



PROPERTY OF AZURE MAGAZINE

**TRAFFIC STALLS  
BECOME MARKET  
STALLS ON THE  
BRIDGES OF THE  
WORLD'S FASTEST  
GROWING CITY**  
TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY  
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# LAGOS GOSLOW

Lagos is the modern mega-city of sub-Saharan Africa, a metropolis of between nine and 15 million people, depending on who's counting and where they draw the lines. It is gaining 3,000 new residents every day." The United Nations has estimated that in eight years the population of this Nigerian megalopolis will reach 23 million, which would make it the third-biggest city in the world. It is a high-contrast place, where computers are sold from stick-built kiosks that have no electricity, and multinationals make piles of money from informal streetside stalls. When it comes to business, Lagos is the equivalent of Jorge Luis Borges' Aleph: a point in the world that contains everything. It is impossibly polluted, impossibly crowded, impossibly annoying, impossibly haphazard.

This vision – of Lagos as the urban nadir, the most vile, squalid, and criminal place on the planet, site of government corruption and source of annoying scam spam – has long dominated writings on the city, and has even been parroted with pride by Lagosians themselves. In contrast, Rem Koolhaas, who spent four years researching the city, has put forward a less desolate, more nuanced view – seeing Lagos as an often self-built and organic conurbation full of social messages. Lagos, Koolhaas says, has much





**LEFT** THE EKO BRIDGE, BUILT BETWEEN 1965 AND 1975, HAS HAWKERS ON ITS UPPER SIDE AND THE 700 MERCHANTS WHO MAKE UP THE ABASSA ALAKORO SHOE AND BAG MARKET UNDERNEATH IT. **RIGHT** JUST A FEW HUNDRED METRES AWAY, THE CARTER BRIDGE IS A 15-YEAR-OLD METASTASIZATION OF THE NEARBY IDUMOTA MARKET.

to teach us about the future of cities and the evolution of their structures. He admits that Lagos is “a zone of incredible frictions.” But, he says, “even without organization, it is already really powerful.”

Lagos is discordant and degraded, and the city’s infrastructure is appalling. The power that Koolhaas alludes to comes from the people, not the city’s built form. Lagosians are too busy to worry about their city’s place in the global urban prospect. They make their way, nonetheless, as they occupy every centimetre of public space for commerce.

“The informal economy in Lagos takes down all the boundaries of what you would normally associate with the city – the street, public/private, tree, house, road, everything,” says Papa Omotayo, a director of O + O Architectural Design, based in Lagos and London, and a member of the British architectural collective Bukka. “The demand for economic activities takes over everything.”

Nowhere is this more apparent than on the two principal bridges that link Lagos Island, the city’s oldest settled section, with the mainland of Nigeria, where the mass of residents live.

Great bridges change city life. The Brooklyn Bridge, which linked America’s biggest city to its fourth largest city when it was completed in 1883, helped pave the way for the unification of New York into one metropolis 15 years later. The Confederation Bridge finally brought Prince Edward Island, Canada’s one totally offshore province, into the fold. In Lagos, the bridges have changed the city, certainly, allowing it to grow out of its original island

base. But the city has changed them, too. Lagos’s Eko and Carter bridges are not notable design achievements. These neighbouring crossings over Lagos Lagoon have no looping cables or ornate girders. They are functional concrete and rebar platforms balanced on pilings sunk into the muck.

The Eko and the Carter carry thousands of cars, trucks and buses every day – most often snarled in massive jams locals call go-slows. But that is not what makes these bridges so central. The people of Lagos, as in unrestricted capitalist embryos everywhere from eastern Europe to the Pearl River Delta, have acted with utter disregard for what urban planners might say, and have cobbled together a marketplace where the mass of people is. So these bridges, with their stopped cars and trucks making much of the Lagosian population a captive audience, have become shopping centres.

Carter and Eko, utterly transformed from their original intent by the will and needs of the people, are the haphazard African versions of two more-famous bridges: the Ponte Vecchio in Florence and Istanbul’s Galata Bridge. These crossings were designed equally for commerce and for transport. The Eko and the Carter were made for traffic, but they have become vehicles for commerce.





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**YOU NEED TO DESIGN NEIGHBOURHOODS THAT ALLOW PEOPLE TO TRADE ON THE STREETS WITHOUT CONTESTING WITH CARS. THIS WORKS A LOT BETTER THAN POURING CONCRETE SOMEWHERE AND EXPECTING THE INFORMAL MERCHANTS TO OBEY SOME KIND OF GOVERNMENT RULES**

Poultry, has been operating in the shaded underbelly of the Eko Bridge for 20 years. Though much more crowded than it was two decades ago, this wholesale and retail market remains primitive. There's no electricity here, so merchants buy blocks of ice, which they place at the bottom of massive old iceboxes that insulate the chilled birds from the heat. As Segun spoke, several men outside his small stall slung a hairless white goat carcass on top of one of the freezers, which they had covered with a large piece of brown cardboard. As several of them began debating the price, one of them sharpened his knife.

