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## Venice Take Away: The British Pavilion at the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale / RIBA Ideas to Change British Architecture Season

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Liam Ross / Tolulope Onabolu

## LIAM ROSS & TOLULOPE ONABOLU

Why did you want to be part of Venice Takeaway?

We wanted to engage with the debate on regulation in British architecture, which unfortunately is at an impasse. On the one hand, most British architects consider architecture to be over-regulated, stifling innovation and creativity and leading to standardised and monotonous designs. On the other hand, they long for a risk-free creative practice, asserting that the government needs to take responsibility for the population's health, safety and convenience – a recipe for disciplinary impotence. Our aim is to reframe the debate. We want to clarify that it is only through exposure to risk that we develop responsibility as architects, clients and building users. In other words, the curtailing of creative freedom by regulations is not the main issue. The real problem is the excessive regulation that enables us to avoid taking responsibility for ourselves.

Where did your idea come from?

Our idea was shaped through two phases. The first took place during a workshop at the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture in which students surveyed the city. Their drawings depicted the built environment as it responded to a particular 'British standard'. These drawings clearly illustrated that much of contemporary architecture resembles the clauses of building regulations set in bricks and mortar. Secondly, we wanted to compare the highly formalised set of regulations in Edinburgh with a less regulated city. How would the same risks be managed, and what tactics would individuals adopt to manage that risk? We chose Lagos partly because it's Tolu's hometown, but also because it's a former British settlement. We expected to discover imported or inherited 'British standards' to make comparisons.

Did you discover what you set out to find, or something different?

We had hoped to record the behaviour of individual Lagosians through film and photography but soon discovered that this was impossible. It is very difficult to shoot photographs or films in Lagos. There is reluctance and hostility towards the photographing of personally invested property in Lagos – from the self, to the home, to places of employment or perceived national heritage. As a result, we decided to concentrate on differences in the regulatory apparatus and document the physical fabric of the city.

What was the most surprising thing you found out?

We were surprised to uncover the Lagos State Physical Planning and Development Regulations – both Tolu and the Lagosian architects and lawyers we interviewed had been unaware of their existence. Securing a reproduction of these regulations required a three-hour drive to the Lagos

State Secretariat, a personal meeting with the Director of Urban Development, some persuasion, some collateral and two hours at an outdoor single-sided photocopier. The regulations contain the 'setback' rule, which defines the urban character of Lagos and effectively allows the state to summarily relocate development as required for road and infrastructure expansion. Although no development is permitted within the 'setback' area, in practice the location is the most vibrant space in the city – occupied by ad-hoc and temporary development, kiosks, garden centres and mosques, bars, gin-drinkers and mendicants. It's a legally defined zone of extra-legality.

What was the most challenging part of your trip?

Getting permission to take photographs was both challenging and revealing. It took 24 hours for the British Council to grant clearance for us to photograph the street frontage of their office, and we were required to take the photograph outside opening hours to ensure that no members of the public were seen entering or leaving the building. Whilst photographing other frontages and setbacks – from Ikoyi to Lagos Island – we set up a visible camera and tripod and asked permission to photograph anyone present. Most private individuals declined. For a small tip, a shopkeeper or a guard occasionally agreed. Despite these precautions, after taking a photo that included the Lagos State police headquarters in the background, we were arrested and our equipment was held for 24 hours. We had not broken any law and were released, but the photograph was destroyed. Even the Lagos State police commissioner was unable retrospectively grant permission for its having been taken.

How has the experience affected and changed your own work?

This is the first time we have worked together, and it was an exciting opportunity to combine our interests in architecture and law. This opportunity to think about regulation in the context of a former British colony highlighted the importance of the 'reg' (king) in regulation. Additionally, the exploration led us to connect concepts of law and personal responsibility with sovereignty, which suggested that writing law is a means of generating an exception from it. For Tolu, the exploration ignited an interest in fieldwork and offered an opportunity to consider the possibility of an anthropology purged of exotica.

