Collaborative Research on Communal Spaces in Nima: Reflections on Accra's Urban History, with Learnings for Professional Planners

Report for the American Planning Association's International Division

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Executive Summary

Accra is a rapidly urbanizing West African city where urban growth and demands for space far outpace local authorities' ability to accommodate present urban development needs. Accra's dominant urban imaginary[1] aspires toward a world-class, "modern" city – a dominant vision for urban development that is deeply informed by the histories of colonial and post-independent planning. Today, many urban dwellers live in densely situated urban environments, and available community spaces such as streets, alleyways, sidewalk pavements, and open spaces are utilized in everyday life as an essential, yet limited resource. Residents claim and inhabit these sites for private life, public life, and livelihood, yet government authorities' maps, designs, and plans do not capture the magnitude and spectrum of these activities, which are part of residents' valuable landscape of community spaces.

This report to the American Planning Association's International Division contextualizes historic and contemporary planning challenges in Accra, Ghana and describes my PhD research project that attempts to critically and ethically situate itself through a collaborative approach with a local organization and participatory methods. From mid-January through August 2019, I was in Accra working with the youth-focused NGO Spread-Out Initiative (SOI) based in Nima, and we conducted research on youth's experiences in specific community spaces. We worked with SOI students using arts-based methods, conducted interviews, and organized a site-specific intervention in the street to document, describe, and discuss young people's everyday experiences in their neighborhood. Drawing lessons from this collaborative and participatory experience, I attempt to describe some key accomplishments and provide recommendations for professional planners (as well as academic researchers) on considerations for operating as critical and ethical professionals in contexts like Accra, Ghana.

[1] The term "urban imaginary" refers to the ways in which a city can be imagined, whether by planning professionals, residents, or others in the city. Although there are a multiplicity of ways in which different residents and professionals can envision their city, based on their own lived experiences, needs, and desires, urban planners, architects, and other urban professionals working with the state have the power, resources, and official access to influence and ultimately materialize their own specific vision for the city, hence producing their own urban imaginary that dominates over that of over residents in the city.

Introduction

Accra, the capital of Ghana, is a rapidly urbanizing metropolitan area of more than two million residents, and a regional hub of financial and economic activity. The city is also home to deep urban inequalities: Many of Accra's residents on a daily basis self-organize their own housing, employment, and social opportunity outside of government-recognized systems. This report provides historical context on this contemporary planning challenge, describes and reflects on PhD research with a local community organization based in the Nima neighborhood, and shares key accomplishments and recommendations for professional planners and researchers seeking to work in international contexts like Accra.

Urban Planning and Development Context: Accra, Ghana

Oral history traces the first settlers of present-day Accra to the 13th century, and the country of Ghana has a rich history of diverse peoples whose interactions have long included trade, peaceful cohabitation, as well as intergroup conflict, and even warfare. Scholars have produced rich literature detailing and describing the historical settlement designs in African settlements as well as vernacular architectures grounded in local traditions. Unfortunately, we often only recognize the urban planning and development in West African cities that dates to the colonial and post-independent periods of planning. That said, these have strongly shaped the dominant organization of space as well as the dominant spatial imaginary for major cities like Accra, both of which are linked to authorities' aspirations to develop "modern" Ghanaian cities.

Colonial Planning and Design

The Congolese scholar Valentin Mudimbe described the European domination of African physical territories, local economies, and the 'reformation of natives' minds' as the three complementary components of Europe's 'colonizing structure' in the continent, a structure which serves to reproduce and extend colonial modalities (1988: 15). Through colonial architecture and planning, the European colonizers imposed their spatial ideologies, which has reorganized spatial and social relations on the ground and subjugated indigenous ways of life in African territories (Fanon 1963, Mbembe 2003).[2] In the historical context of Accra, urban planning and design