The market rents the space from the Nigerian government, paying 1.4 million naira a year, or a little less than US\$11,000. Yet despite that official recognition, Adeleye admits that his primary business is actually against the law. Like many local vendors, he smuggles his goods into Nigeria from the Republic of Benin, to the west.

Adeleye likes doing business under the bridge. It is a secure and shaded environment – perfect, he says, for birds. But he wants modern accoutrements, electricity and refrigeration, so he can build his business. The government, he suggests, should renovate the bridge as a better place for commerce.

Despite the vitality of these markets, the state government would very much like to wipe them out. "This is all going to change soon," says Francisco A. Abosede, commissioner of the Lagos State Ministry of Physical Planning and Urban Development. "We have a master plan based on the same principles as Shanghai's."



THE THREE BRIDGES – THE EKO, THE CARTER AND THE LONG THIRD MAINLAND BRIDGE – THAT CONNECT THE ORIGINAL ISLAND OF LAGOS TO MAINLAND NIGERIA ALLOWED BOTH THE CITY AND ITS ECONOMY TO EXPAND EXPONENTIALLY.





**LEFT** THE IDUMOTA MARKET IS HOME TO ALL MANNER OF RETAILERS AS WELL AS IMPORTERS, EXPORTERS, AND PRODUCERS OF THE WORLD'S THIRD-LARGEST FILM INDUSTRY, KNOWN INTERNATIONALLY AS NOLLYWOOD. **RIGHT** ABOUT 80 PER CENT OF LAGOS'S RAPIDLY INCREASING POPULATION IS AFFILIATED WITH THE CITY'S INFORMAL ECONOMY, GOING TO WORK IN MARKETS LIKE THE ONE ON AND UNDER CARTER BRIDGE IN A CHAOTIC MERCANTILE ENVIRONMENT.

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The Carter Bridge is the older of the two, dating from the British colonial era. Named for Sir Gilbert Carter, the governor of Lagos when the bridge was built in 1897, the bridge quickly became one of the city's chief commercial thoroughfares, with 2.6 million people crossing during an average year at the start of the 20th century.

The Carter Bridge rises from Idumota, a crowded market district on Lagos Island that is home to thousands of import/export businesses, a bewildering array of retailers, and even many of the producers of Nigeria's famed Nollywood videos (Nigeria's film industry ranks as the world's third largest, behind Hollywood and Bollywood). The narrow streets of Idumota have long been thick with street merchants, and, metre by metre, lane by lane, over the past 15 years or so, they have taken over the bridge.

Six days a week (most of Lagos's street sellers rest on Sundays), hawkers seize a lane of the bridge in both directions. All they need is a blanket or a piece of cardboard or a plastic tarp on which to spread their goods. There is no particular order to where they set up shop: you can find baby shoes butting up against tiny packets of razor blades, a man selling carrots that are soaking in a bucket of water squats next to a woman selling underwear, who is

next to a mother and daughter hawking flashlights. As the workday progresses, the bridge gets an added influx, becoming a bus depot as well as a public marketplace. Scores of battered yellow buses known as *danfo* and *molue* (*danfo* are van-sized jitneys; *molue* are the size of larger school buses) take over two additional lanes of the bridge. The one lane that remains open swarms with pedestrians and *okada*, the city's ubiquitous, unregulated motorcycle taxis.

The turmoil of the Carter Bridge reveals a key fact about Lagos: the informal sector is the most dynamic and fastest-growing part of the city. Eighty per cent of the people who live in Lagos work in the informal economy, which accounts for more than two-thirds of Nigeria's gross domestic product. This gives informal workers unusual economic power: about US\$125 billion worth. The unemployment and the massive social upheaval and misery that would exist if the thousands of people who immigrate to Lagos every day weren't able to find work could quickly lead to social and political anarchy. The informal sector is what holds the country together and what determines its shape. These bridges are not just connecting Lagos, they're supporting it.

The Eko Bridge, a few hundred metres away, was built between 1965 and 1975 and takes its name from the ancient Yoruba word for "the city." Its commercial tenants are not on it but underneath it. The 700 merchants of the Abassa Alakoro shoe and bag market do business beneath the sloping ramps that rise over Lagos Island. Across the span on the mainland side, in an area called Ijora Olopa, Segun Adeyeye deals in chickens. His firm, Faith Frozen





Abosede says his agency is embarking on a long-term plan to rid the city of many of its informal marketplaces. If he has his way, one by one these street markets will be replaced by high-rises and malls containing thousands of stores and parking spaces. Noting that hawkers and itinerant outdoor merchants congregate where density is greatest, and even block the streets to create the density, the commissioner declares, "When we get the right land use, we will definitely get rid of the street traders." His threats are not entirely empty ones. The Social and Economic Rights Action Centre, a local community organization, estimates that more than 12,000 residents have been evicted since 2005. Nationwide, more than 1.2 million people have been forcibly displaced since 2001, often without warning or compensation.

