



#09

Città in crisi: morfologie e storie

Cities in crisis: morphologies and histories

a cura di Filippo De Pieri & Matteo Robiglio

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Città in crisi
Cities in crisis



Accra Airport City: from Crisis to Practice

@ Arturo Pavani |

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Crisis |
Accra |

City |
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Accra |

Le città africane vengono spesso associate al concetto di “crisi”. Questo articolo propone di affrontare l’argomento mettendo a fuoco il concetto di “città africane” attraverso la lettura di un contesto urbano specifico, il Central Business District di Accra, Airport City. Il caso studio è analizzato attraverso le testimonianze di chi ha contribuito attivamente al suo sviluppo. Questo tipo di approccio permette di riconfigurare la crisi non solo come fenomeno negativo, ma come potenziale catalizzatore di innovazione.

Accra Airport City rappresenta l’ultimo passo nello sviluppo urbano della capitale ghanese. La sua posizione strategica ha riposizionato il baricentro del business all’interno della città, allontanandosi dalla congestionata città storica ed avvicinandosi invece alle nuove zone residenziali suburbane. Vista da lontano, la sua architettura è assimilabile a quella di qualsiasi altro Business District. Uffici, alberghi e centri commerciali dalle forme e materiali moderni. Ad un’analisi più attenta invece si notano alcune peculiarità: elementi come la distribuzione, gli spazi pubblici, i dettagli architettonici, rivelano una vocazione locale ben più particolare. Tutto questo è frutto delle dinamiche specifiche del contesto della capitale ghanese, nella quale l’acquisto di un terreno segue dei processi ben diversi rispetto a quelli occidentali, e nella quale la mancanza di tecnologie e materiali di alta qualità influenza in maniera radicale i processi costruttivi e, di conseguenza, l’architettura. Attraverso le testimonianze di chi vi lavora quotidianamente emerge come la crisi ad Accra Airport City sia presente in tutti i suoi aspetti negativi, ma anche come generatore di nuove soluzioni, forme e configurazioni spaziali.

African Cities and Crisis

“African cities don’t work” or are sometimes more generously defined as “works in progress, exceedingly creative and extremely stalled” (Simone 2004, p. 1). Joining a number of other authors such as Myers, Pieterse and Parnell, Simone advocates towards focusing scholars’ attention on *how* these cities work, rather than how we think they *should* work.

Africa and its cities are often associated with the idea of crisis (Myers 2011, p. 3). This tendency ranges across different fields of study, from urban stud-

ies to political science. From sanitation to infrastructure, education, security and urban sprawl, African cities offer fertile ground to those who seek to find emergencies and radical differences from their Western counterparts to which they might seem to aspire. As Murray and Myers suggest, we should move beyond the “diagnostic mindset” that looks at African cities only as examples of failed urbanism (Murray & Myers 2006, p. 7). Instead, it is imperative to turn to appreciate the local specificities of each city, trying to understand “how they make themselves and at the same time they are made” (Simone 2004, pp. 15–16). Cities in Africa are very much diverse, and the “African City” label has proven ineffective in addressing such heterogeneity. Simone looks at what happens “in a circumscribed space and time to help prepare specific actors to reach and extend themselves across a larger world and enact these possibilities of urban becoming” (Simone 2004, p. 3). The particular space that this paper analyzes is the Airport City Business District of Accra, Ghana. The analysis is conducted through field-research, with sketches and first-hand accounts of those who have contributed to its development. The choice to analyze a relatively exclusive and technologically advanced neighborhood is intentional. It derives on one hand from the will to shift the perspective on African cities too often portrayed exclusively as basket cases, “plagued” by informal settlements and slums and on the other hand to show that the potential and the challenges of contemporary urbanization are well visible also – and possibly more even easier to understand from a Western perspective – through the study of a district that might as well have been built in London, Paris or Milan.

The following accounts were gathered over the past three years, during which I have conducted a number of field research study trips to Accra and the region, resulting in a series of interviews to local professionals that helped me better understand the background and the dynamics that led to the creation of this latest addition to the city’s urban environment.

Accra Business Districts

Ghana has been politically stable since 1992. In that, they somehow constitute an ideal case study – and cautionary tale – showing both the urban potentials and challenges that persist despite a stable political environment and a relatively steady economic growth.