[2] Frantz Fanon (1963: 37-40) engaged the European colonization of Africa as a parcelling out of territories into colonized worlds, achieved through the "appropriation" of African spaces and the violent imposition of colonial rule. Achille Mbembe writes that the colonization process was "a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical area—of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations" through the re-organization of border and territorial arrangements, property relations, resource extraction, and spatial imaginaries (2003: 25-26).

were introduced as part of a regime of colonial control that sought to impose a dominant (European) spatial, economic, political, and social order. As technical tools, they were employed to facilitate the extraction, administration, and export of the Gold Coast's resources of enslaved persons, gold, and cocoa, among others (Fuseini and Kemp 2015), to create race-based segregated spaces, and to produce a modernist spatial and urban imaginary oriented toward European conceptions of space and place.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the late 15th century marked the first encounter between the indigenous people of present-day Accra (the Ga) and Europeans. Subsequent encounters with the Danes, the Dutch, and finally the British were centered around trade of resources and goods with the Ga and other peoples (Hess 2000, Fuseini and Kemp 2015). The colonization and subjugation of disparate peoples was part of the British formation of the Gold Coast colony, and in 1877, the British officially relocated their administrative capital from its initial site (Cape Coast) to Accra. This date marks the shift of Accra from an independent indigenous Ga settlement to the capital of a European colonial territory. The British selected Accra as colonial administrative site for a number of reasons, including health and environmental concerns. Accra had been a key site for government operations, but the 1862 earthquake (which destroyed large portions of the Ga settlement) created an opportunity to rebuild and therefore re-organize the space, including designing and building into the new urban environment their protections from native-borne diseases (Grant and Yankson 2003).

Accra became a mercantile and administrative core for the colony, and operations were spatially organized around the merchant and administrative offices, European residential spaces, forts, and the port. For example, the British constructed commercial trading houses and offices, missionary and religious buildings, and government administrative offices – such as the offices of Yates Brothers, F&A Swanzy's, Alexander Miller & Company, the Basel Mission, the Anglican Church, and the British Bank of West Africa, as well as the James Town Light House, port, and customs building along the James Town High Street (one of the earliest main streets in colonial Accra), which jutted up against African settlements (Hess 2000). In the interior region of the colony, Kumasi (which had previously emerged as a major population center of the Ashanti Empire) retained its status as a major city due to the ramped-up extraction of gold and cocoa

cultivation during the colonial period, which was transported to the coast and shipped to Europe. To the west of Accra, the coastal cities of Takoradi-Sekondi emerged into prominence as a direct result of the Gold Coast's Development Plan under Governor Guggisberg (1919-1926). The plan included massive infrastructural developments to support colonial profits: construction of inter-urban trunk roads, a railway line between Takoradi and Kumasi, construction of the Takoradi Harbor and the Cocoa Research Center at Tafo (in Kumasi), as well as construction of the Achimota School and Korle-Bu Hospital in Accra. These transport and social infrastructural investments played an important role in enabling the Gold Coast to become a major global exporter of cocoa, timber and gold during the colonial period, more deeply integrating the Gold Coast colony into the global capitalist system (Fuseini and Kemp 2015).[3]

Colonial planners and architects employed European zoning, building codes, designs, and construction materials requirements to achieve a European sense of place (Pierre 2013), to successfully segregate European and African residential spaces, and to compel and control activities (Hess 2000). Colonial planning ordinances empowered the colonial government as authorities over residents, imposed taxes on African residents, and enabled authorities to fine and detain African residents to compel them to clean and repair their buildings deemed unsanitary, but without providing substantial investment to upgrade residents' living conditions. Early on in colonial cities, the native residential areas of African populations were frequently left largely to tend to their own needs. Key disasters occurred and provided a turning point. The 1908 bubonic plague epidemic and 1900 and 1939 earthquakes devastated major parts of Accra. These disasters compelled colonial planners to act, and they did, using public health and sanitation as a rationale for a series of "decongestion" practices. These decongestion exercises included razing African dwellings, instituting new infrastructure, furthering the segregation of residential populations, and establishing new "planned" residential areas to extend the city (Amarteifio 2015, Pierre 2013, Quayson 2014).

