The Colonial Afterlife of Encroachment

Part of Architectural Dissonances

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How does coloniality *live on* in everyday urban space, practice and design?

Working through the concept of 'encroachment', I presence the colonial violence still produced and reproduced in contemporary African urban space and spatial relations. I locate my thinking in Accra, Ghana, where I have lived, built relations and experiences, and worked on urban planning and design, policy and community research. I locate myself as an African diasporan, born in the settler-colonial United States, having lived in post-independent Ghana, and now living in the post-imperial UK. These movements and stays shape my perception of the relations and realities of coloniality and inform my navigation of 'encroachment' as a concept in the planning and design of urban space. Locating myself through these traversals leads me to the work of Black scholars who link the projects of slavery and colonialism, [1] and frame these projects' continued impacts as an *'afterlife'* – reverberations that continue to structure everyday life, Black lives and embodied experiences. [2] These reverberations persist, including through space in African locales. [3] I draw upon this lineage of thought in order to attend to coloniality as (not dead and gone but rather) kept *alive* and enduring through the ways in which we conceptualise, design and speak of space in post-independent Accra.

'Before the British [colonial administration] started building infrastructure, nobody owned land,' says Nat Nuno Amarteifio, former mayor of Accra, to Larry Aminu, Fatimatu Mutari, Mustapha Adamu and me in our research interview. It is a conversation informing our project on children and community space in the Nima neighbourhood of Accra. Amarteifio begins from deep within the city's history, and he makes discernible for us the entwined trajectories between migrations, British colonialism, territory and urban change. He continues: 'You used it [land] for whatever you needed – to farm, to house your family. Ownership was very fluid, it belonged to the whole group.'

It is the thirteenth century when the Ga people form Accra as a coastal settlement comprised of seven residential quarters, where they establish land customs and relations in the ways Amarteifio describes above. [4]

1. **Jemima Pierre,** *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race*, **Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.**

2. **Christina Sharpe,** *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, **Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016; Saidiya Hartman,** *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, **New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.**

3. **Wangui Kimari, 'The Story of a Pump: Life, Death and Afterlives within an Urban Planning of "Divide and Rule" in Nairobi, Kenya',** *Urban Geography*, **vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 141–160, 2019, tandfonline.com (accessed 7 November 2021); Hamza Moshood, 'Colonialism Walks into a Chop Bar',** *Populа*, **27 September 2019, popula.com (accessed 7 November 2021).**

In each quarter, members manage their own coastal lands alongside 'hunters' lands', inland farming villages originally inhabited by the descendants of hunters' groups and families then living in the settlement. The Ga people shape spatial access, use and inhabitation through membership to a particular quarter and within the larger society. Within a quarter, members openly farm on and cultivate unoccupied lands, and they farm or construct their homes on a specific land plot with permission from the relevant custodian, such as the family head. To farm or construct a home in another quarter, a Ga member seeks permission from recognised local authorities, such as the chief priest or elder. With permission of a political leader, even non-Ga residents, both subjects and strangers, have limited rights to land usage and can access leftover unused lands for hunting, fishing, farming and building their homes. This multidimensional socio-spatial organisation orients around custodianship and permissions, relations, and usage. [5] It creates flexible and 'fluid' uses of land – as per the former mayor's description – held not by a single individual, but through the group.

When the British colonize the settlement and surrounding territories (formally, from 1874–1957), they produce the 'Gold Coast' through subjugating and joining together diverse peoples and their territories into a single colony. They position Accra as colonial capital, drawing it into the global landscape of British empire. Accra's land emerges as a principle asset to the colonial administration, which stakes its dominance through multiple violences. The spatial violence of colonialism lies in its practices of unseating Indigenous uses and relations, through the epistemic, physical and material violences of devaluing and dismissing Indigenous land claims, spatial relations and ways of living: the principles of *terra nullius* and *tabula rasa*; [6] the demolition of and claim to territory; then the work of colonial architects and planners to produce spatial and urban transformations, grounded in modernist visions and projecting westernised concepts, designs and control onto these peoples and their lands. The colonial administration transforms land through the expropriative forces of seizure, design and planning, along with, as Amarteifio points out, infrastructure: the roads, streets, corridors, ports and railways necessary for colonial extraction and globalisation. These are predicated on and entangled with land ordinances and regulations – laws created by the colonial authority to control the use of land and space in everyday life, formalising the dispossession and curtailment of Indigenous custodianship and spatiality, in order to transplant a western concept of property, with enduring ramifications.

