

HOT AIR OVER LAGOS

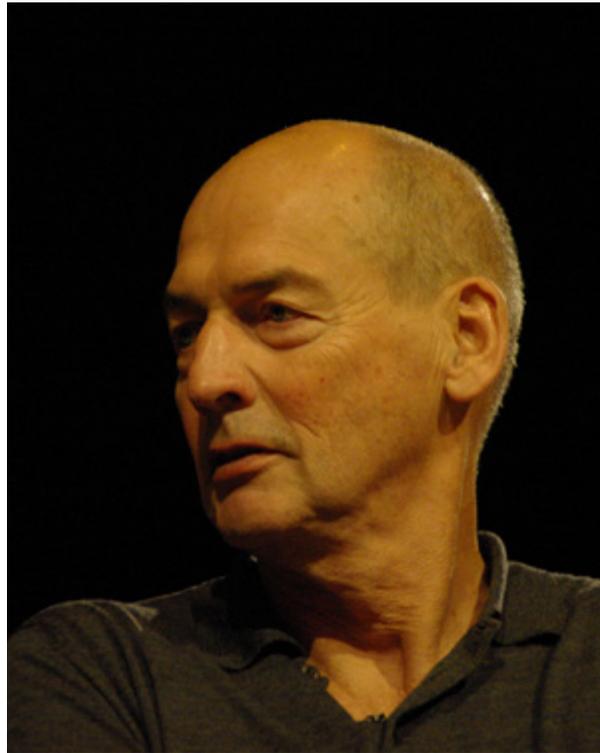
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Rem Koolhaas admits he knew next to nothing about Africa when he decided to investigate Lagos as part of his Harvard Project on the City (HPC). In fact it was partly that unknown that attracted him to Africa's megalopolis: "this forced me to confront something I didn't know anything about," he recapped in a 2002 interview, adding specifically about Lagos, "there was no established interpretation" (Koolhaas and van der Haak). Over the course of half a decade of research, his own interpretation eventually became that "Lagos may well be the most radical urbanism extant today, but it is one that works" (Koolhaas and HPC). In the decade since Koolhaas wrote that sentence, numerous Africanists have praised him for seeking to learn from an African city, while perhaps just as many critics have roasted the quite-literally broad perspective (at times from a helicopter) from which Koolhaas "confronted" Lagos, its people, and its history.

["Koolhaas, in his typical effect, has heated up debates over how to study Africa's growing cities and what conclusions to take away from those studies."](#)

With his completed manifesto on the city — *Lagos: How It Works* — still in limbo as he decides whether or not to publish its undoubtedly provocative content, Koolhaas's Lagos legacy remains up in the air. However, that the project has had, and continues to have, an immense impact on the burgeoning field of African urban studies is without question. Koolhaas, in



Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas at the 2 Moscow Biennale of Architecture, 2010 by Rodrigo Fernández. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

his typical effect, has heated up debates over how to study Africa's growing cities and what conclusions to take away from those studies. These debates are spilling over into real world implications at a pace far faster than posturing-prone academics are used to, and, as evidenced by the redemptive transformations Lagos has undergone since Koolhaas's Project on the City, Africa is not waiting for the dust to settle. This paper considers Koolhaas's study of Lagos and the scholarly papers in response to it, summarizing and evaluating their stances, and suggests that the disagreements are representative of and informative to a larger paradigm

shift well underway in the field of African and urban studies.

THE PROJECT

The story of Koolhaas in Lagos is a fascinating one. An international rock-star of an architect, at the spire of the architectural world (he would win the Pritzker Prize—architecture's Nobel Prize—in 2001 while in the midst of his Lagos project), decides to turn his attention to Sub-Saharan Africa—a region where the phrase "urban Africa" still carries oxymoronic connotations and where none of his buildings exist to this day—to a megalopolis at the height of its reputation as the world's most dangerous city—a city whose population had quintupled to New York levels, while its investment in infrastructure had plummeted to Boise, Idaho levels.¹ Yet for Koolhaas—who "started teaching at Harvard in order to be able to establish [his] own agenda"—the Project on the City was an opportunity to break free from the client-driven demands of the architectural market and to investigate what he considered to be a new and critical kind of urbanism (Koolhaas and van der Haak). He sensed that something novel was rapidly mutating in places like the Pearl River Delta of China (Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Macau, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai) and the Bight of Benin in West Africa, and suggested that these new urban centers could not be wholly captured by "painfully inadequate" architectural discourses that "perpetuate an image of the city which is essentially Western, and subconsciously insist that all cities, wherever they are, be interpreted in that image" (Koolhaas 2002, 175). According to Koolhaas, the HPC (begun in 1995) was an opportunity to develop that vocabulary, and from 1999 onward was a chance "to discover what we can learn from Lagos" (Koolhaas and van der Haak). In their ensuing study, Koolhaas

