

2 THE NEW YORK OF NIGERIA

'My advice is always, do what you can to come to Lagos. If you are young and creative, get yourself to Lagos. Lagos is the New York of Nigeria. Sometimes you don't know who you can be until you see it expressed somewhere else. I saw my first ever fashion show in Lagos. The year I moved to Lagos, Steve Wozniak came to give a talk. I got to listen to him and meet him. That would only happen in Lagos – Steve Wozniak isn't going anywhere else in Nigeria. You can do anything in Lagos. There are collectives geared around whatever your interest is. There's even a salsa dancing community. I went with a friend once and I couldn't believe it: salsa dancing here! There were a couple of Argentinians and Brazilians but really it was all Nigerians, all salsa dancing. Being in Lagos alters the way you see the world. Things are closer. You begin to think: I can do these things. You begin to figure out your place in the world from Lagos. You can do anything in Lagos. It's not easy, there's a lot of hustle and a higher cost of living but it's the place where you stand the highest chance.' John, 34

'There is almost a living energy here. Everyone you meet is running a business, running a side business, pushing forward every day, hustling. There are people on the road at 5am heading to work; there are people still on the road at 11pm heading back home. It's one of those cities in the world that doesn't pause. Lagos doesn't stop. It just continues. It's tough. It's hard. It's gritty. But everyone from all over the country is drawn to Lagos. Imagine what New York would be like if

San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington DC, all the other big cities in the US, didn't exist and everyone just headed to New York. That's Lagos.' Odunayo, 28

'I like Nina Simone. Do you know her song "Young, Gifted and Black"? That's us. The young African in Lagos right now is excited. We live in this really terrible place. If you have a liveability index, Lagos is almost always the worst. Lagos does not work for anybody. It's terrible but so, so good as well. You have people doing the wildest things with nothing here. If you look across every sector, there are young people doing things. Even governance, as bad as it is, underneath the elected officials are a bunch of really efficient young people who are trying to change things. It's the people that make Lagos, the people who are innovating themselves out of this nightmare. That's not to say bad things don't happen here – they do – but it is exciting times. Oooouuuf! You know that cliché, that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger? Well, boy are we strong. Being a part of this generation feels like a gift. It's exciting, it's inspiring. There are not enough words.' S. I., 25

From the air, the city is a vast carpet of brown and green squares sewn together by silver grey stitching. The carpet stretches to the horizon, on and on and out of sight. As the plane drops lower, details emerge: rooftops and gardens become visible and the stitches morph into roads and acquire colour – the metallic tones of millions of vehicles reflecting the sunlight. The plane skims over homes, warehouses, a bustling market, a highway jammed with traffic and lands beside a sliver of green. Outside, the air is thick and heavy in the tropical heat and palm trees shiver in the breeze. An egret flies low, a white silhouette against the grass. On the streets, dense with traffic, cars spill messily across the lanes, trucks belch exhaust fumes. Small yellow Danfo – the minibuses that are endemic to Lagos and which traverse every corner of

the city – pick up passengers, their conductors hanging precariously from the doorways. Auto-rickshaws, called *kekes*, toot and squeeze by, turning three lanes to four then five. Through the open window, the scent of sweet donuts and grilling meat emanating from roadside food stands mixes with the heady flavour of exhaust fumes. Slowly the vehicles edge forward and after a time the road becomes a long bridge straddling a wide lagoon, the water flecked with the gold and pink of the setting sun. Lights come on in the high glass office buildings on the island beyond the bridge and the skyline of a modern city emerges from the dusk.

Off the bridge and into evening life. Office workers in skirts and heels, some wearing brightly coloured *gele* – cloth headwraps that cover the hair – walk confidently along the sidewalk, avoiding potholes and scorning the traffic. Young men, many wearing traditional suits – slim-cut trousers topped with tunic-like jackets in



Figure 8 Lagos

Source: Michael Kraus/EyeEm/Getty Images

brightly patterned fabrics – lean in groups against walls, chatting and laughing. A man pushes a barrow filled with tomatoes; another sells cold drinks from a large pail. Tall and regal, these entrepreneurs, students, secretaries and fly boys, strong men and proud women, have the bearing of queens and princes. The overwhelming majority are young and all emanate confidence, panache and energy.

Welcome to Lagos, Nigeria. With a population of more than 20 million¹ it is one of the world’s great megacities, as thriving and energetic as Bangkok and Hanoi, as sprawling and unequal in wealth and opportunity as São Paulo or Miami, and as full of dreams and aspirations as New York or London.

