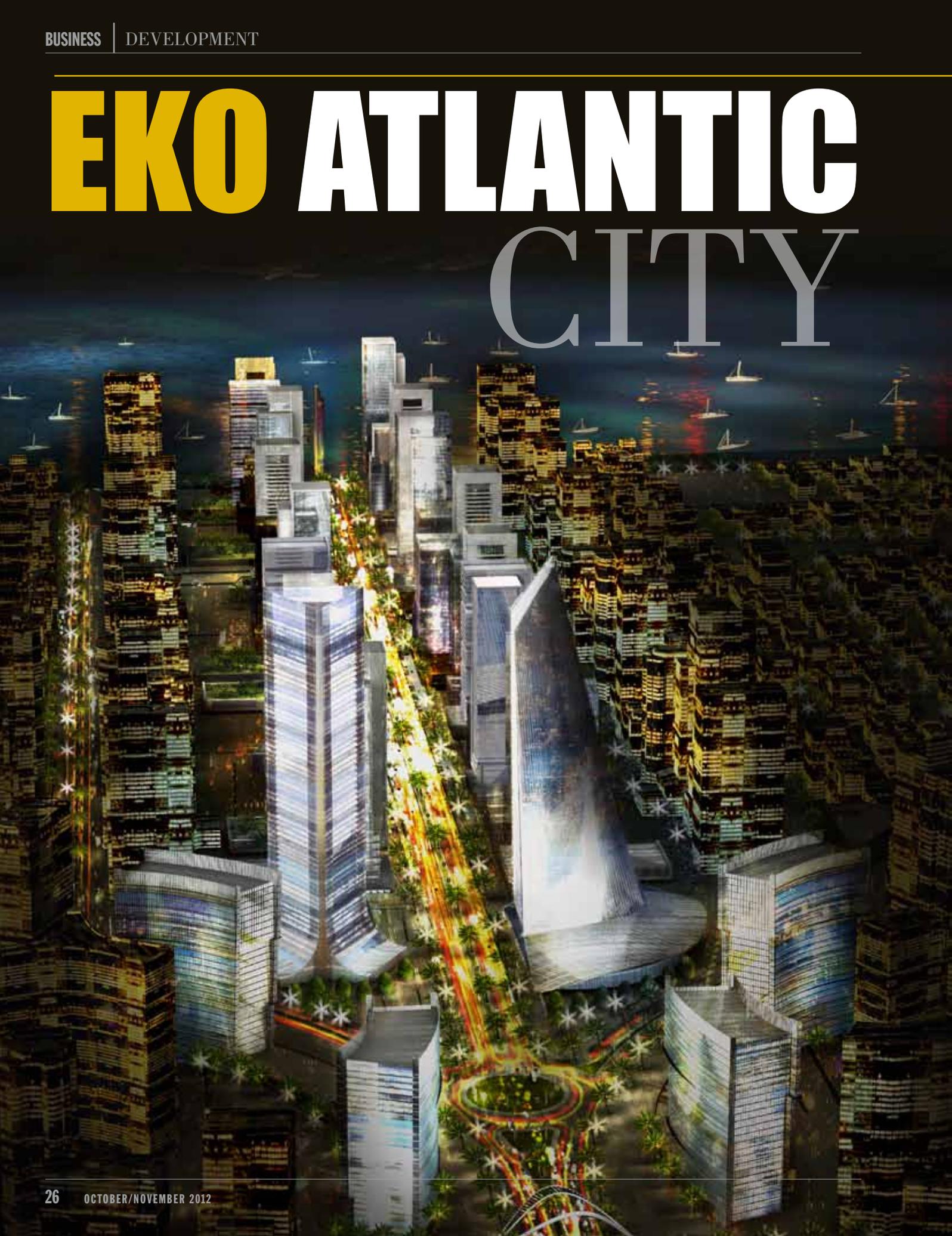


EKO ATLANTIC CITY

An aerial night view of a futuristic city, likely Atlantic City, featuring a central illuminated corridor with glowing skyscrapers and a large, curved, illuminated structure. The city is surrounded by water with many boats, and the overall scene is lit up with vibrant colors and lights.