The Towns Ordinance of 1892, predicated on 'better regulating towns and promoting the public health', introduces the concept of encroachment on streets:

> **It shall not be lawful without the permission of the Governor to erect any house, building, wall or fence upon or adjoining any street; nor to extend, make any additions to or bring forward any house, building wall or fence adjoining any street, or any part or outbuilding of any such house or building, so as to encroach upon any**

4. Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*. **Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.**

5. Naaborko Sackeyfio, 'The Politics of Land and Urban Space in Colonial Accra', *History in Africa*, **vol. 39, 2012, pp. 293–329.**

6. *terra nullius*, **'nobody's land', exploited by the British colonizers to justify their occupation of territories;** *tabula rasa*, **'clean slate'.**

> **street … nor to stop up, divert, enclose, or permanently obstruct, or cultivate, or otherwise turn to any private use, any street or any part thereof.**

I look up the term 'encroachment' in the Oxford English dictionary:

> **Noun: An intrusion on a person's territory, rights. A gradual advance beyond usual or acceptable limits.**

The word draws its lineage from British domestic concerns and makes boundaries, enacts property, ownership.

The ordinance and the term 'encroachment' disregard and dismiss pre-existing Ga authority, spatial usage, customs and modes of conduct, and vest authority and power with colonial administrative authorities, specifically the Public Works Department. From the acquisition of lands, to the construction and demolition of buildings, to the regulation, maintenance and repair of streets, walls and fences, and even the maintenance of unbuilt spaces, the Public Works Department cedes numerous powers from Indigenous authorities in order to produce westernised orientations to space, and with the power of threats, fines and punishment to compel the obedience of colonial subjects. This regulation introduces the concept of encroachment in order to re-conceptualise spatial relations, resulting in colonial administrative processes that dispossess Indigenous ways of using space, relating to space, dwelling, building and being in space.

Today, I notice this concept that infiltrates understandings of space and continues its hold, displacing Indigenous spatial relations and practices. Encroachment surfaces in contemporary planning discourses and pronouncements. In turn, residents' claims to and use of urban spaces in ways that would align with precolonial modes of spatial usage are understood as unauthorised developments, as diversions, or as misuses of space:

> **In Nima, residents self-organised '78 buildings … unlawfully constructed on Crown land', forming an 'unauthorised development' and creating a 'slum' neighbourhood, which 'represent[ed] a flagrant trespass on Government's property, and a defiance of the [Accra Town] Council's Building Regulations and Town Planning restrictions.'** [7]

7. Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Ministry of Work file no. DGD 172, p. 58A,

In the city's 1958 strategic plan, prepared by British architects and signed off by the independent country of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, this vision continues. The plan laments how the myriad self-organised uses of space take away from the 'modern' character of the postcolonial city shaped through colonial planning and design:

> **Vehicle drivers claim the edges of main roads to park their vehicles in the outer parts of town.**
>
> **Young boys transform open lands and fields through play into their own 'makeshift' football pitches.**
>
> **Residents construct their own 'slum housing' around urban commercial zones and large workshops.**
>
> **Local laborers assemble around bus repair depots, starting up makeshift activities and other 'non-conforming uses' around markets and lorry parks, and street vendors and hawkers' trading activities as 'unofficial overflow' from the government-built markets onto the adjacent streets and throughout the central commercial area.** [8]

8. B.A.W. Trevallion and Alan G. Hood, under the direction of W.H. Barrett, *Accra: A Plan for the Town. The Report for the Minister of Housing*, **Town and Country Planning Division of the Ministry of Housing, Accra: Government Printer, 1958: 23, 46, 58, mci.ei.columbia.edu.**

In these and other ways, residents have continued to claim urban spaces for their own livelihood, shelter, social and recreational needs, thinking and doing outside of top-down colonial and post-independent design schemes in everyday life. In response, encroachment continually designates these activities as problematic diversions from the plan and the dominant modern imaginary for the city. This framing of encroaching activities weaves its way into local conversations, with each utterance of the 'modern' extending the life of coloniality and its hold on contemporary time, place, and being in space.

