to change those professional roles. There is an increasing need for dialogue, interpretation, and mediation among professionals, and the idea of the architect’s work as a loftily enlightened and despotic creation is increasingly unsustainable; the documentary plays a key role in introducing the complexity of urban forces and players that must be taken into account in urban projects.

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Notes
2. I had the privilege of being contacted by Jacobo Sucari when he began filming the documentary, in connection with some texts of mine he had read and that were in line with his position. From that interest came my own connection to the film. My texts are La arquitectura de la ciudad global (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2004) and “Privatización del espacio público: Diagonal Mar, Barcelona,” in Jordi Borja, ed., La ciudad conquistada (Madrid: Alianza ensayo, 2003).
3. For a real-time open communication and information platform on the Can Ricart conflict, see http://canricart.info (accessed 5 May 2009).
4. 22@Barcelona is an urban renewal project that seeks to transform two hundred hectares of industrial land into a new technology industrial zone. At the beginning of the project, it was seen as an opportunity to upgrade the whole neighborhood, creating a mixed-use and dense area, joining new activities to the existing ones. Nowadays, more than seven years after it was presented, the inhabitants are feeling defeated. Strange and new buildings have been built, but perhaps a few for daily life. Instead, large corporations were installed there with no relation to the place—a kind of generic and global city growth that erases much of the identity of the place. See http://www.22barcelona.com (accessed 5 May 2009).
5. For a real-time open communication and information platform on the Can Ricart conflict, created and coordinated by Josep Saldana, see http://canricart.info (accessed 5 May 2009).

Bregtje van der Haak, director
Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City

That is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos.1—Rem Koolhaas

Lagos, the former capital city of Nigeria, was for Rem Koolhaas an ideal case study for examining what happens when urban planning fails in a metropolis long expected to collapse under its immense weight but that has remained surprisingly resilient and dramatically alive. Skeptical of city planning in the early 1990s, and in need of a site where his skepticisms could be tested, Koolhaas found Lagos attractive because while there were traces of systematic organization in the form of extensive roadways and bridges constructed decades ago, what kept the city going and what marked it out as perhaps the model future city were the self-organizing, unregulated entities and spaces whose existence depended on the city’s notorious structural dysfunctionality. It is the logic of these zones of organized autonomy within the larger scheme of unruly, apocalyptic urbanization that the Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City by Bregtje van der Haak takes as its subject. This film is a documentary on Koolhaas’s adventure into one of the ten most populous cities—a city that is mysterious because of its dearth of systematic accounts and forbidding of the proliferation of its dreadful news. Much of the film’s material was generated in the course of the Koolhaas-directed Harvard Project on the City research on Lagos, part of an ambitious, multicity study motivated by the desire to come to terms with the processes of massive, runaway urbanization and its implications on architecture and urban planning.

Van der Haak shares with Koolhaas the curiosity to understand how a city like Lagos works. She combines video footage and Koolhaas’s commentary with the voices of eight inhabitants of Lagos who in various ways participate in the production and sustenance of the self-organizing entities so crucial to the architect’s theory of Lagosian urbanism.2 However, Wide & Close is not obsessed with producing a narrative account of the city. Rather it paints an incisive, witty, yet impressionistic and unfinished portrait of Lagos, although the resulting picture ultimately tells the viewer more about what makes aspects of the city work, and in some ways heightens the mysteriousness of Lagos, perhaps the world’s biggest unknown metropolis.

Shorn of any overriding narrative, one crucial subplot in the film is a fragmentary account of a day in the life of Olawole Busayo, a resident of Mushin in the Lagos mainland.3 Busayo works twelve hours a day, six days a week driving a danfo—one of Lagos’s ubiquitous yellow minibuses—along the Ojuelegba-Oshodi-Ikeja routes and struggles mightily to earn enough to pay for the bus rental and to support his wife and young child. The film begins in a dark street, possibly in Mushin, lit only by the filmmaker’s harsh lights. As it sweeps through the scene, it illuminates a satiric scene of fast-paced pedestrians, a streetside food vendor, children fetching water from a well, and vehicular traffic, including a danfo, possibly Busayo’s own, heading off for the day’s work. In a sense, this opening scene sets up the underlying theme of the film: the failure of planning and infrastructure (evident in the badly paved street, and absence of electricity and potable water) and residents carrying on with their lives in spite of their depressing living conditions.

