Cultural influences and the built environment: An examination of Kumasi, Ghana

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Abstract: This paper examines indigenous and colonial influences on the development and use of urban space in Kumasi, Ghana as a historical narrative. I conclude that sanitary concern, the creation of a culturally recognizable landscape, and residential segregation, through the importation of contemporary English planning practices and ideas, drove residential planning decisions. I then proceed to examine these spaces today, noting that they have either been abandoned or reappropriated through the reassertion of long standing cultural traditions. I examine the characteristics of such spaces noting that flexibility, multipurpose, functionality, and location all play a role in creating a successful urban space.

Introduction

This paper will examine both indigenous and colonial cultural influences in determining the use and creation of urban space in Kumasi1, Ghana, once the capital of the Ashanti Empire (roughly present day Ghana), later a regional capital under the British Gold Coast Colony, and finally, a modern day African city. Using archival material (personal journals, official colonial administration memoranda, first-hand accounts) available through the library of the University of Science and Technology (UST), the British Council, and the Ashanti Regional Archives in Kumasi, I examine the use of urban space in pre-colonial Kumasi, identifying a number of functions such spaces played in Ashanti society. I then turn to the British conquest and subsequent rebuilding of the city, arguing that the need for European habitation in Kumasi made new demands of the colonial city, beyond that of a center for resource extraction and economic exploitation, and brought European cultural determinants to bear on the urban landscape. In
order to establish a culturally acceptable landscape, administrative officials and town planners borrowed from familiar design features and referred to contemporary intellectual thought to legitimate their decisions. Since independence, long standing cultural influences have reasserted themselves again, either abandoning such spaces or appropriating them for different purposes. The informal sector, itself a response to exogenous influences, has triggered a return to a pre-colonial urbanism. Utilizing contemporary plans, orthophotography, and site visits, I examine some of these same interventions 50 years after Ghana received independence (1957). As a point of comparison, I examine characteristics of local origin urban space. I conclude by discussing implications for the planning process in Ghana.

The use of the built environment by a colonizing power to express and maintain control over a local population has been explored by King (1976), Duncan (1990), Vale (1992) among others. King (1976) examines the use of physical segregation as a means to control the local population by the British in New Delhi, India. Duncan (1990) argues that prevailing religious and political discourses shaped the landscape of 19th century Kandy (Sri Lanka) to express the divine status of its rulers. Rapoport (1969) associated control with culture and tradition, and examined the relationship between culture, and the built environment, something he felt was often misunderstood. He believed this was due to the erroneous assumption that culture and built form were “equal in scale”. He argued that built form was "…actually a subset of culture, which makes the nature of the translation process of one into the other rather difficult to grasp” (Rapoport, 1990,p.10), and therefore proposed that “components of culture”, specifically human activities and behavior, could be useful in understanding the link between culture and form. Along these lines, a number of studies, Craig (1972), Hutchinson (1987), and Rose (1987), Loukaitou-Sideris (1995), and Choudhury (1996) have examined differences in use of urban
space by ethnicity, under a variety of settings. This paper presents a historical narrative of the city of Kumasi to understand how cultural and intellectual practices informed the use, creation, and modification of urban spaces.

**Kumasi as Case Study**

I have a number of reasons for choosing Kumasi. First, specific historical knowledge about Kumasi is fairly extensive. Because of its role and position in Ashanti society and strong urban identity, Kumasi has long held a certain fascination for explorers, historians and African research. Our knowledge of the physical environment is the richer for it: maps, sketches, photographs, various accounts, plan views, and physical descriptions stretching back to the 19th century are available (cf. Bowditch, 1817).

Second, due to the deliberate effort to impact its morphology, Kumasi presents an interesting case study in the examination of cultural influences on urban design. The British conquest and consequent effort to subjugate the Ashanti Empire resulted in a purposeful and dramatic alteration of the city’s function and form. It became the fulcrum for British attempts to politically, economically, and socially subjugate the Ashanti. Kumasi was recreated not only as a modern trading center, complete with appropriate infrastructure, but as its new function required new administration, the city was also made suitable for European habitation. This is reflected in the design and layout of areas developed and regulated by colonial officials.

