Keynote lecture by OluTimehin Adegbeye at the Conference 'The Future of the African City', Leiden 24 January 2019

The thing that has brought me here, to this room, is that I am a Lagosian. Now, this doesn't mean that I'm *from* Lagos, except perhaps in the Euro-American sense of the word. By definition—and I use the Nigerian, Yoruba world sense to define many things—I'm from Ijebu-Igbo, a small university town that I have never visited but which continues to be home to most of my father's family. However, I am a Lagosian because I grew up in and have lived the vast majority of my life in Lagos. Lagos is my home, but Lagos worries me.

One of my favourite quotes from The New Inquiry is that "the future never comes, because it is not habitable by any part of the human experience except language. And so the future is really only a way to talk about the present, and the past." In the present, Lagos is disappearing. Or rather, Lagos is morphing into a privatised, capital-driven utopia. Many of the things that immediately come to mind when I think of the most popular, most populous city in Africa are now under the slow but systematic threat of 'development'. One of the city's most recongisable icons - the bright yellow danfo, the vehicle that transports the majority of Lagosians along our badly networked roads, is now being overtaken in the minds of many by a new icon. Replacing these mostly unregulated, repurposed minivans as the symbol of the city is the Lekki-Ikoyi bridge, a four-year-old link bridge whose colourful lights overlook the lagoon. This new face of Lagos commands the priciest toll in the city and connects one expensive, exclusive neighbourhood to another even more expensive, exclusive neighbourhood. And therein lies the rub; the Lagos that is now being layered over the Lagos that is disappearing seems to be designed for the rich, and the rich alone.

Historically and currently, Lagos is only slightly more dysfunctional than many of its African counterparts. We have flooding problems like Freetown, an overpriced housing market like Accra, electoral violence like Nairobi. So perhaps the particular failures of that city to cater to all of its residents, no matter who they are, are not so particular. And perhaps its narrow-minded march towards an exclusionary future is not unique. But is it inevitable?

Every city changes; it is the nature of urbanisation that cities constantly morph according to the times, the needs of residents and the visions of governments. But Lagos seems to be changing by consuming itself. For instance, so much of the infrastructure going up in Lagos is destroying its coastline and eroding what little climate resilience this low-lying, flood-prone city might have had. I have memories of church services on beaches that my daughter will never get a chance to see because they no longer exist. The once-popular Bar beach always seemed smaller every time I visited. And then one day, it was simply gone, replaced by the cranes and scaffolding of a super-luxury development. A couple of years ago, at a dinner party, the marketing manager of this development asked me if I was Kenyan. I told him that I was Nigerian enough to remember when there was a public beach where his expatriate salary now came from. He laughed and said something about how the project's sea wall was a climate-change mitigation device. Later in the year, I remembered his claims when, during some massive flooding, a man tweeted a video of a fish he had caught with his bare hands just a few kilometres inland from that development.

The future is not a single, unified thing. The people in charge of that project, which is privately owned but state-backed, understand this intimately. Their sea-wall signifies their certainty that a time will come when the consequences of their actions will pose a significant threat to someone. They just want to be sure that this 'someone' is not them. And they're doing so with the state's blessing, because their vision fits neatly into the future that the city's most recent governments seem to want for it. But what about the rest of us?

Many of us are not wanted there; that is what the script of the city says, as written by the state, by private capital, by policies and laws, and even by the ways in which citizens refuse to make space for one another

or acknowledge the space people are making for themselves. But that doesn't change the fact that we're all already there. So I wonder, can a self-cannibalising city have a future?

I don't have many answers. But it is important to me to ask questions as an entry point into exploring how, even beyond infrastructure and services and governance, cities shape the lives—and the deaths—of the people in them. For some of us, maybe most of us who live in African cities, the failures of the state are inextricably linked to the ways in which our communities fail us. We are gearing up for elections in Nigeria, and recently, a much-loved and much-feared transportation kingpin was stabbed at a political rally in Lagos. The consensus was that it was over pre-election palm-greasing and the dissatisfaction of certain parties with the share that they received. This is what happens when the social contract between leader and led is ultimately a bag of rice in exchange for a badly constructed bridge and nothing else, because the leaders simply don't care.