How do you plan to take this forward?

We would like to use the project as a platform to engage with policy in both Britain and Nigeria. For example, we will propose revisions to British Standards, including regulations directed at the safe cleaning of windows. We plan to engage with the ongoing consultation on the first detailed set of building standards in Nigeria.

How are research and exploration important to your practice?

We teach at the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture and are active researchers. Neither of us has ever called ourselves 'explorers' before, or since.

How has the project expanded your international connections?

Both explorations provided opportunities to meet local architects and other construction industry professional, regulators and ambassadors of the arts.

**LIAM ROSS &  
TOLULOPE ONABOLU**

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**BRITISH STANDARD,  
LAGOS EXCEPTION**

## BRITISH STANDARD, LAGOS EXCEPTION BY LIAM ROSS & TOLULOPE ONABOLU

### EXPLORATION ONE: BRITISH STANDARDS IN EDINBURGH

Britain's built environment is subject to a range of sophisticated legislative frameworks, professional codes of conduct, planning requirements, technical standards and modes of environmental assessment. All address a range of governmental concerns, including legal accountability, the right to develop land, health and safety, crime, accessibility and the preservation of fuel and power. Ultimately, this combined regulatory apparatus encapsulates the extent of the population's individual liberties by defining the physical areas in which we can be left to do or be what we are able to do or be, without interference by others.

Regulations can be considered a form of risk assessment: they seek to limit the risk of harm –whether physical, social or financial – that the built environment exposes us to. In Britain these standards are universalist in scope. The limits they impose are often derived from the capacities of the weakest in society – children, the elderly and the infirm. Regulations ensure that the design of a built environment does not present an obstacle universal use.

We recognise that regulations have played an important role in improving the buildings and cities we inhabit. Often, they create welcome order out of general chaos whilst addressing universal problems such as public health. Recently, however, the dynamic has been to expand the domain of regulations into an increasingly broad range of issues – including anti-social behaviour, security, obesity and community outreach. Consequently, the legislative apparatus and the built environment that it regulates represent a trajectory for government to assume increasing responsibility for the population's health, safety and welfare.

This expansion poses a series of concerns: with respect to architectural design, regulations free architects, clients and building users from the responsibility (and opportunity) to undertake their own 'risk assessments'. Further, by increasing the degree to which it regulates citizens' everyday activities, the state and its agencies free us from individually assessing risk. In doing so, we relinquish accountability for everyday actions that have, in the past, been negotiated through individual decision-making.

Additionally, counter to their universalist ambition, these regulatory frameworks often formalise the unequal distributions of risk. Consider British

In Britain's current architectural climate many practices consider the industry to be over-regulated. Architects argue that burdensome building standards stifle innovation and creativity, resulting in monotonous design. At the same time practitioners acknowledge a need for the state to take responsibility for the population's health and safety. Architects Liam Ross and Tolulope Onabolu travelled to Lagos, Nigeria to reframe this debate and offer an alternative critique of regulation through an examination of risk, personal responsibility and sovereignty. The exploration compares Edinburgh and Lagos – two quite different legislative structures – and reflects on the different ways they distribute risk and responsibility between the state and individual. Their research provides a critique of the inclusive and universalist rhetoric of British building regulations and suggests that the purpose of rules is actually to generate the possibility of exceptions.

