**The Real Estate Boom And Accra's New Poor**

The city is changing very quickly. Old structures are tumbling and modern high rise buildings are taking their place. A friend recently remarked, "today there aren't many birds in the sky except the towering cranes raising these concrete giants all across the city." For the boy visiting Accra from the countryside, this is all such a beauty to behold, what he does not recognise is that it all comes at a cost. What is the real social cost of Accra's burgeoning infrastructural space?

Accra is rapidly urbanising at a rate of at least 4.3 percent meanwhile over 50 percent of Ghanaians already live in urban areas. With this progressive bulge in the City's population arises many challenges: housing, poor sanitation, unemployment, and insecurity among many others. Ghana has a housing deficit of about 1.7 million units, which is projected to increase to 2.4 million by next year, 2018, and 3.8 million by 2020. Will development be swift enough to catch up with the needs of the increasing population? The real quandary is how do we manage the outcomes of rapid urbanisation to reap the gains?

Although urbanisation is noted to have contributed to poverty reduction; two academics: Agyei-Mensah and Owusu (2010), caution that "if the provision of housing, basic needs, job opportunities are inadequate, slums will rise up, leading to declining health outcomes, growing poverty [inequality] and greater insecurity."

**Land Dispossessions and Urban Poverty**

Urban poverty is rife and Accra is becoming increasingly segregated; the inequality gap is widening, and there are frequent [violent clashes over land](http://www.graphic.com.gh/entertainment/showbiz-news/clash-over-land-leaves-2-dead.html).

Traditional families have been dispossessed of their ancestral lands within the city. First by the state, then by real estate companies, private business corporations and the bourgeoisie. The same process of dispossession is being reciprocated in the peri-urban areas today. Arable land is being converted for real estate development which is denying the locals of their primary sources of livelihood. The commodification of land in peri-urban spaces is leading to many families being stripped of their ancestral land which drives them further into poverty.

The real estate boom is effectively widening the poverty gap as valuable land resources are being redistributed from the poor to the rich. The statistics indicate a continuous exodus from rural spaces to fill the urban spaces. The new poor are not necessarily the income poor but the poor by their quality of life, living conditions, housing and access to basic amenities.

The old affordable houses are disappearing, new plush apartment complexes are emerging in their stead and going out for an average rent per month of $400 at the least. But the average resident of Accra makes just about $300 per month. How can these people afford descent housing?

**The Stories**

Nii Okantey, is an indigenous Ga and has lived in Adzen Kotoku, a suburb of Accra, since he was a boy, on land that his parents cultivated the tomatoes that paid his school fees. He laments that "all the land has been given out to the real estate companies; today we have no rights to land, this was where our ancestors were buried and we, the grandchildren cannot even find land to farm cassava anymore."

"They have money, they have bought the police, they have [land guards](https://goo.gl/KSX7BY), the chiefs have been bribed and we are powerless. Some of the land these people take is not theirs, but if you don't have power can you speak up?" he further lamented.

**The Villain**

In this story, the capitalist estate developer is not the villain, but the state itself. Government had appropriated close to 40 percent of the land in Accra for various developments but when these lands were not used they were not reverted to their original owners but were given to real estate companies and other actors. The real estate developer builds a gated housing estate that my good friend, Nii Kpakpo's father cannot afford. Hence they relocated to their family house at Chorkor (a congested coastal community in Accra) that now houses a huge majority of the family. He doesn't have a room to himself so he sleeps out in the open at night.

It was at the confluence of all these mostly economic migrants that urban common spaces such Old Fadama sprung up. Old Fadama that has been derogatively rechristened after the biblical sin-city of "Sodom and Gomorrah". Until the appearance of these communities, government did not envision the usefulness of these spaces, hence, it allowed it to degenerate into the mishmash it is today. There have been elaborate campaigns to flush these people out of these spaces; demolitions, task forces and the media that promotes rather ignorantly the government's revanchist propaganda.

One of the things the government has been able to do most effectively is dispossessing locals of their land and giving some to wealthier real estate/private interests. Therefore, effectively redistributing wealth creation resources from the poor to the rich.

As one author puts it "the state has become a puppet for tourism, banking and real estate capital." Where the state should be building social safety nets for people, it is instead dispossessing people of the little they have. The World Bank has indicated that "Ghana's success in reducing poverty and promoting shared prosperity, three significant challenges remain: growing inequality and polarisation in household consumption, large spatial disparities in welfare, and the deteriorating macroeconomic environment".

The real challenge for us going forward would be re-conceptualising our spaces and embarking on a deliberate social re-engineering drive.

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