Land-use zoning, a town planning method for regulating the usage of land in line with desired social and economic outcomes, was employed to operationalize strict segregation of uses of urban space. Small-scale commercial trading, a central part of community life and historically

[3] These resources are still among Ghana's primary global exports.

practiced in communal areas, was relocated to government-planned market structures. Green areas were largely limited to European parts of the city, but also employed as open, undeveloped areas ("green wedges" or *cordons sanitaires*) meant to separate European and African residential areas. Public spaces such as streets, pavements, and lorry parks were intended solely for transportation. Any confluence of activities on the streets and open spaces was framed as problematic diversions ("encroachments" or "appropriations") from the plan. This implantation of European design and urbanization processes through colonialism constrained the traditional communal conception of space: Once open to diverse users under the stewardship of families, communities, and traditional authorities, design and regulation of private and public spaces shifted to the purview of (colonial and postcolonial) government authorities for specified usages.

With the exception of a small number of foreign-trained local architects, it was largely Europeans professionals, hired and placed across the empire, who designed plans and buildings during this period. British architects like Maxwell Fry, Jane Drew, B.A.W. Trevallion, and Alan G. Hood worked across colonized locales under the British colonial government, attached to Public Works Departments and Town and Country Planning Departments. They designed government buildings, houses, design layouts, and town plans; they also wrote texts and books meant to guide architects and planners in their work in tropical locales. Their approaches re-created European architectural styles, borrowed ideas across colonial locales, as well as experimented with new forms. While their designs were not always a direct repetition of British style, they did represent an Anglicized vision projected by the British onto the colonized, a colonial idea of what these colonized territories should look like (Fry 1979; Bhabha 1994).

Post-Independent Planning

Ghana gained independence in 1957. Accra's 1958 plan, meant to guide the city's spatial development, was designed by two British architects as a "simple extension of what exists…not to superimpose a completely new pattern" (Ministry of Housing 1958). As a newly independent nation, Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah and his administration aimed to expand the national economy through a development agenda focused on large-scale industrialization and modernization. The 7-Year Development Plan (1964-1970), influenced by socialist ideology, sought to achieve economic development through industrialization and modernization of agriculture, an import substitution agenda that included state-owned enterprises operating with

state protections, and massive infrastructure developments (Fuseini and Kemp 2015, Obeng-Odoom 2012). Rather than exploiting the country's resources and people as done throughout the colonial era, the plan aimed to provide strategic investments according to spatial and human resource potential in both urban and rural areas. To enhance citizens' livelihoods and living standards, the plan designed improvements and expansions to transport and shipping at the southern coast, agricultural processing centers in the farming areas of the interior, and meat and shoe factories in the northern areas of the country (Fuseini and Kemp 2015, Sawyerr 2007). The administration established a new University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, planned and constructed 52 new towns, and expanded planning administration and institutional capacity (from the narrow colonial focus on only Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi) to additional cities throughout the country.

However, planners were soon overwhelmed by the massive post-independent urbanization taking place and concomitant demand for housing, infrastructure, and basic services, particularly aggravated by the fact that economic, commercial, and industrial opportunities were disproportionately located in Accra, Kumasi, and Takoradi-Sekondi, the three urban centers also located within the southern half of the country.[4] As mentioned in the previous section, these were the cities that had been favored by the colonial administration and had received the disproportionate benefit for infrastructure development and investment. After independence, these cities have continued to operate as the major magnets for livelihood opportunity, demonstrating not just an emphasis on rural-to-urban migration generally, but also particular migration preference in line with agglomeration (Songsore 2009).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, planning was deeply impacted by the economic crises caused by a combination of internal and external factors, including government instability, declining national savings, investment, increased inflation, a series of severe droughts, and falling cocoa prices (Barwa 1995). In the early 1980s, the national government began implementing austerity measures designed by the International Monetary Fund to grow the national economy and (formal) employment. The Economic Recovery Programme policy measures devalued the

