

Terra ex Nihilo

Land making in Lagos' Eko Atlantic City

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Abstract

The 'creation of earth from water' is central to the daily definition of the geography of Nigeria. Aggregates of sand move under the influence of natural forces as erosion and are moved by humans in a bid to build, reclaim land that has been lost to tidal forces or more simply to develop new sites for anthropogenic activities. This fluid relationship between land, sand and water is best typified along the coast of Lagos, which has been the frontier for a successive series of modifications to serve specific ends, most recently the new Eko Atlantic city. The project launched in 2008, as an appendage to the Lagos metropolis and is simultaneously its antithesis. Eko Atlantic City is a medium through which to explore the ubiquity of land making practices in coastal Nigeria that is the expression of specific cultural worlding practices. In this paper, I deploy the term land making instead of land reclamation because the latter alludes to taking back what has already been lost, which is not the case for a lot of the land making in Nigeria, especially Eko Atlantic, hence Terra ex nihilo, land from nothing, a term I go on to challenge in the paper.

Introduction

"Everyone in Lagos has to, one way or the other, make land."

- George Osodi¹

User 1 5:42pm on Jul 17, 2022:

Hi. Please can anyone give me an estimated cost it will take to Sand fill a one plot of land in a swamped parcel of land. 50 by 100. Thank you.²

User 2 6.01pm On Jul 17, 2022:

Land survey should be done

Highest level of water when it is flooded will be used to calculate the cost and volume of embankment. I have a plug for a trip of sand at 38k check for whatsapp contact.³

As inhabitants of a highly urbanized coastal Nigeria exchange goods and services including mineral resources, so too do they exchange the land on which these activities take place. The ground, far from being immutable, is manufactured through the conversion of swamps into solid ground - terra firma or in the case of Lagos' Eko Atlantic, the outright encroachment of land into water. There is nothing novel about land making but the scale and ubiquity at which it is practiced in Nigeria is what is.⁴ What usually takes place over the course of centuries in port cities and urban settlements around the world is happening at an unprecedented

¹ Mendelsohn, "Making the Urban Coast," p. 12.

² User 2, post to "Cost of sand filling a swamp Land in Port Harcourt", Nairaland, July 17, 2022, 6.01 p.m., <https://www.nairaland.com/7233287/cost-sand-filling-swamp-land>.

³ User 1, post to "Cost of sand filling a swamp Land in Port Harcourt", Nairaland, July 17, 2022, 5.42 p.m., <https://www.nairaland.com/7233287/cost-sand-filling-swamp-land>.

⁴ Mendelsohn, "Beyond Binaries in Urban Coastal Futures: The case of Lagos, Nigeria", p. 276.

rate here, within a few decades. In the making of artificial ground, new urban soils are slowly built up from a variety of sediments including trash, construction debris, coal ash, dredged material and rock ballasts that then become the new 'ground' level that is later unmade and remade.⁵ There was no such slow build up in Lagos' Eko Atlantic City, currently in its 18th year of construction with 90% completion of its land build up. The ground has single source origin, reportedly composed of sand dredged in 1m sheets from the seabed of the Atlantic Ocean, in waters deeper than 15m and 'quantities so small that they have no significant effect'. This recorded narrative of the ground, as an abstraction, glosses over other additives inevitably present, that are swept up in the process of extraction and sedimentation. In my reading of the ground, I upend the geological stratigraphy of Eko Atlantic - as distinct layers of time and history - in favor of more complex methods of reading the ground. These readings are rooted in specific cultural making practices that when exhumed, muddle the notion that the sand and sediment used in the creation of terra firma are from nothing, and their utility lies in the creation of the new land. Also muddled, is the notion that the solidification of ground across coastal Nigeria, especially in Eko Atlantic, is simply for infrastructure building. To center the practice of land making in Lagos, I use two distinct yet interrelated cultural practices as lenses to see Lagos' Eko Atlantic City.

The first lens is **land making to materialize myths and social imaginaries.**

Eko Atlantic represents a vision for a new social imaginary, one that can only happen not in the old city of Lagos with its tainted land formed by years of sporadic urban development but on fresh ground. Eko Atlantic as a formal twin of the adjacent Victoria Island is a do over in infrastructure, unimpeded service flows, ecology and citizenry.

