instead emphasizes “learning about new ways of living . . . as a spontaneous reaction to a changing city.” This disjuncture exists in both films, though is arguably more pro-



FIGURE 5. *The Shell Cup* (Lagos/Koolhaas). Image from Lagos/Koolhaas courtesy of Icarus Films.

nounced in the second, particularly in certain combinations of “interactive” viewing experience. If not to provoke the audience, why do van der Haak and Koolhaas decide to pair these images? Moments such as the one depicting the football match happen intermittently in the film, and lead one to question whether Koolhaas is actually ignorant of this relationship or if he's simply trying provoke the viewer. Because of the sheer number of tense moments, contradictory statements, and implausible gaps in knowledge, it is difficult to imagine that at least some these aren't intentional.

Watching *Lagos/Koolhaas* one is struck by Koolhaas's harmonic conceptualization of Lagos's urban dysfunction. Upon a closer reading of the film and Nigerian history, however, Koolhaas's conclusions about Lagos's informal organization seem even more bizarre and deliberately provocative. Inflected by a neoliberal understanding of market mechanisms and a disregard for socio-political conflict, *Lagos/Koolhaas* can best be understood as a film about an individual architect's experience with the city, rather than a historically situated documentary about a particular African city.

LAGOS WIDE & CLOSE (2004)

The second film, *Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City*, though constructed from much of the same footage as the first film, differs in fundamental ways. Largely an improvement on the first film, its most obvious additional feature is an interactive feature on the DVD which allows the viewer to choose between two camera angles: a “close” view featuring ground-level scenes of everyday Lagosians, and a “wide” view comprised mostly of aerial footage taken from the perspective of a helicopter. Michel de Certeau has made a similar distinction between the “walking city” and the “panorama-city.” As he wrote,

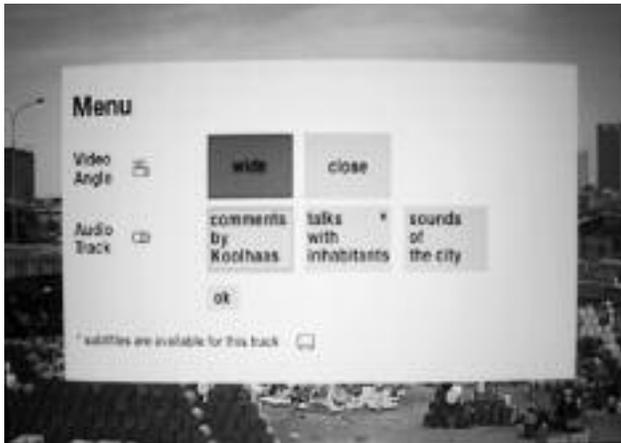


FIGURE 6. Menu page for an interactive journey. Image © Lagos Wide & Close, Submarine.

“The panorama-city is a “theoretical” (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and misunderstanding of practices. . . .”⁴¹ It can be said Koolhaas’s panoramic speculations in *Lagos Wide & Close*, much like his aerial musings in *Lagos/Koolhaas* commit the same “misunderstandings of practices.”

In addition to the choice of perspective, the viewer can select one of three soundtracks: Koolhaas’s commentary, conversations with Lagos residents, or sounds of the city. Altogether, there are six possible combinations of audio and visual material on the DVD (FIG. 6). Of the audio tracks, the commentary by Koolhaas is much the same as on *Lagos/Koolhaas*, though it’s assembled in a different order. However, many of the conversations with inhabitants and sounds of Lagos are unique to the second film. In addition, several scenes from the first film are conspicuously absent in *Lagos Wide & Close*, including the celebratory Carmina Burana/Alaba Market scene, a humorous scene in a hat boutique where Koolhaas claims to find a “definite sign of improvement,” and many of the interview scenes from the Lagos talk show *New Dawn on Ten*. As the booklet accompanying *Wide & Close* explains,

Lagos/Koolhaas is as much a portrait of the architect and his research methods. . . . But another, more personal interpretation of the city was embedded in the 55 hours of material [director Bregtje van der Haak] shot during her three trips to Nigeria. . . . If Koolhaas looked at the patterns of Lagos from afar and then zoomed in on the details, van der Haak started from within, letting personal encounters gradually reveal clues for deciphering the larger picture.⁴²

Though the description and experimental layout are promising, *Lagos Wide & Close* ultimately commits many of the same errors as *Lagos/Koolhaas*.



FIGURE 7. Kaleidoscopic urbanism. Image © Lagos Wide & Close, Submarine.