My research partners and I also interview a former MP, Hon. Shareau Tajudeen, who represented the Nima neighbourhood for nearly two decades. As we sit in the internal courtyard of his house, which sits within a compound, two male workers mix concrete into bricks to build an extension to the multigenerational family home. Tajudeen uses this same concept of encroachment to frame for us the multiple ways in which residents of Nima continue to claim spaces across the neighbourhood: 'People are encroaching, encroachment is too high,' he tells us. 'So, any small space, somebody will claim it.' It is February 2019, and his statement describes residents' practices of building and extending their homes for residential activities, and setting up kiosks and containers for commercial and money-earning

activities, not only in Nima but throughout the city. These extensions, constructions and occupancies even take place in the *lungus* (alleyways), on pavements, and in any remaining open spaces, in an increasingly tight and built-up neighbourhood, and in ways that can also block or prevent the movement of vehicles and pedestrians.

Victoria Okoye, 2019. Cement structure built in neighbourhood pathway. Painted text reads 'FRIED RICE AND INDOMIE FOR THE ROAD' with seller's mobile number. Nima, Accra, Ghana.

Throughout the city of Accra too, encroachment constantly resurfaces. In Jamestown, the historic neighbourhood where the colonial government first set up its port, business and trading, and administrative activities, media sources report Accra Metropolitan Assembly's (AMA) execution of:

> **'demolition exercises' to tear down fisherfolks' 'wooden shacks serving as abodes … constructed washrooms and kiosks among others', as a means to 'police the site to prevent encroachment', which the government pegs as 'unauthorized structures [that] had sprung up at the site contrary to the agreed plan.'[9]**

> **At the Spintex Road, similarly 'unauthorized' structures are 'demolished because the owners had encroached on a buffer zone for the Kotoka**

9. *Modern Ghana*, **'AMA demolishes illegal structures as temporary "fishing bay" in Jamestown', 16 July 2021, modernghana.com (accessed 13 September 2021).**

International Airport.' [10]

In the Achimota School grounds, the AMA demolishes 'illegal structures … to clear squatters off the school's property' and to 'pave the way for the fencing of the school's land, which has been encroached upon by churches, slum dwellers, and estate developers.' [11]

These instances form part of a wide and long historical trajectory in which government authorities – colonial and post-independent – continue to invoke this colonial term and its concomitant processes to demolish shelters, livelihoods and other material building blocks of place that they deem 'informal' and 'illegal' encroachments. In Accra, these violent devaluations, dismissals and demolitions form the colonial blueprint in a path-dependent pattern upon which the dominant and mainstream visions and narratives of Ghana's modernity are modelled. These visions are tightly tied to a 'neocolonial modernity' grounded in violent colonial histories and practices. [12]

These framings echo the long histories of locating such practices of taking space as out-of-place, and demonstrate the normalisation of the colonial concept of encroachment. Through exercises in decongestion, government forces raze, clear and displace individuals, materials and practices, reproducing precarity for already marginalised publics in order to pave the way for official urban visions. [13] As this concept continues to shape dominant planning and everyday imaginations, it illustrates how coloniality *lives on*, pervading spatial practice and shaping constructions of what is authorised or non-authorised usage of urban space today, in order to produce a 'modern' African city.

10. Edna Agnes Boakye, 'Structures pulled down over encroachment on KIA buffer zone; contractor arrested', *Citi Newsroom*, 14 June 2021, citinewsroom.com (accessed 13 September 2021).

11. Salomey Appiah, 'AMA Clears Squarters on Achimota School Land', *Graphic Online*, 19 November 2015, graphic.com (accessed 13 September 2021).

12. Epifania Amoo-Adare, 'Who Rules the Waves? A Critical Reading of (An)Other-Ed Modern Future', paper presented at the conference, 'Postcolonial Oceans: Contradictions and Heterogeneities in the Epistemes of Salt Water Joint Annual Conference of GAPS and IACPL', May 2019, University of Bremen.

13. Lena Fält, 'From Shacks to Skyscrapers: Multiple Spatial Rationalities and Urban Transformation in Accra, Ghana', *Urban Forum*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2016, pp. 465–86; Tom Gillespie, 'Accumulation by Urban Dispossession: Struggles over Urban Space in Accra, Ghana', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2016, pp. 66–77.