and his team of Harvard design school students sought to understand the city's "continued existence and productivity in spite of a near-complete absence of those infrastructures, systems, organizations, and amenities that define the word 'city' in terms of western planning methodology" (Koolhaas and HPC, 652). Eventually, they made dozens of trips to Nigeria over the duration of the project, wrote several articles sketching the skeleton of what they had learned from Lagos, and produced two documentaries depicting Koolhaas's wanderings through the city. Alas, his 580-page manuscript on Lagos remains unprinted, even though it has an Amazon webpage and an ISBN number.

What we are able to gather from these fragments? Although the articles, films, and interviews do not represent the complete version of all the evidence Koolhaas collected and thought about during his time studying the city, they do provide an idea as to how his thoughts progressed and to the big conclusions he took away from the project. Like anything with Koolhaas's fingerprints, there are contradictions and clever ambiguities throughout the project—as Okwui Enwezor (2003) has put it, "perhaps no other architect fits this mould of cultivated dissidency better than he does" (110).

In 2001—two years after Koolhaas's team turned their focus to Lagos—the HPC published their initial findings as a chapter in the book *Mutations*, which was comprised of a collection of essays reflecting on "the continuously accelerating phenomenon of urbanization." On the first page of their chapter, Koolhaas's HPC team laid out their principal tropes for Lagos. Their first point of emphasis was that Lagos "is still—for lack of a better word—a city; and one that works," even "in spite of a near-complete absence of those infrastructures, systems, organizations, and amenities that define the word 'city' in terms of Western planning

methodology" (652). Additionally, they set the tone that "anguish" did not define Lagos's "exuberant existence" and would not characterize their study. Instead, their more celebratory approach was one that sought to see past grieving for a city in crisis in order to uncover the "ingenious, critical alternative systems, which demand a redefinition of ideas such as carrying capacity, stability, and even order." By taking this bright-eyed road through Lagos, Koolhaas and his team distinguished themselves from Robert Kaplan's well-known 1994 article "The Coming Anarchy," in which Kaplan recoiled at what he found in Lagos and used the bleak vision he paints of its slums as a harbinger of the apocalyptic future awaiting mankind.

However, with regard to Lagos being ahead of the rest of the world, Koolhaas's team could not have agreed more. To them, Lagos was not "en route to becoming modern," or "becoming modern in a valid, 'African' way,"—an in vogue view around 2001 when Dilip P. Gaonkar edited a collection of essays entitled *Alternative Modernities*—but rather "a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity," (Koolhaas and HPC, 652). Pushing the point further, they argued that "to write about an African city is to write about the terminal condition of Chicago, London, or Los Angeles." This meant that to them Lagos suggested a "paradigm for [the city's] future," and, explicitly agreeing with Kaplan, was therefore a place that warranted "a new round of postcolonial 'exploration,' with different intentions [than those of colonialism and neo-colonialism] and a more intensive methodology" (718). To Koolhaas, Lagos was a future lab to be learned from.

The rest of the *Mutations* chapter reads like a collection of semi-disparate school reports, and it is likely that that is exactly what they were—write ups

by Koolhaas's team of Harvard architectural students on aspects of the city they had each researched (which would be the same format as the HPC's Pearl River Delta report). The various sections explore the city from a smattering of angles, using subtitles such as "property," "line," "wall," and "bottlenecked," as entry ways into the city's space. The chapter ends with a particularly well-developed few pages on the Alaba electronics market, which challenges stereotypes of Lagos as an isolated city detached from globalization, shining a light on just how interconnected Lagos is to other megacities such as Taipei, Moscow, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, and Dubai, where Alaba's vendors travel to buy secondhand electronics. One unifying thread through all the chapter's sections is their clear architectural, analytical emphasis on how Lagosians utilize space and material. Koolhaas's team of architects-in-training is insightfully perceptive in noticing when Lagosians utilize structures and material in the city, such as cloverleaf exchanges, train tracks, and roads, for purposes other than those that their designers intended, and they catalogue these spatial adaptations in ways other observers might have missed.