Myth 1: Sand is tabula rasa (holds no memories) until it becomes land.

Myth 2: The world was created from water and from water, it will continue to be created (Yoruba creation myth)

Myth 3: Water (deluge) is imminent and so we need to act)

The second lens as a driver for the first, is **land making as an instrument to assert ownership made possible by technological advancement.**

While Eko Atlantic is envisioned as taking back from the ocean what was eroded over time, its situation outside the existing realm of the city, means its ownership can be ascribed to an elsewhere. In this section, I trace the acts of displacement that made Eko Atlantic possible rooted in laws and decrees that govern land ownership in Nigeria and make every morsel of ground, contested territory. These regimes of ownership are only possible through the technology associated with its process of formation. The scale of the new City is as a result of advances in dredging technology that improve man's ability to move large swathes of ground with vessels designed for the purpose. A further technological addition is the deployment of a 20km sea wall revetment that keeps away erosion and the effects of the ocean. This seawall is part of a number of technological modifications to the coast, that were arguably the causes of the plight of erosion in the first place. To archaeologically exhume these layers from Eko Atlantic as Terra ex Nihilo means to see this littoral stretch of the Lagos coast as both the frontier of land and water and thus the location where these sediments of myth are deposited.

To achieve this, I will be addressing the questions:

⁵ Graham, "Vertical", p. 284.

1. Terra, sand, earth is granular, therefore neither liquid nor solid. Under this cloak of Invisibility, how does it function as a tool of contested yet quotidian action in new cities formed from water?
2. If we consider any action on the ground as a form of indexing, how have terra ex nihilo indexed natural and anthropocenic patterns of the past, present and future?
3. How can we draw stronger lines between the pattern of formation of African cities and certain cultural practices, beyond totalizing categories of capitalism, modernity and neoliberalism, that betray the nuances of human environment interactions along the global coast.

Land making to materialize myths and social imaginaries.

It is April 1972 and as expected, Lagos is sunny, hot and fairly humid with the slight threat of rain. A light breeze wafts across the sand, carrying with it the salt of the ocean mingled with the miasma of retribution. Bar beach is brimming with Lagosians but more apt would be to describe them as Nigerians because the public execution that they have congregated to witness form a collection of legends that permeate the remotest of towns. They are the fulfilment of the Yoruba adage, "everyday is for the thief, one day for the owner of the house" and a release valve for the spate of crimes that have gripped parts of the country in the aftermath of the just concluded Civil war. 8 successive shots ring in the air, punctuated by a silence unusual for one of the most cacophonous cities in the world even at this time. Only the sound of the crashing waves are audible over this silence. The crowd dissipates, the stakes are dismantled and barrels filled with sand onto which the executed were tied, are removed. The day goes on and as the waves from the ocean crash in, they wash away the blood stained layer of sand that sits atop the beach and with it, the lingering miasma of retribution. As families filter in the next morning, the grains of sand that they set their lawn chairs and coolers filled with drinks on, are devoid of the events of the day before.

Bar Beach, a littoral zone that belonged simultaneously to land and sea was Nigeria's public square, where the spectacle of moral cleansing took place, only to be followed by the physical cleansing of the Atlantic Ocean. The sandy beach, drained of social and historical traces on a daily basis, presented itself as free of any stabilizing force. It could go from being a place of public execution one hour, to a place of fun and rest in the next, and to an incentivized, instantaneous urbanity 40 years in the future with the Eko Atlantic Development project. The past - existing as stories notionally 'buried in the sand', with Eko Atlantic as the current genealogical iteration - are stratigraphical layers of history that can exist simultaneously because of the cultural practice of myth making and world building we deploy in our cycles of existence.

