

## INTERVIEW WITH REM KOOLHAAS

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*Interview with Rem Koolhaas, in which he reflects on his research project in Lagos, Nigeria with the Harvard Project on the City (started in 2000, but so far unpublished) and on the interactive film Lagos Wide & Close, directed by Bregtje van der Haak (presented as an art installation and DVD in 2004 and available [online](#) as of July 2014). Rem Koolhaas is the director of the Venice Architecture Biennial which opens on June 5, 2014.*

**RK = REM KOOLHAAS, ARCHITECT**

**BVDH = BREGTJE VAN DER HAAK, FILMMAKER**

**BvdH:** I would like to talk to you about Lagos. I think it's about 15 years since you went to Lagos for the first time, and in 2001, we went there together for the first time. We've seen some of the information you collected appear here and there, but the research project in its entirety has not been published yet. What has the reception been of your findings as presented in lectures so far?

**RK:** I think there are two things: I think that, in Africa, the reception has been very good. There was a sense of welcome because we were looking at Lagos and trying to understand Lagos. I think there was also a good reception of the idea that we were not simply coming to Lagos and trying to analyse it, but that we came with Harvard students who were "married" to African students. Therefore the project also involved sections of the Lagosian population.

Outside Lagos, the reception has been on the one hand great, because I think the material that we



Video still. Rem Koolhaas shot by Jean Counet, directed by Bregtje van der Haak ([lagos.submarinechannel.com](http://lagos.submarinechannel.com))

introduced was deeply surprising for most people. It had to be, because Lagos at that point was poorly understood and there weren't many documents of it. So I think the fact that there suddenly was a flood of visual material, was very interesting. On the other hand I've also been taken aback and – to use a melodramatic word – "traumatized" by the hostility of part of the reception. For some, the sheer fact that I would go as an architect and inject myself in the heart of Lagos, was seen as a kind of cynical enterprise and any part of my judgment or my analysis was questioned. First of all, it was questioned because people did not trust my motives, and they also felt that there was not enough empathy and not enough declaration of empathy to start with.

This has made me very aware that we are now in a period of our cultural mentality where analysis itself is becoming almost controversial. And where, before we look at anything, we have to first declare our empathy and be deeply empathetic, with all the symptoms of empathy, before we can proceed. One very good example of that was, for instance, the fact that we used the president's helicopter, which was universally seen

as a form of "distancing" and even as a form of cowardice, because we wouldn't dare to be on the ground. It was seen as a kind of escape, even though one of the classical elements of the architectural apparatus is the "bird's eye view", because from above, in a bird's eye view, you can capture and understand things that you cannot understand from the ground. So it's simply part of an arsenal of analyses. But "an arsenal of analyses" in itself already sounds suspect in the current cultural moment, I think.

**BvdH:** How do you explain that scepticism?

**RK:** Well, so, I partly explained it. I think at this moment the notion of the architect is probably highly charged; an identity automatically assumed to have motives. It is assumed that one of your motives is to change a particular situation or to profit from it. And the fact that I was there not necessarily as an architect but simply as a researcher is not recognised in how people look at architects currently. I was there as a Harvard professor. The word "architect" is now so charged that it automatically triggers suspicion, I think.

**BvdH:** Suspicion of what?

**RK:** The suspicion of ulterior motives, and the suspicion of bad motives, and the suspicion of condescension, and the suspicion of insensitivity and the suspicion of whatever, you name it.

**BvdH:** Profit?

**RK:** Yeah, profit, ultimately, to benefit from it.

**BvdH:** But people didn't read the book, because the book hasn't been published. So what exactly were they critical of?

**RK:** That's what's so interesting. The whole thing has a kind of strange virtual quality, because there was no book, even though the book was announced. So, in that sense, I was also guilty of provoking this situation. People could only respond to the visual symptoms, and not to the substance of the whole thing. That is perhaps why the symptoms became part of the perception in such a strong way. In retrospect, I really think that I made a serious mistake, and did a serious injustice to the energy of the first groups of students, by not publishing the book as it was. But it was exactly this kind of culturally correct pressure, and to some extent intimidation, that made me think twice in terms of producing something that was blatantly not doing justice in every sense to the situation. So I was caught in a trap. On the one hand, there was a lot of fresh observation, a lot of intelligence. On the other hand, it didn't have the language or perhaps the tone that political correctness expected. And I was simply maybe not courageous enough to bring it out in that particular form.