Finally, Kumasi is unlike other African urban centers, which are either recent creations (Nuoakchott), a product of colonialism, (Dakar), political happenstance (Harare), or those which have long since declined (Timbukto), and has remained vibrant throughout its history, a truly ‘hybridized’ African city, experiencing both Ashanti and colonial influences at their most deliberate and extensive.
Pre-Colonial Kumasi

It is not easy to establish the exact origins of Kumasi as a city, due to the variety of historical accounts, but most authors do agree that Nana Osei Tutu, the Ashantehene (chief of the Ashanti people) built Kumasi during the early part of the 18th century, the nexus of several pre-existing villages (Abloh, 1976). It was conceived of as the capital city of the Ashantis, a highly structured militaristic society which had been pursuing an aggressive foreign policy during the 18th century, subduing surrounding tribes and conquering an empire larger than present day Ghana. When the first Europeans began traveling to Kumasi, in the early to mid 19th century, their initial response to the city was very favorable. Thomas Bowditch, the head of an 1817 expedition sponsored by the British owned African Company of Merchants, admired the town: “The cleanliness of Kumase impressed most visitors. The red and white clay of the buildings was frequently renewed and polished during peaceful times, and the streets were swept and cleared at the King’s orders before important visitors were permitted to enter the city” (Mcleod, 1991, p.46-47). From the various early accounts of Kumasi, two descriptions of the city’s pre-colonial form speak directly to this research.

First, the emphasis placed on urban space which served multiple public functions. For example, the renowned central market in pre-colonial Kumasi was used not only a market place, but also as a royal courthouse, a parade ground for military reviews, and for the reception of distinguished visitors. Because of this accommodation requirement, the market “had no permanent stalls or fixtures, because the space itself was often commandeered for other purposes by the state…” (McKaskie,1995, p.35). Europeans who had heard of the Kumasi market were puzzled by it. Freeman, an early English explorer to Kumasi commented: “Coomassie possesses nothing deserving the name of a market. There is…a large area in that town called ‘The Market
Place’ but nearly all that can be said of it is, that it is a large open space, where a kind of market is statedly held; but there are no sheds or stalls…” (Freeman, 1824 as cited in Mckaskie, 1995, p.35). Indeed, the wealthier merchants were only able to mark their premise with ‘wooden contraptions’, while “…less prosperous colleagues simply seated themselves wherever there was space.” (Wilks, 1975, p.384). In order to serve the purposes of a market, Freeman felt the space should be clearly delineated as such.

Second, another feature of pre-colonial Kumasi was the system of “wards”, of which Wilks (1975) accounts for 77 throughout the city. Particular wards were inhabited by business people with a common trade. For instance, goldsmiths, coffin makers, and umbrella makers all practiced and lived within a particular section of town. This level of geographic specialization and diversification was unprecedented in this part of Africa. Even the executioners and those who patrolled the city after dark had a particular part of town in which they worked and resided (McCleod, 1991). The villages within the immediate vicinity of Kumasi were also responsible to the Palace to fulfill specified tasks - a village may owe certain personal services to the Ashantehene, the palace, or to the Ashanti empire in general. For example, one village supplied the palace with bathroom attendants, another was responsible for supplying the Ashantehene with umbrellas (Bowditch, 1817), yet another (the village of Bantama) was responsible for housing and supplying soldiers. As these villages became incorporated into the city and became neighborhoods, these tasks were often carried over - even today Bantama is the location of the Army barracks. This geographical distribution of particular skills and commercial enterprises has reasserted itself in modern day Kumasi, and will be further explored later on.

Although the British, along with other European nations, had been active in trade and mercantile colonialism along the Ghanaian coast since the 15th century, they rarely had the need
to exert domination over the interior, and remained content to trade with the Ashanti for both
gold and slaves through coastal tribes such as the Fante. Eventually, however, rival intentions by
the German and French, expressed at the Berlin Conference of 1885, made it imperative that the
British subdue and occupy the Ashanti Kingdom (Wilks, 1975). Justifying a 1895 military
expedition, the then Secretary of State for the Colonies stated that it was necessary to “appoint a
resident in Kumassi who would see to it that the King carried out his engagements” (Fraser, 1979,
p.340). With this mandate, the British returned, and Kumasi, along with its adjacent villages, was
razed. Thus, after 1896, the urban morphology changed radically (Wilks, 1975, p.379), as the
British proceeded to rebuild the city on the exact same location according to their own needs and
intentions.