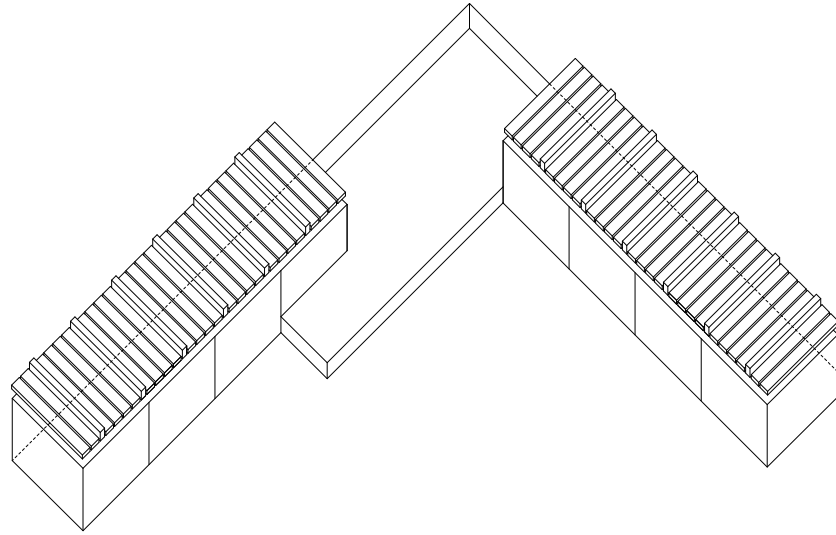


Fig. 1  
Anti-vagrancy bench,  
Grassmarket

Designing Out Crime  
Supplementary Planning  
Guidance  
5.11: Streetscape

Well-designed street furniture and public art in streets and public places can contribute to a safe and distinctive urban environment. Poorly designed and sited street furniture and clutter can lead to an increase in crime and fear of crime. Street furniture should not obstruct pedestrian views or movement or be positioned to encourage anti-social behaviour. A small design change, for example, the inclusion of dividing arm rests on benches may have a significant effect in preventing misuse. Street furniture and public art should be designed to respond to the local townscape.

Standard 8213-1: 2004, Design for Safety in use and during Cleaning of Windows. This regulation provides detailed design recommendations for the size, arrangement, opening method and guarding of windows, door-height windows and rooflights, with consideration of collision, entrapment and high falls. This regulation recommends that windows should be maintainable from within – without the use of a stepladders or cleaning devices and without stretching – by women in the 64–75 year age range. Additionally, the regulation recommends that window size is limited to meet a maximum overhead reach of 1825mm, and 556mm while reaching outside.

This standard has made a profound impact on contemporary architecture in Scotland, leading to a proliferation of low-headed door-type windows with Juliet balconies. However, it is not difficult to find exceptions to this rule. Architects, clients or building occupants can use ‘factoring agreements’ to transfer the risk of window cleaning to professional window-cleaning contractors. Consequently, small low-headed door-type windows with Juliet balconies are most prominent on low-value, speculative housing developments.

The standard is aimed at ensuring that everyone has the ability to clean their own windows. Yet the regulation actually supports an economy of risk redistribution. If occupants can afford a factoring contract, they can have windows of any size. If an occupant can’t afford one, their windows must be tailored to the size and shape of a small elderly woman. The regulations have not created the possibility for economic redistribution. After all, it has always been possible for those with money to outsource risk. Without BS8213, individuals could decide for themselves the degree of risk and responsibility they are willing to take when buying property or choosing windows. But regulation prohibits this. As a result, it introduces another party to risk evaluation: the professional window cleaner, who is simultaneously freed from taking risks for himself, and free to sell that risk to somebody else.