**BvdH:** But generally, you are not so easily intimidated by criticism.

**RK:** I know, and so I've often wondered why I didn't do it, but I think that in this case actually, I'm not intimidated personally. It's different if it's about my own performance, or what I do or what I think. But in this case, ironically, I also felt a huge sense of responsibility for not caricaturing, or not ridiculing, and not being simplistic, to these people. So that made me

vulnerable, my own actual empathy made me vulnerable by wanting to be scrupulous.

**BvdH:** Does the suspicion in the reception also have to do with this image of a tall white man looking at Lagos?

**RK:** Well, that was definitely part of it, of course, but again, more from the outside than inside of Africa. First of all, I was a tall white man among even taller Nigerian men, and I never felt any kind of resentment or reservation from that side, from the side of Lagos or the country. It has been a hugely welcoming and, of course, hugely humorous reception.

**BvdH:** Back then, you said: "When I look at a picture of myself standing at a crossroads, a traffic point, I think it looks strange. But when I stand there, it doesn't feel strange." Do you think that this sort of inhibited attitude in the Western engagement with Africa is keeping us from embracing it more closely, from really engaging with it and understanding it on different levels?

**RK:** In retrospect, it is very clear to me that I was not the first one to feel such intimidation. If you look at it as a kind of general pattern, this intimidation actually had kept Africa under wraps, literally, and had kept Africa removed from us. And therefore, this intimidation written large was responsible probably for a lot of the more tragic aspects of Africa. If we had been much freer, we could have engaged with Africa, as we did with China, by simply saying: "What can I do here? How can I operate here? And how can I have an interaction here which is not based on special pleading, but on naked interest."

"Africa has been taking care of itself in many different cases, in ways that are plausible and more robust than perhaps we could have thought."

**BvdH:** What naked interest?

**RK:** Naked self-interest and naked interest of the other party, the other side.

**BvdH:** So Africa is...we're denying it something?

**RK:** Well, I think that, yes, by being so careful we've been denying it a form of engagement, a form of uninhibited and free engagement. That is definitely what I felt.

**BvdH:** Do you feel that has changed over time? It's been almost fifteen years now.

**RK:** I think it has changed enormously because, first of all, Africa has been taking care of itself in many different cases, in ways that are plausible and more robust than perhaps we could have thought. So there isn't the same emphasis on delicacy and sentimentality anymore. And I think perhaps another thing that has contributed to it, is that we've been confronted much more with our own chaos and our own weaknesses and our own organisational ineptitude. So perhaps we are more modest now in the way we look at these places. And our lack of modesty was also one of the reasons why we couldn't really engage.

**BvdH:** Are you referring to the economic crisis unfolding in Europe and America since 2008? When we talked first, it was just after the Enron case, and I remember you said: "Look, corruption is taking on

a whole different meaning. It's going to be so much harder to maintain that Africa is corrupt now." How has that changed since then?

**RK:** Those are really visionary words now and when we started looking at China, we said: the one thing that we need to do is change the content and the concept of "corruption" and really find out what "corruption" is. I read in a book about China that corruption is "any financial means necessary to bring two parties together". So it's a form of understanding there.

**BvdH:** But economies in the West also turned out to be much more corrupt than we knew before. Corruption proved to be structural, not simply an aberration.

**RK:** Yes, it's a ubiquitous practice, so we need to integrate it in some way in our thinking. Which is not to say that I am an active advocate of it.

**BvdH:** Not yet.

**RK:** No I'm sure it will never happen.

**BvdH:** Have you been back to Lagos?

**RK:** Yes, I've been back a number of times. Every time, it has been really wonderful, on the one hand seeing improvements, and, on the other, also seeing that some of those improvements, for instance in traffic flows, have eliminated some of the phenomena that we were most interested in studying. What we were particularly interested in is how failure generates opportunity, given a certain form of creativity and necessity.

I read George Packer's article<sup>1</sup> about Lagos again and what he seems to be most indignant about is that we did not continually say: "These people have no choice." That we do not say: "They have to do this because they otherwise wouldn't survive." That there is on our part no indignation about their condition and only some kind of aesthetic slumming. But I still maintain that would be the wrong reason and that there is a real creativity in Lagos, that doesn't exist anywhere else and enables people to make the best of terrible situations.