[4] For example, Accra's own residential population grew by 240 percent between 1950 to 1960 (Wood 1970).

national currency, reduced government spending and service provision, and opened the space for increased private sector role in these and other areas. Although the policies aimed to support economic stability and accelerate growth, the effect was the opposite: Formal employment opportunities grew only minimally, providing limited options for the nation's growing labor force (Obeng-Odoom 2012; Huag 2014). The direct result of Ghana's economic crisis and economic liberalization (structural adjustment) policies were informalization of the labor market: As unemployment increased and formal wages declined, large numbers of workers were forced out of the formal and government sectors and into self-employment. By the mid 1980s, it had become clear that population growth and self-organized urban development were far outstripping governmental spatial planning for Ghana's cities, including Accra. National and urban authorities simply did not have enough capacity to plan and execute plans with essential infrastructure and services to meet the rapid urban growth, and this trend has unfortunately continued to the present (Songsore 2009).

Contemporary Planning and Design Challenges

Today Accra is a large and rapidly urbanizing West African regional hub, Ghana's political and financial center, and one of its largest cities. Yet many of the inherited challenges from the colonial and post-independent period remain. Government administrations were unable to fully transform the country into an economically independent nation able to make the most of its human and non-human resources to benefit its citizenry, and national and local authorities have been unable to transform planning governance into an institution capable of meeting the needs and demands of a growing population.

Neoliberal reforms since the late 1980s, in which the state ceded out many of its activities to the private sector, have further reduced planning authorities' financial and administrative capacity to plan and manage housing, commercial opportunity, infrastructure, services, and concomitant social protections to meet an ever-growing population. Neoliberal orientation also facilitated the entrance and proliferation of the private-sector in urban renewal processes, which often align with the desire for a "world-class" or international (western) aesthetic. Deep tensions continue to exist due to stark contrasts between the envisaged urban trajectories held by government authorities and urban residents' everyday struggles for survival. Authorities aspire to modernize the city of Accra and the country through top-down implementation of plans and projects, in an

approach that internalizes and reproduces the historical relation between the colonial authority and colonial subjects. These aspirations, again, are in stark contrast to the everyday experiences and lived realities of urban residents (the majority of whom are poor and must self-organize their shelter, livelihood, and other opportunities).

International planning, architecture, real estate development, and construction and engineering firms and professionals often operate in Accra and other Ghanaian cities as consultants, technical and international experts who develop long-range spatial development plans as well as design and oversee the construction of transportation infrastructure, commercial and office complexes, and high-end apartment complexes geared toward affluent Ghanaians and international expatriates. However, the local implementation and accountability that must undergird and direct these interventions, through planning, policy, administration, and local participation, is often missing or conducted as a token element in projects. This contributes to a landscape in which spatial plans are developed, but not executed (or only in part) and it reinforces the upkeep of already serviced areas. These practices also further entrench urban poverty in economically deprived neighborhoods, which in turn often only receive necessary supports when targeted by international development projects (many of which provide limited support in terms of water and sanitation provision, or limited infrastructure development).

Residents are therefore continually forced to self-organize their own needs and desires. For the city's wealthy residents, the entrance of the private sector, along with personal resources, are the means through which this gap is addressed. For the majority (urban poor residents), this requires that residents create their own solutions, which they do by individually and collectively re-creating urban commons (Gidwani and Baviskar 2011; Gillespie 2015): In the city of Accra, this includes the numerous slum ("informal") settlements, and public spaces and open lands for livelihood, shelter, public social life, private domestic life, cultural and religious life. At the same time, the city government consistently employs legal, policy, and physical force to curb these activities – through bylaws, street clearances, harassment and confiscation of goods, and demolitions – while actively colluding with private firms to achieve private investment-determined futures.

Therefore, while research and reports on lived experience demonstrate that residents' self-organized spatial practices are increasingly prevalent and essential to the city's function and residents' lives, urban planning in Ghana is generally biased toward "formal" living, working and operating practices and arrangements – including private land tenure, regulated labour arrangements and infrastructure, service provision, government data and plans.