**Motivations for Colonial planning**

Urban planning under colonial rule was largely an ideological activity, (King, 1976), intended to achieve primarily economic (the exploitation of natural resources and local markets), and political (the subjugation of the local power structure to the Crown) ends. Indeed, immediately upon conquest of the Ashanti in 1896, as a sign of things to come, a British Captain commented on Gold Coast (as the colony was called) Governor, Maxwell Hodgeson’s, intentions for the future of Kumasi:

“His excellency (Governor Maxwell) formed a committee….to administer the town and villages of Kumasi, under control of the Resident; and left instructions for the Acting resident … who was then on his way up from the Coast, to continue the work of laying out the town of Kumasi and encouraging trade. He further directed him:
1. To rigorously suppress any attempt on the part of Kumasi to reassert a superiority over the neighbouring districts, and, to show clearly to the tribes in the vicinity that they were absolutely independent of Kumasi.
2. To open the road to the north to visit the Kintampo district, with a view to establishing there, at a future date, a trade centre, to which the Muhammadans from the interior would be attracted for the purchase of Kola nuts, salt, etc.” (McInnes and Fraser, 1987)
Thus, Governor Maxwell established official British policy in the Ashanti region for the next half century. First, the suppression of Ashanti political power (symbolized by the denial of Kumasi as an independent source of power and domination, and its political subordination to the colonial headquarters in Accra), and second, an aggressive economic policy centered on the extraction of natural resources and furthering trade.

Physical changes happened rapidly in response to the political and economic demands placed on the new regional capital. First, in order to achieve the goal of political subordination, the British established a strong military presence in Kumasi by constructing a fort on a ridge above the center of town (Korboe and Adarkwah, 1999), with the colonial administrative headquarters huddled around the fort. Second, by 1903, the wetlands directly adjacent to the central part of the town were drained to make way for a railroad station with connections to Accra and Cape Coast. Industrial areas (such as saw mills and processing facilities) were established to facilitate the extraction of natural resources. Importantly, the market area which had so puzzled Freeman decades earlier was replaced with an orderly square. The Fort actually played a major role in re-establishing Kumasi as a strategically important city (the population had dwindled to 3,000 in the years following its conquest), for now commercial transactions could be conducted in relative security (Korboe and Adarkwah, 1999). Thus, political and economic agendas became intertwined. No longer the spiritual, political, and religious center of Ashanti, Kumasi would henceforth be transformed, its purpose and function to be determined by outside forces. The urban economy was divided in two – one serving the extractive, export-oriented needs of the colonizers, the other serving local, domestic consumption.

However, As King (1976) points out, enacting these changes requires permanent administrative personnel, which in turn required European residential areas. Consequently,
planning practices were not solely focused on extractive infrastructure, but on creating a habitable environment for European administrators. The importation of European cultural values and their physical expression became principal determinants in altering the form and spatial configuration of Kumasi. I argue that the primary influences in the creation of European residential areas were first, concerns for sanitation and health, second, the segregation of European districts from indigenous, and third, the desire for a culturally familiar landscape. These goals are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, often overlap.

Concerning sanitation, it is clear that even the most humble British soldier felt that conditions in the Ashanti capital were intolerable from a health standpoint, and would need to be improved immediately in the city in order to make it livable. Upon entering the fallen city, a non-commissioned officer wrote:

“January 19th (1896) – Kumassi – Had Church service in Palavar Square followed by a general cleaning up, burning jungle, cutting bush, and making the place as conducive to the general health as possible.” (McInnes and Fraser, 1987)

Another wrote:

“January 17th (1896)…We soon marched up to our quarters in the town, which is nothing but an enormous cluster of mud huts. We found that most of those told off to us we’re absolutely uninhabitable, but there was fortunately a convenient open space, where we pitched tentes d’abris and were quite comfortable.” (McInnes and Fraser, 1987)

As I shall explore in the next section, the concerns for sanitation permeated nearly every aspect of colonial town planning, from the laying out of parks to the size of residential blocks.

Second, along similar lines, the segregation of residential districts was seen as an imperative (in fact, sanitation and segregation were often interpreted as the same goal). In sharp rebuke of the mixed live/work ward system of pre-colonial Kumasi, the British segregated
residential districts along both race (European versus indigenous) and use (single land use versus multiple land uses).