**BvdH:** You made a distinction between choice and options, which I think is interesting. Do you still see that now?

**RK:** It's still the case, but some of the most interesting things disappeared. For Lagos, that's a good thing probably. And as you observed recently, other things and other conditions are still exactly the same, like the street markets. At some point, I met the governor and some of the people who currently make a difference in Lagos, and what I discovered is that a more regular Lagos is not a Lagos where the tradition of planning intelligent infrastructure or collective facilities has been restored. Instead, it's now leapt one phase further, where what happens is ultimately determined by developers working with the state. So it has shifted to a commercial model of development that we also know in America, in Europe, and in Asia.

**BvdH:** So is Lagos becoming more like other megacities?

**RK:** If you look at the visual language, and the visual language is of course mostly Photoshop, then the ideal

Lagos is a version of Dubai. I can understand that, because I see the virtues of Dubai. Saying that the ideal Lagos is like Dubai is not a form of condemnation. I can understand that is the new ideal.

**BvdH:** But is that the same all over the world?

**RK:** Yes, I think it's very similar all over the world. Currently, there is the connection between China and Africa, but there is another very strong connection, that people are less alert to, which is the connection between the Arab World and Africa. Most of Eastern Africa is planned from Arab countries, and particularly Dubai, and they're also beginning to work in West Africa. So what I can predict over time is a really close connection between the Arab World and Africa, closer than between China and Africa. It runs through Islam, on the one hand, but also through Christianity, and other commercial connections, and, of course, there are also traditional connections between Lebanon and Africa, that have been very intense. A lot of Lebanon is now in Dubai, so I see signs everywhere that this is going to be the biggest involvement.

**BvdH:** Do you think the Arab world is going to be a bigger influence on Africa than China?

**RK:** Yes, much bigger, and much more authentic also. I think there is a kind of compatibility and involvement there. Of course, there are also many Indian people who operate from Dubai, simply reinforcing already long existing ties.

**BvdH:** Do you think this idea of China sort of colonising Africa all over again is overrated, or misstated?

**RK:** I think there are really two big tragedies in the last 20 years. The first one is the way in which America and Europe collectively misunderstand China, and the second big one is the way Europe and America collectively misunderstand Russia. Those two mistakes are having a colossal impact on our daily lives in every sense and I think they're based on fundamental misunderstandings. In the case of Russia it meant thinking that it was a kind of hopeless party that was on its back and didn't need to be taken seriously, and that therefore was treated like nothing, basically. And in the case of China, it meant such systematic misreading of motives that the result is the same. What do you think? You also have real experience.

**BvdH:** Well, I think China does have a large impact at the moment. There's a lot of Chinese capital going to Africa, and it's changing more than European development aid, I think.

**RK:** That's for sure, because they're basically building an infrastructure.

**BvdH:** But I also think that the children born out of these relationships will be a new generation of Chinese-African and Arab-African kids. I think they will have a new worldview, in which Europe and America are not very important.

**RK:** Out of the picture.

**BvdH:** At the time you were also sort of starting to get irritated with the market economy and with its effects. Now I think those effects are much stronger,



Video still. *Rem Koolhaas* shot by Jean Counet, directed by Bregtje van der Haak ([lagos.submarinechannel.com](http://lagos.submarinechannel.com))

and much more inescapable in a way. How do you feel Lagos relates to that right now?

**RK:** I want to go back very soon, but before I've seen it in its current form, I don't want to say anything about that.

**BvdH:** But part of your interest in Lagos was that it was a city disconnected from a global system. Now, can you say that Lagos is disconnected?

**RK:** No, I'm sure it's much more connected to the global system now. And that was why our timing, in a way, was impeccable, because maybe we inadvertently discovered the last *terra incognita*, the last moment of any disconnected point in the world. That might be an interesting way of reading and re-reading it, because I'm still very interested in doing something (on Lagos – BvdH) immediately after this Biennale, I will work on it. I still don't know how to do it. I want to weed out the first wave of impressions and I also want to write something from my perspective about that whole

experience. In retrospect, to have been there is a much more unique condition than we realised at the time.