Another difference between the first film and *Wide & Close* involves packaging and graphic design. The packaging of *Wide & Close* is much flashier, capturing vast urban vistas from above and emphasizing the aesthetic dimension of Koolhaas’s proclamations about the city and the HPC’s findings. In particular, the design of the DVD menu screen, as well as the cover and information booklet, amplify Koolhaas’s conception of formal patterns seen from the “wide” perspective provided by a helicopter. And transitions between pages of the “interactive journey” provide a morphing kaleidoscopic patterning of the city (FIG. 7).

In critiquing the disjuncture between the urban dysfunction depicted in *Mutations* and that book’s slick graphic design, Gandy noted the “faint resemblance . . . to a giant Mandelbrot or perhaps a Deleuzian algorithm.”⁴³ This disjuncture and formalist understanding of the structure of the city is even more pronounced in *Wide & Close*. In many ways, the film can be seen as a more refined, yet programmatically separated version of *Lagos/Koolhaas*. Despite the film’s title, its design inevitably favors the “wide” perspective exemplified by Koolhaas, rather than the “close” perspective of the people interviewed. And because the audience is composed largely of architects and urban planners attracted by the star power of Koolhaas, a safe assumption is that not many viewers ultimately take in the film through the “close” camera angle or view to the film while listening to the “sounds of the city” track.

The “innovative” interactive layout, while at first seeming to provide a more open-ended depiction of city, also has the tendency to undermine the initial intention of the HPC to develop a “new conceptual framework and vocabulary for phenomena that can no longer be described within the traditional categories of architecture, landscape, and urban planning.”⁴⁴ By functionally separating the various layers of information, it sometimes contradicts the detached specula-



FIGURE 8. Selling bagged water. Image © Lagos Wide & Close, *Submarine*.

tions of Koolhaas. For example, as the viewer listens to Koolhaas wax poetic about the “definite sense of improvement,” the camera shows a fourteen-year-old boy, Ahmed, selling bagged water on the cramped highways of the city (FIG. 8). He earns about six cents per bag while bobbing and weaving through cars and trucks. In general, the “close” images undermine or provide potential misreadings of Koolhaas’s heretofore harmonious conception of a “self-organizing entity,” while “wide” images are similarly complicated by the voice of inhabitants. And the “sounds of the city” track largely remains impressionistic, doing little to alter the conveyed meaning of the image, whether “wide” or “close.”

Another disjuncture between form and content involves an interview with *danfo* driver Olawole Busayo. As he reveals the contested terrain of passenger transport, Koolhaas pronounces the spirited intentions of the HPC to broaden existing vocabularies to describe cities. These disjunctions operate in multiple directions with varying degrees of intensity, though they do tend to have the effect of undermining or complicating Koolhaas’s conceptualizations. Whether or not these semantic conflicts were intentionally staged by van der Haak or Koolhaas is highly unlikely, though their existence is intriguing. Ultimately, any nuanced reading of *Lagos Wide and Close*, like *Lagos/Koolhaas*, is subsumed beneath the narrative of the world-class architect confronting the “alien” and “distant” urbanism of Lagos.

FINDINGS

To summarize and underscore the problems of the HPC Lagos research, it is useful to make a list. The problems outlined above cluster around five themes which recur at particular moments in the articles and films. Before moving to a conclusion and discussion of alternative approaches, let me

quickly enumerate and describe these. The list is not intended to be authoritative or comprehensive; nor are its categories distinct. But it does help elucidate the issues.

False Novelty. In part of an interview featured in the second film, *Lagos Wide & Close*, Koolhaas baldly asserts that “Nobody has really looked at the combination of very big cities, like Lagos, and real poverty.”⁴⁵ This incredibly misinformed statement, supposedly explaining why he has chosen to study Lagos, is characteristic of the rest of the work. It seems to imply that no one has ever looked at Lagos seriously before. His extraterritorial excursion to Nigeria is framed as an innovative journey to an “exploding city,” proceeding as though the encounter with Lagos were unprecedented. Any reference to other scholarship on Lagos, African cities, or cities in general has either been ignored or muted as if to amplify Koolhaas’s wry sense of provocation, “emergence,” and innovation. In fact, the work produced by the Lagos studio shares similarities with multiple bodies of work, many of which aren’t new at all. Whether or not Koolhaas’s lack of acknowledgement of this work is intentional or not, again, is beyond the scope of this investigation.