Third, as noted by King (1976), neighborhoods designed for occupation by colonial officials were constructed to provide a “culturally familiar and easily recognizable environment which was a formal and visible symbol providing psychological and emotional security in a world of uncertain events”. This was primarily accomplished by importing contemporary trends in English town planning, such as landscaped parks and various garden city ideals, both of which were popular trends in English planning at the turn of the century. As a justification and source of legitimization, colonial administrators referred to the work of recognized “experts” in the field of ‘tropical’ planning. Patrick Geddes, the planner who had done work in India, and his immediate intellectual heirs, Maxwell Frye and Jane Drew, are often quoted and referred to in colonial administrative memoranda. In fact, Frye’s book: “Village Housing in the Tropics” was consulted for everything from road alignments to market place planning. In an almost biblical manner, the Town and Country Planning Board would quote or refer to Frye’s book. For instance, in regards to determining access road alignment, an officer based in Kumasi wrote:

“…by making rules and regulations may be able to restrict village development to areas away from main trunk roads and to also restrict the number of entrances on these roads. Plates Nos. 16 & 17 of ‘Village housing in the tropics’ indicates the right way and wrong way of planning villages in relation to the main trunk roads.” (Ashanti Archives, from executive officer, Town and Country Planning Board, Ashanti Region, to chief commissioner Gold Coast, March 2, 1949)

Or, in this memorandum from the District Commissioner:

“Note the ‘Village Unit’ in Maxwell Fry’s “Village Housing in the Tropics” and base the layout on the lorry-park and market but on a base-line roughly parallel to the main road and 100 feet from it.” (Ashanti Archives, from District Commissioner, Ashanti Region to Town and Country Planning Board)
Ironically, Geddes, an advocate of what he referred to as “conservative surgery” in implementing design, was an outspoken critic of British planning practices abroad, and probably would not have approved of much of the “imposed” development occurring in colonially administered Kumasi. Geddes, commenting on the landscape park development in India said, “When transplanted abroad, as in the British cantonment, the successful effect is rare, the failure is frequent” (Tyrwhitt, 1947, p34). Although superficially referred to in colonial planning memorandum due to his prestige, his concepts were never actually applied in any practical manner.

These three influences – sanitary concerns, residential segregation, and the desire for a culturally familiar landscape, drove residential planning decisions during British rule. I now turn to how these concerns were physically manifested through design and planning implementation.

**Elements of the colonial cityscape**

I identified and was able to examine three specific planning interventions undertaken during colonial rule in Kumasi: greenbelts, recreational parks, and the layout of residential areas, all of which embodied the British desires for racial segregation, culturally familiar landscapes, and sanitary urban conditions. Additionally, I undertook a personal “follow up” examination of some of these same interventions over 50 years after Independence.

**Greenbelts.** Due to the undulating topography and numerous streams which transect Kumasi, greenbelts invariably coincided with stream channels. Greenbelts, an idea borrowed from various ‘Garden City’ plans popular in England, were seen as both sanitary measures and as a way of separating residential areas. In regards to specific design, a Memorandum from the Town and Country Planning Board (Accra, 19th December 1951) states that:
“The provision of a green belt 330 yards wide and from buildings surrounding residential areas selected under G.O.648(g) was designed for the main purpose of protecting European officers residing in these areas, from infecting from mosquito borne disease, principally yellow fever, originating in the surrounding areas occupied by Africans.” (Ashanti Regional Archives, Town Planning memo)

Medical knowledge of the time was based on the idea that tropical diseases, such as Malaria or Yellow fever, originated among the native population. By creating a greenbelt, colonial officials hoped to distance themselves from what they perceived to be the source of topical diseases. The idea that malaria originated in native populations and was spread through "emanations from the soil" (Curtin,1992), and not water-borne mosquitoes, was rather common and accepted throughout the British Empire. In a paper to the British Royal Society in 1900, Christopher and Stephens, two research doctors studying in West Africa concluded that the "…primary aim (of European settlements) should be to remove susceptible Europeans from the midst of malaria. To stamp out native malaria is at present chimerical, and every effort should rather be turned to the protection of Europeans." (Christopher and Stephens, 1900 as quoted in Curtin,1992,p.240). Their conclusion were based on observations of the close associations of "...malaria and the native in Africa...so wonderfully constant is the presence of anopheles where natives are collected in numbers...". Two kilometers was thought to be sufficient to provide a measure of protection (Christopher and Stevens,1900 as quoted in Curtin,1992,p.240).