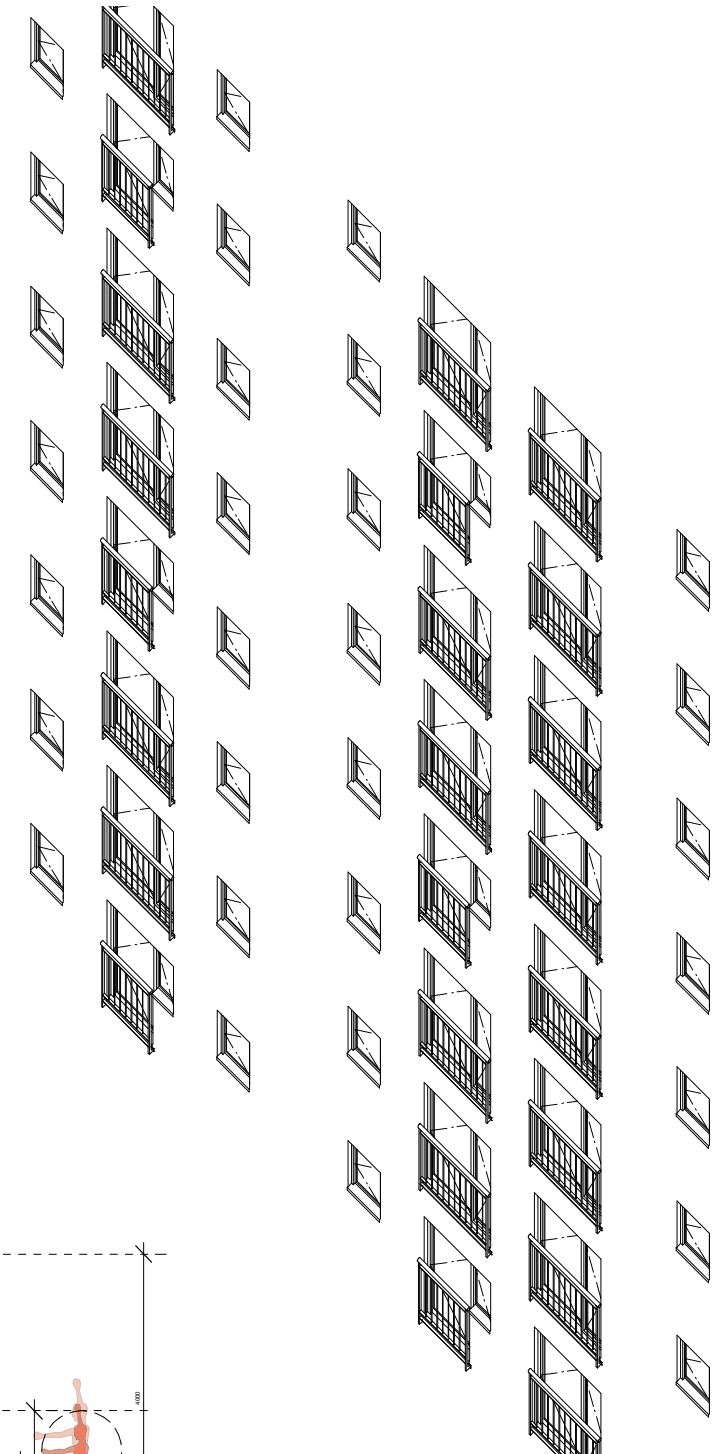


Fig. 2 – 3

British Standard 8213: Design for safety in use and during cleaning of windows, including door-height windows and rooflights.

Windows should be designed such that both external and internal surfaces can be cleaned safely from inside. The window design and location should ensure that is possible for cleaning to be carried out while standing on the floor, preferably without the need for a stepladder or other such foothold. Design for reach should accommodate the 5th percentile of the UK adult population, i.e. within the capabilities of 95%. This would indicate limits of 556 mm for reaching out, and 1825 mm for overhead reach.

Diagram BS8213  
Easily cleanable windows,  
Corinthian Quay



**EXPLORATION ONE:  
SURVEY (EXCERPTS),  
PHOTOGRAPHIC SURVEY  
OF WINDOW CLEANING  
IN EDINBURGH**

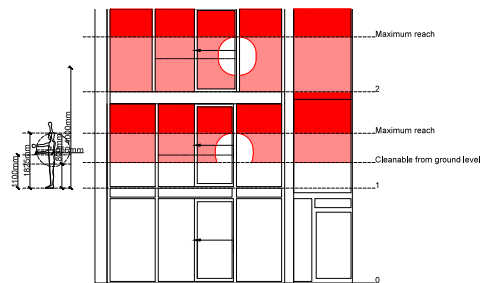


Fig. 4 – 5  
Quartermile  
Fixed and sliding glazing not  
reachable from within, as  
per requirements of BS8213.  
Factoring contract required.