One of the biggest threats to the future of our cities, to my mind, is the fact that the people with power over them seem to have almost no concept of the city as a shared space. In the privatised utopia that Lagos is being steered towards, the political will to co-create an urban reality that serves more than a select few does not seem to exist. In the absence of governmental willingness to build functional, inclusive cities, the burden then falls on citizens to not only provide their own public services, but also to create self-sustaining ecosystems and communities that can somehow compensate for these gaps. Yet, the combination of a higher cost of living due to necessary self-sufficiency and a lower quality of life for the same reason produces an urban culture where we must climb on one another's backs if we are to make it out alive. And unfortunately, some of us are more likely to be crushed than others.

There is no way to divorce how governments fail their citizens from how cities fail their residents. Recently, the Lagos-based public relations officer of the Nigeria Police made a statement telling homosexuals to leave the country or face imprisonment. This, in a context where many young queer people living in rural or semi-rural areas flee to the city to escape the false idea that they are alone, or alien. And of course these young queer people and those who are otherwise marginalised find spaces to survive, but only under extreme duress, and only after being forced to understand that their belonging is to the specific carved out space, and not to the broader whole of the city which others are able to take for granted.

Urban space is a social thing, as much as it is a physical thing. And the inadequacy of the social space that exists for certain groups in our cities both comes from and is reflected in the lack of physical space. For instance, there are currently no known gay bars in Lagos, whether as part of a subculture or not. Women and girls are constantly under siege in public. The disabled are almost always either invisible and ousted from public life, or they exist in public primarily as beggarly spectacles. Even public spaces that are constructed as the domain of the dominant middle class male are being or have been cornered by private capital, such that Bar Beach has become Eko Atlantic and Ikoyi Park has become Parkview Estate. The masculine rich own the world, and their money owns our cities. But what does that leave the rest of us?

When I think of the future of African cities I sometimes think that the only way the poor will continue exist will be as hands and sweat and bodies worked-to-death, and even those will be invisible. In many of our cities already, the urban poor travel long hours using inadequate public transportation to get to jobs that pay them too little to be able to live in the cities whose wheels are lubricated by their labour. And if they live close to the city centre, it is often in communities that are under-served and at risk of violent gentrification or eviction. Or worse, they live on the streets, and work on the streets, and are ultimately at the mercy of the cartels who run the streets, whether those be gangs or governments.

Back home, there's a young man named Hakeem who cleans my windshield every other day. His family lives about two hours away in a small town or village, and he's in Lagos to try and make it — he told me this during one of his two or three attempts to get large chunks of money out of me. The first time, it was to pay to get the results for exams which I could immediately tell he hadn't taken. The second time was for

driving lessons that he claimed cost almost three times the minimum wage, and there was one other scheme I don't recall. He has given up the scams now, and we have an easy understanding. But anyway, when Hakeem disappeared over the Christmas break, I wondered if he was dead, then felt ashamed of the thought. After a few weeks, he resurfaced and told me, "those people want to kill us. They came and took us away, it's only God that saved me." I immediately assumed that 'those people' were from one of the many state agencies who round up people on the streets in order to extort them, but the traffic light had changed and he couldn't finish the story. It was only the next day that he was able to clarify that it was just regular Christmas-time kidnappers, who are rumoured to kill people for their body parts, that took him. He never told me how he escaped.

For street based workers like Hakeem who happen to be women, whether they are selling sex or selling food, urban safety is a myth. And part of that is because the sale of sex or food or little knickknacks on the street is criminalised by the state, but also because women's existence is erased from the cityscape, and our right to public life is delegitimised by the socio-political devaluing of our needs and refusal to acknowledge our realities. The city does not see us or plan for us; every space we carve out to survive in is hard-fought for, and the fight is ongoing. Sexual violence against women who work on the street happens at higher rates than against women who work in office buildings, but all of us experience it. And this violence is facilitated by the anonymity of urban life and social reinforcement of discriminatory norms. Gendered abuse, which happens at higher rates in cities than in rural areas, finds us wherever we are. More women and children are trafficked into domestic or sexual slavery in our cities than across borders into Europe or elsewhere, because a city is an easy place to disappear, especially if you are poor, young, and/or female.

The present is bleak, so for us to have any kind of meaningful future, we must interrupt the processes that sustain our current realities. Cities are full of energy, and their futures are built by people and the social and economic outputs they create when their lives and futures are secure. Thus the best cities, I imagine, will be those that safeguard people and harness their dynamism in order to multiply the space in which they are able to explore what it means to build a life among a throng of others who have the same goal.