The spatial organization of Accra has always been related to its economic activities. During precolonial times, the city constituted little more than a fishing village organized around sheltered harbors (Hubbard 1925, p. 21). Colonization brought foreign models of urban development, that centered their activities around the coastal forts. In 1877, the township of Accra was established and some first attempts to the sanitation of the local environment were made. The port remained the epicenter of all activities with its docks, warehouses and railway terminals. Colonial administration’s buildings and military bases were all located nearby, and it became the starting point for the establishment of a regular urban pattern, which was gradually super-imposed over the existing non-planned city (Brand 1972). The first European Central Business District (CBD) was located next to the port, hosting

a wide variety of activities, from trading to distribution, transportation, banking and insurance. In post-colonial times, foreign presence decreased, and by the 1980's there was only a modest foreign presence in the urban economy of Accra (Grant 2009, p. 26).

In the 1990's, the political situation stabilized, and the commercial Real Estate market began to grow again, although the confusion in the land-holding systems determined a scarcity of available land in the city center. In 1962 commercial activities had been transferred to the nearby port-city of Tema and the city center had begun to shift gradually towards the now predominant connection with the rest of the world: the airport. Despite its historical value and potential as a tourist destination (Ghana's coast counts 28 World Heritage Sites¹), the traditional CBD located in Ussher Town decayed. Traffic congestion, poor maintenance and overpopulation led to its dismissal by most foreign companies. Despite its proximity to the Ministry area – where the bulk of government buildings are still located – the CBD started to expand towards the central and more accessible Ridge area, where the presence of notable developments such as the World Trade Center and the Mövenpick Hotel had begun to attract the majority of businesses. Nonetheless, wealthy residential areas were growing in the only available space: on the outskirts of Accra. Commuting times increased considerably for the new generation of businesspersons, who resided in the northern parts of the city, and as maritime traffic and light industry were transferred to Tema, the airport became the hub for the city's international connections. Its location being strategic also thanks to the proximity with the highway that connects it to the port and the rest of the coast. Airport City became the next destination for foreign companies.

The shift towards Airport city began in correspondence with the country's economic boom in 2007 when the country discovered crude on its shores. It also roughly coincided with the deterioration of the political situation in Ivory Coast, which forced many investors and companies to relocate elsewhere in the region. This combination of factors led to a prompt increase in the demand for quality commercial real estate.

Unfortunately, the government borrowed more than it could afford, the oil production underperformed, and the oil crisis hit. A series of controversial economic measures followed in an ill-coordinated attempt to stop the local currency's fall, resulting in a loss of over 40% of its value between 2014 and 2015, becoming the world's worst performing currency (Blas, 2014). Nowadays, the situation has somehow stabilized. Despite the current economic stall, Ghana still represents an appealing destination for foreign investors, attracting more than 3 million US \$ in foreign direct investments.

In 2007, the planning of the Airport City Central Business District symbolized



Fig.1 Map of Accra. From south to north, the city's business districts: Ussher Town, Ridge and Airport City.

1 Forts and Castles, Volta, Greater Accra, Central and Western Regions. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/34>



the beginning of a new era for Accra and Ghana, in which they consolidated their position at global level both as an economic player and as destination for international businesses (Mills-Tettey & Adi-Dako 2002). The area was strategically located in direct vicinity of the airport and the newly built residential areas of Airport residential and East Legon. In a context traditionally plagued by infrastructural issues, it provided a clean slate to plan and develop a completely new business district. Between 2007 and 2014, up to 20 new developments were planned and built, including three hotels, one shopping mall and a number of commercial buildings. Rent prices almost doubled, going from 22\$ to 40\$ per square meter, while in the rest of the city prices remained stable at around 30 \$/sqm.

Fig.2_ Map of Airport City. The circulation within the district is limited by the lack of access.

Developing Airport City

Today, Airport City looks like a traditional Central Business District, with its shopping malls, cafes and office buildings. However, getting close, some of its peculiarities jump at the eye: the absence of real public spaces and urban design elements, while, at the same time, street vendors are ubiquitous but never random: they choose their spot very carefully based on shade, circulation and local hierarchies. The use of unmarked pathways to travel around the district is a constant, with businesspersons hopping over little walls and crouching under parking bars to avoid walking around buildings. The almost artisanal look of every single architectural element is striking. Circulation and accesses suffer from the lack of regulations for public space and infrastructure (or their application), result in narrow streets, with no sidewalks and little public parking space. Entire portions of public streets have been privatized and closed, limiting access to the area and exacerbating the already problematic traffic situation.

In Airport City, urban planning left much to be desired. By looking at a map of the district, it is clear how portions of land that should have been streets were instead sold to private developers, blocking the access to the district. Circulation within Airport City is precarious, as the only two entrances lie on the same trafficked road.

Land rights and transactions also constitute a problem. Accra still lacks a proper land registry, and the jurisdiction on land is split between multiple government entities, a condition that not only undermines the growth of the city but also its citizens' rights (Thurman 2010). At the same time, return on investment time is much shorter than in Western countries. As local developers explain, here the motto is "build fast, sell fast".

