



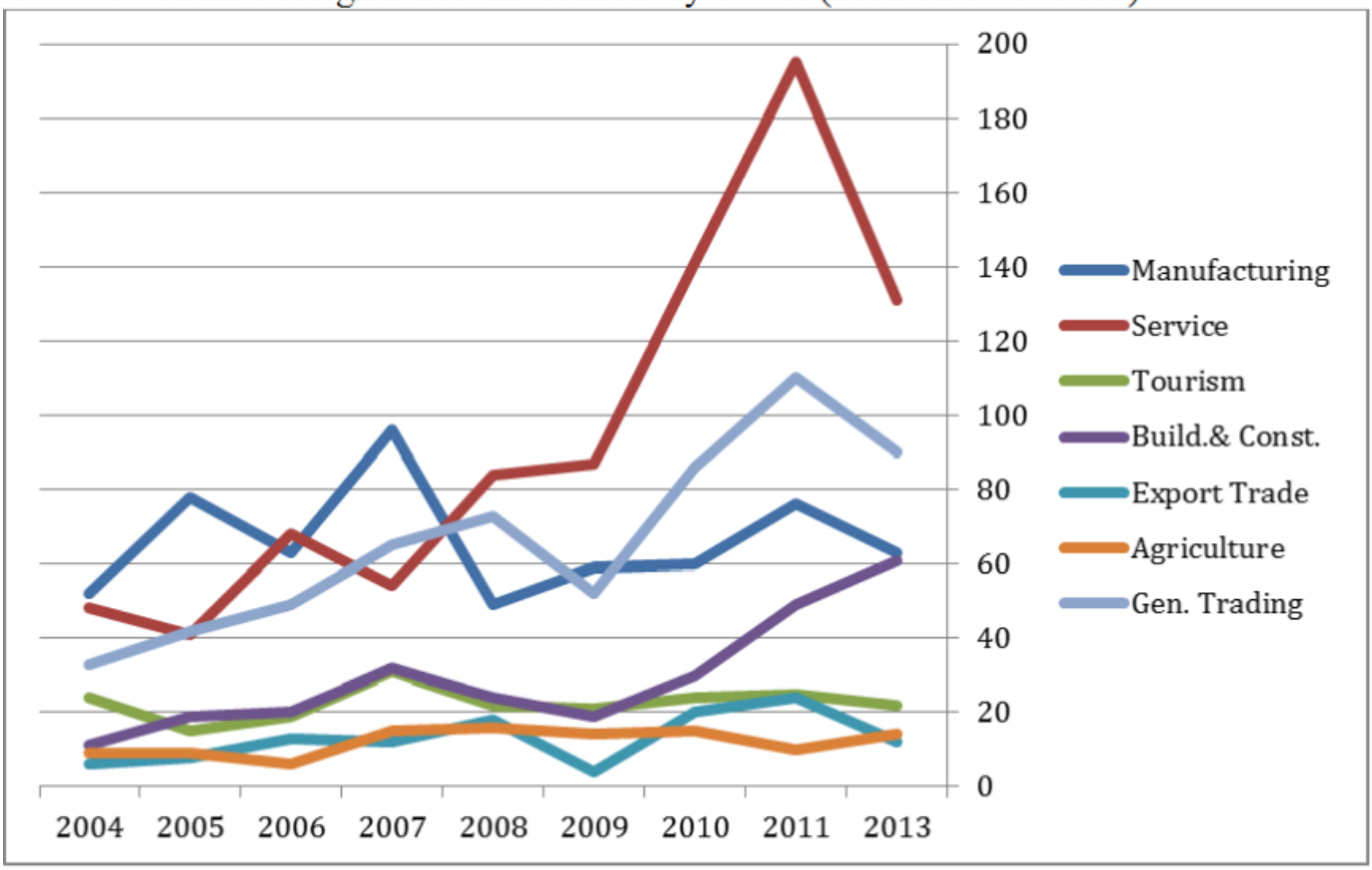
A Man, A Plan, A Mall: The Role of Globalizing Elites in the Development of Accra, Ghana

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Over the past forty years, cities have become increasingly global in orientation, delinking from their national hosts to participate in worldwide circuits of accumulation (Sassen 2001). Sub-Saharan African cities, however, are rarely considered global because they lack what many consider key indicators of globality, such as foreign direct investment, air traffic, and the presence of multinational headquarters. But even a brief visit to an African capital reveals the degree to which globalization touches urban development processes in Africa, reshaping lives and fortunes.

Accra, the capital of Ghana, is a perfect example. Strong economic growth over the past ten years, the discovery of oil off the coast, and an influx of new foreign investment have increased its profile worldwide and contributed to a massive boom in the service sector and in real estate (see Table 1). These forces were set in motion in the 1980s with Ghana's adoption of structural adjustment programs, which led to deregulation, the privatization of state enterprises, and a turn toward national "business friendly" policies. Yet these changes alone do not fully account for the way Accra looks today—a city of elite islands of shopping malls, gated housing developments, luxury hotels, and new business parks amid a growing number of informal settlements and slums. [i] The Ghanaian government has played a large part in supporting the efforts of private real estate developers through direct investment in malls and new high-end communities, the provision of land, and tax abatements for new real estate developments. Yet no such support exists for the poor, who have largely been left to their own devices, encouraged, in municipal planning documents, to engage in "self-help" and to take personal responsibility for improving their lives and surroundings.

