

URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES  
EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPES

**Euphorigenic Landscapes – issue 1.0**

Sören Schöbel, Daniel Czechowski (Ed.)

(Schriftenreihe - LAREG, Bd. 12/

Monograph Series - Department of

Landscape Architecture and

Regional Open Space, Vol. 12)

© 2013

Fachgebiet für Landschaftsarchitektur

regionaler Freiräume

Technische Universität München

All rights reserved. This publication is protected by copyright. No part of this book may be printed without permission of the editors.

**LAREG**



ACCRA  
5° 33'00"N 0° 12'00"W

SIZE	894 KM <sup>2</sup>
POPULATION	2,291,352
DENSITY	9,589.2/KM <sup>2</sup>
ELEVATION	61 M
TIME ZONE	GMT (UTC)

## THE HUMAN DIMENSION TO URBAN SPACE IN GHANA

Joel B. K. Asiedu

### INTRODUCTION

I am tempted to agree with Stuart Elden who in a discus on some of the writings of Henri Lefèbvre stated that 'a society produces its own space'<sup>1</sup>. In other words the culture and traditions of a society determine and shape the creation of space. Space then becomes a social product. In the city this is a hotly contested social process shaped by human practices and power and has received several descriptions. It is described as green as in green space<sup>2</sup>, open<sup>3</sup> or public as in public space<sup>4</sup>, communal as in communal space<sup>5</sup>. It can be tasteless or tasteful<sup>6</sup>, geographic<sup>7</sup>, productive, as you find in the ocean or inland water resources<sup>8</sup> or even parasitic as in parasitic space<sup>9</sup>, among others. In actual sense then, space becomes a difficult concept to explain<sup>10</sup> but studying about it is a very important exercise as it unconsciously reveals much about the ideals of the men and women in a community who have shaped it <sup>11</sup>.

### PUBLIC SPACE

In the Ghanaian context, space is not an entity of the landscape, edifier of an

otherwise 'concretized environment', but a piece of land yet to receive the contractor's attention. Thus the Ghanaian urban dwellers' knowledge or appreciation of space is as it relates to financial rewards. The road side small-time petty trader recognizes the value of space as a spot along the road where one can display his ware, or erect a 'store'. The house-help or house-wife and the occasional visitor to the urban area only knows space as a parcel of land yet to be developed which one can use as a place for dumping refuse and other forms of unwanted products, even as a temporal urinary. The family member who is privy to the ownership of the 'space' consider it as a means for a quick gain, while the intrepid entrepreneur sees it as an opportunity for some form of investment. In this way space is valued more for its inherent economic potential as land to be developed <sup>12</sup> than as an integral part of the built environment. This context of space as an integral part of the urban environment however, is a farfetched phenomenon which is not considered among the list of priorities for the society. Yet the governing authorities in Ghana in their bid to introduce some human dimension to the urban environment endeavours to create a few of what will be described as public spaces. A good example of such is the 'lorry

parks' scattered across the city; a very important space for the weary traveller who may have to wait for hours standing on a scorching sun or perched on some improvised seat provided by a sympathetic petty trader for the next bus or 'trotro' to his or her 'perch-out'. Another is the very few water featured and fountains on the city's landscape which never seems to work except when some 'big short(s)' from the international community is in town or even the children's' park, known more for its Christmas 'celebration oriented' use than as an open space for daily public use. Unfortunately even these are circumscribed and are mostly too uncomfortable and boring, or too crowded by pedestrian and vehicular traffic to be appreciated, too distant and isolated to be within reach to the ordinary person, or completely off-limit to the ordinary person. Such space considered off-limit to the public are 'barricaded' by the authorities to protect so-called important monuments of the society, a situation which further alienates the ordinary person on the street.