The pace of growth of Airport City has been stunning, as Joe Osae-Addo, local architect and founder of the ArchiAfrika magazine, recognizes. "When it comes to new large-scale developments the first issue is the speed at which they get built. They just sprout here and there from one day to the other. As a consequence, plans and regulations are chronically lagging behind the market and the construction activities". Addo advocates for the integration of traditional activities within the contemporary city. Local architects have a central role in this, as they should "take on the responsibility that derives, on one hand, from a deep knowledge of the local context and on the other



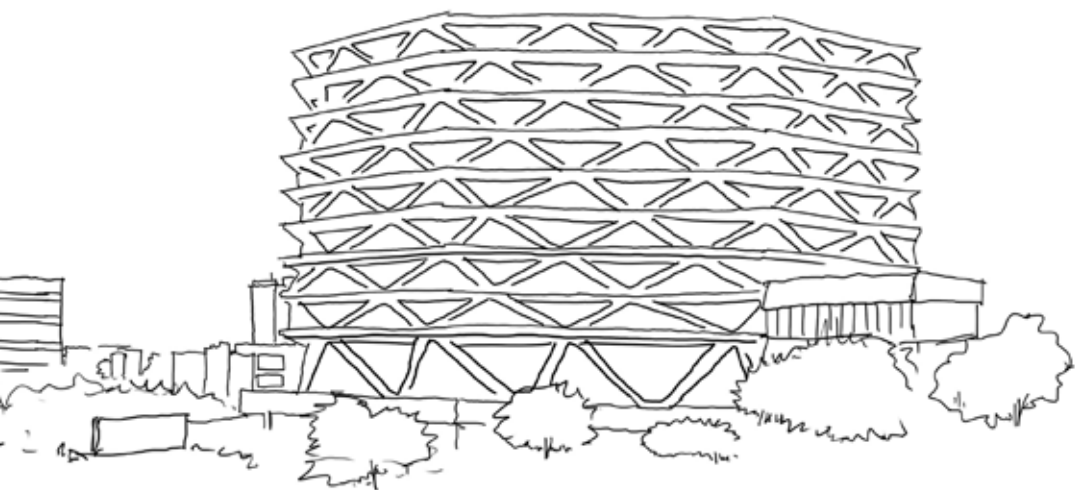




Fig.4_ *One Airport Square under construction. Credits: Laurus Development Partners. < in the previous pages: Fig.3_ Airport City. Sketch by Arturo Pavani and Alberto Minero.*

from the potential that lies beneath the surface in terms of innovation". The reality of contemporary building in Accra suffers from a lack of care for the context, which derives from the unsustainability of its pace and manifests itself through buildings "that are not African in any way: they are just better or worse variations of the same curtain wall buildings and glass towers. They are ubiquitous, from Luanda, Angola to Abuja and Lagos in Nigeria, to Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire and Addis Abeba in Ethiopia. West-inspired office buildings dominate the landscape; they are copied but not adapted in any way to the local conditions".

An exception to this rule is represented by One Airport Square (OAS), the first energy certified building in West Africa, designed by Italian architect Mario Cucinella. Its construction manager was born in Nigeria but has Italian roots. Jimmy Castagna explains how the lack of advanced building skills and technologies were the key to the almost handcrafted feel of the building, whose façade diagrid joints have been manufactured individually in Italy and were then cast in-place, contributing to its effective aesthetic. Indeed, the project was a commercial success even in times of economic crisis for the country. With this building, the developers wanted to show that it is possible to build quality contemporary architecture in Africa acknowledging the characteristics of the local context both in environmental and economic terms. One Airport Square is representative of a new approach towards architecture and Real Estate in Africa, which combines global technologies, design and skills with a deep knowledge of the local context.

Joe Addo is confident that the time for local architecture to assume its driving role in the construction and development of a local identity will come soon, just as it has happened in visual arts, literature, music, cinema and fashion. "One luxury that African architects do not have is time; they must

learn from the mistakes of others and experiment incessantly. Experiment and innovate. They should get inspiration from the challenges of the local context rather than discourage themselves and allow them to drive the design process, therefore rooting it within its territory” (Excerpt from Osae-Addo 2015).

Ultimately, these episodes attest that Accra might in fact be considered in a state of crisis when it comes to its land rights, planning practices and its very own urban and architectural identity, but Joe’s prediction has already been proved right, as the challenges of the local environment have already started to catalyze innovation and generate positive outcome.

Accra certainly has its own specific issues, but its challenges and potential can be easily recognized in a great number of other cities, both in Africa and beyond. A city where crisis becomes a positive catalyst, what Simone calls *the city yet to come*.

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It was nice to meet you!

search us, find us, read us, follow us, tag us, contact us, ..

