



Infrastructure becomes suprastructure

While cellphones, computers, mobile internet access and satellites increasingly shape African urban realities, people must in their everyday lives also navigate an infrastructure marked by decay and unpredictability.

Text by Ulrika Trovalla

IN JOS, A NIGERIAN CITY with more than one million inhabitants, electricity is supplied through a spider web of official and unofficial power lines. The wires continually, and in a very real sense, connect and disconnect the inhabitants to larger wholes – the city, the nation and beyond – through their power to turn television sets, computers and mobile phones on and off. The electricity situation is often referred to as “epileptic,” and power cuts are so common and lengthy that inactive lines are the norm. When electricity does run through the wires, the current is often either too weak to even charge a mobile phone, or too strong, ruining light bulbs, precious second-hand fridges, television sets and mobile phones. Thus, homes and businesses rely on voltage regulators, surge protectors and back-up power systems – generators, invertors that charge car batteries, solar panels and a vast array of rechargeable lamps and torches.

In a very literal sense, the flaws in the infrastructure mean that the prefix “infra” (“below”) should be placed in brackets: instead of operating behind the scenes, manifesting itself primarily through its effects, the constant failures bring it to the forefront of experience. Infrastructure becomes a part of everyday life and its imperfections come to be very visible

and tangible in the material trail they leave, traces that shape the urban landscape but that can also serve as signs to be read.

DEFINING MOMENTS in the nation’s history, such as the oil boom of the 1970s when prosperity peaked, and the oil bust of the 1980s, when broken dreams and structural failure became the order of the day, are described in terms of infrastructure. Many Nigerians try to make sense of what Nigeria used to be like and where it is heading through stories of how infrastructure has changed over the decades.

John, a man in his seventies, lives with his family in the civil servants’ quarters in Jos. He has waterlines connected to the bathrooms and the kitchen, but there has not been any water running in them for many years. The children instead draw water from the well next to the house. They fill up a plastic barrel located in one of the bathrooms. From there, buckets of water are distributed to the different rooms in the house. His house is connected to the city’s electricity grid, but many days there is no more than five minutes of power. For John, Jos is not what it once was. He often talks about what Jos was like in the 1970s compared to the present – there was water coming through all the lines, constant electricity, the roads





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This is Ezekiel, one of the millions of generator owners in Nigeria. There are about 60 million generators in Nigeria, the most generator-dependent country in the world.



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were not littered with potholes, motorcycle drivers wore helmets and the taxis did not look like they were falling apart and took four instead of six passengers. He does not like to take them anymore. He prefers to use his own car, but petrol is always scarce and he does not want to use the petrol from the black market – it is costly and could be diluted, ending up destroying his car. In reality, the car more often than not stands idle.

Tales of this sort are so common that they echo throughout the city, just as they do in the nation at large.

THE ELECTION OF OLUSEGUN OBASANJO as president in 1999 not only brought to an end 16 years of military rule, it brought promises of improved power supply and hopes that the new century would bring the fruits of democracy. As generators have increasingly become an essential feature of the Nigerian urban landscape, this period of democracy has, in much the same way as previous periods, come to be known, understood and spoken of in terms of the infrastructural signs. When in 2005 NEPA, the National Electric Power

Authority, was rechristened the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), it was for most Nigerians simply a matter of putting old wine in a new bottle. Whereas NEPA was mockingly spelled out as “Never Expect Power Always,” PHCN has gained the nickname “Problem Has Come to Nigeria” or “Problem Has Changed Name.” Today it is commonly referred to as “Please Hold Candle Now.”

Wires, pipes and roads that connect people to and, equally, disconnect them from, the rest of the nation have, in this way, become an essential tool for analysing the state of the country. Instead of being infra – underneath and hidden – they have become supra – above and visible. Constantly on people’s minds, the unpredictable infrastructure has come to symbolise what it means to be Nigerian.

THE STATE OF PERPETUAL infrastructural crisis brings forth its own mode of cultural production. People find new ways around the flaws in the infrastructure, sometimes even turning disadvantage to advantage. Chronic traffic jams serve as market places, dead





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- ▶ power lines are used as clotheslines, refrigerators do service as rat-proof cupboards and the Global System for Mobile Communications becomes an alternative banking system. The lack of electricity spawns demand for cheap generators, which in turn, and together with the constant fuel shortages, keep hundreds of small-scale black market petrol vendors in business. Jos still has a train station and is connected to the rest of the country through the railway network. However, no

trains move along the rails, and in the train station waiting passengers have been replaced by a shop selling second-hand furniture, while along the tracks there are markets.

Existing technology is assigned other functions and new inventions are made. In 2007, a crudely made battery-operated lamp consisting of LEDs, with a used CD as reflector, was suddenly to be had for purchase on street corners all over Nigeria. In wry reference to the previous president's failed ambitions to upgrade infrastructure, the lamp was tellingly named "Obasanjo ya kasa," translated by one Jos resident as "Obasanjo was not able to." He elaborated: "I guess since Obasanjo said he would resolve the power problem of the country and he didn't ... they had to find an alternative!"

All of these are examples of how failing infrastructure creates its own production, but also of an alternative or parallel infrastructure that has become an integral part of many African cities. In many ways, this infrastructure depends on the fact that things work less than perfectly. If fuel was distributed without interruption, hundreds of black market petrol vendors would be out of jobs. Many people, especially children, do work on the deteriorating roads, filling potholes or warning of dangerous obstacles. For their services, passing drivers give them occasional "dash" – a small amount of money that is for many of them essential to their daily survival. The many small businesses that sell generators, invertors, surge protectors, rechargeable lamps and batteries, depend on the irregular power supply. Likewise, government employed traffic directors would not be standing in the junctions if there was electricity for the traffic lights.

Urban development initiatives often view these alternative systems as redundant and parasitic and aim to eliminate them. However, many people have come to depend on the deteriorating infrastructure for their survival and "clean-up" activities risk destroying the livelihoods of already vulnerable groups. For many, the parallel systems are the only source of vital supplies. They form the backbone of everyday life in the city, a spine that would crumble if things worked as intended. ■