

Ghana's Modernist Metropolis: National Ideals and Urban Imperatives in the Port City of Tema

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I spent June 2009 engaged in a new research project on the port city of Tema. A sprawling industrial, commercial, and residential complex, Tema was built and conceived in tandem with the staking out of Ghanaian independence in the 1950s and early 1960s. Designed with an eye to both productive enterprise and domestic life, nation-building and international engagement, Tema at its founding provided an urban example of high-modernist infrastructural development, among the first of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa. Though subject to new forms of global interdependence, the expansion of population and premises, and a sometimes unsteady state, some 50 years hence Tema continues to thrive with its original plan largely in-tact. While other cities across Africa straddle the knife's edge of chaos and creativity brought about by inadequate infrastructure, migration and mismanagement, Tema is the sight of remarkable order and prosperity.

Tema's realization was driven by the socialist-inspired nationalist vision of Kwame Nkrumah and the input of a Greek urban planner, Constantinos Dioxiadis, whose firm authored the designs for a host of new cities in South Asia and the Middle East. Reflecting a totalizing conception of public and private life, Tema remains organized around separate residential zones for workers, a middle managerial class, and high-level bureaucrats and industrialists. Marked by a sleek form-equals-function aesthetic, each neighborhood is equipped with schools, sports facilities, and places of worship.

At the city's coastal edge, Tema Harbor, once the largest and most technically sophisticated ports in West Africa, was built by African laborers and expatriate technicians to facilitate the country's engagement in the world market. Hosting a mix of state-owned and foreign industries, an extensive industrial zone was sited next to the port. After two decades of decline, the harbor is once again among the most active on the continent, but defying

the original nationalizing impulse, it's functioning now depends on partnerships with global shipping and logistics firms.

As a preliminary foray, this summer I sought to explore the on-going impact of the nationalist imperatives and modernist ideals shaping Tema's founding on the life of the metropolis. I spoke with the management of the Tema Development Corporation (TDC), the city's first governing body, and conducted preliminary interviews with members of the original planning division. I also met with representatives of the Tema Municipal Assembly (TMA), the current governing authority, along with the leaders from the Ga House of Chiefs. The terms of power sharing between TDC and TMA, it soon became clear, are still unsettled, and the traditional authorities, largely eclipsed. Beneath the aura of urban provisioning I learned of the 'planned' exile of the city's indigenes and underclass into under-serviced locals at the port periphery. In the midst



of these inequities however, across the city there is a strong local identity, tinged with national pride and cosmopolitan consciousness. For "Temanians" of this ilk, the reproduction of urban order is less about the efforts of governing authorities than the force of self-monitoring driven by suburban ideals of homesteading and the lingering promise of upward mobility.

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