**BvdH:** Do you recall an image or a situation which represents that?

**RK:** That represented the purity of non-connection? Many. It is also important to recognise that we were not only in Lagos. Before we went to Lagos, we drove 5000 kilometres through Nigeria to see it and to understand what kind of relationship Lagos had to the rest of the country. We wanted to see the rest of the country first. So we had a fairly complete sense of how it then operated. I think globalisation now is not only economic connections, not only Chinese investment, not only relations with Dubai, but probably also the intensification of Islamic and Christian conflict. It seems that a lot of the tensions that currently characterise global divisions are important in Lagos, or in Africa, or in that part of Africa. So I think that's also a form of globalisation.

**BvdH:** But is there one thing you remember, or one moment that represents that time in Lagos?

**RK:** Yes, but I always rebel against this kind of question. One moment? There were hundreds of moments. And it was the fantastic kaleidoscopic quantity and intensity of experiences that really brought the whole thing home.

**BvdH:** You said: "I want to become the storyteller of the friction zone." What did you want to get out of it?

**RK:** Now you're a little bit guilty of the same thing. Really, when I go somewhere, I do not want "to get

something out of it". I want it to influence me, and to eventually produce something about it. That is really my most authentic motivation. So, in that sense, I'm not worried that I didn't get anything out of it.

**BvdH:** But how has Lagos changed you?

**RK:** Well, I think it has changed me in many ways. I think it reinforced confidence in terms of understanding larger patterns and larger coherences, it reinforced my confidence in terms of talking about really complex situations in a way which does them justice. Actually, it also, of course, intensified and reinforced an emotional register that was perhaps born in Indonesia and deepened in Lagos. And it reinforced endlessly my openness to Africa.

**BvdH:** Would you like to build in Lagos?

**RK:** I was alluding to it when we talked about my meeting with the governor. He was suggesting that I could maybe do a bus station at the end of one of the bridges, and that we could on the roof of the bus station do a kind of market. So there was an exceptional moment, when it seemed I could almost directly write myself into the script that was unfolding. That was very beautiful, because it coincided with my increasing discomfort about the way architecture is used as a tool for the articulation of individual values away from a public dimension. So the idea of doing a bus station in Lagos would have been a crowning achievement in my vain search for a utilitarian use of architecture. But, so far, it hasn't happened.

**BvdH:** Why not?

**RK:** I think it was the money, or there was another developer for the project. And actually there was another project for creating a loop around the lagoon that had a lot of commercial backers and maybe that won.

**BvdH:** Has Lagos influenced for example the CCTV building?

**RK:** (thinks) Well, what I'm always looking for is a demonstration of imagination on every level where it happens. In the case of CCTV, I have a collection of self-made building implements, because there was a general kind of poverty, so that the workers had to make many different tools themselves. And so it's recognising urgency across different cultures and moments that is really one of my passions, you could say. So it was more a matter of finding similarities even in extremely different environments, moments, and conditions, then it has influenced it. I would not say directly. And actually it was in the same year, so do you think one influenced the other? Would you construct an influence?

**BvdH:** No. It seems like two different worlds. That's why I wonder sometimes how they connect inside your mind. Maybe they don't?

**RK:** I remember that my relations with other architects underwent a serious and traumatic break when, at the end of a 10-year-long series of conferences in the Guggenheim Museum in New York, I presented work on Prada and Lagos in one presentation, and was therefore talking openly about the stretch that is implied. Then it was still the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the last moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and as we were going to the

"The relation between...dysfunctionality and self-organisation, was the essence of that city [Lagos]."

21<sup>st</sup> century it was simply too much for the audience to accept. So I was almost thrown out of the room. And I remember Peter Eisenman saying: "I don't want to hear this kind of combination! I can't handle it!" And I think that is one of the few really wonderful sides, which by the way is of course your experience too, of a profession that injects you into different conditions. I think there's a great similarity between journalism and architecture.

Just one more thing: one of the really kind of strange things about Lagos is that of course my perception of it *itself* changed a lot, because initially I thought it was all self-organisation and then, in the second instance of looking at it more carefully, I saw that it was the interaction between a contemporary infrastructure that was planned to be a very smooth system, that was then falling into disrepair, and that, in this disrepair, triggered all these other possibilities. And so the self-organisation was there, but it was inscribed in a larger and dysfunctional system. The relation between this dysfunctionality and the self-organisation, was the essence of that city. So, ironically, that gave me a much stronger conviction that one could actually plan something. So initially I used it as a weapon or rhetorical device against planning, but after I discovered that relationship, I used it for the opposite and it convinced me that planning was not always as futile as I was claiming. So that is important to say, because that was perhaps the best recapitulation of what Lagos did with me. Initially, it confirmed scepticism, and then it confirmed a belief in something, and, presumably, a more sophisticated involvement with planning.