A MAMMOTH NEW DEVELOPMENT ON THE COASTLINE OF LAGOS

Words Tolu Ogunlesi

To keep the ocean at bay forever, a wall – The Great Wall of Lagos – is rising. From the Bar Beach Waterfront of Lagos's Victoria Island it looks like a grey snake nestled in the water. Once completed, the seven-kilometre-long mass of rocks, topped by five-ton concrete blocks, will rise nine metres above sea level. The developers, South Energyx, say it will withstand the worst storms that the ocean can muster for the next two centuries. Actually, they are banking on this, that the wall will protect Eko Atlantic City, their massive new \$6 billion infrastructure and real estate development being built on land reclaimed from the Atlantic ocean.

In the Trenches

Eko Atlantic City is off-limits to wanderers and the curious, and signs to this effect are boldly printed on the main gate to the development, on Victoria Island's Ahmadu Bello Way. The only other entrance is from the far end, via Bar Beach, which is itself policed by enterprising young men who have made a business of collecting an entrance fee from anyone wanting to walk along the water. I begin here, making my way past revellers and shoeless prayer-warriors, headed in the direction of the new development.

I soon come to a stretch of giant, rusty steel tubing, part of the machinery of the city-in-progress. In the distance is a cluster of workers' cabins, painted green. I spot a lone man, cooking out of a makeshift kitchen – a ramshackle wooden shed topped with aluminium sheets

Part of Lagos's centuries-long fight with the ocean, Eko Atlantic City, will supposedly relieve congestion in the fast-growing megalopolis. Some herald it as part of an economic rebirth for the city, others are more sceptical.

– next to the wall of a warehouse in which Eko Atlantic's giant concrete pipes are molded. His name is Lawrence Inyang and he's 57 years old. He is one of the hundreds of men working to make the Eko Atlantic City a reality. He drives a Volvo "motor-grader" – an imposing piece of machinery that resembles a caterpillar. "My job is to do all the roads in here," he says, something he's been doing for close on two years. There are no feeding arrangements in the living quarters, he tells me, which is why he's here, making his food. "We're up to 12 in one room. All we do is sleep there and then go to work," he says. On weekends he goes home to his family in Ikorodu, one of Lagos's fastest-growing urban corridors, far away on the mainland.

The life he lives now has nothing in common with the kind of life

he is helping to create for those who will inhabit Eko Atlantic City when it's up and running by the end of the decade. "Unless I get a job here I don't think I'll ever be able to enter the city," he says. "This place is for big men." He's heard that one square metre of land costs 700,000 naira – about \$4,000. (South Energyx Limited says prices actually start from \$850 per square meter, with plot dimensions starting from a minimum of 2,000 square meters). On his current income, Inyang would have to work for one year to earn 700,000 naira. To prove it he rummages through his nearby grader and returns with a sheet of paper on which is scribbled his name, a Guarantee Trust Bank account number, and "N18,000." That money, he says, was for two weeks' worth of work. The wage for workers like him ranges from N1,500 (\$10) to N2,000 (\$18) per day. I ask him if he would take a plot of land here if it were offered to him. "I won't take it," he says. "Even if I take it I'll sell. Maybe after 20 or 30 years the wall will break. I can't stay here. I'm scared, I have to be honest with you. One day this place might sink or be overrun by water. We see it on TV all the time, [footage from other countries], where floods come and cover entire houses."

Why Lagos Needs Eko Atlantic City

Lagos, which sits in the southwestern region of western Nigeria, is a city perpetually on the brink of flooding. Bounded in the South by the Atlantic Ocean, the city is

A BELGIAN DREDGING VESSEL, THE CONGO RIVER, IS DOING MOST OF THE HEAVY LIFTING. BY THE TIME ITS WORK IS DONE, 140 MILLION TONNES OF SAND WOULD HAVE BEEN DREDGED FROM THE FLOOR OF THE ATLANTIC, TO CREATE THE NEW CITY.

situated on the mainland, home to 70 percent of the city's population with series of islands and a peninsula that holds the remaining 30 percent. At the heart of the city lies the expansive Lagos Lagoon. Today, if it were a country, Lagos would be Africa's fifth largest economy – as is, Lagos is Africa's second largest city. It is one of the fastest growing cities in the world – from a population of 300,000 in 1950 it has grown to some 15 million people. The United Nations predicts that by 2015 it will have a population of over 25 million.