Eko Atlantic City has been presented as the creation of a new world that is a salve and an antithesis to City of Lagos as it exists today - Congestion for regularized road networks, blackouts for uninterrupted power, frequent floods for an integrated flood management system, failing infrastructure for a buried network of water and sewage pipes up to 150cm in diameter that buildings plug into once they are constructed. The buildings envisioned to populate the city are not to be left behind too. They are conceived in smooth, clean striated renders as concrete towers ensconced on all sides in glass and aluminum cladding, further

accessorized by palm trees. This is 'the Dubai of Africa' as it has been referred to.⁶ A qualifying phrase that foregrounds this new vision of social inhabitation that inadvertently detaches itself from the city of Lagos and the prior methods of inhabitation of the coast. With this image presented, Eko Atlantic like Dubai, is a nowhere and as an appendage to the city of Lagos, so too can it be an appendage to any other stretch of coast. Yes, the new image of Eko Atlantic can be read in the same tone as other developer driven, speculative and instantaneous waterfront urbanisms promising economic riches on reclaimed land⁷, it still exists in the context of Lagos with its own specific urban cultures as well as Yoruba traditions and should be read as such. These urban cultures and traditions are what I am referring to as myths. Not because they are fallacies or untruths but because as a collection of ideas they elucidate the alliance between city making and land making in Lagos that culminates in Eko Atlantic City.

Land making is but a material reflection of the culture of its inhabitants.⁸ In this case, a cosmological culture of creation. ***The first myth then is the Yoruba creation story that the world was created from water and from water it will continue to be created.*** In Yoruba tradition as per the ethnic identity of the indigenes of Lagos, the earth was created through the conversion of water to land.⁹ Sand was brought down by a minor deity and poured over water in the aftermath of a deluge. The sand did not appear from nowhere however, because in material form, it was carried, manipulated and reformed once it got in contact with the water. The sand was carried in a snail shell, manipulated by the claws of a five toed chicken to form earth and tested for firmness by a chameleon that walked atop the new ground.¹⁰ Mendelson links this subsequent process of formation to land making practices in the ubiquitous conversion of water to land in Lagos today. The snail shell and chicken claw he likens to the dredging vessels, hand shovels and excavators that litter the Lagos landscape, a continuation of that process of creation¹¹. The creation story is not just the creation of the world but the creation of the city of Ile-Ife where every Yoruba indigene traces their roots. Ile-Ife translates to "The Land of Expansion" and is a self-fulfilling prophesy that is reinforced every time land is made in Lagos, with Eko Atlantic City as the most recent iteration at scale. With this foundational idea of expansivity, Lagos is thus not an enduring artifact, but rather it is a process constantly in a state of flux.¹² As commerce, education and society itself are constantly being made and negotiated on a daily basis, so too is the land on which they take place subject to circulatory flows. Land, as the most fundamental of all infrastructures, moves in an embryonic state as sand, a material whose malleability is central to its utility.¹³ It has been reported that in Lagos, 40 million cubic meters of sand are moved and consumed for building and construction yearly, a share of the 84 billion cubic meters moved around the world.¹⁴ Where these large volumes of sand are sourced from are tertiary to what they become in their final state, in the way that the origin of the sand in the Yoruba creation story is secondary to the creation of the city of Ile-Ife. Once they morph a swamp into terra firma or are trapped within a concrete slab as the ground for a new home, a new set of meanings and associations are ascribed to them. In contrast to the materiality of other "fixed" infrastructures, however, sand is removed and traded by a host of actors, including local and regional governing authorities.¹⁵

⁶ Oduntan, Gbenga "Why Nigeria's plans for a dream Eldorado city are not radical enough" August 10, 2015. Accessed May 10, 2023. <https://www.ekoatlantic.com/latestnews/why-nigerias-plans-for-a-dream-eldorado-city-are-not-radical-enough/>

⁷ Masoud, Fadi, et al. "Terra-Sorta-Firma: Reclaiming the Littoral Gradient," 94.

⁸ Sullivan, Louis, "Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings," 65. n

⁹ Olupona, "City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination".

¹⁰ Olupona, "City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination".

¹¹ Mendelsohn, "Making the Urban Coast", 3.

¹² Varzi, "What is a City?,"

¹³ Comaroff, "Built on Sand."

¹⁴ Adebayo, "Shifting Sands."

¹⁵ Comaroff, "Built on Sand."