Such avoidance of contemporary debates in African urbanism has the effect of delinking the research from the structural constraints faced by theorists like Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttal, and AbdouMaliq Simone. Instead, Koolhaas remarks that he is in “extraterritorial waters,” and would like to approach Lagos from a removed position, in much the same way he approached New York.⁴⁶ And elsewhere he claims, “it was clear that nobody really knew what was happening in Africa.”⁴⁷ Koolhaas’s pretense to theoretical originality when speculating on the urban future from Lagos ultimately proves unsustainable, though, in that he joins a growing debate about cities in the developing world.

The focus here is on the rhetorical effects of such an elision. Part of this investigation is to contextualize the HPC’s work, situating it in a broader field of discursive production and revealing its rhetorical congruencies. It thus aims to reduce Lagos’s exceptional quality and the pervasive sense of it as beyond comparison to “normal” cities.

Dehistoricized. Related to the Lagos Project’s sense of unprecedentedness is its odd relation to history. Mark Jarzombek has commented on Koolhaas’s “careless and almost comical use of historical evidence,” a characterization which can certainly be said to apply to the Lagos work.⁴⁸ Other than an acknowledgement of a period of “modernization” in the 1970s and a sense that the current project was being conducted during a period of transition in Nigeria to democratic rule, the city is otherwise taken *prima facie*. And any notion of Nigeria having endured centuries of colonial rule is nearly absent from the research, as are the effects of postwar “development” schemes initiated by the IMF and World Bank. Further, the city is seen in isolation from the history of other cities; as mentioned earlier, the oversight of Abuja’s relation to Lagos was a particularly serious one on the part of Koolhaas.

As Derek Gregory has astutely argued, it's imperative to contest these "amnesiac histories."⁴⁹ Much as Gayatri Spivak critiqued poststructuralist and Marxist philosophers for their "sanctioned ignorance" of imperialism and their own role in the production of ideology, this review of Koolhaas's research indicates how it proceeds with the same oversight.⁵⁰ Unaware that his musings have their own implications in economic as well as intellectual history, his speculations about Lagos's conurbation act as legitimized evidence for a particular entrepreneurial understanding of the urban poor. Again, whether or not Koolhaas intentionally avoids history (as he does existing scholarship) is beyond the scope of this paper. However, his lack of historical perspective subsequently makes it much easier for him to depoliticize the urban context.

Depoliticized. Tied to the absence of history is the HPC's cursory treatment of the city's political economy. Rather than engaging with serious analysis of the structural constraints and economic instability faced by the people of Lagos, Koolhaas chooses to revel in the city's explosive population growth and its ability to "self-organize" in spite of the presence of decaying infrastructure. Ignoring the underlying reasons for these conditions, Koolhaas's research is ultimately about surface appearances. Nigeria's violent geography of petro-capitalist development, and its poverty, slum evictions, and chronic ethnic strife, are quietly elided. Politics are drained from the analysis, and the agency of Lagos's inhabitants is narrowly conceived as their participation in the city's thriving informal economy.

In a strange syncretism, Koolhaas merges the apocalyptic vision of a city with inhabitants stripped of historical agency, epitomized by the work of Mike Davis, Robert Kaplan, or Patrick Chabal, with the neoliberal populism exemplified by William Easterly, Hernando de Soto, and C.K. Prahalad. The heroic entrepreneur is celebrated for his ability to navigate the enclave urbanism and "stinking mountains of shit" left behind in the wake of corrupt military regimes, structural adjustment programs, and trade liberalization.⁵¹

Describing Lagos's Alaba Electronics Market in utter fascination, Koolhaas remarks that it, "in a way, organizes itself — it has a chairman, and even its own system of law and order. Three days ago we watched a court case. There's even a small prison."⁵² The "self-regulating" quality of this system is fetishized, taking precedent over all other struggles, and the city is conceived as a homeostatic organic entity.⁵³ Koolhaas's photographer explains, "Because of the complexity there, you think, at first, that it's not organized. But there's an informal organization that you can see more clearly from a helicopter than from the ground."⁵⁴

The similarities to the Chicago School of Urban Sociology's conception of human ecology are striking. Burgess's "social ecological" understanding of the city's Darwinian metabolism is inscribed in his seminal concentric ring diagram.⁵⁵ Koolhaas's aerial view operates with the same organic and structural assumptions. The clarity of the dia-

gram, however, belies the violence which engenders it.