**EXPLORATION ONE:  
INTERVIEW: PHIL MACDONALD, OBERLANDER ARCHITECTS**

LR: Could you describe the regulatory limits that informed the design of the St Vincent Place project?

PR: The project involved completing the last remaining portion of the second new town of Edinburgh. A planning brief was put together in the early 1990s, and it set parameters for the site. We had to deal with an extension of what already existed, and it needed to factor in Georgian proportions. We faced challenges in terms of how we could design large-scale windows so that they could be operated and cleaned in accordance with current regulations.

LR: What specific regulation posed a problem?

PR: The most onerous regulation was the provision for the safe cleaning of windows from the inside. In Edinburgh and around the UK, a prevalence of

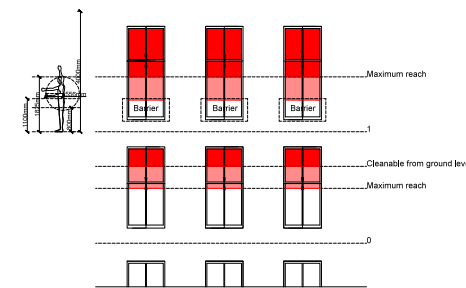


Fig. 6 – 7  
St. Vincent Place  
Large vertically sliding and  
inward-opening windows.  
Upper sash does not lower to  
under 1825mm. Outer face  
not reachable within 556mm.  
Windows not cleanable as  
per requirements of BS8213.  
Factoring contract required.

squat-proportioned windows has been the result of this regulation. You can get a modern window to meet standards, but with a more traditional style, it's difficult – particularly if you have to keep glazing to a low level – because you have to deal with regulations concerned with preventing falls from heights. In our case, there was a contradiction between the requirements of the technical standards and the ambitions of the planning brief.

LR: How did you resolve that contradiction in this particular design?

PR: It was clear that we wouldn't be able to comply with the technical standards, so we considered taking the burden of window-cleaning away from flat-residents and bringing in professionals to take on maintenance in a more controlled way.

LR: So the contradiction was resolved by outsourcing?

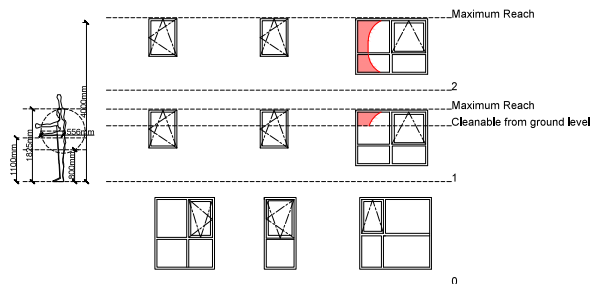


Fig. 8 – 9  
Beaver Bank Place  
Inward-opening windows of c.  
1825mm head and c. 1100mm  
sill allow for cleaning from  
within. NB: Fixed lights do  
not appear to comply with  
requirements of BS8213.

PR: The regulation was directed at households that independently cleaned their windows. If you could bring in expertise, it would resolve the issue.

LR: How are the windows cleaned?

PR: They are sash-and-case windows, designed in such a way that the inside can be hinged-in for cleaning. But because of the heights involved, cleaners must use an extendable pole. This allows you to deal with the lower sash of the window from inside the flat. Externally you need to use a reach-and-wash system from street level. That is something that can be done by a contractor, but it's not something an individual property owner would be able to do.

LR: So a window cleaner needs to have regular access to the inside of the flats?

PR: Yes. There is a requirement to get inside to clean the inside faces of the windows. The windows are 3.3m high. Now there is an arrangement where maintenance can clean the inside to keep property owners from standing on stepladders.