The pace of urbanisation across sub-Saharan Africa over the last 60 years is without precedent. In 1950, most African countries were agrarian societies and just over

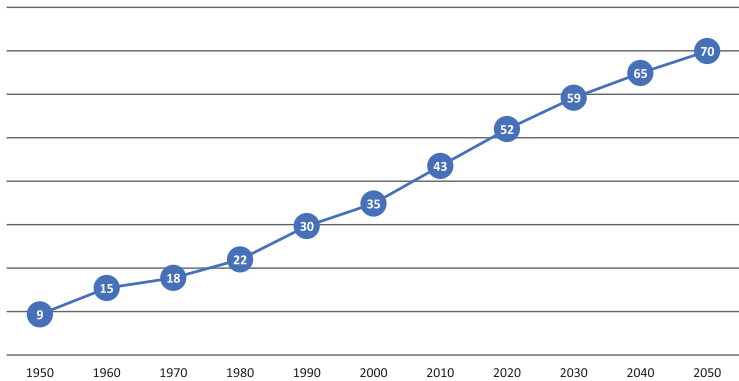


Figure 9 Growth of Nigeria’s urban population, 1950–2050
Source: UN DESA World urbanisation prospects 2018, <https://population.un.org/wup/Download>

a quarter of the population lived in cities. By 2020, the continent had 74 cities with a population of more than one million people, equivalent to the US and Europe combined.² Today almost half of sub-Saharan Africans are urban dwellers and by 2050 that number is projected to reach 60 per cent. In the next 30 years, Africa will need to accommodate almost 950 million new urban dwellers, which is equivalent to what Europe, the US and Japan combined have managed over the last 265 years.³ That means two-thirds of the continent's projected population growth over the next three decades will be absorbed by the region's humming, thriving, bustling megacities.⁴ And, as the OECD notes, 'this transition is profoundly transforming the social, economic and political geography of the continent'.⁵

Those most impacted by the continent's growing urbanisation are the young. While historically it was rural to urban migration that contributed to the urban growth, today it is largely due to natural population increase. The Soro Soke generation are the children of cities and this is changing their life prospects, their mindset and their cultural expression.

The growth of megacities has led to a density and connectivity previously unseen in Africa, which remains physically fragmented due to poor infrastructure. Cities like Lagos give young people access to jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, create income and growth and, by their density, enable a leap forward in the ability to innovate. Evidence suggests that doubling a city's size boosts income per capita between 3 and 8 per cent.⁶ Lagos confirms the opportunities cities bring – it has a nominal per capita income of more than US\$5,000, more than double the Nigerian average.⁷ The city is home to a pan-African banking industry, it is a leader in the fintech and cryptocurrency sectors and has become one of the continent's biggest tech hubs.

‘In terms of spirit of opportunity, Lagos is the epicentre’, says 30-year-old entrepreneur Davies Okeowo. ‘People come here, from across the country and other places because they think “if I put in the effort, I will make it work”. If you really work, it really is possible. The optimism in the tech space is typical. The start-up eco-system is crazy in Lagos. We have a number of unicorns already and a lot more are going to come. Capital is continuing to flow, and it is much better from an economic standpoint.’

Odunayo Eweniyi, 28, is a tech company founder and CEO. Her company, PiggyVest, which she co-founded when she was 22, has three million customers and is credited with changing the way young Nigerians save and invest. ‘There are a lot of problems in Lagos but it’s also one of the best places in Nigeria for entrepreneurship’, she says. ‘It’s only in Lagos where three people, like myself and my co-founders, could come, start a company and have people trusting us. All industry is here, everyone from all over the country is drawn to Lagos.’

The Yaba district, which includes the busy, vibrant neighbourhood of Ojuelegba immortalised in the Wiz-Kid song of the same name, is the tech centre of the city. Colloquially known as Yabacon Valley because of its predominance of start-ups, it is home to a host of small tech campuses featuring bright contemporary branding and the kind of young, hip workforce that wouldn’t be out of place in San Francisco. The streets are filled with a cacophony of cars, Danfo buses and motorcycle taxis. Vibrant clubs pumping Afrofusion beats sit beside bars and takeaway restaurant chains that appeal to a youthful audience of developers, entrepreneurs and creatives.

‘I was drawn in by the promise of the city, but I moved here for the people most of all’, says influencer and entrepreneur John Obidi, 34. ‘The people are creative, hopeful and full of promise. They are Nigerian thought leaders making an impression on a global scale. All

Nigeria's great creatives are based in Lagos, and they pushed me to achieve, too.'