PhD Research Project: Context & Description

Research Context: Nima

This PhD research project is situated in Nima, one of Accra's most densely populated neighborhoods. Nima is bounded by the Ring Road to the south, Kokomlemle and New Town to the west, Maamobi to the north, and Kanda to the east. Nima emerged as a settlement in the early 1930s, when Mallam Futa, a Fulani, a cattle header, and Muslim religious leader, entered into a land agreement with the Odai Kwao family that enabled him and his community to settle on their traditional Ga family lands outside of the congested core of colonial Accra. Mallam Futa's followers, who were also migrants and Muslims, followed him to Nima, creating a migrant and religious enclave that began to grow momentously. Early on, Nima attracted, in particular, Muslims migrants from throughout northern Ghana and the wider West African region. In the 1980s, amidst the countries' economic challenges, the pull of affordable housing in a centrally located neighborhood attracted additional waves of migrants, including from southern Ghana.

The neighborhood, long since incorporated into the city, has grown into one of the most densely inhabited and diverse residential neighborhoods, with an estimated population of 80,843 people (GSS 2010). This same census data demonstrates that Nima's demographic makeup has evolved dramatically since Mallam Futa and his followers first settled to include—in addition to the third and fourth-generation migrants—peoples who trace their origins to throughout southern and northern Ghana, the wider West African region, as well as from throughout the continent. Only a small minority of Nima's residents identify as Hausa, but Hausa (as a historically important language for commerce and trade in the West African region) is the widely spoken language in the neighborhood, and the culture influences many residents' dress, in addition to residents' affiliation as Muslims whose children attend Q'uranic schools (Agyei-Mensah and Owusu 2012). As a Muslim community in the predominantly Christian city of Accra (and predominantly

Christian southern portion of Ghana) and as a neighborhood with migrant origins, Nima is still heavily (and incorrectly) framed in both everyday discussions and academic literature as a "migrant" or "stranger" community, a framing that is deeply associated to its popular and institutional description as a "zongo" community[5]. Nima residents cite these framings as problematic in that they continue to depict Nima as a static historical community, rather than in line with its diverse multiethnic demographic makeup, and in the context of Accra's own diverse population.

Spatially, Nima is a densely packed neighborhood with few open spaces, and residents make deliberate use of the area's streets, sidewalk pavements, and other spaces for a wide variety of activities for both public and private life: Nima is well known for its Wednesday Market, in which thousands of market and street vendors extend from the formal Nima Market to take over the Nima Road, the main thoroughfare, as a commercial market space to sell goods. There are also myriad ways in which residents employ other neighborhood sites as well, for funerals and wedding celebrations, political meetings; as commercial and social spaces; as leisure and meeting spaces. These activities, invisible from city authorities' plans for these sites and spaces, demonstrate the ways in which residents operate outside of formal urban plans and illuminate the ways in which urban plans fails to acknowledge and support community life.

Research Project Description

In March 2018, Spread-Out Initiative (SOI), an NGO based in Nima, agreed to work with me as part of a collaborative PhD research partnership. SOI provides after-school programs and supports more than 50 young people up to 25 years of age in creative writing, digital technology, art (such as painting and photography), and entrepreneurship. SOI was founded by a self-taught public artist with a long history of experience engaging young people on creative projects and community space interventions. From January through August 2019, SOI and I collaborated together to research young people's spatial experience claiming and using community spaces in the community of Nima. Three NGO team members and I worked as facilitators with 17 of the NGO's students (girls and boys between the ages of 10-16 years of age) using a series of arts-based participatory methods. Together, we identified the spatial boundaries of our research,

[5] Nima is one of several neighborhood targeted by the Ministry of Inner City and Zongo Development, which by and large targets indigenous and migrant communities as slums in need of redevelopment.

