

THE SHEM PERSPECTIVE

Housing • Infrastructure • Public Delivery

ESSAY | REFLECTIONS ON URBAN
POSSIBILITY

Letter to Lagos

What I Learned Living in Hong Kong

*“Cities are not just places where
people live; they are expressions of
what a society believes is possible.”*

BY

SHEM AYEGBA, PhD

From The Torchbearers: Rethinking Nigeria's Future Together

AN ESSAY

Letter to Lagos

What I Learned Living in Hong Kong

By Shem Ayegba, PhD

Dear Lagos,

As I write this from the bustling streets that shaped me, having returned from the gleaming towers of Hong Kong, I find myself carrying two cities in my heart. The journey from Victoria Harbour back to Lagos Lagoon has been more than geographic; it's been a masterclass in urban possibility, told through the lens of lived experiences.

When I first stepped off the plane at Hong Kong International Airport in 2018, I thought I had a sense of what a major city felt like. After all, I'd spent years in Lagos, navigating our own unique rhythm of ambition and resilience. But Hong Kong didn't just show me efficiency; it showed me what happens when a city decides that ordinary citizens deserve extraordinary infrastructure.

THE MORNING REVELATION

My first profound lesson came during the morning commute. In Lagos, I had grown accustomed to the familiar ballet of danfos weaving through traffic, the patient resignation of hours spent on Third Mainland Bridge, and the creative problem-solving that turns every journey into an adventure. But on my first Monday morning in Hong Kong, I descended into Hang Hau Station and watched something magical unfold.

The MTR arrived exactly on schedule, not approximately, not hopefully, but exactly. Doors opened with surgical precision, passengers flowed in organised streams, and within minutes, I was gliding beneath the mountains toward Kowloon at 80 kilometres per hour. No traffic, no excuses, no prayers for safe arrival. Just seamless urban mobility that treated time as sacred and every citizen's journey as necessary.

Standing in that train car, surrounded by construction workers, executives, students, and elderly residents all sharing the same reliable system, I realised something profound: Hong Kong had made a collective decision that mobility was a

right, not a privilege. The city had invested not just money, but imagination into the idea that people deserved better than spending their lives stuck in traffic.

THE DEMOCRACY OF INFRASTRUCTURE

This wasn't just about trains. Hong Kong's infrastructure spoke to a more profound philosophy, the democracy of access. Whether you lived in a luxury apartment in Mid-Levels or a subdivided flat in Sham Shui Po, you had equal access to world-class transportation, healthcare, and education systems. The city's escalators and moving walkways weren't just conveniences; they were declarations that everyone's energy was valuable, that a construction worker's time was as precious as a banker's.

Walking through the endless network of covered walkways connecting buildings, shopping centres, and transport hubs, I thought of Lagos's rainy season. How many productive hours do we lose each year to weather, to poorly planned urban spaces, to infrastructure that sees pedestrians as an afterthought? Hong Kong had essentially weatherproofed an entire city centre, making it possible to live, work, and move regardless of external conditions.

THE ART OF URBAN DENSITY

Another striking lesson came from observing how Hong Kong managed density. At over 7,000 people per square kilometre, Hong Kong made Lagos look spacious. Yet the city hummed with efficiency. Public spaces were meticulously maintained, waste management was invisible but effective, and green spaces were carved out and protected like precious gems.

During my research at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), working on affordable housing solutions that would eventually inform my work back home, I spent countless hours studying Hong Kong's public housing estates. The reality was complex and sometimes heartbreaking. I encountered families living in subdivided flats barely larger than a parking space, with over 220,000 people crammed into "shoebox" homes under 10 square metres, sharing bathrooms and corridors that doubled as bedrooms. It was absurd, yet oddly inspiring. Every square inch became purposeful: fold-away beds, nested cupboards, furniture that transformed to serve multiple functions.

But here's what struck me most: despite these cramped conditions, this was still a government that had housed over half its population in public or subsidised housing, not as temporary relief, but as permanent communities with dignity and services. These weren't just buildings warehousing the poor; they were investments in social

stability, economic mobility, and urban harmony. Even the smallest units had access to quality schools, healthcare, and transport networks.

The contrast with Lagos was stark but instructive. While we struggle with informal settlements that often lack basic services, Hong Kong has made housing a cornerstone of governance. Yes, land was scarce, and affordability remained a challenge, but the commitment to housing as social infrastructure was unwavering. The government had accepted that in a dense, expensive city, the market alone couldn't house the people who made the city function and had built systems accordingly.

“Cities are not just places where people live; they are expressions of what a society believes is possible.”