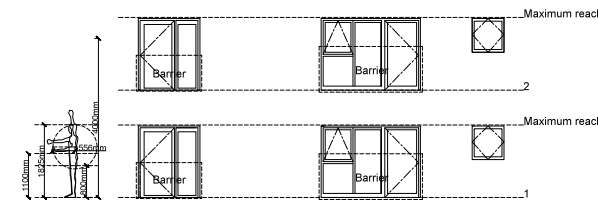


Fig. 10 – 11  
Corinthian Quay  
Balcony allows head heights  
greater than 1825mm, and fixed  
glazing reachable from balcony.

LR: And the window boxes, which satisfy the protection against falls from height – don't they cause problems for cleaning from outside?

PR: Yes, the metalwork detail, which is consistent with other Georgian frontages around the town, impedes the reach-and-wash system. You need someone to access the window from inside the flat to clean the outside of the window.

LR: Do these requirements increase or decrease the value of the property? Are there limits to the kinds of developments that could adopt this approach?

PR: Owners of these properties don't need to worry about window cleaning – it's rolled up in a factoring charge. From a developer's point of view, this can be sold in a positive way. It gets difficult when you consider mid-market or low-cost housing where a professional cleaning regime can't be imposed – it's not something those buyers can necessarily afford. That situation creates the challenge of how to proportion and optimise daylight in a way that is safe for people to maintain their own windows.



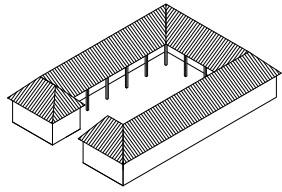


Fig. 12  
Yoruba Compound

Treaty of Cession, 1861

'I, Docemo, do, with the consent and advice of my council, give transfer, and by these present grant and confirm unto the Queen of Great Britain, her heirs and successors for ever, the Port and Island of Lagos, with all the rights, profits, territories and appetencies whatsoever thereunto belonging...' Prior to the Treaty of Cession, British bombardment destroyed most of Lagos. Under duress, King Docemo transferred ownership of the territory to the Crown.

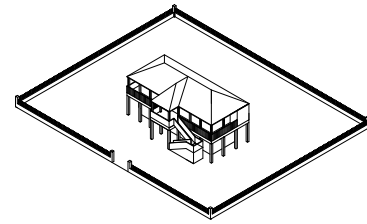


Fig. 13  
Government House, 1860's

Lagos Town Council By-Laws 1877.

The By-Laws of 1877 followed a fire started by the wadding of a gun and which destroyed a third of the island. Based upon British models, the By-Laws acted as a guide for local authorities who were responsible for setting and enforcing minimum standards. One By-Law forbade the discharge of firearms and demanded that all buildings roofed in thatch be separated by at least seven feet from the roof of any other building.

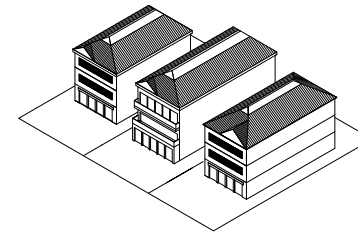


Fig. 14  
LEDB development at Idumagbo Avenue, c. 1930's

Nigerian Town and County Planning Act, 1946.

Based upon the British Town and Country Planning Act of 1932, the NTCP remains the basis of planning regulation in Lagos. The most important NTCP regulation for the urban planning of Lagos directed that no more than 50 percent of a site should be covered for residential purposes or 70 percent for other uses, and that an air space of 5'6" be left round a single-storey building and only a 3'-6" boundary wall in front of the building line is permissible.

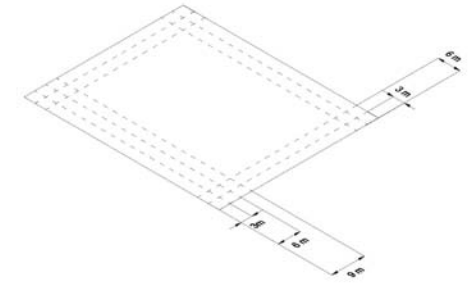


Fig. 15  
LSPPDR Regulation 15, 2005

Lagos State Physical Planning and Development Regulation 15: Permissible Setbacks.