The second myth is that sand is tabula rasa (holds no memories) until it becomes land. The ubiquity of sand as a commodity precludes it from accurate recording and as a result, the intra (er) geographical drift of sand leaves only the most fragmentary of traces. Sand displacements are difficult to map and nearly impossible to quantify until they turn up in their final location of use as an aggregation of seemingly homogenous material.¹⁶ When placed under the lens of a microscope, literally and archaeologically, this ambiguity of identity breaks down and the constellation of sources becomes visible (Fig.1). In the case of Eko Atlantic, a complex stratigraphy is revealed, beyond the talking point that the sand it is made up of is dredged in 1m sheets from the seabed in waters deeper than 15m and quantities so small that they have no significant effect (Fig.2). The first disruptor of this narrative of tabula rasa is the evidence of the living organisms churned in the process of dredging, whose habitat was the seabed. The next disruptors are pieces of detritus from centuries of intercontinental trade and among these are the fragments that are continuously washed away from the shore by tidal action. The final layer includes the tapestry of much older sands that had been used to transform the coastal islands from the marshland they were centuries ago, including sediments from inland sources. Lagos is a crucial node in the global flows of goods and as a port city it is subject to particularly unique methods of making. A cross national look at port cities shows that they are often partially built on made ground that has been imported over centuries in the form of “ships’ ballast dumped on shore to make space for goods to be exported”.¹⁷ Thus, sand is far from being tabula rasa. When the foil of homogeneity is disrupted, the complex stratigraphy exhumes memories that can then be read. The layers outlined here are mapped with an understanding of the factual histories of Eko Atlantic. It is a conceptual reading of the entanglements of land reclamation and sea encroachment, beyond the abstraction of sand as an opaque resource only valuable for its utility as land or otherwise.

Sand is used to mitigate the action of water. In the case of Eko Atlantic, the new terrain is purported to reclaim kilometers of coast that had been lost to tidal action of the Atlantic Ocean over centuries. More terrain has however been made in this project than what was ‘lost’ due to erosion. The more crucial water action being kept at bay is rising sea levels, in a similar fashion to the deluge that preceded the Yoruba creation story. For centuries, inhabitants of the Lagos coast had negotiated this fraught relationship with the water and in dealing with sudden surges, the images of flooded streets and houses washed away as a regular occurrence. One of the most significant surges happened in 2012, where 1500 residents were displaced in a nearby beach and 16 people killed.¹⁸ A lot of Lagos is built on land that is less than five feet above sea level and when combined with the city’s infrastructure, such as it is, is poorly designed to deal with flooding and storm surges.¹⁹ The new kind of Lagos that Eko Atlantic presents is one that is first and foremost devoid of these threats of nature. This is however detached from the rest of Lagos in the way its drainage is designed and after all, while inhabitants on the other side of the wall are deeply entrenched in the threat, deepening the divide between those who will make it and others who won’t. In the coming years, that divide will only grow wider, creating what amounts to a climate apartheid.²⁰ There are conflicting visions here, the creation of resilience for the coast to prevent impeding surges to the rest of Lagos, or the creation of resilience for the investments that Eko Atlantic City inevitably hold, in the form of created nature. Because a few miles off the coast, land erosion is taking place at an accelerated rate, a recorded increase since the Great Wall of Lagos was constructed.

¹⁶ Comaroff, “Built on Sand.” <https://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/39/built-on-sand-singapore-and-the-new-state-of-risk>

¹⁷ Graham, “Vertical.”

¹⁸ Ajibade, “Can a future City enhance urban resilience and sustainability? A political ecology analysis of Eko Atlantic City, Nigeria”, 4.

¹⁹ Adedeji, “Socio-Ecological Metabolisms of Eko Atlantic City, Lagos, Nigeria: An Unjust City?”,

²⁰ Goodell, “The Climate Apartheid: How Global Warming affects the Rich and Poor”, 2.

Land making as an instrument to assert ownership made possible by technological advancement.