For our cities to move towards futures that are better than the ones that seem imminent, they cannot be driven primarily by profit and the profitable. The global trend lately seems to be that cities want to be autonomous economic hubs that have more in common with one another than with other parts of the countries or regions to which they belong. But this has serious, and to my mind, negative implications for the ability of African cities to become or remain adaptive to their local contexts. Prioritising 'global megacity status' over the realities faced by the majority, or pursuing private capital at the expense of human dignity, cannot yield sustainable futures. Economic growth and capital generation have limited value in cities that remain fundamentally unequal. City governments must work to increase disenfranchised citizens' access to public goods and resources, and urban development must capture and cater to the needs of all demographics. Policies must be informed by citizens' input, regardless of their economic, social, or other status, and they must increase welfare, including and especially for women, sexual and gender minorities, the disabled and people living in poverty — all of which are demographics that can intersect.

I believe African cities must escape the trap of capital taking precedence over people as the primary defining factor for 'progress'. Our cities must be more than just sites of economic production or monied nerve centres that function to generate and store wealth for a minute few. After all, what kind of relationships can people have with the cities they work in, if their work sustains the city yet does not allow them to enjoy it?

Our future cities must prioritise public spaces and services that encourage community building, social cohesion and cultural creation. Last year, the Nigerian President flew to Lagos to commission a bus terminus that the state government touted as part of a plan to revolutionise transportation in the city. It was built on land people had been evicted from, in a style completely incongruent with how Lagosians

approach public transportation. The day after the ceremony, the terminus was locked back up, and has remained so ever since. In 2013, a $500m cable car project was commissioned by the State. Six years later, the only physical infrastructure in existence is a signboard where the primary station is supposed to be. But that's actually okay, since I don't know any self-respecting Lagosians who would trust a transportation system that suspends them hundreds of feet in the air. We haven't even figured out our electricity yet!

To build cities that are inclusive and self-sustaining rather than self-cannibalising, we must move past the narrow, decontextualised visions that inform urban planning and policies in this century. Instead, city leadership must begin to critically examine local contexts in order to define urban goals that are relevant and achievable. They must also strengthen the mechanisms for planning and policy input that are available to city dwellers who are managing to survive, despite the glaring inadequacies of the current systems.

I'd love to see, for instance, more models of democratic transportation being designed by locals and adopted by city leadership, such that our majority-poor cities don't continue to subsidise the transportation costs of car-owners to the detriment of pedestrians and public transport users. As an example, the transportation systems of the cities of our future could be designed to absorb existing private responses to current transportation shortages, without penalising providers or burying them in regulatory bureaucracy, at least pending when more efficient and cost-effective models are successfully implemented.

Imagine if city governments adopted collaborative models for the delivery of water, electricity, sanitation and waste management. We already have such models on the micro scale in Lagos, since everyone has to navigate the under-provision of public services. The Lagos State Water Corporation has been expanding the first phase of its grid—the one laid in the colonial era—since the 1990s. Yet, over 60% of the city is still not served, despite hundreds of millions of dollars invested in private-public partnerships. Imagine if cities created transparent and inclusive models for distributing the cost of public services, rather than relying on corrupt practices to ensure private profit from them.

I want to live in a city that earnestly addresses the question of how to fix our housing deficits, especially given the current injustice of violent evictions of slums in favour of luxury housing that will predictably have significant vacancy rates. I want our cities to become spaces where citizens can meaningfully leverage democratic process to keep governments accountable, such that when they go to court and win, like the people of Otodo Gbame did, they actually get justice, like the people of Otodo Gbame have not.

The future of African cities, to my mind, must be about the future of the people in them. And that sounds cliché, but really; streetlights and roads and trains and buildings, parks and waterworks and power generation plants, and even foreign direct investments and city governments all exist in service of people. Or, well, they should. But it seems as though this crucial point is often lost or forgotten in the race towards the mega-smart-connectedness that so many of those with the most power seem to have decided is the future of our cities. But what is the relevance or even usefulness of these frameworks to the people who already live in our cities, or to the people who are most likely to have migrated into them by the time we arrive at this future that we benchmark as 2050 or whatever? Ultra-modern markets that nobody can afford or free public Wi-Fi at the expense of internet freedom cannot be the key issues of our future, when housing, work, healthcare and mobility - both of the physical and the economic variety, remain too difficult to access for so many urbanites.

The urban future I like to envision for my continent is one in which we are less distant from one another, as people and as geographies. One where we are able to thrive in community and in solidarity, rather than being forced by scarcity and corruption to constantly violate one another. One where people are able to live, work and play in safety, without question or negotiation, and with the knowledge that they have a right to the city. This is the future I want, and I think what it takes for us to get there is for enough of us to want it too. So, do you?