Architect Papa Omotayo, however, suggests that modelling the city on Shanghai is a misguided effort that is typical of development in Lagos: "People are looking at things in other parts of the world and just plopping them down here with complete disregard for the urban fabric and how the city is developing."

While he doesn't want to glorify the cacophonous markets ("It's too easy to look at the chaos and see it as a random order of beauty," he says), Omotayo thinks the informal "is something that needs to continue to be a part of Lagos." But he urges the city "to create niches, little nooks and crannies" where "people are given a choice of whether to seek out the informal or not." Indeed, Omotayo says, when he's travelling around the city he rarely thinks of going to stores to run errands: "You don't think about

going to a shop. You think there's going to be a guy just down the road in the next few minutes who you can buy from."

Ayodele Arigbabu, who writes a Sunday column on architecture and development for the magazine supplement of Lagos's popular *Guardian* newspaper, takes an even tougher position. "Government is fond of doing this kind of stuff, but it's not going to work," he says of the push to drive out the informal markets. Arigbabu suggests that the city must accept the informal street invasions. "You need to design neighbourhoods that allow people to trade on the streets without contesting with cars for control of the road. This works a lot better than pouring concrete somewhere and expecting the informal merchants to obey some kind of government rules. The idea of incorporating the informal into private or public architecture is flawed. We are trying to organize the unorganized. It exists as the informal sector because it's chaotic."

The message for anyone trying to figure out how to build and develop Lagos is that balance is critical. If you don't let the informal into new designs, the city will atrophy. At the same time, if you formalize the informal, it will wither, and the city with it.

So what is to be done? One answer lies in encouraging and promoting small and seemingly haphazard solutions rather than proposing big-bang redevelopment projects.

For the Carter Bridge, this would involve studying how to accept and even expand the market while providing more lanes for traffic. One possible





LEFT ARE THE GO-SLOWS MADE SLOW BY THE MARKET THAT HAS GROWN UP AROUND THEM, OR IS THE MARKET SIMPLY CATERING TO AN ALREADY ANARCHIC TRAFFIC SITUATION ON THE CARTER BRIDGE? RIGHT WITH THE CITY SET TO BE THE WORLD'S THIRD LARGEST BY 2015, AD HOC CENTRES LIKE THE CARTER AND EKO MARKETS WILL HAVE TO BE AT LEAST PARTIALLY ACCOMMODATED WITH ARCHITECTURAL INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT A TOTAL BREAKDOWN.

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method of opening the bridge to traffic without restricting commerce would be to allow the market to sprawl across the entire span, rather than the half it currently occupies. Another way forward might be to take a lesson from the Ponte Vecchio and Galata Bridge and come up with designs that would refurbish and expand the walkways across the bridge to make more room for commerce. A third, more invasive, approach – floated in the 1970s by David Aradeon, professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Lagos – would be to tear down the crossing and replace it with a twin-level suspension bridge with a commuter rail spur (interestingly, this would bring the Carter closer to what it looked like when it opened, when it included a tram line that linked the island to the mainland). Just downstream at the Eko Bridge, such contextual planning would involve doing what Segun wants: investing in infrastructure to make the businesses more apt to modernize.

Lagos's many ad hoc marketplaces remain its signature urban achievement, and they seem unlikely to be dislodged from the transportation hubs where they have formed, no matter what government officials may like to think. The mind-bogglingly massive market at Oshodi, for example, developed around a highway overpass similar to the Carter or Eko bridges – and it

is unlikely that merchants there will want to move. In fact, in the middle of July, one portion of Oshodi, the Kairo market, was bulldozed by authorities. But within three days, the destroyed wooden structures were being replaced by stronger metal ones. There's also the interchange at Mile 2, a major crossroads on the western edge of the city, which has spawned an outdoor auto market and a sprawl of assorted kiosks in, around and under its ramps – and no attempts to drive them out have succeeded. In Lagos, commerce has followed the bridges across the highways, and has spread all over the city.

This story of two bridges is the story of modern Lagos. Traditional planning and architecture, ruled by developers and rational uses, would strip the city of its character, possibly its livelihood, and certainly its central place in global thinking on the evolution of urban spaces.

"It makes so much planning sense to move the markets out of Lagos to the fringe of the city," says Tuoyo Jemerigbe, a director of James Cubitt & Partners (a firm based in London with branch offices in Lagos and across Africa, the Middle East and Australia.) Then he pauses, seeming to visualize his city without its markets. "The funny thing is," he says, "I think that the same sort of density that has attracted all those informal businesses would grow up again." Though they may be troubling from a planning perspective, Jemerigbe senses, spontaneous markets like those on and under the Eko and Carter bridges will continue to thrive because they are indispensable parts of the city: "I don't know what Lagos would be without them." **AZ**