In 2002 Koolhaas followed up *Mutations* with the release of a documentary, *Lagos/Koolhaas*, and a short paper, "Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos," consisting of his admittedly essentialized summary of the project. These additions provided further contextualization as to how Koolhaas's ideas on Lagos had evolved through the development of his methodology. On the first trip, he and his team largely observed the city from "a mobile position," too wary to venture out into the city without the metal frame of the car as a barrier. From that vantage point, they were confronted directly with the immediate foreground of the city, which overwhelmingly had "an aura of apocalyptic violence" (175).



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On the second trip, as they moved out on foot into parts of the city that had initially looked like random, smoldering “giant rubbish heaps,” they started to see “very elaborate organizational networks” underlying the city—networks that “could organize incredibly efficient transformations of garbage in a highly structured way.” On the third trip, Koolhaas was able to rent President Obasanjo’s helicopter to aerially survey the city beyond the foreground, and “from the air, the apparently burning garbage heap turned out to be, in fact, a village, an urban phenomenon with a highly organized community living on its crust” (177). Counter-intuitively to the ethnographic sensibilities of many non-western scholars, for Koolhaas and his architectural eye, it was the trajectory of a broadening perspective that allowed him to eventually see Lagos as a conglomerate of “self-administered enclave[s] with strong rules and regulations that applied only within the parameter of those areas” rather than anarchic rubble.

In 2006 Koolhaas’s team released another documentary, *Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey*

into an *Exploding City*, of mostly recycled footage from *Lagos/Koolhaas*, but with the added feature of allowing the viewer to select whether to view the documentary from a wide perspective (helicopter footage) or from a close street-level view, and also to select the accompanying audio track: Koolhaas’s narration, interviews with Lagosians, or sounds of the city. This documentary seems to more representatively span Koolhaas’s myriad experiences and methods in the city.

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Before moving on to the reactions Koolhaas’s Lagos project received, a few points he made in a reflective interview in 2002 are illuminating as to what Koolhaas ultimately took away from the project. In the interview with Bregtje van der Haak (the creator of the Lagos documentaries), Koolhaas mused about his inspiration for the project, the sensations of being in Lagos, and, interestingly, how, as a result of his research on Lagos, he was coming around to a belief in planning, which he had previously written off as irrelevant during his years of endorsing post-critical commercialism. At first Lagos had reinforced his skepticism in the value of planning, but, in the interview, he recounted how he soon began to realize that the city would not work without the 1970s high modernist infrastructure projects created by the German macro-engineering firm Julius Berger—even if the people of Lagos used those cement and steel structures in entirely alternative ways to what Berger’s planners had intended. Koolhaas seemed to have arrived

at the resigned opinion that planning projects would always be imperfect and already outdated as soon as they were constructed, but that the alternative *laissez-faire* attitude (the path that he implied humanity is on) would lead to the world being “a pretty horrible place.” From this realization, he suggested “we have to try to assume the role of planners, perhaps in a new way.” What would this new way look like? Koolhaas did not pretend to have the answer, and in another book on the Pearl River Delta he summarizes his predicament that is paradigmatic of the 21st century planning experience:

The absence, on the one hand, of plausible, universal doctrines and the presence, on the other, of an unprecedented intensity of production have created a unique, wrenching condition: the urban seems to be the least understood at the very moment of its apotheosis. The result is a theoretical, critical, and operational impasse, which forces both academia and practice into postures of either confidence or indifference. (Koolhaas et al. 2001, 27)

It seems that for Koolhaas this dilemma called for more studies like the HPC to investigate emerging forms of urbanism in order to learn how new, persuasive, and credible theories for planning might be developed, suggesting that the foundation of these new theories would be an emphasis on sustained, embedded investigations of the people and cultures of the space to be planned.

THE REACTION

Immediately Koolhaas’s theories on Lagos had a polarizing effect. Enwezor recounts a visible illustration of this divide: “In a recent [2002] conference in Lagos, Nigeria, the full room was evenly divided between opposing camps of supporters (mostly enthusiastic young

students) and detractors (older observers, less sanguine about his theory of Lagos)” (110). Amongst scholars, the division was not necessarily split along age-lines, but the reactions nonetheless have been sharply divided. Nearly everything about the project has been contested, from the argument that Lagos works, to the idea that Lagos is indicative of the future, to the methodology utilized in the study.

