

## The City Centre

### An introduction to the video entitled 'Mapping Accra'

The 'Mapping Accra' documentary is available at [www.up.ac.za/academic/architecture](http://www.up.ac.za/academic/architecture)

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Joe Addo is principal and founder of Constructs LLC, a firm that synergizes architecture, urban planning, landscaping and building technology into a single unit geared towards bringing modern architecture and building techniques to Africa. Constructs LLC has offices in Accra (Ghana), Washington DC and Los Angeles. Addo studied architecture at the Architectural Association (AA) in London (1980-1986) and has worked for architectural firms in Finland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Early influences were with Peter and Alison Smithson through their protégé Peter Salter at the AA. The work and interest of the practice has been influenced by various investigations of *genius loci* and how architecture can/should respond to this in creating pieces that are both site specific and meet the needs of the people who will inhabit or interact with it.

The heart of the city begins faintly, drawing in its strength from its peripheries further away first. It is an act that has been rehearsed many a time, but one that is learnt by new actors everyday. The first encounter with a city requires an immediate restructuring of the senses; a sort of fine-tuning to balance the dense, collective overstimulation of the urban experience. Yet the city's encounter with the newcomer is pronounced slowly over time, its space is redefined as it grows, its identity changed forever.

For Kofi, a *trotro* driver in Accra, the day's journey begins at 3.45am. Pouring petrol out of a gasoline container, checking his pockets for spare change, he drives off solo to pick up his 'mate' – his sidekick who will ensure that their vehicle is sardine-packed and out of danger through the day. How do I know this? Well I walk past his home daily as I try to take on my middle-aged bulge, but to no avail.

Walking through my neighbourhood has been most enlightening and educational; transforming my architectural snobbery into a growing admiration of the rural pulse of Accra. People, against all odds, are building with little means yet creating their own suburbia with minimum central control. What a phenomena! New suburbia does not only creep but envelopes and distorts the dynamics of the new city.

As his vehicle draws closer to its destination, the beat of the city slowly gains momentum. This awakening across the city landscape is varied, widespread and synaptic in nature. The sound of brooms sweeping concrete, the crow of a cock, the gurgling hum of an old engine, the shrill ring of a mobile phone: signs of awakening in a West African city.

Contemporary African cities thrive in spaces that are no longer constrained to permanent physical domains. Not only does the majority of people on Earth live and work in cities for the first time in history, but they work outside their geographical locations along virtual lines of communication and in virtual landscapes. Ideas of density and collectivity associated with the city have been redefined on the African landscape, to such an overwhelming extent that urbanization may be solely understood quantitatively from plan – rapid expansions and increases in size with extensive networks.

Understanding the African city begins at eye level where density reveals itself through juxtapositions of Mediterranean villa and wooden kiosk side by side, where collectively manifests itself in a series of nodes with its own centres and where networking exists throughout these physical and virtual spaces yet can only be accessed by selective membership.

I had always known this dichotomy of rich and poor sharing space, but only by observing up close kids being bathed, mother and daughter brushing their teeth in trenches which will eventually become open drains of gutters and men showering in make shift stalls, did reality begin to settle. Sights once taken for granted began to make me realize that this new social order actually works on a certain level. Three families, living in unfinished concrete behemoths are pioneering new frontiers, which are enveloping established rural communities from within. There seems to be a code for survival, which the rich neighbours may actually learn from. Kofi and his family are at the bottom of this social milieu and their story for survival characterizes the daily African theatrics of living. Who better to describe the city and its quirks than a *trotro* driver who shuttles mostly poor Africans from city node to another, experiencing all the dysfunctions and occasional triumphs that it offers.

### **NORTH, EAST, WEST: THREE AFRICAN CITIES**

The African city's vast transformation in are pronounced in the city's built forms. A brief examination of the cities of Fez in the North, Nairobi in the East and Accra in the West depict this reality in ways unique to their own history and culture of the people; between those were there and those who have come.

For longevity's sake, I begin with the historic city of Fez – or perhaps I should say the *cities* plural, for Fez is not one but three entities consisting of the old medina, the new Fez and the administrative city built by the French, Ville Nouvelle.

The tripartite characteristics of the city's space is mirrored today by the economically distinct roles of its people and much more so the city's heritage – urban/Arab/textual versus rural/Berber/deviant Islam – a heritage seen through French eyes. Yet the story Fez is much more expansive, complex and intricately woven together along these demographics. Its culture and tradition today safeguarded by those who were considered to be its source of destruction.