One may think the situation different in higher institutions of learning (The public universities), but unfortunately, it is not. Apart from the Victorian picturesque modern style inherited from our colonial masters, nothing unique

has been added. To put it lightly, recent attempts to develop open spaces in some of the public universities have fared even worse. A good example is in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in the city of Kumasi, one of five public Universities in Ghana, where an attempt has been made to put 'extra value' on a previously tree filled, garden-seat-spotted, pedestrian-trekking open space between the University library, the Queen Elizabeth II and Republic halls of residence. A few years ago when I was a student, this space was very important to students. It was used during hall week celebrations where students organised parades and durbar and also for the periodic 'by-the-fire-side' programmes, an open air story telling event which was usually sponsored and received television coverage. The space was popular also because of its central location, open access and good views to parts of the university campus. The presence of the closed canopy trees enclosing an open area always ensured a cool and windy atmosphere for relaxation on concrete garden seats spotted across the area for students while an open treeless centre provided the space for parade and durbar activities. It was always a welcome place for respite from the stresses of student life or a place to relax after hard walking

in a hot scotching sun either from the central lecture theatres or the commercial area. What has happened to this 'venerated symbol' for students could be considered a complete 'defilement' of the space as the designer sort to impose an alien form of picturesque<sup>13</sup>.

### SOCIAL EVENTS

Social events are very important in Ghana and this could range from funeral rights for the departed, birthday celebrations, out-dooring and baby naming ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, religious festivities, to political party activity. However space to allow for such exuberant display of culture in urban areas is almost non-existent. One either has to hire a room or hall into which the public and invited guests may have to squeeze-in or for those who are daring enough, commandeer a section of a street, erect the necessary structures to provide some comfort from the blazing sun or rain for the many sympathizers and mount the necessary gadgets. This usually includes loud speakers blasting away loud music to announce the progress of the programme to the community and neatly arrange seats on the road pavement. This phenomenon has become a weekly cycle which revolves between Thursdays and Sundays and

the inconvenience this form of imposition creates to pedestrians, motorists and unwilling members of the community cannot be over-emphasized. Why planning and design of urban space to accommodate these fruitful social events which forms a very important part of the culture of urban dwellers and a tourist attraction to the urban centre has not been given the needed attention by the city authorities can only be explained in the light of Henri Lefebvre's statement that 'a society produces its own space'. And so, the youth who cannot afford space at a designated stadium will have to contend with the neighbourhood on the use of abandoned building sites or yet-to-be-developed parcels of land as a communing point to exercise their stressed muscles. Likewise the sports field for school pupils, which is transformed into a venue for all sorts of social and religious events with its negative repercussions on the value of the facility for sports and learning. The emergence of political pluralism in Ghana has also created space for the youth who through their political mentors may acquire or commandeer a piece of land by the road side to create a niche for a particular political party in the form of small sheltered holdings; a common feature in almost every low income neighbourhood in

the urban area. This niche for political activism could be as small as 3 m × 5 m or larger and is usually paved, bounded by a rail, painted in party colours, decorated with party paraphernalia and garnished with a Ghana flag. It may have seats and a roof over it or may not. Such space attracts both the young and old party activists who meet to while away time, relax, enjoy the latest models of cars over rather mundane road side scenery and trade the latest stories on their political opponents.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF SPACE

The development and creation of space is a fundamental social right which governments must provide and protect for the good of their society. In fact it is not a waste of precious space and resource as the ordinary person on the street, or a less informed person will take it to be but can be developed in a community to help establish lasting relationships<sup>14</sup>; a place to release the tensions and stresses of the teeming population, a paradise on earth<sup>15</sup>. In traditional African societies, as you will find in most communities in Ghana, the chiefs who serve as custodians of the traditions of the people foresaw the importance of space and thus created the 'plaza'. The 'Plaza' is an open usually paved area located close to the

chief's palace and used to host social events including traditional festivals, serving as a place for public assembly as well. In the urban area such space is highly politicized, limited in number and size and thus not easily available to the ordinary person. Such places thus tend to be used by only the wealthy, socially important members of the community, influential members of the royal family or political parties for their rallies.