Leading the detractors has been Matthew Gandy, an urban geographer at University College London, who published a critical article in 2005 entitled “Learning from Lagos” reacting to the “new attention” Lagos had been receiving “not so much from development specialists or Africa scholars but from high-profile convergence of architectural and cultural theory and critical urban studies” (37). He splits the new attention into two camps, with the first characterized by Kaplan’s “eschatological evocation of urban apocalypse,” and the second exemplified by the “far more upbeat” attitude of Koolhaas and the HPC (38). The first half of Gandy’s paper is dedicated to contesting nearly every aspect of Koolhaas’s study of Lagos, charging Koolhaas with both de-historicizing and de-politicizing the city by treating it with a “neo-organicist” approach of drawing on “cybernetic metaphors of urban space as a multiplicity of networks ‘rapidly expanding, transforming, and perfecting’” (39). Gandy’s interpretation is that Koolhaas views the explosion of Lagos’s population and the accompanying plummet of infrastructure development as “simply an act of nature,” which sets up the rest of Gandy’s essay dedicated to what he might call a more realist interpretation of the city, historicizing and politicizing its underdevelopment from colonial through recent times (42). He explains how Lagos, like much of the third world, suffered from the structural adjustment “recipe for mass production of slums” in the mid

1980s when small scale farmers could no longer make a living and sought better opportunities by moving to Lagos in droves, while soaring interest rates simultaneously bankrupted the government and halted development programs (49). The resulting proliferation of informal economies were what Koolhaas and his team found in the early 2000s, and Gandy writes: “Like other admirers of the informal economy, Koolhaas seems to ignore its highly hierarchical, often coercive structures, and does not differentiate between the mini (or even major) entrepreneurs and traders on its summit and the mass of those barely surviving at its base” (47).

Gandy seems to have been severely put off by what he considers to be Koolhaas “marveling” at how Lagos works, and draws the cynical conclusion that for Koolhaas, “it is the city’s ability to sustain a market that is the sole signifier of its health” (52). Additionally, in keeping with his “realist” approach, Gandy does not agree with the “dubious logic” that Lagos is ahead of other cities, writing that “this is to occlude the fact that the very extremity of Lagos’s deterioration over the past quarter century has been linked in inverse proportion, to the capital accumulated in Chicago, London, and Los Angeles” (42).

Several other scholars have augmented Gandy’s critiques in the years since. In a 2010 paper entitled “Lagos, Koolhaas, and Partisan Politics in Nigeria,” Laurent Fourchard praises Gandy as “probably the author who has most undermined [Koolhaas’s essentialist] vision of Lagos,” and goes on to flesh out the argument that Koolhaas de-politicizes Lagos, elaborating on the political causes for the underdevelopment of the city that he believes Koolhaas ignored (41). He concludes by stating that the three (domestic) political reasons for Lagos’s underdevelopment are the independence era leaders’ obsession with expensive modernization projects that

only benefited a small portion of the city, the financial neglect of Lagos after the federal government decided to move the capital to Abuja, and the continual antagonism between the federal government and Lagos State. Like Gandy, Fourchard sees Koolhaas as neglecting the complaints of Lagosians and being deaf to the conflicts over the city’s space: “If Koolhaas’ [sic] team has tried in a way to rehabilitate the Lagos informal economy, their perception is a romanticized rereading of the history of the city which underestimates the ceaseless denunciation by Lagosian [sic] themselves of the successive failures of their mass transportation and housing systems” (53).

Commenting specifically on the aerial photographs that Koolhaas included in *Mutations* and “Fragments,” Tim Hecker (2010) joins Fourchard’s criticism in arguing that “it raises the question of to what extent this representational strategy promotes a fidelity to the subject matter, in this case the citizens and the city of Lagos, by portraying a city through an aesthetics of immensity and the apocalyptic sublime” (256). He proceeds to describe the images as “a de facto celebration of poverty” and a “dystopic voyeurism of the contemporary megalopolis” (258).