Table 1: Ghana Foreign Direct Investment by Sector (2012 data excluded)



Source: Ghana Investment Promotions Council

How has this all come to pass, and why has there not been more opposition to high-end development, given that the vast majority of Accra's residents will never buy a house in a gated community or shop for new clothes at the mall? Scholars producing work on African cities have long maintained that the "global city" framework does not account for the diverse articulations of globality in African cities. Some, for example, write about the importance of transnational migration in reshaping the daily lives of wealthy and poor residents of African cities (DeBoeck and Plissart 2006, Malaquais 2006), while others maintain that media and the presence of new technologies have contributed to "globalization of the imagination" (Malaquais 2006), even for those who never leave. In Accra, the changes wrought by structural adjustment and globalization have become evident in the widespread embrace of a neoliberal ethos that celebrates individual over collective accomplishments, entrepreneurialism over state-led development, and "trickle-down" economic policies. As the memorial park of Kwame Nkrumah, independent Ghana's first president—a socialist and Pan-Africanist—sits unvisited, international and domestic magazines, newspapers, and blogs laud real estate developers and entrepreneurs as the new national heroes.

One of the most celebrated of these figures is Joseph Owusu-Akyaw, now deceased,

who opened Accra's first modern shopping mall, the Accra Mall, in 2008. Like many of his peers, Owusu-Akyaw was a product of the Ghanaian diaspora, having studied abroad in the UK and traveled extensively in the UK, US, and South Africa. Fueled by a dream to provide European and American-style amenities for Ghana's growing middle class [ii] and inspired by time spent at the Brent Cross Shopping Centre in North London, Owusu-Akyaw undertook a decades-long effort to secure financing for the project, which eventually came from a UK-based development bank. The mall opened in 2008 to great acclaim [iii] and has spurred a construction boom in the surrounding area, where home prices are the highest in Accra.



Perhaps more revealing than the story of Owusu-Akyaw, however, is the fanfare that surrounded the opening of the mall. On opening day, Owusu-Akyaw gave a speech to a large audience, including then-president John Agyekum Kuffuor, announcing:

> I set out to realize a dream that I believed would contribute to the growth and modernization of this nation… In the end, I have been driven by my sense of purpose to realize a vision that is contributing to my country at a critical point of its economic development, and hope will inspire a young Ghanaian to believe that with integrity, sacrifice and dedication to a purpose it "can be done.

Positioning the mall as a symbol of national development, Owusu-Akyaw characterized himself as a pioneer paving the way for future Ghanaians to take up the challenge of building the nation. Upon his death he was eulogized in the popular media, becoming a national hero. Edward Boateng, a friend and business associate, wrote of the mall, “This edifice stands as a symbol and the pride of his life… [The Accra Mall] stands for the betterment of the quality-of-life of today’s Ghanaian Citizen” (Boateng 2010). The mall has become a gathering place for rich and poor alike—a park in a city without green spaces, a beacon of cleanliness and order in an otherwise chaotic urban landscape.



Ghanaian popular media and international coverage of Accra are rife with stories of people like Owusu-Akyaw—individual entrepreneurs, self-made men and women determined to bring change to Ghana through the provision of new technologies and amenities. Implicit here is the understanding that development has become the job of determined individual actors with big dreams, and that hard work and innovation are panaceas for many of Ghana’s biggest problems.

Public planning documents and the promotional material of real estate developers echo one another in denouncing the sorry state of Accra, its squalor, the haphazard nature of its development. The private sector blames the government, while the public sector blames the poor, urging them to “get involved,” “stop, think before you act,” and “do the right thing” (Accra Metropolitan Assembly 2010).

So what does it mean for a mall to become so universally celebrated, especially in a city where, according to UN Habitat (2009) over 50% of the population lives in informal settlements lacking access to the most basic amenities—water, electricity,

stable and secure shelter? In their discussion of “millennial capitalism” Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) suggest that “lifestyle choices” offered by a global marketplace of consumer goods have replaced the civil society of a bygone era. As Accra’s developers seek out new foreign investment, they must market the city itself as a commodity. What, then, are the consequences for those who are seen as an “aesthetic” problem? If they lack the power to consume, do they really have a right to the city? Given the inability of Accra’s municipal government to provide the requisite infrastructure for a growing population, it is no surprise that private developers have stepped in to do the work of development. Yet Ghana’s growing levels of inequality may mean that developers will eventually run out of people who can afford to shop at malls, eat at restaurants, or buy luxury condominiums. What happens then?



Notes

[1] UN Habitat has estimated that 58% of Accra residents live in informal housing (2009).

[2] Much has been made of Ghana, and Africa’s rising “middle class,” but in reality the middle class in Africa remains small and has been buoyed by abnormally high GDP growth, which is now beginning to decline (Blas 2014).

[3] The only opposition to the mall came from the mayor and a group of city planners

who tried to shut down the project after it was already completed because of traffic concerns (the mall sits at a busy intersection). The ineffectuality of their resistance to the project perfectly encapsulates the power of private developers to realize their visions despite resistance on the part of local officials, and is evidence of the inability of the municipal authority to control development.

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