Exoticized. One of the problems with the exceptionalist position Koolhaas takes on Lagos is that it removes from possibility the explicit comparison to "normal," ostensibly Western, cities. Ignored in much of the popular globalization literature, Africa remains a space of "absolute otherness," counterposed to the liberating flows of the networked world system as "mute, abject, and otherworldly" and *beyond comparison*.⁵⁶

The HPC's take on Lagos does little to subvert this tendency. Though Koolhaas inverts the pathology prevalent in dominant modes of African urban analysis, his compensatory fetishism and romanticization of Lagos's urban ills does little to unsettle its status as a distinct urban other. In fact, it operates in much the same way.

As Edward Said famously argued, much nineteenth-century European culture "gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."⁵⁷ Koolhaas proceeds as a twenty-first-century Edward Lane heroically capturing the strange urbanism of this "alien" and "distant" city. His voyeuristic position in relation to Lagos seems to have learned little from intellectual developments in postcolonial theory over the course of the second-half of the last century. Speaking of his engagement with the city, he writes:

Our initial engagement with the city was from a mobile position. Partly out of fear, we stayed in the car. That meant, in essence, we were preoccupied with the foreground, and, at that time, Lagos had an incredibly dense foreground. . . . Lagos seemed to be a city of burning edges.⁵⁸

A photograph serves to demonstrate the detached relationship Koolhaas maintains with the city and its inhabitants (FIG. 9). One wonders who took the photograph of Koolhaas taking a photograph while hanging out of the side of a moving car? Was it someone from the Harvard research team? Koolhaas's syncretism of this apocalyptic outlook with a celebration of Lagos's informal survival mechanisms serves dualy to set it apart from the "normal" city, creating a necessary



FIGURE 9. Koolhaas's drive-by urbanism. Source: "Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos," p.174.

“other” by which to judge “normal” Western cities. In order to make sense of this disjunction, he devises a stratagem of “foreground” and “background,” or the “wide and close.” It is the “wide” or “background” view which allows him to retreat from an embedded understanding the city’s urban conditions. It allows him to more fluidly postulate the theory of Lagos as a “self-organizing entity.”

Institutional Framework. Lastly, the discursive boundaries which the HPC ostensibly set out to challenge ultimately end up reconstituted. The conscious move to study a city which had largely been overlooked by urban theory is admirable. It presents a challenge to the way knowledge about cities is produced, and it interrogates the discipline of architecture’s penchant for shutting itself from “informality.” However, because Koolhaas is unwilling to be self-reflexive as to his position in the system of architectural production, those institutional frameworks are reinforced.

Who provides the money for the research and the production of the books and films? How are these connected to Harvard and the Office of Metropolitan Architecture? Koolhaas “employs” graduate students at an expensive private institution to produce works in a neoliberal “informal” arrangement similar to those documented in the Lagos research. The lack of meaningful comparative thought between the production of space in Lagos and the West instead has the tendency to create an essentialized other, ontologically set apart.

CONCLUSIONS AND ALTERNATIVE WAYS FORWARD

So what is one to make of Koolhaas and the Harvard Project on the City’s work in Lagos? As the field of African urban theory continues to burgeon, what lessons can be taken from Koolhaas’s observations? As in *Delirious New York*, is the project simply another case of Koolhaas euphorically surfing the *Großstadt*, only this time off the coast of the Gulf of Guinea? So far, my assessment has been primarily critical. However, upon closer inspection the limitations of the research seem to suggest alternative approaches.

Koolhaas’s initial intuition to examine Lagos as a way of countering architecture and urban theory’s chronic Eurocentrism can be seen as a qualified success. If he hadn’t taken on Lagos, I, a Western-educated white male, arguably wouldn’t be studying it all. The celebrity status and institutional mechanisms behind Koolhaas and the HPC are seemingly able to generate interest in a diverse range of topics, Lagos notwithstanding. The resulting discourse, laudatory or critical of the project, has started to fill a gap in the literature about this city of 12 million inhabitants. It can be read as one of many contributions to the growing sense that architectural theory should address global practice rather than singular monuments in the Western world.

True to his earlier theoretical work, Koolhaas successfully “disrupts” the perceived autonomy of architecture as an internalized exercise separate from political or economic concerns. However, in the same breath, he reinforces formalist auto-generative understandings of the city when he describes it as a “self-regulating entity,” thus undercutting the initial disruption. As Gandy has pointed out, this approach can best be understood as “neo-organicist,” in that it repeats classic formalist urban imaginings.⁵⁹ Further, conceiving of Lagos as a “teeming marketplace” sheds light on how Koolhaas’s thinking about the metropolis fits with his older, more established understandings of architecture in relation to the larger processes of capitalist development and modernization. The similar enthusiasm for the emancipatory and open-ended possibilities of crisis moments in capitalism with that of neoliberal scholars is compelling.