The Medina of Fez, declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in the mid-1980's, is currently undergoing a restoration whose vast undertaking is assures the continuation and blossoming of the ensemble of social, economic, cultural and religious life that made the particular genius of the medina. It is the idea that the contemporary essence of dwelling is measured by a balance of creation and preservation; the idea of working with a living city and at the same time a monument.

The medina of Fez has claimed a central role in Moroccan and Islamic history. Its earth walls declare it 'up front and centre', to enter its space is to descend deeper into a maze of a different time where theatrics and trade take place somehow in the present.

It is a city of coexistence: where internet cafes exist behind the medieval earth walls, where donkeys roll their eyes at automobiles. Yet like many historic cities, time looms over space holding its architecture hostage to modernization and its ideals: telling its citizens within the walls medina that tradition will prevail.

The ancient craftsman of *zillij* receives his commission for a new job on his cell phone, it's a job somewhere in Ville Nouvelle; a journey he will begin on foot, horse and then automobile...within 25 minutes he lives the evolution of urban movement.

Nairobi, itself, begins with the train. The city began as a railroad stopping stop for builders en route to Uganda, and later its strategic position as a military based against the Germans in Tanganyika during WW 1 assuring its administrative future. Like many other African cities, fear of disease and crime in these expanding spaces yielded a reorganization of who occupied what space. In Nairobi this occurred in 1906 along lines of race – the European to the largest sector of West to Northwest, the Asian to a smaller North to the Northeastern sector, and the African to the East and the peripheries.

Yet what occurs in a city like Nairobi where over a shorter, more recent period of time, space and movement are delineated more along lines of indigenous and foreigner, the colonizer and the colonized? How are these identities negotiated in its city centre, its highest point of interaction?

While Fez emerges from the foot of Atlas Mountains, Nairobi seems to descend from its skyscraper-littered horizon. The city's structures loom over what previously used to be swamp land giving it the name Nairobi meaning 'place of water'. Today this city is one of Africa's most important commercial hubs, its impatient *matutus* (Kenya's versions of public transport) squeeze in between cluttered century-old modern buildings. Its density and bellowing structures immediately differentiates it from its rural peripheries, yet possesses no urban authority over its inhabitants. 'Life must go on' takes its shape vividly: vendors line up on streets and trucks climb over sidewalks leaving its newcomers to suck in the theatrics of African snobbery of urban order. The magnetic effect of the city centre never subsides in Nairobi.

In all three cities, the bottomless pit of in-migration processes makes it impossible to provide sufficient housing. Consequently short-term socioeconomic balance within the community is always skewed. At independence in Nairobi, this phenomenon is more alarmingly perhaps because of its citizens highly emotional reaction to the uplifting of harsh segregation and movement laws.

Whereas in Accra, locals prevailed and competed in trade in the city centre before independence, Africans in Kenya were considered temporary residents – their permanence in the rural East and peripheries. Most importantly the African in Nairobi were male bachelors living in a forced triple unit of 10 x 12 ft. African family life in Nairobi was not ever a factor in designing city residence before independence in 1963, whereas in Accra the residence of the family found its design and expansion enrooted in the family members' functions and size.

Despite these differences, the landscapes of Nairobi and Accra together are linked together through characteristic features: the crystallization of temporary slums, the omnipresence of the street hawkers and the rise of gated communities. Private and public space have reacted to overwhelming numbers similarly.

Over time the African city centre remains a manifestation of how these groups negotiate differences between each other in space, and more importantly how these different groups have managed to negotiate these differences *within* themselves.

African urban dwellers have come to terms with density in a way that is not collective; giving rise to separate communities which are worlds on their own. Their residents living in a time scale of neither old nor new; neither their own nor someone else's. In understanding this scenario, it is insightful to immerse ourselves in this grey space. I use this documentary on Accra to capture these spaces – traditional settlements hidden within Accra suburbia, rooms in uncompleted houses. It portrays life through the eyes of people who traverse in and out of these non-existent walls yet which exist as invisible fortresses to mainstream city dwellers.

This phenomena is what I wanted to understand and finally, after a week of traversing the same route, I summoned the courage to approach the elegant young woman moving her makeshift kiosk to the unfinished concrete walls of a house clearly inspired by Las-Vegas and Palladian imagery probably seen in renderings in a children's bible. I am learning a lot to be less strident as I have been known in Los Angeles, where I lived to walk up to houses under construction and berate hapless contractors.

Thank you.

The 'Mapping Accra' documentary plays.