THE LONG VIEW

What struck me most about Hong Kong was its long-term thinking. Infrastructure projects were planned not for the next election cycle, but for the next generation. The Cross-Harbour Tunnel, the Airport Express, the land reclamation projects, and the Hong Kong Terminal 2 expansion project were investments in a future that planners might not live to see but believed in anyway.

This long-term approach contrasted sharply with Lagos's often reactive urban planning. In Hong Kong, I watched the third runway at the airport take shape, a decade-long project that required reclaiming land from the sea. The scale of ambition was matched by meticulous execution, with every phase planned to minimise disruption while maximising long-term benefit.

THE INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

Being a student of HKUST exposed me to Hong Kong's approach to innovation, which is systematic, well-funded, and globally connected. The city had positioned itself as a bridge between East and West, leveraging its unique position and world-class infrastructure to attract talent and capital from everywhere.

But it wasn't just about having smart people in one place. Hong Kong had created institutional frameworks that turned ideas into enterprises. From the science parks to the university-industry partnerships, from government innovation labs to private incubators, the city had built an ecosystem where innovation was expected, supported, and rewarded.

This systematic approach to innovation felt revolutionary compared to the heroic entrepreneurship model I had become accustomed to in Lagos, where individual brilliance had to overcome institutional gaps. Hong Kong showed me what was possible when institutions worked in harmony with personal ambition.

THE LESSONS FOR HOME

Coming to Lagos with fresh eyes, I see our city's incredible potential alongside its persistent challenges. We have the dynamism Hong Kong sometimes lacks, the creative energy that comes from a young, hungry population building something new. Our music, our food, our fashion, our technology innovations, our financial services sector—these speak to a city bursting with creative potential.

But we also have lessons to learn from Hong Kong's playbook. The first is about the relationship between the government and citizens. Hong Kong taught me that the government's primary job is to create platforms for prosperity, transport systems that work, utilities that never fail, educational institutions that compete globally, and healthcare systems that leave no one behind.

The second lesson is about the power of long-term thinking. Lagos needs infrastructure that will serve not just today's 20 million+ residents, but tomorrow's 40 million. This requires moving beyond electoral cycles to embrace generational planning. The Fourth Mainland Bridge, the Lekki Airport, and other projects I now work on represent this kind of thinking, investments in Lagos's next chapter.

The third lesson is about density done right. Lagos will only get denser, and we can choose to see this as a problem or as an opportunity. Hong Kong showed me that density, properly managed, creates innovation, efficiency, and community. Our challenge is to build upward and inward while maintaining the social fabric that makes Lagos special.

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS

My time in Hong Kong didn't just teach me about urban planning; it taught me about possibility. Every city makes choices about what it values, what it invests in, and what it accepts as inevitable. Hong Kong chose efficiency, long-term thinking, and inclusive access to world-class infrastructure. These weren't accidents; they were decisions.

Today, as I contribute to Lagos's strategic infrastructure programs, I carry Hong Kong's lessons with me. When we discuss the Lagos-Calabar coastal highway or plan

new housing estates, I advocate for the Hong Kong approach, systematic, long-term, designed to serve everyone who calls this city home.

But I also bring Lagos's gifts to this work, our resilience, our creativity, our ability to find solutions where others see only problems. The best of Lagos isn't about choosing between our dynamic spirit and Hong Kong's systematic excellence. It's about building bridges between both approaches.

LETTERS TO THE FUTURE

Hong Kong taught me that cities are not just places where people happen to live; they are collective works of art, expressions of what a society believes is possible. Every tunnel, every park, every school, every housing estate is a letter to the future, a statement about the kind of community we want to build.

As Lagos continues to grow and evolve, we have the opportunity to write our own letters to the future. We can choose to build infrastructure that serves everyone, not just the privileged few. We can choose to think in decades, not just every four years. We can choose to see our density as a superpower, not a burden.

The view from Victoria Harbour taught me to dream bigger for Lagos Lagoon. The efficiency of the MTR taught me to demand better from LAMATA. The long-term thinking that built Hong Kong's infrastructure taught me to advocate for generational investments in Lagos's future.

This is my letter to Lagos, written from the heart of someone who has seen what's possible and believes in what we can become. We have the talent, the resources, and the determination. What we need now is the collective will to build the city our children deserve.

The lessons from Hong Kong are clear: cities that invest in their people's mobility, dignity, and opportunity don't just grow, they flourish. It's time for Lagos to write its own letters to the future.

With love and hope,

Shem Ayegba, PhD

Clarity from HK, purpose for Lagos.