Why, then, was a greenbelt of only a few hundred yards planned for? It is possible that distance was an impediment, or that as a majority of European neighborhoods in Kumasi were built at higher elevations, a combination of higher elevations and limited green space was thought to be “sufficient” in preventing the spread of malaria. The practice of laying out European residential areas on higher ground had gained favor in British India, where "Hill Stations" were found outside many cities. However, it is more likely that greenbelts were
primarily implemented as a means to segregate residential areas. Indeed, Curtin has noted: "To the extent that the mosquito theory was recognized at all, it was as a justification for segregation, which was desired on racist grounds anyway" (Curtin, 1992,p245).

Upon independence, the colonial Greenbelts became “Nature” Reserves (so indicated on zoning maps). Their original intention long since rendered moot, their purpose was “recast” as recreational space by a centralized planning administration inherited from Colonial rule. Today these areas are largely vacant, their borders slowly being infringed upon by home builders with the wealth and prestige to receive titles from traditional chiefs. Their main uses consist of subsistence agriculture, dumping grounds, and as a refuge for petty thieves (Mensah, 1999), as Figure 1 below attests to. Not surprisingly, these reserves are viewed in a negative manner by many people (Mensah, 1999).

(Figure 1 about here)

**Parks.** The earlier observations by British soldiers concerning the general unhealthy and unsanitary nature of the city was the justification for much of the open space and park planning during the colonial period. However, the goals of the urban park system were soon expanded to include not only the creation of healthier environments, but also as a means to create familiarity and instill cultural and social values through the introduction of recreation. In 1924, the Town Engineer’s office stated:

“…The total work on this park as shown on plan including cricket ground and Bandstand with all roads and drains….in addition to being advantageous to the community also serves the purpose of eliminating from the present congested area a most unhealthy
swamp.” (Ashanti Regional Archives: Town Engineer’s Office, Coomassie Public Health Board, 9th September 1924)

Later, even the Chief Commissioner was impressed enough to voice an opinion:

“…I give wholehearted support to the policy of preserving open space, not only on health grounds, but also on the ground that amenities of this nature, once lost, can never be regarded and a lack of vigilance at this stage may lead to a state of affairs which is the very negation of town planning. Space for recreation, within easy reach of the main residential centres, is an essential in any properly planned town, and playing fields, in particular, are an important feature both in preventive medicine and in the preservation of juvenile delinquency. From a materialistic viewpoint, too, the existence of such amenities is a factor in the assessment of the saleable value of houses in the vicinity.” (Ashanti Regional Archives: Memo from the Chief Commissioner, 5th January, 1952)

Thus, spaces with predefined purposes and agendas were laid out. Playing fields, cricket grounds and landscaped parks with undulating topography brought familiar elements of English design and the landscape park tradition, popular at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. These would also serve multiple purposes of instilling social values, promoting the public health, and enhancing property values.

I was able to examine the five colonially planned parks, as listed in The Kumasi District Resources Development Handbook (Dinye, Edusei, King, 1987): Kejetia, Suntreso, The Kumasi Zoo, Amakom, and Swame Park. In examining these parks, one finds that the majority have several specific elements in common: they are highly designed (incorporating a large number of design features such as benches and paths), focused on “passive” recreation, are often physically separated from surrounding neighborhoods, and are generally underused. Suntreso park also contains a stream corridor, perhaps an appropriate amenity in the west, but not necessarily in Kumasi. The zoo, which requires an entrance fee, showcases a number of native species in rather cramped conditions. The specialized function of the zoo does not appear to translate well, as witnessed by its lack of visitors (Mensah, 1999). The conclusion of Dinye, Edusei, and King
(1987) was that such recreational facilities were experiencing a “downward trend” in terms of popularity and use, primarily because “little effort is put into developing and maintaining these facilities” and due to the “unauthorized development in the form of buildings (primarily small scale industrial and commercial establishments), etc, which were fast depriving the public use of them.” (Dinye, Edusei, King, 1987). To illustrate, Figure 2 depicts characteristics of Kejetia Park.

(FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE)

**Residential districts.** The separation of different “races” was seen as paramount to British planning policy. This not only entailed a distinction between European and African neighborhoods, but also between the numerous ethnic affiliations. “Separate the races, keep the peace” (Wellington, 1999) was an often heard catch phrase, and was used to justify the lay out of many of Kumasi’s neighborhoods: For example, Ashanti- New Town, settled by Ashantis displaced after the 1896 war, and Fante-New Town, settled by Fante migrants from the south, were planned as ethnic neighborhoods. I shall describe several physical characteristics of neighborhoods planned for Africans as well as Europeans.