The camera follows the bus, then pans out from this close shot to a wide overhead, then aerial view of streets, bridges, chaotic bus terminals, narrow streets densely hedged by big houses with rusting tin roofs, and roads clogged by endless lines of static yellow buses. In his running commentary, against the background of street noise, Koolhaas explains his motivation for studying Lagos: his curiosity about a metropolis largely unknown to the West and apparently disconnected from global networks. Toward the end of the film we see Busayo at the Alpha Beach on a Sunday evening enjoying his drink and beachside noise with friends. At one point a youth approaches the camera, declaring
in affected American accent, “This is New York City, baby!” and swaggers into the evening darkness.

As he tells it, Koolhaas’s initial encounter with Lagos—its unpredictable, ever-present dangers and frightening conditions, as well as its illegibility to a newcomer—soon gave way to a better understanding of how it works. What first seemed like complete urban chaos, expansive dumping grounds, and snarled traffic, all of which mark what he refers to as “friction zones,” turned out to be “intensely emancipatory zones.” Bridge underpasses, originally intended by city planners to be vacant lots, are occupied by highly self-organized networks of traders and entrepreneurs responsible for sorting and recycling garbage or refitting used metal drums for resale to businesses. What the film does not make apparent, however, is the fraught relationship between these autonomous networks and the city government, specifically the ever-present threat of forced removal of these violators of proper land use by city officials and law enforcement agents, often if adequate bribes are not paid up. These constantly negotiated relationships between official and unofficial visions about urban land use are the primary, if less obvious, friction points that ultimately are responsible for the peripatetic, precarious existence of the emancipatory zones Koolhaas discovered in Lagos. One crucial example is Oshodi Junction, the notorious commercial and transportation hub rightly described in the film as “the most extreme place in Lagos.” Its imponderably chaotic vehicular and human traffic, Koolhaas observes, turns out on close inspection to be a “deliberately engineered situation,” that makes for a most efficient use of space rather than a site of crisis. Clearly the city government did not share Koolhaas’s admiration for the uniquely proficient space utilization by Lagos mobile traders, for in January 2009 it resembled a ghost town, with unoccupied roads, rail lines, and bridge underpasses. In the wake of this campaign, the local news features residents denouncing the city government for its lack of sympathy for those too poor to afford the rent for shops in designated markets. As such, the proliferation of these emancipatory zones is inversely proportional to the city’s ability to promulgate proper urban planning; one exists where the other does not.

One of Lagos’s more captivating self-organizing networks represented in Wide & Chloe is the Alaba International Electronics Market, arguably the largest in Africa, with an estimated annual turnover of more than 2 billion dollars. The market, established in the late 1970s, consists of more than 50,000 traders who either privately own shops or are apprentices to the owners. Alaba’s autonomy arose, for the most part, from the need by predominantly Igbo traders—who control the trade of auto parts, electronics, and textiles in the city—for security, given rampant armed robbery, marauding alaye boys (street gangs), and a long history of harassment by landlords and native Lagossians anxious about the economic influence of “immigrant” Igbo from Eastern Nigeria. Overseen by an executive body of elected officials, the electronics market (a key component of the Alaba Amalgamated Traders Association) has elaborate private security arrangements, including its own prison, and is responsible for provision of utilities. Yet, its market is never free of pressures from the police, government officials, armed robbers, and street gangs attracted by the immense wealth circulating therein. Although Alaba traders, with the help of scouts sent to Asian and European locations, are constantly informed of new products in the global electronics markets, the market is also a hub of second-hand appliances. In the film, a large shipping container had just been opened with stevedores unloading old television sets that would be sold or recycled in shops Koolhaas poignantly described as “technological abattoirs.”

In another sequence devoid of commentary, the camera pans through a scene with women sorting items from huge open-air mounds of used electric irons. One of the women, speaking in low tones to her mate in Igbo, refers to the film crew as “CNN people,” and expresses her anxiety at not being able to see how her image would be incorporated into the news. This unscripted moment brings up the question of representational power of the observer/filmmaker, given its similarity in tone, method, and raison d’être to normative anthropological inquiry. Moreover, one cannot but note also that the combination of Koolhaas’s fascination with Lagos as terra incognita; his attempt to understand how it works; to be the first European architect to systematically describe it (in films and publications by the Harvard Project on the City); and the framing of his spectatorship/readership as exclusively Western recalls the methodological scenarios of classical and colonial anthropology. In the film, Koolhaas deflects Van der Haak’s question about the relationship between his method and that of anthropology, stating that while he has a method and “a certain amount of objectivity,” he looks at Lagos with “the freedoms of a writer.” The challenge for the viewer is figuring out which of his observations about Lagos benefits from his methodological objectivity and which from his authorial freedom.