To add one more example of criticism, Joseph Godlewski’s 2010 article, “Alien and Distant: Rem Koolhaas on Film in Lagos, Nigeria,” chimes in specifically with regard to van der Haak’s documentaries on Lagos, arguing 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” (8). He goes on to expound on the aforementioned criticisms, emphasizing that Koolhaas had committed the error of doing “little to

subvert” what Godlewski considers the tendency to counterpose Africa as “mute, abject, and ‘otherworldly’ and *beyond comparison*” to the rest of the globalized world (16). These four authors represent the strongest criticism Koolhaas has received.

Evidently, raining ire on Koolhaas’s Lagos research has been a popular paper prompt for the past decade. But was the criticism entirely deserved? All of the above mentioned papers were well written and thoughtful, but this essay suggests that they were excessively critical of Koolhaas and the HPC.

There is no question that the rhetoric Koolhaas uses to describe his project and Lagos is at times extremely off putting, such as when in *Lagos/Koolhaas* he insults previous scholarship both within Nigeria and in universities around the world by saying sans irony that he “wanted to be first to understand how the city works.” Other moments in the articles and films are just as cringe-worthy, as Koolhaas seems at times oblivious to the respect and deference expected of a European male trudging around an African city and talking about the city as he might discuss New York, quipping things like, “when [Lagos] gets itself organized it will be extremely powerful,” that come off as insensitive to the colonial and neo-colonial legacy of exploitation and malicious neglect (Koolhaas and van der Haak). Another area of warranted scrutiny is his notion that cities like Chicago, LA, and London are “catching up with Lagos.” This bold idea inverts the teleological conception of Africa as lagging behind western advancement, but what Koolhaas has released so far only presents the idea in a superficial, provocative manner, leaving the assertion (purposefully?) ambiguous as to whether Lagos is the “terminal condition” of capitalism, civilization, urbanism, or something else. Certainly these aspects of the HPC are irksome and imperfect.



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However, the relentless claims that Koolhaas disregards poverty, history, and politics are likely overblown. Perhaps Koolhaas brought this criticism on himself with the brash, attention-grabbing language of claiming to explain “how Lagos works,” which implied a far deeper theory and investigation than the one he has provided to date (*Lagos/Koolhaas*). But the critics lose sight of the fact that Koolhaas and his team of Harvard Design School students turned to Lagos with an architectural perspective, searching for insights into how the city “works” from a built environment point of view—how the city spatially and materially accommodates its millions of residents. To interpret the study as attempting an existential explanation of how Lagos operates on all levels is an easy way to construct a straw man. Koolhaas acknowledges that “of course politics plays a huge role,” but his project was not a political scientist’s investigation into the political structures underlying the city (Koolhaas and van der Haak). Whether or not Koolhaas is blind to the suffering of the city’s poor might be countered by asking whether the somber “realist” accounts of Gandy and Fourchard are

blind to the agency apparent in Lagosians’ ability to innovate and organize the space around them in spite of the powerful economic and political forces acting upon the city. Whether Koolhaas’s approach flattens out the multitude of Lagosian actors will be briefly addressed in the conclusion, but his work studying the strategies of people on the ground can undoubtedly illuminate untapped potential and inform future planning projects.

In the conclusion of Godlewski’s article, he pauses and breaks out of the Gandy and Fourchard hyper-critical discourse, writing:

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 architectural 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 moments in the Western world. (16)

Godlewski’s last minute epiphany into the broader significance of Koolhaas’s project invokes the alternative ways other scholars have chosen to more



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enthusiastically welcome the project, emphasizing first and foremost the significance of an international trendsetter deciding to learn from an African city. This is not to say that these scholars have been uncritical of Koolhaas, but rather that they have been more inclined to guide and supplement his research rather than to rebuff and ridicule it.

For example, in a 2007 essay documenting the innovations and adaptations of Nollywood, Jonathan Haynes, after summarizing Gandy’s criticisms, argues that Koolhaas needs to be “given [his] due” for making the “point that existing vocabularies and analytical frames of reference from urban planning and other disciplines are trapped in an almost entirely negative contemplation of Lagos’s deficiencies and failures and are inadequate in showing how things actually operate” (132). Haynes perceives the value of studies of African cities that do not proceed with a presumption of finding crisis and failure but rather seek to learn from African innovations and adaptations. Similarly, AbdouMalik