First, the emphasis on sanitation dictated much of the layout of African residential areas. For example, a seventy five foot block gridiron pattern was often imposed, on what had been a much tighter grid based on compound size and spacing. In Figure 3, I have juxtaposed block footprints from an original Ashanti neighborhood (Ayija township, which escaped the burning
of Kumasi and still reflects original Ashanti design) on the left, next to one laid out by the British (Amakom, an inner city neighborhood) on the right (taken from 1992 Orthophotos).

*(FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE)*

Note the extended block size as well as the straighter, wider street sizes (block sizes increased from an average compound size, roughly 175 square feet, to roughly 200 by 500 feet, containing multiple compounds plus an alley way). If we examine contemporary planning literature, the straightening of blocks was common practice (See figure 4).

*(FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE)*

The principle reasons cited were sanitary: wider streets at regular intervals were easier to maintain than narrower, irregular streets. According to Abloh (1976), alleyways (a feature which did not previously exist) served “…as sanitary lanes for night soil carriers or outlet for waste water disposal from houses” (Abloh, 1976, p55). My survey of these neighborhoods and their alleys, sidewalks, and lorry parks noted that they are host to a variety of daily activities. Recreational, commercial, agricultural, and domestic uses (an extension of indoor space) are common in these alleyways originally designated for sanitation. Figure 5 below depicts a variety of different alley uses. Invoking the ward system of ancient Kumasi, particular activities, such as
coffin building or tailor shops, which often take place in alleyways, have a tendency to cluster in certain parts of town.

(Figure 5 about here)

Similarly, residential areas originally designated for European habitation, characterized by curvilinear street patterns, large lots, setbacks, and detached, single family homes, were also driven by sanitary concerns. The spaciousness and bucolic design of these neighborhoods carried with it connotations of healthy living. The typical residential structure (see Figure 6) in such areas was the Bungalow, “raised some 10 feet or more off the ground on iron pillars, have been built on sanitary sites away from these towns (old town center), much to the promotion of health and comfort” (Hodgson, 1901,p.352). Such practice “…was common prescription for the tropical housing in India and the West Indies as well as Africa.” (Curtin, 1992,p235)

(Figure 6 about here)
The Europeanization of Kumasi’s cityscape culminated in Maxwell Frye’s 1945 “Garden City of West Africa” plan for central Kumasi (Frye, 1946b). Ostensibly conceived of to address an urgent transportation problem, namely connecting a downtown which had been bisected by the 1903 Takoradi-Kumasi-Accra Railroad, it morphed into an attempt to recast the entire area as a European city, with boulevards lined with Parisian style development. Needless to say, with the exception of the bridge, none of the plan was realized. See Figure 7.

(Figure 7 about here)

Second, African neighborhoods planned under colonial administration emphasized singular land uses. For example, a number of developments (for example, North and South Suntreso) were laid out after World War II in the then-outskirts of Kumasi. Intended as housing for war veterans, these were the first attempts at pre-fabricated housing, manufactured from heavy concrete panels. Built on curvilinear roads at low density, these single family residential neighborhoods were intended primarily for commuters who would use para-transit means to travel to the central city for employment. Since independence, the neighborhoods have seen a proliferation of small scale commercial development. Much of the area between lots, as well as the streetscape, have assumed new roles.

This is at least partially due to the rise of the informal economy – the black market in which many newly arrived migrants participate and depend on. The informal sector has been alternatively explained as an attempt to escape a highly centralized administrative bureaucracy
(Riddell, 1997, De Soto, 1989), itself a legacy of colonialism, or as a response to the vagaries of contemporary globalization and economic structural adjustment, in particular, state divestiture in the formal sector and the removal of protection for local industry (Adarkwah, 1999), also an exogenous influence. Thus, it is widely perceived as a coping, or substitute mechanism, for those who can’t afford, or don’t have access to, the formal urban economy (Guy and Mhone, 2000).

To the extent that it has transformed this neighborhood, the informal sector has turned this once single use residential neighborhood into a mixed use development of commercial and industrial activity. There has been much extension work – houses have been augmented, rental units have been constructed, so much so that today it is difficult to see the original structures, a process which has been well documented by Tipple and Owusu (1994). See Figure 8. In addition, small workshops, commercial establishments, and vegetable gardens have sprung up. As such, it is much more reflective of pre-colonial Kumasi in its function - multiple, densely packed land uses, simultaneously serving as residence, commercial establishment, and places of employment.