“For the most part, the project commodifies not just nature but the idea of adaptation by converting a publicly owned common-pool resource (ocean space and seabed) into a prime estate for capital accumulation.”²¹

The existence of Eko Atlantic City is primarily possible through the laws that govern land use and ownership in Nigeria. These laws as part of a highly obscure jurisprudence are at conflict with each other. Yes, individuals can buy and sell areas of territory but under the Land use Decree of 1978, “all land in each state of the Nigerian Federation is vested in the Military governor of the state and such land shall be held in trust and administered for the use and common benefit of all Nigerians in accordance with the provisions of this decree”.²² This decree was put into effect under a military regime at the time and endorses the incessant cycles of displacement of communities along the coast, a practice that continues till today. Eko Atlantic City was founded in a similar fashion, a partnership between the state administration at the time and South Energyx Nigeria, a politically connected development company created for the purpose. This sequence of dispossession, and large-scale geoengineering are part of a genealogy of colonial infrastructural development that have persisted in Nigeria. Between 1908 and 1920, to mitigate the buildup of sand and silt that reduced the mobility of ships from the Atlantic ocean to the Lagos Lagoon, the colonial government constructed harbor moles, stone jetties that were meant to help regulate the waterway.²³ As has been recorded after, these large interventions interrupted the equilibrium in longshore sedimentary drift and since they were built, the coast of Victoria Island has experienced about 1km of erosion. The moles are the first large scale technological modifications along this coast. Further technological additions were to mitigate the resulting erosion from the introduction of the moles. Subsequently, a series of land nourishment and sand dredging efforts took place between 1958 and 1999, all as temporary salves with no long lasting effect. The idea of coastal protection coupled with commercial land making emerged in 2005. ²⁴ The coastal protection in this case is a seven-kilometre stone and concrete wall, ascribed as the ‘Great wall of Lagos’, a nomenclature that draws on the stance of defense, as Lagos wages a battle against nature. The wall is made up of 100,000 concrete tetrahedrons, each weighing five tons with layers of material build up all working in tandem to create an impenetrable barrier that delineates the newly created territory. The wall is a technological advancement in coastal protection strategies and as the developers report, “an accurate scale model of the wall was built in a lab in Copenhagen and tested against the worst

²¹ Ajibade, 2017 ,

²² Nigerian Land use Decree 1978

²³ Mendelson, “Making the Urban Coast,” 10

²⁴ Oghifo, “FG commits n4bn to Bar Beach”

storms in a thousand years". Perhaps the most crucial to what makes Eko Atlantic peculiar in the context of land making in Nigeria, is the technology associated with the process of formation. The scale of the project, along with similar land formations around the world, are as a result of advances in dredging technology and our ability now to move large swathes of ground with vessels designed for the purpose. In this case, a Trailing Suction Hopper Dredger (TSHD) known as the Congo river, a vessel with a capacity of 30,190sqm. The vessel takes up loose material from the sea bed, loads it into a hopper onboard and then through the process of dumping or rainbowning, discharges the material in another location.²⁵ A crucial aspect to this process of land creation is the status of Eko Atlantic in relation to the rest of Nigeria. As a Special Economic 'free' Zone as Dubai is, it will not contribute to taxes for the city of Lagos or the rest of Nigeria. One can argue that it is thus not only terra ex nihilo in the making of land but also terra ex nihilo in its apparent statelessness, only gaining ownership in its commodification. A city that thus belongs nowhere but to itself.

*"Few institutions have shaped the social structure, excited emotions, nursed and inspired political revolutions and ideologies, brought the state and society into both partnership and confrontation as the interests which individuals and social groups have on land."*²⁶

Conclusion.

Eko Atlantic City has been discussed extensively as a trope of speculative urban development that paints the picture of dichotomy of coastal inhabitation, between the two extremes of financial standing in Lagos. It is a picture that undermines the prevalent socio-cultural regimes of action that make and remake the city of Lagos every day. With this paper, I have painted a different picture of Eko Atlantic, acknowledging the inherent inequality that persists in its creation, while situating it as part of a tradition of land making that is carried out in coastal Nigeria on a daily basis, only in this case at the scale of a whole city. I trace this land making tradition to cultural myths and beliefs that I describe not as fallacies but as a collection of ideas that elucidate the alliance between city making and land making in Lagos that culminates in Eko Atlantic. The myth of the Yoruba creation story, the myth of sand as tabula rasa, and the myth of an impending deluge that defined the 'need' for a revetment at the scale of Eko Atlantic in the first place. The cycles of displacement that define the origin of Eko Atlantic City are rooted in obscure laws that at a moments notice dispossess whole communities of their land. These laws, coupled with technological advancements in Geo engineering, render land as an instrument through which contested relationships can be solidified, as is the case of Eko Atlantic City.