focusing on streets, sidewalk pavements, *lungus* (alleyways) and open spaces in Nima and Maamobi neighborhoods. Our work together investigated how, when, and where these young people create "place" for themselves, including the spaces these young people use in everyday life, such as for recreational and social activities, how these young people navigate the power dynamics of space, and how their activities, personal memories, and meanings connect them to these sites. As part of an arts-based research approach, we asked the youth participants to produce photographs, maps, and stories to document and describe their everyday spatial experiences. Our elicitation discussions enabled presentations and further reflections on their situated experiences. As part of our work together, the youth participants also imagined alternative stories and narratives for their community spaces, including alternative present and future possibilities.

Body Mapping (left) and Group Mapping (right).(Photo Credit: Victoria Okoye)

Group Mapping (Photo Credit: Victoria Okoye)

Early on, the exclusions young people face in public space emerged as a major feature defining their experiences. Therefore, we (SOI team members, the youth participants, and myself) also worked together to produce a temporary, street space occupation that served as both a site-specific spatial intervention (creating space for young people's activities and to challenge existing power dynamics) and a community engagement event in which we brought the young participants into conversation with adult residents, leaders, and local authorities in Nima on the role of community spaces for youth. Finally, through collaborative analysis workshops, we (the SOI facilitators and myself) have begun initial reflections as part of a collaborative analysis process, which will continue over 2019-2020 academic year.

PhD Research Project Accomplishments

Collaboratively researched with a local community organization

This research collaboration has been deeply grounded in existing relationships and building community accountabilities, researcher reflexivity, mutual decision-making, valuing of and engagement with local knowledges, and open and transparent discussions on positionality[6], as part of a critical (decolonial and feminist) praxis. The research collaboration was born out of my existing professional acquaintance with the founder of the NGO of Spread-Out Initiative, a self-trained public artist who led art initiatives with youth in the Nima community. Key elements of our collaborative work included working together to select and define our methods for data collection; flexibility in working through each method to enable changes, do-overs, and time to incorporate inputs from the NGO team members; working together to reflect on our activities; recognizing, valuing, and integrating team members' explanations and understandings of residents' practices as local theorizing; and working together to collaborative analyze the information we gathered. By working in collaboration and with participation of community residents (young people), we attempted to operate differently from the status quo of contemporary urban planning and design research and professional who drop in and out for projects in the city of Accra.

Organized a site-specific intervention and community event

In our research, we found that although residents use community spaces in myriad ways, young people were often prevented from occupying, claiming, and using different spaces. To work through and critique this, we decided to organize an event in which the youth could therefore take over the space, and worked with the youth to plan the event: In a series of meeting sessions, the youth described the activities they would like to do in the space: presenting the products they had produced as part of our research, especially their photographs and captions; playing board games, sports games, and dancing competitions, and performing spoken word poetry and rap battle performances. We (the SOI team members and myself as facilitators) input their ideas to inform a budget and event program. Together, we planned a program of activities and prepared for the event through practice sessions where the youth participants practiced reading and performing their works. We informed community residents in advance, through written letter invitations to community leaders and verbal notification to youths' parents by phone and in person. We also verbally notified shop owners and vendors operating along the street a few days

[6] The term "positionality" refers to how one's identity (in terms of race, gender, or class, for example) influences, and can potentially bias, one's understanding of the world.