Yaba illustrates the opportunity that African cities have to reshape urban thinking, moving away from what American research group the Brookings Institution calls 'lumpy grid infrastructure'⁸ and towards a more flexible way of living that utilises technology, peer-to-peer transactions and entrepreneurial energy to create a successful, liveable and productive city.

'Yaba has a great support system – if you are looking for a writer, or a programmer or a designer you can find one here. And Lagos was one of the first cities in Nigeria to have creative hubs like Co-Creative Hub in Yaba', says Obidi. 'CCH is a co-working space with good internet access and running electricity and other people who are there for the same purpose. To have access to that office space, to be able to work there with all the facilities and brilliant people was amazing. I remember being there as great days – working together, sharing ideas, creating creative synergies. And the crop of creatives I worked with, we forged relationships and many of them have gone on to do great things all over the world.'

Yaba is situated on mainland Lagos, near to the thriving university district of UniLag and not far from middle-class neighbourhoods such as Ikeja. The 12km-long Third Mainland Bridge connects these districts to the upmarket island suburbs and the up-and-coming Lekki Peninsula. In wealthy island neighbourhoods like Banana Island and Ikoyi, huge homes, palatial in scale, sit behind high walls that hide large gardens complete with swimming pools and tennis courts. The Eko Atlantic development on Victoria Island is an entire sub-city overlooking the ocean and targeting the super wealthy. (Eko is the original Bini language name for the Lagos region.) This new 25sq km peninsula, reclaimed from what was formerly a popular public beach, is designed to be home to 250,000 residents

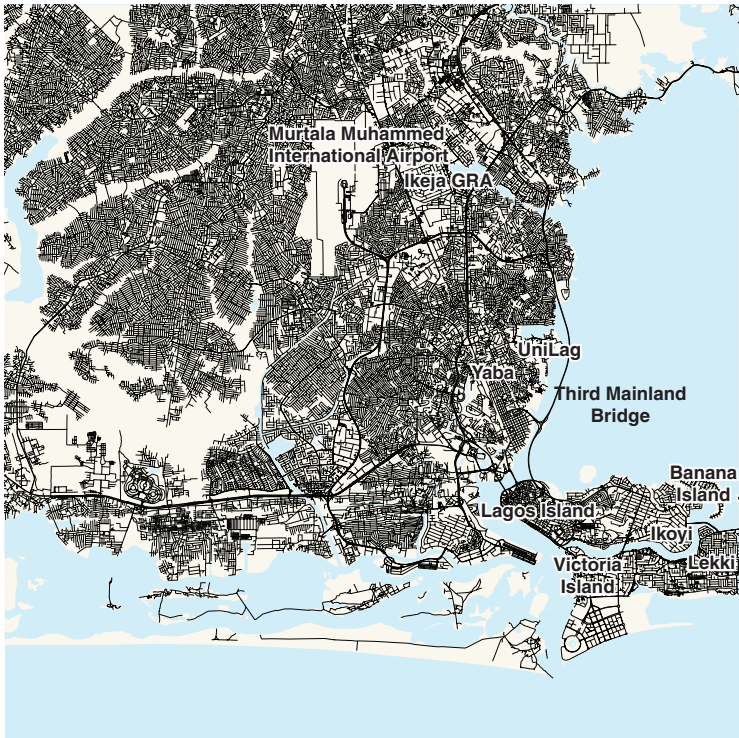


Figure 10 Map of Lagos mainland and islands

Source: Getty Images

and accommodate a daily flow of 150,000 commuters. But the site stands mostly empty, just two towers of luxury apartments are marooned in one corner of the huge site.

Olamide Udoma-Ejorh, 36, is executive director at the not-for-profit Lagos Urban Development Initiative (LUDI). She believes luxury developments like Eko Atlantic have had their time. ‘The last two administrations in Lagos had a vision of the city that was all about grand gestures that look glossy but are not really helping anybody. Take Eko Atlantic. It has become so upscale that even the rich can’t afford it and you can see they are not really building.

Recently I've noticed a real shift in thinking – it's more about how we can do something to help the population', she says.