We did not yet talk about the assumed influence of Lagos on my own behaviour and my own life, in terms of being more direct and more able to go straight to a goal. I think, for me, the strongest effect was in a small architecture project for a house, which refused to come to a conclusion. I'd been wrestling for a long time with the client before I went to Lagos, and when I came back, I was able to translate that concept for a house into a competition for a concert hall and that, for me, is the strongest effect in architecture. That kind of directness or ability to jump from one condition to another is still part of my relationship to architecture.

**BvdH:** In urban planning in Europe and America, the big shift, or the latest fashion if you wish, is that the grassroots or “bottom up” approach is now facilitated with digital tools. It involves the idea that we can now all build our own cities and neighbourhoods, and from there construct new kinds of cities. With digital networks and the end of top down planning in the West, are we becoming more like Lagos-with-digital-means? But Lagos is also becoming digital very soon, so we're becoming more like each other, I think.

**RK:** Well, you know the most famous thing we said: “Looking at Lagos we're not looking at something ancient, but we're looking at the future.” So it would be easy to say now: “Yes, that implication is entirely right. We sensed that more than 10 years ago.” But that is not so true. I'm working on the Venice Biennale now and the digital is also an important part of that. I think that we're very lucky we're now speaking after Snowden and that this conversation would have been very different two years ago than it can be now, because two years ago, I think we could have constructed

that argument (about grassroots planning with digital means—BvdH), but now I think the illusion that “bottom up planning” exists as something that is not part of a much larger umbrella of surveillance and control is no longer tenable. So, ironically perhaps, I would venture maybe a hypothesis that the digital is not the triumph of the bottom up movement but the final termination of it, or the ultimate impossibility of it, because all bottom up efforts are somehow absorbed and accumulated in these big banks.

**BvdH:** As a kind of total surveillance?

**RK:** Maybe not total surveillance, maybe we need a new fantasy or new names for it, but the idea that you can assemble groups that then freely determine their fate through new digital means is highly naïve, I think. If you look at the Arab Spring as a supposed feat of digital mobilisation, and if you look at the kind of situation now, that speaks for itself in terms of which illusions we should abandon.

**BvdH:** I think, in Lagos, an interesting part of your analysis was the idea of “foregrounding”. What you said earlier about looking down from the helicopter of the president, was also an inspiration for the film. I decided to separate wide and close shots as two ways of looking at the same thing and to run them in parallel to tell the same story about Lagos from two different perspectives. Do you think, looking back, that this is still a productive way of looking at a city? Can you envision bringing that into some kind of publication or apply it to other things?

**RK:** Yes, it's incredibly interesting for me and it's also interesting now for the Biennale. We have made

a kind of scan of Italy and in that scan we present for every single location or zone in Italy, both a movie and an architectural project, and what we see in the movies is that the reading of an image as foreground and background is absolutely part of the tradition of movies, or maybe it is the essence of movies.

We've looked at the film *I Fidanzati* (1963) by Olmi. At the time, I thought it was perhaps a slightly trivial story about two lovers, but if you look at it now, you see this unbelievable formal masterpiece where the foreground is bodies in various states of undress and in various events and the background is always this kind of impassive architectural grid or stage set. So yes, I think it's a productive way of reading, but it probably came from movies. It's the essence of what movies do: actors in the foreground against a background. So I'm constantly wondering about the connection between film and architecture, but that was probably a tool of film that was a productive way of looking at an urban situation.

**BvdH:** The growth of cities has not stopped. At that time, you said: “The megacity is where modernisation takes place, that's why I'm interested in it.” Now, you're interested in the countryside. How come?

**RK:** The first time I went there I was circling Lagos by going through the entire country. And it was actually one of the first times I became aware that it's not a simple situation of countryside and city, but that there was an enormous amount of traffic and that you could not really survive in the countryside without the connection to Lagos, and vice versa, you could not survive in Lagos without the connection to the countryside. So that hypothesis is also how China is going to develop. It's not that everyone should move to the city, but that

there should be kind of informed relationship between the two.