in advance of the event to make them aware of the event and how it might temporarily impact their business activities. We printed two large-sized banners with event information (including the date and location of the event, the name and address of the NGO and our research project) to post along the street on the day of the event. The event began in the morning and lasted until late afternoon. In many ways, our event appeared similar to other street occupations by adults that take place in the community for outdoorings (naming ceremonies for newborns), weddings, funerals, and political meetings: We blocked off the street using rented chairs, tables and canopy tents, and we employed a DJ and speaker and microphone system for presentations and music. The event served as a space of encounter involving the youth participants and an estimated 100 community members—including community leaders, youths' parents and friends, neighbors, shop owners and commercial vendors. In the first part of the event, we introduced our research project, and each of the youth participants presented their stories and/or poems, followed by responses and reflections from a Nima community leader and audience members. Most of the event took place in Hausa language, which is the language predominantly spoken in the community, and done to ensure accessibility to the ideas and concepts we discussed. The sharing and responses created a dialogue concerning the ways that young people use, contribute to, and are marginalized through the power dynamics of community space access. In the second part of the event, the we rearranged our occupation of the street, resituating the canopy tents, tables and chairs to create a kids-only recreational space at the street. This activity was deliberately sited at the street bearing in mind the cultural context of this community and how events in such spaces are performed as part of everyday life. Our event also served as a valuable platform for us to challenge the power dynamics that typically exclude youth from such spaces and to center youth in their representations of their own experiences and interpretations concerning their experiences in community spaces.

Community Event, with exhibition of youth participants' photos (Photo Credit: Victoria Okoye)

Each of the youth participants said they were happy with the event and the opportunity to participate, share their work with their community, and to have a space of their own. For many, this event was their first public speaking opportunity, and while it was scary, they also enjoyed the opportunity to shine. Many of them said that the event provided a space for them to stand out in the community and to share their creativity. When asked about their favorite parts of the event, almost all of youth participants mentioned the second part of the event, when they had the space, time, and freedom to dance to their favorite music with their friends, challenging each other's improvised moves, performing choregraphed dances they had created, and enjoying a kids-only space that was protected for them.

This community event was also grounded in the important ethic of accountability to the community in which we are conducting this research. Nima is a popular site for research

inquiries—for studying, applying, and generating theory—but too few researchers include as part of their research process a commitment to sharing their research in an accessible manner and providing community residents the space to reflect, respond, ask questions, and challenge our work. A key takeaway from this experience is that community events, designed in cooperation with community residents and tailored to the needs, practices, and expectations of residents, are an important method for sharing our research not just with other scholars or professionals, but also with the residents whose lives our research concerns—and opening our work up to further critique and adjustment in line with community feedback.

Recommendations

As Planners, We Must Develop a Critical and Ethical Practice

As this project was part of PhD research, I would like to highlight how we can and (in my opinion) should operate critically and ethically when doing our research and practice, and this includes building a sensitive awareness to the histories of oppression, injustice, and marginalization that inform the contexts in which we work. Urban planning, design, and architecture research and practice have long prioritized and centered European and US perspectives, expertise, and experiences. This as part of a long tradition of privileging western knowledges in our universities such that the intellectual contributions, largely from white men, from a small handful of western countries form the scholarly basis or "canon" for the social sciences and humanities disciplines, including in architecture, planning, and urban design (Grosfoguel 2012). This centering of the west in the academic arena is intertwined with the colonial histories of European conquest and colonialism dating back to the 15th century and US imperialism from the 19th century and the concomitant assertion/assumption/expectation that for postcolonial peoples, development means following a unilinear trajectory from traditional institutions to colonial institutions to modernity that is in line with western experiences, knowledges, and ways of being (Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Mignolo 2014). These and other scholars point out that not only has colonialism occurred and still have resultant impacts, they also highlight a coloniality of knowledge that *continues to privilege* western understandings over others, even in non-western locales. The enduring experience of coloniality, therefore, becomes a powerful framework for conceptualizing the continually imbalanced relationship between the

western world and the rest of the world, not just in terms of economic relationships, but also in terms of the flows of knowledge and values accorded to different knowledges (Mignolo 2014).[7] For example, regardless of the sites of our research and practice, it is most commonly western theorists' writings whom we are expected to cite and use to situate our work around in our studies on space, place, and cities. Western theories are expected to be universally applicable, and are employed and applied to analyze data from African sites to further our understandings of space, place.