One of the more frustrating aspects of Lagos Wide & Chloe, which questions its status as a systematic documentary, is the recurrent disconnect between Koolhaas’s commentary and the film’s footage. Scenes are not identified or explained, leaving the arduous task of figuring out relationships between their sometimes startling juxtaposition of scenes to the viewer. For instance, no attempt is made to contextualize the transition from a chaotic traffic jam, with their emancipator zones of children selling items at traffic stops, to a surprisingly quiet location with lush greenery and paved roads with expensive cars dropping off uniformed school children, then to a noisy recycling zone under one of the bridges in the mainland. Van der Haak may have intended these passages of the two Lagoses—one in which very young children must work as street traders, and thus exposed to the dangers of the urban jungle (one of these, a fourteen-year-old water seller whose brother disappeared while street-trading, is included in the film’s eight voices), and the other inhabited by wealthy Nigerian and expatriate Lagossians in expensive Ikoyi and Victoria Island. The
and other essential urban infrastructure, and bridge girders, power transformers, and vandalization of street lamps, road manifests in the residents’ routine removal of individual agency.\(^5\) This fraught relationship is considered inimical to civic order—complicated by official corruption—of the city—weakened by the needs of impoverished residents for whom basic survival trumps any consideration of proper use of land or urban infrastructure. The truth, of course, is that in real life the boundaries between planned and amorphous, formal and informal, proper and rude Lagos are never clear, as the busy intra-traffic trading scene along Kingsway Road, Ikoyi shows in the film.

Like Nigeria, most of the residents of Lagos operate outside the official economy, thus making any kind of meaningful planning virtually impossible. Statistics on population or unemployment are the stuff of mythology. Only a tiny minority in Lagos can claim to be indigenes in a country where town and state of origin is the most important spatio-cultural and political locus of individual identity. Thus most residents see the city as a place of opportunity for self-advancement, and where civic order—complicated by official corruption—is considered inimical to individual agency.\(^1\) This fraught relationship manifests in the residents’ routine removal and vandalization of street lamps, road and bridge girders, power transformers, and other essential urban infrastructure, and city officials’ occasional destruction of illegal residential neighborhoods and commercial zones.

The longest sequence of the film focuses on perhaps the most spectacular of the self-organizing networks identified by Koolhaas and Haak: Sunday service at the Winners’ Chapel owned by Bishop David Oyedepo, one of Nigeria’s most successful evangelical pastors. Located at Ota in the northern outskirts of Lagos, the church’s sprawling real estate, Canaanland, includes its incredible 50,000-seat church, nursery, primary and secondary schools, as well as its 6,000-student Covenant University. The church also has its own independent power supply, security and traffic wardens, and is proudly debt-free.\(^6\) At the end of the service, several large sacks of money are hauled into a minibus by church security as cleaners sweep the grounds and arrange the seats for the next service with the kind of efficiency alien to official Lagos. This is what Koolhaas finds attractive. “It makes manifest,” he says, “the gigantic scale, the capacity to organize, and the incredible power that is latent in Nigeria. If something like the Winners’ Church can happen, then it’s also possible for the city to decide to completely reinvent itself in five years.”\(^7\)

It is impossible to not be impressed, as Koolhaas ostensibly was, by the scale of the Winners’ Church, the savvy of its pastor, and the efficiency of the organization’s operations. Yet, his use of the church as a model for the city’s reinvention is dubious and also pulls apart the strings of his theory of Lagos urbanism. Like many of the new-age Pentecostal churches, the fortunes of Winners’ Church are inextricably tied to the power of the bishop’s charisma. In Nigeria the civilian and military political elite are often beholden to the powerful pastors, and the impoverished masses are of course captivated by the promise of prosperity and refuge from the world outside Canaanland. The success of the church is indicative of the failure of the state and the city. Moreover, the same conditions that make Canaanland attractive make it impossible for any emancipatory or friction zones—the very spaces and processes that make Lagos unique, according to Koolhaas—to exist within its borders. In other words, were it possible for the city government to successfully emulate the efficiency of Canaanland, Lagos would become, alas, a normal city in which things work.