²⁵ Masoud, "Terra-Sorta-Firma," 19.

²⁶ Uchendu, "State, Land, and Society in Nigeria: A Critical Assessment of Land use Decree (1978)", 1

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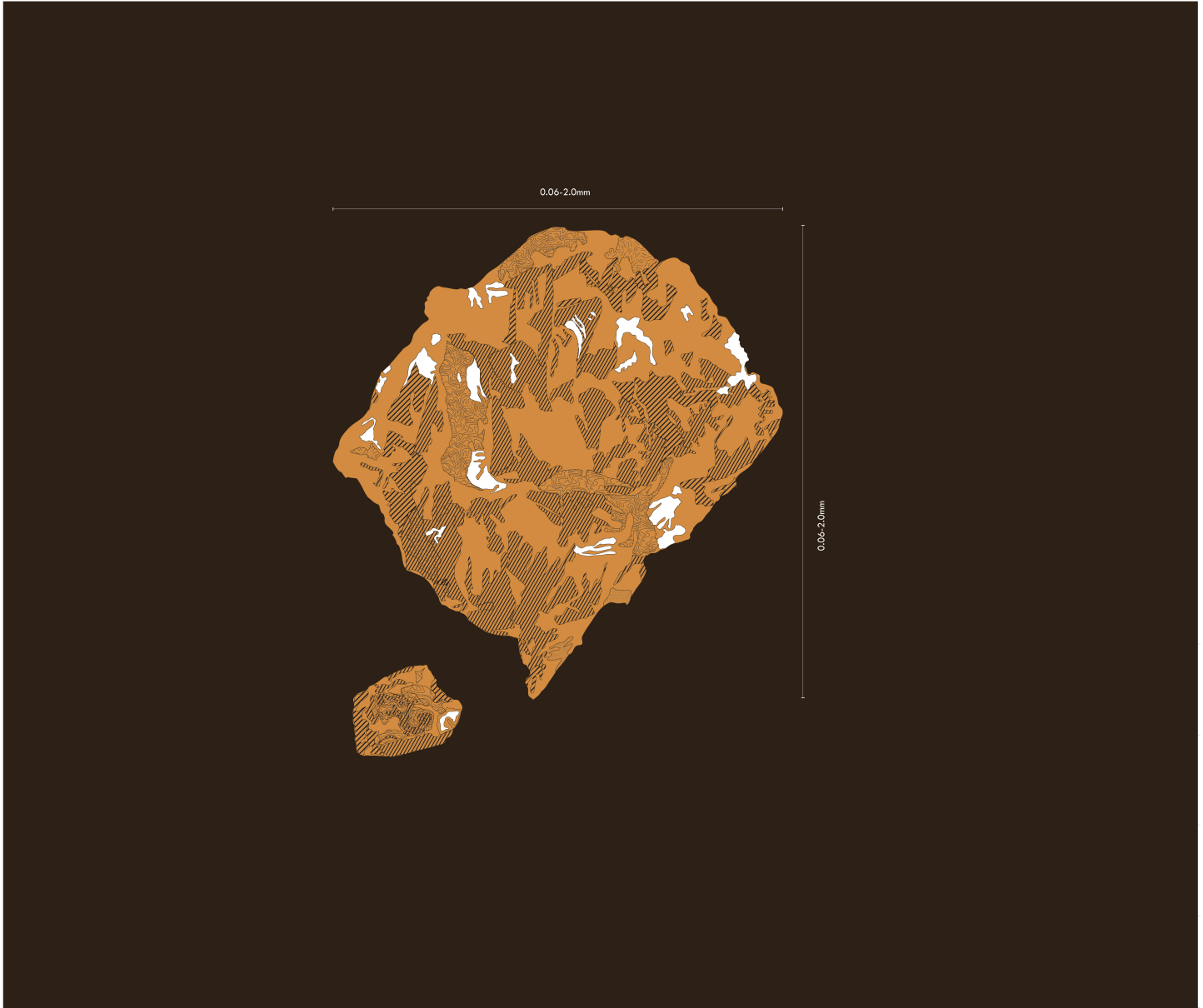
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Figure 1:

Terra Ex Nihilo



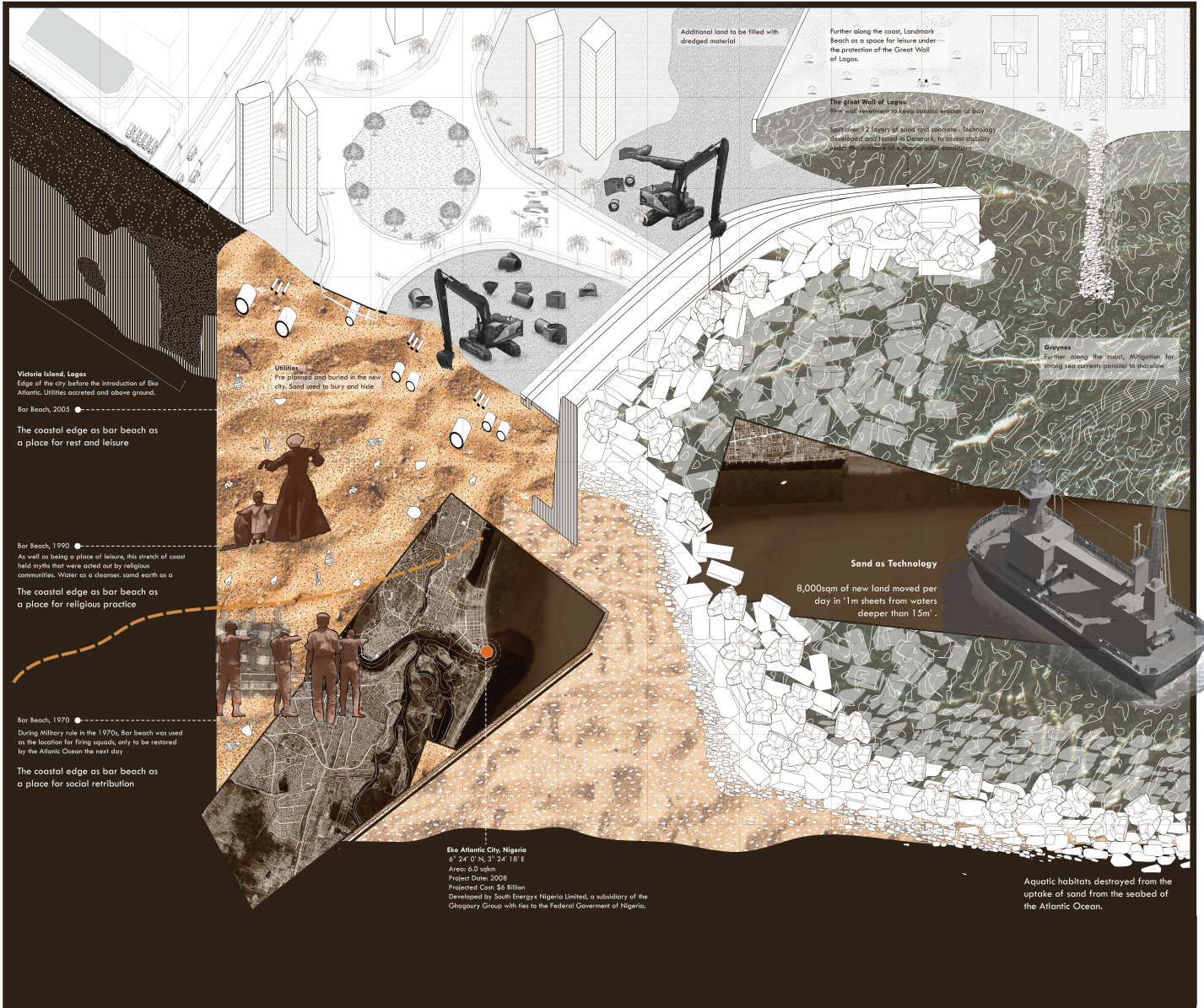
Aquatic sand

Weathered by water, sand deposited by rivers and streams into the ocean are the ideal building block material. Land quarries and river banks were once the main sources for sand. As these sources run out, dredgers turn to coastlines and the sea. Sand for construction is largely quartz, though marine sand can also consist of coral, shells, lava and other minerals.

Sand

Figure 2:

Land making to materialize myths and social imaginaries
Coastal edge as...



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