Regulation 15 continues the prohibition of building to the legal boundary establishing a minimum 'Permissible Setback' for all buildings in Lagos State, ranging from 3m generally up to 6–9m in government residential areas, Victoria Island, and Ikoyi. No development is legal within the setback, and the state has the right to demolish any building within the setback area.

## EXPLORATION TWO: STATES OF EXCEPTION IN LAGOS

The law and building regulations of Nigeria's city planning are largely based upon standards imported and domesticated during British rule. The first by-law, passed in 1877 by Lagos Town Council, was ostensibly a fire-safety measure. Imposed shortly after the city was laid to waste through bombardment and fire, the regulation outlawed the firing of weapons and the use of 'indigenous' roofing materials to limit spread of flame. However, the law also removed duty from 'imported' fire-resistant roofing materials. In the context of Nigeria's history, this original by-law is an example of how regulations have served to create the possibility of sovereign exception.

In contemporary Lagos, the legacy of this early by-law continues in the form of LSPD Regulation 15, which defines the minimum permissible setbacks in Lagos state, in other words, the minimum distance that any development must step back from its legal boundary. Ranging from 3m to 9m in depth, the setback is a major determinant of a site's development potential, and it has proved decisive in defining the urban character of Lagos. This by-law prohibits a Portuguese-influenced courtyard typology brought back to Lagos by repatriated slaves. The development of the European perimeter-block has also been undermined. Instead, Lagos is a city of fenced compounds and detached buildings. Although the rule was originally motivated by the need to protect thatched roofs from fire, today it defines an easement that the state can use for road and infrastructure expansion. The regulation effectively gives the state the power to summarily demolish or relocate any buildings within its bounds.

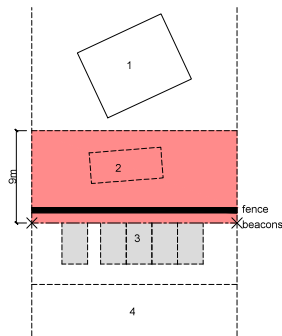
The rule states that no physical development is permitted within the setback zone, an area that includes the street frontage of every building in the city and the immediate land on either side. In reality, this area is the most developed, productive and dynamic part of Lagos. The zone is an important piece of civic infrastructure, containing the ubiquitous fences that define estate boundaries and the ditches that represent the only drainage system in the city. Space immediately behind fences is often used for ancillary structures: security posts, guards' houses, generators, storage and utility buildings. On the street side, space is occupied by ad-hoc and temporary users – roadside kiosks, garden centres, mechanics and religious spaces. In essence, this area is perhaps the principal space for social and economic exchange in Lagos.

In one sense, the setback rule allows sovereign exceptions: it creates a means for the state to pursue summary demolition. Importantly, however, the rule also enables Lagos life to flourish. Nothing is legally sanctioned within this zone, yet – somewhat counterintuitively – anything can happen. In effect, the setback is a legally defined zone of extra-legal tolerance. For the purposes of our investigation, it provides a fascinating counterpoint to the proliferation of regulatory intervention in Britain. In Lagos, the most dynamic areas – the ones that currently host small-scale, temporary and informal development – are precisely those areas which are freed from regulations governing the minutiae of development and everyday life. Social exchanges and construction are undertaken at the risk of those who choose to inhabit or visit. These places thrive when individuals freely accept personal responsibility rather than act in accordance with regulations.

**EXPLORATION TWO:  
PHOTOGRAPHIC SURVEY  
OF PERMISSIBLE  
SETBACKS IN LAGOS**



Fig 16 – 17  
Ikoyi, vulcanisers  
1. Private house  
2. Cargo storage  
3. Vulcanisers  
4. Road



**EXPLORATION TWO:  
INTERVIEW: TUNJI ODUNLAMI, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING,  
LAGOS STATE GOVERNMENT**

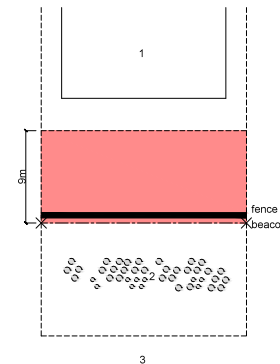
LR: We understand that many aspects of Nigerian planning policy and regulation have been imported from Britain. How did the setback rule originate?