The unsettled shifts between Koolhaas’s skepticism for rigorous urban planning and his fascination for autonomy of individual action, and also his tacit recognition of the ineluctable conflict between desire for order and fantasy for subverting visions of the city, is what makes Lagos Wide & Close not so much an attempt to understand how Lagos works, as a powerful testament of Koolhaas’s unresolved, perhaps irresolvable, philosophical meditation on the work of the architect and urban planner in the wake of rampant, extreme urbanization.

One wonders why there was no voice of Lagos-based independent and government architects and urban planners in Wide and Close. It would have been rewarding to hear, for instance, what the city planners (particularly the Office of Physical Planning) or architect-scholars like David Aradeon, John Godwin, and Gillian Hopwood, whose work has focused on Lagos for several decades, had to say about the metamorphosis of the city and the processes that led to the transformation of well-planned areas such as FESTAC Town into the impossibly rundown habitations replete with Koolhaasian...
emancipatory zones of today. To be sure, a juxtaposition of the city planners’ voices (not just that of the police) with the reality of Lagos’s intractable development would have made quite evident, as Margaret Peil has argued, the limits of official planning, particularly in a city distressed by limited resources and unmanageable population pressures.8

The picture that emerges from Lagos Wide & Close is a difficult one, and this has to do with Koolhaas’s judgment on the city. Coming on the heels of the transition to democracy after years of military dictatorship, the film seems too enmeshed in the euphoria of the moment of its creation.9 In speaking about a Lagos dramatically revitalized and made much better by a new democratic dispensation, it did not consider that the city has actually seen so many such temporary mood changes, the positive spike often occurring at the beginning of a new government, military or civilian. It happened, for instance, in the early 1980s, when upon coming to power, the Buhari military government’s War against Indiscipline program and clean-up campaign forced—as it turned out, temporarily—civility and general cleanliness on the city. A visitor at the time would have probably given the kind of assessment Koolhaas made twenty years later.10 Moreover, it seems that in the four years or so it took to complete the Lagos research, Koolhaas, like many a new Lagos resident, eventually got used to its madness. In a 2002 TV interview, the host, Fumi Iyanda, asked him: “Did Lagos truly change? Or could it be that you simply got used to Lagos?”21

Notes
2. The DVD has a menu of three hour-long sections: the first, “Wide,” is the documentary proper, with commentary by Koolhaas; the second, “Close,” consists of discussions about the Lagos experience by eight Lagos residents; the third is the sounds of Lagos. The package also includes a very informative booklet with profiles and headshots of the eight residents and interviews with Koolhaas (and the photographer Edgar Cleijne) by Fumi Iyanda, the host of the Lagos TV show “New Dawn at Ten,” and by van der Haak.
3. Danfo, are, along with the more menacing big molue, the dominant means of transportation in Lagos. 4. See the Lagos Wide & Close DVD booklet, 20.
5. On this aspect of Lagos, Margaret Peil has written: “The flexible and infinitely divisible communalism makes it difficult to predict what will happen next, except that face-to-face groups will always concentrate more on their own than on the public good. This is important for most aspects of urban life, since it can never be assumed that residents will cooperate with plans or obey laws, even when, in principle, they approve of them. The therefore continue to trade and park at their convenience, bribe policemen, avoid taxes, publish libels, build houses without permission and generally get on with business as if the wider community does not matter, while expecting government to provide efficient services as minimum cost.” See Margaret Peil, Lagos: The City is the People (London: Bellhaven Press, 1991), 194.
7. Lagos Wide & Close, 22.
8. Peil, Lagos: The City is the People, 165.
9. Most of the film footage and sound recordings for the documentary were made between 2001 and 2002.
10. Lagos governments have over the years demonstrated a penchant for short-term crisis management rather than for executing sustainable plans and, as Margaret Peil has argued, “One’s perspective [on Lagos] tends to depend on what has happened recently to encourage optimism or pessimism.” (My emphasis.) Peil, Lagos: The City is the People, 165.

Figure 2 Alaba international electronics market; still from Lagos Wide & Close