(Figure 8 about here)

Like many other sections of Kumasi, the European residential areas have experienced new mixed use and commercial development since independence, although they have proven more resilient to change than other areas. The small pocket parks set up throughout these areas, geared toward ‘gentlemen’ sports, such as cricket, or horseback riding, have fallen into complete disuse.

“Local space” creation
I have examined some of the specific planning design implementations enacted by colonial administrators and have argued that the have been primarily concerned with creating a more sanitary environment (i.e. one fit for European habitation), instituting racial segregation, and incorporating common design features from England intended to create a familiar environment, colonial planners laid out residential neighborhoods, greenbelts and landscaped parks. These interventions displayed similar characteristics: they were oriented toward more passive recreation, well delineated borders, and formalized and highly programmed uses, reflective of colonial power needs and concerns.

Since independence, colonial “space” has either seen a decline (or even abandonment) in use, as such spaces are highly specialized in their design, dismissive of long standing cultural emphasis on multi-functional spaces. In the case where “colonial” space has been modified or re-appropriated to meet local needs, it has come in the form of alley ways being used for alternative uses (such as cultivation), or when multiple uses are introduced into formerly single land use areas (such as the residential neighborhoods).

I believe that much can be learned by examining a “successful” public space for comparison, and trying to understand some of its characteristics. In order to do so, I looked at a number of city parks planned since independence as well as spontaneous, or ‘informal’ spaces.

I was able to distinguish three parks of definite post-independence origin: Abbey’s park, Fante New-Town park, and Asafo park. Patronage for these parks comes either from the city or a private citizen. Abbeys Park, named after its founder (who donated the land), was typical of the other parks examined in that it contained characteristic features common to all, namely: a) a flat, open, centralized space useful for a variety of activities: football, parades, and funerals (Mensah, 1999), b) close proximity to high density residential areas c) permeable borders allowing for easy
access, and d) easy, uncomplicated maintenance and upkeep. Thus, the “market place” of pre-colonial Kumasi, which had confused early European visitors to the city by its apparent emptiness and lack of function, has been reproduced multiple times in modern Kumasi in the forms of new parks and ‘unplanned’ public space.

In examining Figure 9 Abbey’s park (left) looks bleak, deserted, and uninviting. There is no ornamental or shade vegetation. When one enters the park, there is not much of an indication of entering a park; in fact, it could be easily mistaken for a vacant lot. However, it can serve as a parade ground one day, a football match the next, and a funeral ground the day after that (Adarkwah, 1999). Furthermore, unlike Kejetia Park (discussed earlier), it is easily accessible from all sides, with very fluid borders. This basic form is repeated many times throughout the city. Both Fante New-Town and Asafo parks are smaller than Abbey’s Park, but have similar features and elements.

(Figure 9 about here)

In addition to these designated parks, innumerable spaces have been appropriated to meet very localized needs. They constitute the majority of recreational space in Kumasi, countless in number, and appear in a variety of forms and fashions. These parks have sprung up all over Kumasi, and can be found on vacant lots, by the side of roads, on university grounds, within on-ramps of the Accra-Kumasi highway, and the innumerable spaces existing between buildings and residential compounds (as discussed in Mensah, 1999). While many of these spaces are
temporary – they can be set up to serve a purpose and then “dismantled”, others have taken on a sense of permanence. Such spaces serve roles such as work spaces, kitchens, markets, places to congregate and socialize, recreational areas, and other necessary functions in Ghanaian life make them vital parts of the urban fabric.

Conclusion

In order to be successful, the planning and creation of space in Kumasi must be flexible, accessible, multi-functional, and integrated with its surroundings. Planners and city officials dismiss local traditions at their own peril, especially “…given the inability of contemporary city administrators to provide all the essential communal facilities, indigenous mechanisms continue to cover the deficit” (Lowder, 1986, p.22). The continuation of colonial policy after independence has been one of the greatest hindrances to integrating land uses in Ghana today, and similar policies have become ingrained: “With the colonial era, a style and pattern of urban residence was introduced and increasingly adopted, becoming a reference model for the indigenous population…” (King, 1976, p.287). In short, the apparatus of the colonial state has proven itself not easily dismantled or changed. This administrative structure has proven itself unable to control, capture, or utilize the spontaneous growth and creation of functional urban environments which has come to characterize cities like Kumasi in the post-colonial period.

