**Nigeria's slums**

**A journey to the heart of Lagos**

Jul 31st 2012, 19:32 by O.A. | LAGOS

WE TURN from a prosperous street in suburban Lagos into an alley that's barely wide enough for two people to pass through, and enter another world. This is Makoko, a district built on stilts sitting a few feet above the shallow lagoon that dominates Nigeria's commercial capital. Fishing families have lived here for more than 120 years and grown to a community of more than a quarter of a million people, neglected if not despised by the city's more affluent residents.

Steve Adji is a giant of a man, dressed in a brown cloth shirt and wearing a black skull cap. His eyes are bloodshot. As the community's traditional leader he has had a tough time recently. In mid-July some 100 officials arrived and chopped down dozens of the wooden houses that line countless canals. "They gave us just two, three days notice, said we should go back to where we come from. But we were born here," he tells your correspondent by the muddy edge of the water. He led his people in a demonstration to the Lagos governor's office and eventually secured a meeting with him but has little hope of winning a permanent reprieve. "The governor promised us schools and hospitals at election time and we voted for him," he says. "Nobody ever mentioned we would lose our homes."

He complains that the governor wants to create a city that looks like London. "But this is Africa." It's tempting to point out that Britain's capital didn't always look like the place that is now being shown off on television screens around the world.

We get into a canoe and are punted along a narrow channel, passing by hundreds of...

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wooden shacks perched above the water and occasionally connected by feeble-looking bridges. Thumping music is evidence that power runs in wires strung overhead. A family paddles by on their way back from one of the local churches; the three young daughters are dressed in identical white silk dresses. We cross channel after channel, eventually reaching a watery thoroughfare.

Chief Adji greets and admonishes residents drifting past or sitting on their wooden porches. We pass a half-finished wooden boat the size of a two-storey house, apparently for fishing and trading on the high seas, then a vast lady with an extravagantly large straw hat and a baby stuck to her ample chest—her canoe is filled with cases of beer, evidently a floating tavern. Traffic is heavy now and several craft bump into each other. Passengers laugh.

Some of the barges moored in the channel are covered with tarpaulins. Chief Adji explains that families who lost their homes live on them now. All that's left of their former dwellings are stumps in the water and floating debris. Apparently city officials will be back to finish their work. They have orders to clear this strategic strip of coastline. Lagos needs room to expand.

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Denato Aug 10th, 15:31

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In Brooklyn we use hipsters to get rid of “ugly” poor people from our neighborhoods. All you need to do is build a café serving “fancy” coffee with free wifi and the hipsters will come with their Che Guevara T-shirts and bad art to chase these “ugly” people away. Its cheaper than promising schools and hospitals and more politically palatable than bulldozers and police officers with truncheons. Only by transuding these trust fund kiddies into Makoko will Lagos’ ever enjoy their Venice and make these “ugly” people disappear without notice. It is certainly just terrible to have to sip our coffee and enjoy our croissants with the foulness of the beggared ilk. Goodluck Lagos!

**rXxA79CBZm**  Aug 10th, 10:27

why is the colour of the lagoon that dark! how come pictures from SSA always look like this!

**Reigal**  Aug 6th, 13:10

Why can’t it be like Venice or Bangkok then? Is Mr Adji onto something when he says “this is Africa” implying the lack of certain something that is stopping us from becoming or behaving like the rest of the world?

If yes what is that ‘certain something’?

**bluntcons**  Aug 3rd, 09:19

It amazes me after years of experience that the best way to improve peoples’ living standards in urban slums is to give them ownership or rights, we have a government saying that no respectable society can be expected to tolerate people living in such conditions, and so we should pull it down. What happens to the people? re they now better off because they have nowhere to live at all. As we have seen the shacks, looking worse than ever, are mushrooming on the wreckage. Nigeria, with its enormous wealth needs to think about better solutions. How about involving the residents in developing permanent homes above the water, encouraging economic development with tourism to floating markets as in Bangkok, support to the educational and health establishments set up by the people. After forty years in the business of trying to encourage integration of the urban migrant so that they become wealth producing, tax paying citizens, this sort of action shows a total ignorance by the decision makers. Its simply a disgrace!

**amanuensis**  Aug 2nd, 03:32

Across the border, in the Republic of Benin, there is a similar colony on stilts. Yet, the authorities there have turned the place into a tourist attraction. Hundreds of boatmen and hawkers make a livelihood by ferrying around the tourists among the huts and selling local products. Lagos authorities could probably have taken a lead of Benin’s experience book.

**Der Perfesser**  Aug 2nd, 03:20

Every time I visit Nigeria (I am somewhat involved in some mining companies) I visit the Lagoon City. This article has not given this city justice, and its description is lacking. It implies it is a ‘fishing village’. Nonsense, it covers an area larger than
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Venice. And from the economic point of view just as interesting.

Lagos is divided into two zones - the dry land, and the lagoon, where all the houses are on stilts and the people move between them by boat. There are regular (and cheap) water taxi services to the dry land. It grew because 'land' is cheap, actually free, and the houses are actually built on stilts, or land is built up on plastic bags filled with soil and garbage. The commerce and economy there is thriving.

As an economist I could wax ecstatic for hours. Essentially the dwellings are 'economic rent' free. That puts a lot more money in the pockets of the inhabitants. Cost of boats? The relative cost compared to bicycles is low, they carry a lot of goods and people, and they are fast. Compared to living on dry land, where the totally corrupt government officials extract last cent from the people in the name of 'progress', the people are free and prosperous. It is two worlds. No matter the officials hate it.

It is noteworthy that government tries to knock down houses. But the people in the Lagoon city do not need government to legalize their titles, or even police the community. They have their own legal system, private schools and private clinics. Pure Coase. I should write a book about the place, it is so fascinating. But so much to do, so little time to do it......

Hektor Konomi Aug 1st, 12:16

The same, and worse, has happened in London in the past...

SigmaMoon Aug 1st, 10:07

Shame!

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