Simone, one of the foremost thinkers of African urbanism, tacitly acknowledges Koolhaas with the first line of his influential 2004 book, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*, in which he suggests that it is time to reassess the conventional notion that “African cities don’t work” (1). In doing so, Simone looks deep into the “specific social, political, and economic practices” of four African cities, suggesting in Koolhaasian fashion that these practices “might act as a platform for the creation of a very different kind of sustainable urban configuration than we have yet generally to know” (3, 9). Likewise the expert of Kinshasa’s urbanism, Filip de Boeck, strikes an appreciative tone in this passage:

Le travail de Koolhaas a eu un mérite important, il a rendu la ville africaine visible et digne d’être étudiée à un niveau précis, et il a aussi jeté les bases d’une discussion plus large entre architectes-urbanistes, sociologues, anthropologues et démographes. Dans son analyse de Lagos, il survole la ville avec le regard d’un oiseau, un regard froid mais aigu, pour y déceler un grand nombre de points névralgiques au niveau des infrastructures et y dessiner les flux des hommes et des transferts.

Koolhaas’s work has had a significant merit, it has made the African city visible and worthy of study at a precise level, and he also laid the groundwork for a broader discussion between architects and urban planners, sociologists, anthropologists and demographers. In his analysis of Lagos, he flies over the city with the perspective of a bird, a cold but sharp look, in order to detect a large number of nerve centers in terms of infrastructure and in order to map flows of men and movement. (3)

Yet de Boeck also does not hesitate to note that although “Koolhaas portrays a chaotic city of several million people without wanting to import foreign solutions,” he does so “without holding a deep understanding of what, in this apparent chaos, is implemented through local strategies and mechanisms to go beyond mere survival” (3). This is an important issue for future researchers that requires further consideration beyond this paper.

Jean and John Comaroff (whose son Joshua Comaroff was a member of Koolhaas’s HPC team that wrote the chapter for *Mutations*) have perhaps been the scholars to most comprehensively theorize the significance that others have sensed in projects like Koolhaas’s. In the introductory chapter of their 2012 book, *Theory from the South: Or How Euro-America is Evolving Towards Africa*, they put forth the thesis implied by the first half of their title that the global south—the area most affected by the structural violence of neoliberalism—should be looked towards, not solely as the victim of that violence, but as an ex-centric hub of alternative theories grounded in those experiences that are “producing and exporting some ingenious, highly imaginative modes of survival—and more” (18). The *Euro-America is evolving towards Africa* half of their book’s thesis cites and expounds on Koolhaas’s idea of Lagos being ahead of the west, fully elaborating Koolhaas’s vague proposition into a more nuanced (“partially parodic”) theory that warns against swallowing the notion of “alternative modernities” too easily, as this platitude avoids accounting for real geographic inequalities created by “the inherent propensity of capital to create edges and undersides in order to feed off them” (11). Here the Comaroffs agree with Gandy’s assertion that Lagos’s current condition is indeed connected in inverse proportion to the capital

accumulated in Los Angeles, London, and Chicago. However that reality does not prevent them from making the “pointedly provocative” argument that the global south is “ahead” of the global north. Rather the fact that the global south—as a frontier for neoliberal experiments—feels so many of the impacts of neoliberalism before the global north reinforces their argument that the global south is ahead of the curve (for better or worse) and is thus afforded “privileged insight into the workings of the world at large” (12, 1).

CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of whether one considers Koolhaas a callous interloper or a post-colonial visionary, the Nigerian art critic Okwui Enwezor is right that “no one can deny the fact that Koolhaas’s ideas have left a huge impact on our thinking” (118). As demonstrated in this paper, numerous reactions have been penned in response to Koolhaas’s endeavors in Lagos, and his terminology of a “city that works” (and its subsequent variations such as Simone’s suggestion that African cities are “works in progress,” and the title, *Lagos: A City at Work*, of a 2005 collection of essays and photos of contemporary Lagos) and of “a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity” have been imprinted on the lexicon of the discipline. This fact is particularly striking because, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Koolhaas knew little about Africa before founding the HPC.