Cities are catalysts for economic growth, innovation and employment but are also more unequal than rural areas.⁹ As is the case in most cities around the world, wealth in Lagos is unevenly distributed. Slow growth and two recessions have made Nigerians poorer, on average, each year since oil prices fell in 2015, and bad central government decisions have led to the devaluation of the currency and seen annual food inflation soar above 20 per cent – a major issue in a country where many people live on less than US\$1 a day.¹⁰ Lagos is richer than most Nigerian regions. According to the country's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 4.5 per cent of the population of Lagos state were living below the poverty line in 2020 – the country's lowest percentage.¹¹ But in a city of 20 million this is still a large number of people, and Lagos has several neighbourhoods, the likes of Makoko, where housing is makeshift and temporary and severe deprivation and extreme poverty are rampant. There is a desperate shortage of affordable housing across the city, and, for the slightly better-off working poor, *face-me-I-face-you* housing, where several people sleep in the same room, remains common, particularly among young men.

Young local architects, such as Baba Oladeji, 32, are now challenging conventional thinking to try to build a city that also works for its poorer inhabitants. Oladeji's practice, Ministry of Architecture, fuses politics with architecture and seeks to rethink post-colonial African cities. 'In Nigeria it is very common that you have people living day to day', he says. 'When you are poor, you can't plan long term, you simply cannot. You plan day by day how to survive. Our economic systems and built environment should reflect that. It's frustrating that African governments are still intent on urbanising within the

parameters of the West because the idea of a mortgage or a shopping mall are flawed ideas here. We need a theory of impermanence and informality. These are concepts we should embrace. In my practice, we try to consider the informal structures that reflect how we live our lives – umbrella markets, temporary dwellings, hawkers on the move among traffic.’

Oladeji is working on a project in the north of the country creating temporary dwellings for displaced persons. ‘We are doing what local people are already doing but making it stronger’, he says. ‘We use bamboo frames that can be decommissioned and zinc roofing sheets, a material that is abundant in Nigeria. I find beauty in it, the language of rust.’

He is hoping that learnings from the project can be applied in Lagos to offer poor young people access to the property market. ‘In the 1960s you could afford to buy a house in Lagos. Today you can’t. We want to find a piece of land, close to the city centre, so young people can have proximity to work and own their own asset. We have a chance to diversify away from standard global real estate stock, to move away from the idea of permanence to the semiotics of impermanence. We’d be able to match the price of rent and build a home for young people who are a part of the urban poor.’

Affordable housing is one big issue in Lagos; traffic congestion is another – at 67 minutes in each direction, the city has the highest average commuting time in the world (above San José in Costa Rica (64 minutes), Colombo (62), Los Angeles (61) and Calcutta (60)).¹² Images of its blocked roads have become iconic, and traffic jams leave its residents scarred and embattled. There are as many strategies for avoiding its stranglehold as there are drivers. And everyone drives here: estimates suggest there are five million cars on the road each day, with around eight million passengers in them.¹³

Roads in Lagos are largely paved, there are wide bridges holding three or four lanes of traffic in each direction to link the mainland to the islands, and effective and well-made toll roads have helped ease congestion somewhat. But on a working day in Lekki, an increasingly popular suburb on a long, thin peninsula bordered by the Gulf of Guinea to the west and the waters of the city's vast lagoon on the east, the traffic remains snarled and moody. Car after car is jammed across the three lanes of the main road that runs like a spine along the many miles of the peninsula. Horns tooting, hands gesticulating, bumpers brushing, the vehicles sputter along.

For some, the city's perennial traffic has become just one more entrepreneurial opportunity. Hawkers, on foot, walk the lines of semi-stationary vehicles, selling everything



Figure 11 For some, the city's perennial traffic has become an entrepreneurial opportunity

Source: Oluwafemi Dawodu/Shutterstock

from cold drinks to peanuts, throw pillows, hats and vividly coloured paintings. One hawker holds shower caddies, another hedge clippers. Others sell drain cleaners, wallets, face masks, wall clocks, games, paintings, jewellery, books or windscreen wipers.

Funmi Oyatogun, 29, is the founder of travel firm TVP Adventures. She's been leading tour groups across Nigeria and Africa since 2016 and calls herself 'Africa's most adventurous woman'. It's her ambition to visit every country in the world, but today she is closer to home, taking a guided tour of Lagos. 'We say that you can furnish your home or buy dinner and the implements to cook it, while you're stuck in traffic', says Oyatogun, laughing.

Despite the prevalence of cars, more than 12 million Lagosians also use public transport services daily.¹⁴ The informal yellow Danfo buses form part of Lagos' cultural identity,¹⁵ but a formal working infrastructure of public transport is missing. There are no trains, no trams, no metro. Lagos is not Nigeria's capital. Since 1991, that designation has belonged to Abuja, some 600km to the north, a purpose-built city that is home to the country's political elite. When the new capital was pronounced, the nation's revenues began a commensurate flow, away from Lagos and towards the north. Despite being the country's largest city, Lagos has suffered from a lack of infrastructure investment ever since.