This includes the western-centered coursework that comprises our trainings in built environment professions and which we are expected to utilize in our work as international planners; the best practices from European, US and other western locales that we might seek to apply in non-western contexts; and, when we don't bring a full awareness of the histories of contentious social and political histories, reproducing damaging and stereotypical discourses in our work. A prime example that I found in my research with Spread-Out Initiative is the continued framing of Nima as a "zongo" neighborhood by both academics, in popular culture, and by government institutions. In Hausa, the term "zongo" refers to a community, a settlement, or even a travelers' community and refers to the historical trade-related travels of Hausa-speaking peoples throughout the West African region. The formal incorporation of Nima into Accra and the long history of settlement of its residents (in many cases dating back three to four generations) demonstrate that, in fact, Nima is no longer a "zongo," but another diverse neighborhood in Accra. This framing serves to constantly "other" the neighborhood, to challenge its legitimacy as a welcome part of the globalizing city of Accra, and the status and identities of the residents who live there. This is particularly significant given that Accra, which sits on Ga family and stool lands, has become a city full of migrants, who hail from different parts of southern and northern Ghana, as well as the West African region, and yet few neighborhoods are cast this same status as a "stranger community." These critiques underscore the political nature of both research and professional practice in the built environment.

[7] "Colonialism" refers to a political and economic system and a distinct period of time in which a nation asserts sovereignty over another people, while "coloniality" is a pattern of power relations, emergent as result of colonialism but ongoing, which defines and influences culture, labor, relations, and knowledge production well beyond any inscribed administration (Maldonado-Torres 2017).

These critiques also require me to acknowledge my positionality as a Nigerian-American researcher based in a UK institution and conducting research in the West African context. This research and the relationships that inform it are grounded in my previous seven years of living and working in Accra, with planners, architects, artists, and community residents researching and intervening in community spaces. Planners must approach the research project and the Nima community as transparently as possible and with humility, given the numerous ways that planning practitioners and researchers have historically exploited, marginalized, and excluded community members from authentic participation in shaping the initiatives that intimately affect their everyday lives. These critiques also inform the selection of my research approach - embracing a collaborative research structure in which the methods for gathering and analyzing information are also shaped by and done together with the research partner (SOI team members), and as well as the use of participatory, arts-based data collection methods in line with SOI's youth engagements. These critiques informed our shared commitment to local dissemination of research results in Nima before exploring any contributions to academic knowledge. These critiques also informed my commitment to identify platforms and spaces in which the SOI team members themselves would be excited to speak to our work together, their insights, and impressions, including at an academic conference at the University of Ghana in July 2019 and in a longer presentation and discussion to a team of Ghanaian planning and design professionals in August 2019.

As professional planners and spatial researchers, we can also draw on the critical approaches developed by two female architect academics who have influenced my own way of operating. Epifania Amoo-Adare, a Ghanaian-British architect and feminist-womanist researcher, outlines in her work an approach that she terms *critical spatial literacy*:

> "Critical Spatial Literacy, or critical literacy of space, is defined as a form of spatial awareness made up of the ability to read codes embedded in the built environment in order to understand how they affect people's social life, cultural practices, and sense of place. Additionally, it is a prerequisite to determining the need for spatio-political action that is transformative."

Amoo-Adare's writings have influenced my approach as a trained urban planner and PhD researcher, as I engaged in this research project, work in collaboration with the community organization Spread-Out Initiative and in their community of Nima. It has forced me to situate myself and my work within the community's own ways of understanding, priorities, and desires, as well as to tailor my research project, which works between architecture, art, and geography, to operate in line with the community's own conceptions of space to support a (temporarily) transformative experience for young people.

These critiques and reflections will (hopefully) inspire planners and designers to think critically and ethically about our practice in locales such as Ghana. Who we partner with to develop projects, who we engage with as we implement our projects, the understandings and assumptions that we always bring to our work, and what we choose to represent in plans are all political decisions that define our ethics as planners and researchers. As we operate in contexts like Ghana, it becomes hugely important to develop an ethical practice. Our designs and spatial plans and built projects will impact residents – and it is our ethical obligation to critically and carefully try to determine how that can be done as positively as possible.

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