Nevertheless, despite the intentions of planning officials and administrative bureaucracy, urban spaces are adapting and changing. The informal sector, itself a response to exogenously imposed conditions, whether in the form of a highly centralized bureaucracy remnant from colonialism, or an increasingly globalized economy, has served as an ‘enabling agent’ for an indigenous urbanism. It has created opportunities for fundamental cultural values to spatially manifest themselves, values which predate both structural adjustment and colonialism.
Specifically, the informal sector has led to an increase in mixed uses (such as commercial and residential coexisting) in areas originally planned as single use (residential), and has reemphasized multiple economic and social functions occurring in the same space. The informal sector thus creates space which harkens back to the ward system of pre-colonial Kumasi, with its close-knit live-work arrangements, as well as long standing cultural traditions emphasizing multiple uses, such as the market of ancient Kumasi cited earlier. This appropriation of space should be celebrated, or in the very least recognized, for what it is. Planners and administrators who advance an agenda of singular, formalized land uses and spaces (something since discredited in the west) will have little success battling against such long standing cultural forces.

In his landmark work on Peru, DeSoto (1989) criticizes the inflexibility and corruption of the Peruvian ruling elites who engage in redistributive policies that hinder both local and national economies, forcing the burgeoning urban population to engage in informal economic activities. He argues that the (relatively) free market of the informal economy, in turn, acts in an efficient distribution mechanism and system of wealth creation. The planning and design of urban space should make similar allowances. Intsiful (1989) has studied the usefulness of home-based enterprises to the Ghanaian urban economy, commenting on how policy makers often oppose “…work-at-home urban design because of devotion to unifunctional land use theories and because of a moralistic bias against private economic gain from social housing support” (Intsiful, 1989, p.26). He recommends that barriers and regulations which attempt to prevent such activities be reversed and made more accommodating.

Administrative insensitivity has begun to change. The informal sector, long the object of official skepticism and even discouragement from those who saw it as a hindrance to the
formation of a national economy, has received praise as a positive attribute in African urban life Balbo (1993).

Despite dramatic changes introduced by the colonial system, and global changes introduced since independence, I believe the use of space and the ways in which Africans utilize and create it are reflective of long standing cultural norms and have taken on an air of timelessness. As such, I agree with Croquery-Vidrovitch, who suggests that African urbanism “…is, indeed it has always been, a creation of its own in the making” (Croquery-Vitdrovitch in Stren, 1992).

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2
FIGURE 3

FIGURE 4
FIGURE 1: Illegal dumping in the Adisam Valley Nature Reserve

FIGURE 2: Kejetia park: underused, physically isolated, overly designed with specific user intentions.

FIGURE 3: On the left, compound footprints in Ayija township, an Ashanti village. On the right, the Kumasi neighborhood of Amakom, laid out by the British (taken from 1992 Orthophotos).

FIGURE 4: Neighborhood and village street layout as prescribed by *How to Plan your village* (1961), USAID

FIGURE 5: Land use in alley ways, from left to right: banana farming, tailor shops, coffin making

FIGURE 6: Typical Bungalow in the Ridge neighborhood.

FIGURE 7: A model of Frye’s 1945 ‘Garden City’ plan for Kumasi, looking east from the center of town along the present day Kumasi-Accra Highway. The plan emphasizes a new state road and bridge crossing over the Takoradi-Kumasi-Accra Railroad track. Frye recognized early on that the track would become a barrier to commercial growth and hindrance to neighborhood integration. Fry, 1946a

FIGURE 8: Multiple uses in a former single use area. On the left, a fashion boutique on the corner of a residential lot, on the right, rental units (in background) have been added to an original government estate.

FIGURE 9: Fante New-Town park (left) and Abbey’s Park (right) have developed within close proximity to residential areas, and are used for many purposes.
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Notes

1 Please note that throughout this paper I have chosen to consistently spell ‘Ashanti’ and ‘Kumasi’ as written. However, throughout the archival material literature, these can be spelt; ‘Ashante’, ‘Ashantee’, ‘Coomassie’ or ‘Kumase’, respectively. These variations are due to the indigenous oral tradition (no fixed spelling) as well as British insistence on imposing their own spellings.

2 The majority of cooking in Ghana, particularly the pounding of ‘fu-fu’, is done outside.

3 The expressed goals of the Town and Country Planning Office include: “To prepare strategic plans for all districts and major urban settlements, to prepare policy proposals on human settlement and revise planning standards, regulations, and guidelines, and to intensify compliance to planning standards, regulations, and guidelines” (Town and Country Planning Office, Accra)

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