'There is a transport master plan. It is quite old, 10 years maybe, and it does include trains, elevated railways and other public transport', says Udoma-Ejorh. 'There is some progress, but the city is quite slow at achieving it.'

With the population of Lagos growing rapidly, there is an urgent need to make it more liveable. Public spaces like parks are rare. Bicycle lanes and bicycle traffic are non-existent, even walking is a challenge – well-defined sidewalks are few, making walking an extreme sport of dodging traffic while sidestepping puddles and potholes.

Udoma-Ejorh believes a focus on large infrastructure projects to the exclusion of improvements at a community level is part of the problem. 'The government's push is on larger infrastructure rather than smaller changes that could improve community living', she says. 'I think the state also needs to think about layers of the city and how people move through the city at different times. We need more than just large infrastructure. We also need smaller interventions at a micro level.'

Her young team at LUDI works to improve local areas – the organisation is creating vertical gardens and farms, new parks and public spaces and focusing on enabling non-motorised traffic and improving pedestrian safety. 'Most of our projects are around transportation and mobility, particularly non-motorised transport. We also look at public space, climate resilience and building a more equitable city. We have a pro-poor ethos', says Udoma-Ejorh.

Taking personal action to solve larger problems is one of the traits that defines the Soro Soke generation. Sometimes, as with LUDI, it's a proactive engagement. In other cases, it is because there is no other choice. 'Nigerians can solve any problem you give them', says Oyatogun. 'We have to be able to, no one is coming to solve it for us.'

A large truck is slowing progress on the Lekki toll road, the sides of its tanks seeping liquid and leaving spotted trails on the road behind. It is a water tanker, a common sight on roads throughout the city. Neither water nor electricity can be taken for granted in Lagos. Electricity flutters in and out, a sudden drop into darkness elicits no comments here. Those who can afford it run their own generators. But it is water supply that is the more pressing issue. The city's creaking water facility can't meet modern needs and many Lagosians have resorted to trucking water in, or to drilling their own wells. But as more people drill deeper and deeper, the underground water reservoir is being depleted. Lagosians acknowledge

the need for governance on the issue but are also resigned to managing alone.

‘I have to care for myself’, says 25-year-old journalist S. I. Ohumu. ‘We all know what it is to not have water, or not to have electricity. Only a very few very wealthy Nigerians haven’t had a similar experience. It’s the young people in Lagos and other cities who are innovating themselves out of this nightmare. We don’t have an option. You have to get ahead yourself, and you have to take as many people as possible ahead with you.’

Across Lagos, young Nigerians are gathering in like-minded groups. Whether it is solving problems of urban planning, building business to help each other save and invest, making music and having fun or standing up for each other against police and government forces, young Lagosians are inspiring each other and working together to solve the challenges they face. In the process they are creatively disrupting both the cityscape and traditional life. In her paper ‘Youth in Angola: Keeping the Pace towards Modernity’, Cristina Udelsmann Rodrigues points out that, across Africa, urban modes of living are generating new forms of social and cultural interaction. Young people, she says, are eager to distinguish themselves from the rural past and develop new, cosmopolitan styles. ‘In clothing and fashion, places where people eat, urban leisure and the transformation of gender relationships, among others, the construction of new social and cultural references and practices shows how active the role of younger generations is, and how they are able to contribute to the transformation of society’, writes Rodrigues.¹⁶

The GRA (Government Residential Area) of Ikeja epitomises the modernity of thinking and living that is evident in many parts of Lagos. An area of detached houses and apartments in gated communities, it attracts civil servants and business people of all ages. Many of its residents are young and successful – this is where Oyatogun lives. ‘It’s

quiet here, peaceful', she says, a rare feeling in this teeming city.

Like many residents, she values the neighbourhood's proximity to the airport and its shopping malls, boutiques, supermarkets, restaurants, and the likes of the Hans & René gelato parlour, which serves ice cream with flavours such as Agbalumo (star apple). Hans & René is typical of an emerging side of Lagos – cosmopolitan yet rooted in Nigerian culture it appeals to a growing group of young people, those with jobs or businesses, who have money and want to spend it in support of a new, distinct, urban Nigerian lifestyle.

As Oladeji points out: 'The spirit of a city is very important, we inhabit the spirit of where we live. Lagos is very cosmopolitan, it is multiple cultures and multiple identities. It's complex, a melting pot of many things. I'm interested in the material aspect of our culture but also in the philosophical and I believe Nigerians don't yet fully realise how much the city influences our culture.'