So to answer your question: “Why do you look at the countryside?” A very simple answer is: because of some accident in my biography, I went to Switzerland and could over 25 years see the evolution of the countryside there. At some point, the evolution was so enormous - it was subtle, but it was radical - that it became possible to imagine that if you wanted to look at real modernisation, you should look at the countryside. Not only did the kind of population change completely, but also every process changed. Automation creates a hugely different relationship between land and the digital. There are farms where the interaction with the farm takes place behind the desktop. Farming is done with the mouse, triggering processes in the real earth via digital means, sometimes even via drones.

And also for our obviously larger and larger needs, you see that in certain cases large scale elements are no longer fit for the city but are transported to the countryside, from data server farms to huge agricultural complexes. So I see the first signs that the countryside will be on the one hand a territory for sentimentality, tourism and alternative wellness, and the on the other hand all of those other needs. I expect that the countryside will develop a highly Cartesian degree of organisation to enable the supposed freedom and frivolity of the city. The city has funny forms and the countryside is your rigour.

**BvdH:** Will you go back to Lagos?

**RK:** Yeah yeah, very soon, because as soon as this Venice Biennale is over, I want to go.

**BvdH:** And publish?

**RK:** And publish, I need to publish. We are now working on selecting the 300 key images and to describe why they are key. That will be a record of the whole experience, both in images and in words because I think they are equivalent in terms of importance. I will also look, hopefully, in the larger context at what we should do with all the different versions that have been produced of the Lagos book. The original version, which is full of excitement and wonderful interpretations, and all the other, more thorough things we did after that. So we have to find a way to make that whole history of revision accessible.

**BvdH:** Back then, you said that Lagos made you more direct and more visceral. But it seems to have paralysed you too.

**RK:** Well in books I’m kind of reluctant to accept the term paralysis. You could also call it gestation. I think to not have done it immediately perhaps serves also a good purpose ultimately, or it enables you to do another thing, because obviously it’s added ten years or fifteen years about Lagos, but also fifteen years about the rest of the world and fifteen years about myself. So I think that could be an interesting connection.

**BvdH:** I think you need to do it for Lagos, because I remember Funmi Iyanda, the talkshow host and social geographer, saying: “After this, after you publish your book, finally we will get rid of the caricature of Lagos being this filthy dangerous place that everybody should avoid, including African experts on cities.”



Video still. *Rem Koolhaas* shot by Jean Counet, directed by Bregtje van der Haak ([lagos.submarinechannel.com](http://lagos.submarinechannel.com))

**RK:** Well I think your DVD did a lot of that already though. How many were sold?

**BvdH:** I have no idea. I have to check.

**RK:** I really would love to know, because say that a book about Lagos would have sold maybe, if you’re lucky, 30000 copies. I’m interested how close your film would be.

**BvdH:** Maybe similar.

**RK:** Yes, so then I think it has done its work.

**BvdH:** When you look at the film now, do you think it’s outdated?

**RK:** It’s a film of a moment, I don’t think it’s outdated at all. Maybe we can go back together and see.

**BvdH:** One last thing, a more general question that has been on my mind and is also recurring in my own

work. I think part of the criticism and the complicated reception of your Lagos research has to do with a notion of criticality and with a lack of clues as to how, in this time, the 21st century, living in a sort of accelerated capitalist engulfment of a densely networked, increasingly digital world society - we can critically engage with the new issues surrounding us. I think there is a lot of confusion about what it means to be critical in this time and I think we need new options or ideas about how to be and do that in a productive way. How can we be critical in the original sense of “kritein”, the Greek word for exploring, researching.

**RK:** Well, I think there is a kind of really obnoxious process going on where every intention is only recorded when it is announced first. So if you're critical, you have to say “this is a critical look at” and you have to use a certain vocabulary, you have to use certain words, you have to take certain precautions, you have to reassure everybody of your criticality, but also of your empathy. We need at the same time to ignore and to counteract it, because if you really start behaving that way, your life is a nightmare. But we also have to talk about it, and I'm trying to talk about it in different ways myself, saying that this constitutes a nasty loss of fluidity and that thinking needs fluidity, because if you want to retain a statement in a certain narrowly defined zone, that is automatically the exact opposite of what critical thinking or criticality really is. You have to have access and move in every terrain that you think needs to be covered for a real critique. So for me it's very clear. Criticality now is exactly what it was for the Greeks, a mental attitude to be critical about everything, including yourself, and not something that needs a kind of poster or quotation marks first. I think theory is, in its best sense, that: the liberation of



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a terrain on which you can move to try to penetrate a certain mystery. That for me is theory, but to be limited to preannounced results or a declared limited zone of inquiry is not interesting.