In a perhaps unexpected way, Koolhaas’s speculations are not much unlike Marxist geographer Mike Davis’s hellish, but naturalized portrayal of a “slum ecology” and “urban involution.” Davis doesn’t put the optimistic spin that Koolhaas does on this condition, but the bird’s-eye perspective and troublesome sense of inevitability are pervasive in both. The reader/viewer is ultimately left feeling rather disempowered. What can one do but ride “the wave”? Whether it be the “stinking mountains of shit” in Davis, or the rapturous flows of commodities in a globalized economy in Koolhaas, one can only surrender when presented with the theoretical “panorama-city” in each. Both of these views, to borrow a phrase from Sarah Nuttal and Achille Mbembe, display “a certain failure of the imagination.”⁶⁰

A possible alternative to these views is put forth by another Marxist geographer, David Harvey, and his conception of the “insurgent architect” in *Spaces of Hope*. Looking to Harvey’s call for “courage of the mind” to imagine alternatives isn’t just an idealistic sidestep to the harsh realities posed in Koolhaas and Davis.⁶¹ In fact, it seeks to find an alternative which is more grounded in historico-political reality. Koolhaas’s tendency to overlook spatialized power relations and his omission of the shifting forms of political collaboration, urban social movements, and spaces of contestation in the city leaves his analysis ineffectual. Instead, the city is taken *prima facie*.

In an essay on Koolhaas’s writing on cities, William Saunders summarized the above point well when he described how Koolhaas’s weakness “can be understood as resulting from his unfortunate conviction that creative freedom, which he values above all, does not need to be engaged with otherness — that it needs, in fact, to be capricious, private fantasy *ex nihilo*, inscribed on a tabula rasa.”⁶² It is remarkable, or perhaps revelatory, that Koolhaas can apply his universal theory of an urban future which is “a combination of the rigid in free” so *inflexibly* in such diverse contexts, spatially and temporally. Koolhaas’s predisposition to generalize about cities and ignore the complexity of social practices he witnesses is ultimately quite frustrating.

In contrast, AbdouMaliq Simone's use of Henri Lefebvre's work in his article "People as Infrastructure" provides a much more convincing take on urban Africa. Acknowledging the tremendous constraints on Africa's urban residents, he is also able to indicate the intricately social space at work. Rather than receding into metaphors about "self-organization" or romanticizing the "freedom" at play in these contexts, Simone sought to highlight the heterogeneous social "linkages" and modes of organization required to make these spaces work, despite tremendous constraints. These "platform[s] for social transaction and livelihood" are by no means self-evident (indeed, they are often invisible), and require an engaged understanding of the urban socioeconomic context inaccessible from a helicopter or cursory site visits.⁶³

Regarding the use of the "research studio" as an alternative approach to traditionally conceived design-proposal studios, it remains one with immense, albeit risky potential, despite the missteps of the HPC. If the research generates nothing but hyperbolized conjecture from surface readings of an existing condition, the studio's promise quickly dissipates. Flyovers in a helicopter and drive-bys in a speeding car won't cut it. Theorist Kazys Varnelis has asked an instructive question of the "design studio": "How does it help us to re-envision the world anew?"⁶⁴ It seems a critical com-

ponent of any research studio, then — especially those undertaken by Western scholars in a non-Western context — that it should develop a deep understanding of the historical and cultural context from which the data is being collected. Perhaps worse than producing depthless readings of an urban context would be to unwittingly (or wittingly) replicate colonial legacies latent in the urban morphology. In this regard, the capacity for "drive-by" approaches to generate formalist, oversimplified misunderstandings of the city seems dangerously high and academically irresponsible.

The potential of the "research studio" is ultimately related to *how* the "research" is collected. Koolhaas and the HPC team's methods are unfortunately unconvincing. Yet they do open themselves to proposals as to how they might be improved. It's fitting that large portions of the films are devoted to interviews of Rem Koolhaas. If this relationship was inverted, and more ethnographic data were collected from residents in the city over a longer period of time, a more telling picture of how space is produced and contested could have been revealed. Put another way, the project contained too much of Koolhaas's "wide" perspective and not enough of Lagos "up close." Koolhaas's tendency to contradict himself and to make bold statements about the marked "improvement" in the urban fabric only serve to further undercut any knowledge he or the HPC may have produced.

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5. R. Koolhaas, "Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos," in O. Enwezor et al., *Under Siege: Four African Cities — Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos: Documenta 11, Platform 4* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), p.177.
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