Between 1908 and 1912, British colonial authorities constructed three “moles” or “breakwaters” around Bar Beach, to ease the movement of ships into the Lagos Harbour. These moles disrupted the natural flow of the ocean and set up tidal action that would, over the next century, erode more than one kilometre of Bar Beach coastline. Since the late 1950s there have been several unsuccessful attempts to keep the ocean at bay, by sand-filling. By the turn of the 21st century, the Atlantic had crept dangerously close to the heart of Victoria Island, eventually washing away half of the Ahmadu Bello coastal road.

In December 2005, the government launched the Shoreline Protection Project, which involved the construction of a kilometre-long wall of interlocking concrete blocks and stone. The project was commissioned in 2008 and trumpeted as a decisive victory

of man over nature. This same year, Lagos Governor Babatunde Fashola launched an even more daring project – Eko Atlantic City, envisioned as a land reclamation project to restore the Lagos coastline. His predecessor, Bola Tinubu, had in July 2006 granted the concession for the reclamation and development project, including a 78-year lease for the developed land to South Energyx.

A Belgian dredging vessel, the bizarrely named, Congo River, is doing most of the heavy lifting. By the time its work is done, 140 million tonnes of sand would have been dredged from the floor of the Atlantic to create the new city. Three million square kilometres of land have already been reclaimed. When the reclamation is complete in 2015, nine million square kilometres of land will sit where, a decade earlier, the ocean sat, terra-firma for a city one-and-a-half times the size of adjoining Victoria Island. The dredging and land reclamation is being carried out by Belgian firm Dredging International (DI), while Dutch firm Royal Haskoning designed and is building the Great Wall. Providing architectural services are MZ Architects (with offices in the Middle East and North Africa) and ar+h Architects.

Who's Paying and How Much?

The project's main funders are three Nigerian banks: First Bank, First City Monument Bank (FCMB) and Guaranty Trust Bank (GTBank) – all publicly traded on the Nigerian Stock Exchange. The international bank BNP Paribas is also heavily invested. The balance of the funds needed will come from land sales. None of the funding will come from the government, whose role is limited solely to providing the concession for the project and receiving taxes on the land sales

and development. According to South Energyx, 80 percent of Phase 1 has already been sold to private developers – the equivalent of one fifth of the total land mass that will be available.

Eko Atlantic will not be a cheap city in which to live. But, according to a company official, their research has found that Eko Atlantic offers cheaper land, in dollars per square meter, than Banana Island, Ikoyi and Victoria Island – Lagos' most expensive developments. He pointed out an even more striking advantage: unlike their counterparts across the rest of highbrow Lagos, residents of Eko Atlantic will not have to budget for power generators or boreholes, or worry about organising their own sewage disposal and rigging their own Internet connections.

Supporters versus Naysayers

With a price tag of \$6 billion, Eko Atlantic is as ambitious as it is controversial. Publicity material describes it as “a city born from the sea”. It has also been touted as the ‘Manhattan’ of West Africa. The project started out as a land reclamation effort but is also publicised as a way of building a Lagos dream. The developers, South Energyx, say it will be home to 250,000 people when completed, with 150,000 commuting in and out for work. Lagos State Governor Fashola speaks of creating a “model megacity for Africa. A city where people can live, work and play”. Marketing material claims that “instead of the claustrophobic city environment of Lagos, Eko Atlantic will provide dramatic views over the Atlantic Ocean, clear, tree-lined streets and open spaces”, and that “instead of the frequent power cuts, water shortages and communications breakdowns that are well known



in Lagos, Eko Atlantic will have uninterrupted services.”

But not everyone is sold. “Was VI [Victoria Island] not supposed to be the Manhattan of its day?” asks urban planner Simon Gusah, who runs a consultancy in Abuja, Nigeria. “When did that dream bite the dust? When building codes and standards were flouted? When the infrastructure could no longer cope with growth? What, then, is there about the Eko Atlantic City strategic plan that will ensure this does not happen?” Gusah thinks Eko Atlantic is merely another manifestation of privileged Nigerians’ penchant for snobbishness. “Nigerians are very class-conscious and the gated community, the GRA [Government Reservation Area] colonial hang-up is deeply engrained.” Architect Kunle Adeyemi, founder of NLÉ (an architecture, design and urbanism practice for developing cities), thinks that a bridge linking Ikorodu on the Mainland and Epe on the Lekki Peninsula across the lagoon is a more urgent city need. Others, still, cite improving Lagos’s archaic road infrastructure or decongesting traffic by investing in better public transport systems as even more immediate concerns. There is currently no city-wide rail service – a

light rain is still being built, almost 30 years after it was first proposed.