But what is there to take away from Koolhaas’s Lagos project and the deluge of responses it attracted? Again to quote Enwezor, who has written the sharpest essay considering Koolhaas in Lagos, “we may perhaps notice the remarkable paradigm shift that drives Koolhaas’s recent *Project on the City*, first elaborated in the *Pearl River Delta* research, then in *Shopping*, and recently in *Lagos*” (113). This paradigm shift of

examining exploding metropolises as grounds of innovation and creative strategies and theories rather than as just the impoverished tragedies of structural forces seems to be precisely the implication and significance signified by the robust reaction to the project. Koolhaas turned his architectural eye to Lagos at an auspicious moment (or perhaps in his opinion inauspicious, as he has seemed defensive of the scrutiny his project has attracted)² when a paradigm shift was already under way within the field of African—particularly urban African—studies (and more broadly within ethnography and anthropology as suggested by Enwezor). Koolhaas’s writings and documentaries therefore served as a high profile reference point to bring these shifting assumptions and methodologies into a wider discourse. Subsequently, a good deal of hot air was generated over Lagos by scholars such as Gandy, who did not seem to grasp the larger implications for Koolhaas’s study and the compelling reasons to supplement it rather than refute it in entirety.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gandy, Hecker, and Godlewski do not have geographic specializations in Africa, and as a result were oblivious to these larger implications of Koolhaas studying Lagos. While all of their papers contained valid critiques, they were not what could be considered “constructive criticisms.” After charging Koolhaas with de-historicizing and de-politicizing, their own attempts to recount the history and politics of the city treat Lagosians as voiceless victims in a narrative of domination. While the Comaroffs agree that Africa along with the rest of the broadly defined “South” have borne the brunt of neo-liberal, anti-theory politics, they also suggest that historical narratives of domination are misguided, in that these histories further marginalize the people of the global south in removing their agency from what has always

been a dialectical historical process. There needs to be further research to form a deep understanding into the people of Lagos and their particular, long histories, including the process of how they have imagined and created alternative systems of infrastructure sometimes out of recycled materials and other times through communal connections as described in Simone’s essay, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg.” Without learning from this deep, localized archive of knowledge, future solutions will always consist of external models for solutions that are imported into the city from elsewhere. Again, as the Comaroffs make clear, neo-liberalism’s powerbrokers will always be willing to supply vulnerable regions with deceptive models that extract wealth and leave behind pollution and scarcity.

The mushrooming of new, detached cities from scratch in much of Africa—funded by international investors to create protected enclaves for businesses and wealthy elites—points to the most recent external “solution” for African urban areas. Meanwhile, authors such as Philip Harrison (2006) supply another vision of urban planning in Africa, one in which planners are deeply embedded within communities and engaged in “border thinking” in order “to reconcile, or at least engage with, alternative ways of seeing and thinking, and produce new and creative fusions” (332). It is this kind of vision that could potentially provide a framework for how, as Koolhaas wrote, “we have to try to assume the role of planners, perhaps in a new way” (Koolhaas and van der Haak). African cities might then become places not to serve the market but to serve their inhabitants, as the attractiveness of cities is that they provide the density and concentration of knowledge to create systems that efficiently respond to the needs of their citizens.

With Africa's urban future accelerating forward at historic rates, there is little time to over magnify the errors of Koolhaas and his team when much more constructive work could be done to supplement and encourage more influential international figures to learn from particular African modes of adaptability and innovation. However this is not to blindly follow Koolhaas into the cockpit, as several authors mentioned in this essay have lauded the overall symbolism of the project, while still critiquing him in an affable way that does not detract from the project's greater symbolism. Careful consideration of the implications of what is learned from African cities is required; there is legitimacy in Gandy's warning that Koolhaas ignores hierarchies of power and flattens out the people of Lagos. Additionally, as James Ferguson cautions, neo-liberalism is capable of appropriating this trend of valuing informalities in grotesque ways such as assuming that informal markets can support unemployed laborers. Nonetheless, with these cautionary points noted, this paper urges more headfirst Koolhaasian dives into African cities, helicopter optional.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Based on the Lagos State Budget Data for the year 2000 as reported in the 2007 World Bank Report entitled *Nigeria, Lagos State: State Finances Review and Agenda for Action* (chart on page 39), which calculated the total expenditure for Lagos State to be 26.209 billion naira, which equaled approximately 304.826 million dollars (around 400 million dollars in today's value). This is only 50 million more than Boise Idaho's (a city of around 200,000) 2013 budget of 350 million, as published on page 2 of the "Executive Summary" of the City of Boise's FY 2012/2013 Two Year Budget.
- 2 See Rem Koolhaas (2012), "Letter to the Editor" in response to Martin Filler's article "The Master of Bigness."