TOd: It began as the British colonial government’s way of preventing fire. You know, gunpowder and thatched roofs – they are not friends. They go up in flames! The setback makes fire-jumping difficult. The front setback, for all intents and purposes, does not really belong to the individual. The bit before the setback, inside the setback, – does not belong to property-owners. It’s earmarked in anticipation of road expansion.

TOn: Is there a regulation or law that defines this ambition?



Fig 18 – 19  
Ikoyi, garden centre  
1. Private house  
2. Cargo storage  
3. Garden centre  
4. Road



TOd: No, you can’t find this in any regulation. But I have seen things, and I make my own deductions. You see in some areas, like secondary roads, this regulation is enforced. In other areas, such as primary roads in busy areas – where we need space – this property is retrieved for infrastructure and road expansion. You have 6m on one side, and 6m on the other – that’s 12m for developing a new road.

TOn: Is that why a relaxation exists when it comes to structures you can build in the setback? When an architect gets a commission here in Lagos, the first solution they think of is to build against the fence even though they’re aware that doing so contravenes the setback rule. However, the architect also knows that if the building is no taller than the fence – if it’s not visible from the road – the planning department will turn a blind eye...

TOd: You can’t put the main building there. You’re restricted to parking or guards’ houses, but we won’t hound you. Anything that built in that location





Fig. 20 –21  
Lagos Island, Lagos State police barracks  
1. Lagos State police barracks  
2. Mummy Market  
3. Road

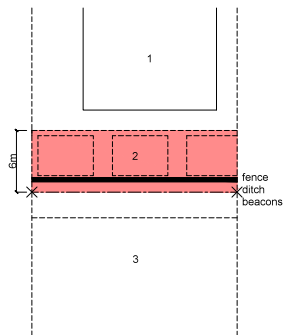
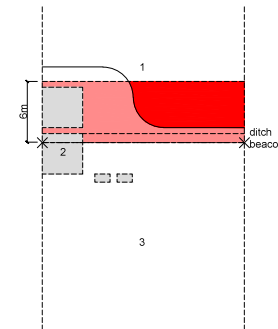


Fig. 22 – 23  
Lagos Island, commercial building  
1. Commercial building\*  
2. Kiosk  
3. Street  
\* Building exempt from setback rule. Building in designated 'no-fence' zone.



can be summarily relocated when the city expands.

TO<sub>n</sub>: So what we see now [fences and setbacks] is not an anomaly; this rule is part of a generic evolutionary process?

TO<sub>d</sub>: If you look at the laws we are developing now, business centres should be 'no fence' areas. On those streets, no properties should have fences. In 20 years, our urban landscape will be more European. You'll be able to jump straight from the sidewalk into the building.

Explorers: Liam Ross and Tolulope Onabolu  
Research Assistant: Nicola Grant  
Image Credits: Maria Esteban Castenas, Nicola Grant, Lauren Potter, Anna Raymond, Liam Ross, Micheal Dargo, Jens Walter  
Thanks to Phil MacDonald and Tunji Odunlami

**Biography:****Liam Ross and Tolupe Onabolu**

Liam Ross is an architect, lecturer and doctoral candidate at the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture. He studied in Edinburgh and at the Architectural Association, and has practised in London, New York and Edinburgh, principally with Malcolm Fraser Architects. Tolulope Onabolu holds a PhD in Architecture (Creative Practice) from Edinburgh College of Art. He is a tutor in Design and Contemporary Architectural Theory at the University of Edinburgh, and he runs a design practice in Lagos Nigeria. His PhD thesis, titled 'Architecture and the Creation of Worlds' (completed in July 2010) was nominated for the RIBA President's Medal for Research.