In the fall of 1982 while I was working for what had become an African-American city, I traveled to cities in four countries in sub-Saharan Africa. At the top of my mind was the relevance of those cities to Detroit. Upon returning, I wrote the following.

CHAPTER 19

Thoughts Based on a Visit to African Cities

Progress and Distribution: Detroit and Some African Cities

I have just returned from a quick "vacation" trip to Africa to gather information about African cities. What does a Detroit city planner see, looking at African cities (in this case, Dakar, Abidjan, Lagos, and Nairobi)? That though the cities vary greatly, the underlying issues are similar in each case and not very different from the issues in Detroit. Detroit is trying to diversify and update its economic base. African countries are trying to modernize their economies. Cities everywhere must deal with issues of self-rule and equitable economic distribution, and also try to achieve cleanliness, comfort, safety, and efficiency. Hopefully, also style and beauty.

I saw pocket electronic calculators being sold on the streets of Abidjan and Lagos by men in sandals and cotton robes. Battery-run plastic toys, electric fans and irons are offered for sale by barefoot female street vendors in downtown Lagos while their near-naked babies play near huge mounds of garbage close to the great gaping holes above open sewers. Inside bank buildings a few feet away, the clerks use electronic calculators. In the nearby Kingsway department store are rows of large TV sets.

In oil-rich Nigeria, the outside of Lagos banks, stores and hotels are guarded by rows of police dogs keeping sidewalks clear, pushing throngs of street vendors out into the street itself, thus making it difficult for taxis or pedestrians to pass by. The city's traffic lights do not work. The water supply is cut off for days at a time. Random violence and armed robbery are commonplace. Smuggling and corruption are rampant.

Nairobi is a jewel of a city, clean and strikingly beautiful in some places, but it is ringed by shacktown suburbs of up to 60,000 people living in near-destitution and terrible health conditions.

Central Dakar's lovely cream-colored buildings and attractive tree-lined streets are just a short ride away from quarters where the muddy spaces in front of rows of shacks are shared by babies, sleeping old men, rubble and families of goats.

Abidjan has a very wealthy appearance—new high-rise buildings are going up in the central areas as handsome as any on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills. Shade trees, bougainvillea, hibiscus, and other semi-tropical plants line

streets. But the literacy rate in Ivory Coast as a whole is 20 per cent and the average lifespan is 43 years.

Obviously, neither "modernization" nor self-rule automatically solves problems of maldistribution. Obviously, too, high-tech devices by themselves do not automatically modernize other aspects of life.

I had a sociological thought about the street vendors selling imported western goods in Lagos. Many have just recently come from rural villages. Self-employed trading is a traditional occupation in West Africa, and especially in Nigeria. If vendors were selling native crafts or produce they would remain closely tied to their original villages, but the goods they sell link them to importers and through importers to the rest of the world.

Since Lagos is a great magnet to Africans from poorer nearby countries (as is the Ivory Coast), as the migrants learn about the outside world, fingers of modernization and internationalization reach far into Africa. Maybe patience is required to let the process work itself out. Or maybe the importers and their suppliers owe some assistance to compensate for disruptions they have helped to set in motion.

Some of the housekeeping problems in Lagos are due to unresolved ethnic tensions, in this case between different ethnic groups within Nigeria. On national TV and in the journals, the educated, westernized elite exhort the others to forget their ethnic differences. However, that elite has an economic stake in "national unity," while the man in the street has an economic stake in the social and psychological support system offered by close ties to his ethnic group. He cannot let go of those ties, and the lifestyle they entail, unless something equivalent takes their place. So, while one group is pitted against another, inefficiency sometimes occurs in the details of government.

Better the baby has to play in the gutter for now, thinks the self-employed mother, than have a system where the whole family is at the mercy of hostile or indifferent others. But she would not have come to the big city in the first place if she did not want to improve her lot. Watchfully, she sees the electronic calculators the man next to her is selling, hears the gossip of the cosmopolitan world, and knows about the TVs in the store and the money in the banks.

Detroit, Africa, and Transportation

Traveling from one African city to another recently, I thought about transportation. Both kinds: people transportation and freight transportation. It is a subject I think about a lot in Detroit.

Most Africans I saw were too poor to own bicycles. They take a bus, if there is one and they can afford it. Or they walk. Many walk, sometimes two or three hours each way to go to and from work. The lengthy time is because the poor live on the edge of the city and the work may be in the center.

From a social point of view, it would make more sense if the people lived close to the work, or if the work were brought close to where they live. The main reasons this does not happen is that work is provided by people with money, and people with money want to be as isolated as possible from the poor people who do the mass of the work.

I am writing about Africa here, but of course I am also thinking about Detroit. The geography is different, but the principles are the same.

To help solve some of its transportation problems, Abidjan in the Ivory Coast is thinking about building a mass transit rail system, part of which would be a subway. The total population of Abidjan is 1.6 million, over 300,000 more than the population of the City of Detroit, but far less than the over four million of Greater Detroit. The total length of Abidjan's proposed line is about ten miles, not quite as long as the light rail system proposed for Greater Detroit.

Freight transportation systems can make or break cities. The real beginnings of Abidjan's rise as the boom town of French-speaking Africa were in 1900 when the decision was made to make it the terminus of a railroad and again in 1950 when a canal and deep water port were finished. Dakar is an important city because it is the leading general port of French-speaking West Africa, a railroad terminus, and an important air traffic center. Lagos is Nigeria's main port and also a railroad terminus. Nairobi is a major node in the East African Railways network that extends into Tanzania and Uganda.

Detroit was virtually a village until it was found to be a natural terminus for pioneers coming west by way of Great Lakes boat. I have a 1904 map of industrial Detroit which clearly shows railroads as the framework and arteries of the city. Detroit's unusually close freight transport ties to Canada have been far more important to the city than most people realize. On the plane going to Africa, I read a magazine story about a new scheme to deepen and widen the Erie Canal. The article claimed the resultant year-round shipping route (in contrast to the shorter-seasoned St. Lawrence Seaway) could be the making of Detroit as a port. Maybe yes, maybe no. But the point is that Detroit is like other cities in that its competitive position strongly depends on where it fits into overall freight transport patterns.

Transportation affects more than economies. In the case of Africa, one of the most serious obstacles to African political unity is the fact that the railroad systems and air traffic routes are fragmented and there is no African equivalent of the Pan American Highway. In the long run I believe there will have to be more North American unity (Canada, U.S., Mexico) than there is, if we are to hold our own against a constantly expanding and integrating European Common Market. One of the ways of achieving that unity will have to be through better north-south transportation links. When the U.S. transport system was built, the primary concern was with linking east with west.