Inyang struggles to understand the insistence on claiming land back from water. “There’s plenty of land along Abeokuta road, free from water,” he says about the expanses to the north of the city, on the Lagos mainland. “Why are they not building this there?” It is a good question. Lagos’s islands teem with unoccupied luxury developments, priced out of the reach of all but the city’s richest, while multitudes continue to make do with slums and slum-like housing. The city desperately needs mass low-cost housing away from the Islands and Lekki peninsula. The last ambitious housing programme, commissioned when Lateef Jakande was Governor, is already three decades old. The state government estimates an existing shortage of five million homes, as well as an annual delivery of 200,000 houses to keep up with the population. It recently unveiled a programme to build, over the next two years, 1,000 apartments – a negligible attempt in light of reality.

Journalist Neuwirth is another sceptic. He has spent time living in and researching Lagos, and his second book, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban*

World, details his experiences living in four squatter communities on four continents. He worries about the “separateness” of developments like Eko Atlantic. “I’m not against rich people having housing but I don’t pretend that it will transform the rest of Lagos,” he tells me. “It doesn’t really constitute development for the masses of people. It’s not going to change the infrastructure on the mainland or the way traffic moves through Apapa. It’s simply one development for a very small percentage of the population.”

A Big Dream Needs Big Developers

Eko Atlantic City is plugged as a public-private partnership between the Lagos State Government and the Chagoury Group, which owns South Energyx. The Chagoury Group, with extensive interests in construction, real estate and hospitality, among other areas, was founded by brothers Gilbert and Ronald Chagoury. Gilbert, born in 1946 in Lagos, to Lebanese migrant parents, is the oldest of eight siblings. Together with younger brother Ronald he founded the Chagoury Group in 1971. He gained prominence in the early 1990s as a close friend of Nigeria’s military dictator Sani Abacha, and member of his circle of financial advisers and fixers. Philip Vasset, a French journalist and Chief Editor of the newsletter *Africa Energy Intelligence*, has described him as “the gatekeeper to Abacha’s presidency”.

Gilbert Chagoury’s knack for building high-profile relationships is legendary. He is also a close friend of Bill Clinton. In a fundraising document released by the Clinton Foundation in December 2008, Chagoury was listed in the class of donors who contributed between



\$1 million and \$5 million. His closeness to Abacha won his construction companies several high-profile contracts in the 1990s, including Nigeria's National Assembly Complex, the Nigerian Defence Academy, and the Federal Secretariat in Abuja. In the 1990s, the Chagoury Group, in partnership with the Federal Government of Nigeria, also developed a mass of land adjoining Ikoyi, named Banana Island. Property prices in Banana Island are the highest in Lagos, already one of the most expensive cities in the world.

Over the last decade, the Chagoury family has enjoyed a closeness to Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Lagos's former Governor, and the most influential politician in south-western Nigeria. HITECH, one of the construction firms in the Chagoury Group, is responsible for the Lekki-Epe Expressway, arguably the most ambitious construction project in Lagos since the Third Mainland Bridge, which opened in 1991 and which connects Ikoyi to the mainland.

Environmental Consideration

In September 2009, Eko Atlantic City was awarded a "Commitment Certificate" by the Clinton Global

Initiative. The certificate recognises "commitments" by members of the Initiative, who create and implement innovative solutions to the world's most pressing challenges. According to the Foundation citation, "South Energyx commits to combating the devastating effects of climate change by reclaiming nine square kilometres of land for a new city, Eko Atlantic. Eko Atlantic will be an environmentally conscious city, built with nature, to restore an original coastline and protect Victoria Island, Nigeria from the severe risk of ocean surge and flooding."

Environmental activist Ako Amadi, a former Executive Director of the Nigerian Conservation Fund, is sceptical about this claim. "The whole of Lekki [peninsula] used to be wetlands, which helped to mitigate ocean surges," he tells me. "The loss of the wetlands is not the fault of the government or the builders of Eko Atlantic, but a new city is not going to mitigate things on a sustainable level."

There have also been demands for the city's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) documents to be made public. Some observers have attempted to link the reclamation to the alarming rate at which water

levels are rising in Lagos, a claim Fashola himself has debunked. "The insinuation that the Eko Atlantic City project is the cause of the floods is untrue. It is an uninformed and erroneous view," the Governor told Channels Television in July 2012.