**BvdH:** You think we can move out of that?

**RK:** I think the worst thing is to lock ourselves in a position of inevitability. Clearly, there are inevitable things about our lives, but when I work in my office and I see that just on this floor about 20 people are working on ideas, then I am not so worried that I'm locked in a kind of prison. I think it's an effect of being free to pursue what I want to pursue, it probably takes a lot of energy, but this is the crucial thing.

**BvdH:** Is Lagos in any way visible in the Venice Biennial?

**RK:** No.

**BvdH:** Is there a Nigerian pavilion?

“It has clarified my image of Africa and of course it has intensified my relationship with Africa...and it confirmed in general my impression of Africa as an unbelievably intelligent and creative part of the world.”

**RK:** No, there will be some kind of West African... We were working with Kunlé Adeyemi of NLE architects on a West African presence. In the end it didn't work, but we will have lectures. So in that sense, it will be present.

(RK shows us a stack of his various unpublished books about Lagos, prepared by his team in the past ten years. Some of the dummy books are completely designed and have a logo of the publisher on the cover).

**RK:** I think this was a kind of brochure we did before any other book. And I think it's actually wrong that one of the key figures in this whole thing has not been mentioned, Edgar Cleijne, our initial guide, a Dutch photographer who knows Africa inside out and guided our steps there. I don't know what this is, I guess it is a slightly more elaborate version... This was the first book the students did. And I've just been rereading parts of it.

**BvdH:** Which year?

**RK:** I think it must have been 2002 or something. I really should do a kind of reconstruction. This was a version that we worked on with Adeyemi, an electrical engineer and architect also from Lagos, who was in our office and actually moved to New York to work with 2x4 (graphic designers – BvdH) on the whole

book... I think this is the most extreme version that we achieved at the time.

**BvdH:** It even has a publisher logo printed on the front. Why was that not published?

**RK:** (sighs) I think in the end a final lack of concentration. It was of course an intense period and I don't know.... And then this one, 2009. The irony is that each of them could have been published and maybe the first and last one are the most interesting.

**BvdH:** How are they different?

**RK:** They are each different and we tried scrupulously to be more factual and to do historical research on the different territories. You should look at it yourself. So on the one hand it's an enormous source of regret, on the other hand an enormous source of potential.

**BvdH:** Has it changed your image of Africa?

**RK:** It has clarified my image of Africa and of course it has intensified my relationship with Africa. After Lagos, I've been to many different countries, both the West and East coast, and it confirmed in general my impression of Africa as an unbelievably intelligent and creative part of the world.

**BvdH:** How do you see the future of Africa?

**RK:** Well, given the first part of the answer, I think it can only be positive and creative. Basically, I hope and could actually envisage that if the current phase of economic thinking ends, and if the current phase of fairly exploitative consumerism ends, that Africa

makes a contribution.

**BvdH:** How?

**RK:** I really don't know how. We're seemingly stuck with this system, but that condition can only mean that, in the end, people will rebel and find something different. Isn't it so?

**BvdH:** Because it's so extreme?

**RK:** Because it's so extreme and so counterproductive for so many people, and so humiliating also to be part of it.

**BvdH:** So that might be the source of something?

**RK:** I don't know, but basically, every territory that is undergoing this intense transformation and economic growth is given a lot of initiative to find things, or a lot of possibility to redefine things. I mean, China has, if you really look at it. If you look in retrospect at what they have contributed, it's probably really important. Not on the level of economic thinking, but maybe in some other way, such as how to rethink development or how to undo poverty. So Africa, certainly, if it has that moment, will also generate a new and different kind of thinking.

#### NOTES

1 George Packer, "The Megacity. Decoding the Chaos of Lagos" *The New Yorker*, November 13, 2006.

#### REFERENCES

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