In May this year, South Energyx and the Lagos state government called a press conference to address concerns about the non-availability of an EIA. "The Eko Atlantic Project has completed a full and comprehensive Environmental and Social Impact Assessment on the entire land reclamation works and its sea wall protection, as required under the Nigerian Environmental Impact Assessment Act No. 86 of 1992," newspaper reports quoted an official of Dutch marine engineering firm, Royal Haskoning, which conducted the assessment, as saying. "The EIA has been carried out in accordance with these regulations." Around this same time, the CEO of South Energyx, David Frame, said to me, "We have approval from the Federal Ministry of Environment on our EIA." But Amadi argues that an EIA is not something you do when you've started construction. "They started dredging in 2009 and are presenting an EIA in 2012," Amadi says. "The EIA should have been done around 2008." He adds that an EIA is a document that "costs money", and because it is issued by a government ministry, "there are many ways of getting around [it]. It can be waived or fast-tracked."

Work as Usual

The concerns have done nothing to affect the pace of work on the site, or the ongoing scramble for Eko Atlantic. Every day as many

as 300 trucks feed the Great Wall of Lagos with rock quarried from Benin and Oyo. And South Energyx says the first developer is already constructing the foundation of what will be a 24-storey residential tower. First Bank, one of the key funders of the project, already has plans to build its new headquarters – more than 50 storeys tall – at Eko Atlantic. “I am inundated almost on a weekly basis by people wanting to prepay, and if there’s any barometer at all about how people feel about it, about how expectant they are about it, it is this huge demand that we want to live there,” said Fashola, in a publicity video for Eko Atlantic City. Inyang corroborates this. “That place that is water,” he told me, pointing towards the stretch of water behind us, “it’s already been sold.” The amusement in his voice is easy to discern. He tells me a story of a client who paid for a plot of land and showed up to discover that his piece of real estate still lay beneath the Atlantic. “When they show you on the drawing, you can’t tell that it’s water. It’s when you come to take a look that you realise its ocean [you bought].”

The Changing Face of Lagos

But that “ocean” – the part closest to us – is fast disappearing. In another few years it will be all gone, sand-filled. Along with it will go Bar Beach, famous in the seventies and eighties for concerts, and public executions of drug barons, armed robbers and coup plotters. Today it is a favourite of horse-riding revellers, roller-skaters, kite-surfers, open-air barbecue-joints, white-garment churches, and young couples. Soon, in its place will be a stretch of prime real estate; a



mass of high-rises, multi-level car-parks, shopping promenades, luxury hotels, boulevards, Venice-style canals and luxury boats.

As a city, Lagos continues to generate significant interest in the global cultural and business imagination. Foreign journalists troop in to write about its startling contradictions and its ambitious plans to master the mayhem that has been its single most defining character for as long as many of its residents can remember. The state government now has plans for seven rail lines (one of them, the “blue line” is already under construction), to take pressure off the city’s perpetually jammed roads. In addition it plans to build 28 “sustainable activity centres”, each of which will incorporate a business district next to residential development, so that Lagosians will no longer have to travel far for work. A new airport and Free Trade Zone are planned for Lekki, as are new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) routes across the city.

Individuals are also hard at work, sometimes in curious ways. Architect Kunle Adeyemi’s focus is a riverine slum regeneration project that he describes as “the antithesis of land reclamation”. In his words, it is about “trying to make Lagos a water-city, like Venice. The centre of

Lagos is a large body of water. Can we develop an aqua-culture for the heart of the city, its transportation, housing?” I interpret that to mean making Lagos comfortable in its co-existence with water; as opposed to the current scenario playing out at Eko Atlantic City, where water seems to be regarded as an enemy to be subdued with sand.

When I finally leave Lawrence Inyang it is dusk. He is now seated within the pipe-molding warehouse, eating the rice he cooked and listening to a transistor radio. I begin the long walk back to Bar Beach. In the distance, Lagos – more often than not a black hole when viewed from the air at night – is an uplifting landscape of dotted lights. In no time I am sucked back into the madness of Victoria Island’s beaches – the barbecue joints and beer tables, the touts and prostitutes. Life continues in Lagos, as it will through the night on the giant construction site that is Eko Atlantic. There will no doubt be many waiting to see if Lagos has finally won a decisive battle with the ocean and in the process brought economic prosperity and a higher standard of living to its citizens, or whether Eko Atlantic City is nothing more than an assortment of castles built on sinking sand. 🌊