A causerie assessment of the spaces that has been created in urban Ghana suggests very little understanding of its use and what it really stands for. As if they were left there as an afterthought; left-over space whose ownership is either being contested or cannot be used for anything of significance or left there for a future expansion of sort (as one sees with road construction). This may be the reason why ordinary people find little use for the few available, which interestingly is made use of by a very specialized group of the urban populace; the lunatic and criminal few. For a city of over 1.8million inhabitants the question of space cannot be overemphasized, even more importantly as its quality is a direct indicator of the quality of life enjoyed by the inhabitants<sup>16</sup>. It may be sufficient to note as observed by<sup>17</sup> that

space can be given a distinct character and that the characteristics and character of space is what will make the difference in the experience it creates. This distinct character according to Condon could be experienced as a void that can either overwhelm, entice, envelop or even create a liberating effect for the one experiencing it; either with or without an enclosure. In this way, it can be used for winding down and to enjoy peace and quiet within the chaos of the metropolis; serving as a refuge<sup>18</sup>. It could thus serve as a good place for contemplation, reflection, interrogation and to entertain doubt on the usefulness of such amenities<sup>19</sup>. The use of a combination of elements of the landscape such as trees to provide shelter from the blazing sun and to amplify wind; water features and the sea to create a cool and soothing atmosphere, an open expanse of a gently undulating terrain, the proper placement and balance between trees and shrubs combined with lawns to 'receive' the setting of the sun, limited paving and various concrete structures rightly placed to give permanence are some of the features which could be used to give a distinct character to space. But unless these very critical entity called 'space' in our urban setting are put to such dynamic use; an indicator of the extent of sophistication in a society,

the society will continue to ignore it as irrelevant, and suffer for it.

## CONCLUSION

The above descriptors paint a rather gloomy picture of space in Urban Ghana and the question one will want to ask is whether such a categorical description is fair. If it is, then how and what should define space in an urban settings in a developing city like Accra? Could it also be that the Ghanaian society is not sufficiently structured and sophisticated to appreciate the essence of space in an increasingly cosmopolitan world? I believe the unique landscape setting of Accra metropolis offer several qualities that can be used to enhance the quality of life of the city dwellers. Accra, the capital city of Ghana is in a tropical region and enjoys a lot of very sunny days, ranging between 7-12hours a day throughout the year at average daily temperatures of between 25-32°C. Any space developed that provides 'shelter' from the sun or the heat generated from built up areas by taking advantage of the cool breeze provided by the sea and various water bodies in the metropolis, tree and shrub vegetation used in combination with other elements to create beauty and to expose the sublime, will make a great difference. Although water is a very simple and unique element

with an amazing effect, it is very little used in the landscape. Perhaps it is not so appreciated. But given the unique climate of the city, an abundance of water in public spaces coupled with the development of natural water features like lakes, rivers, streams, lagoons most of which are a sad reflection of their former glory, will be one sure way to 'tame' the increasingly hot ambient temperature, welcome and calm the weary pedestrian and to say thank you to the many blessings nature has bestowed. Interestingly the giving of water to a stranger, a cultural phenomenon in Ghana, is meant to achieve these very effects.

'Lorry parks' or bus terminals have become very important symbols on the cityscape. These usually occupy a lot of 'room' and provide avenue for a number of business and social activities. It is a place for lovers, friends and family and the business minded who may have to wait in a queue for hours waiting for the next bus. But the current design which celebrates concrete, asphalt and other forms of hard paving together with wood and metal cannot provide for the type of welcome space needed after working for hours in a hot, sunny humid environment. I believe a complete evaluation of the design concept guiding lorry parks

in urban Ghana should take place to take into account its multi-functional nature; as a place for recreation, business, socialization, and ultimately to board the next bus to your destination. And there will be no lack of use of such space.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Elden, S. (2004). *Understanding Henri Lefebvre. Theory and the possible continuum.* New York

<sup>2</sup> Preston, J.C., (2007). *Connecting with nature: Building a spirit of Sustainability in Landscape Architectural Design.* Thesis. Master of Architecture. University of Arizona. p6-15

<sup>3</sup> Holden, E., (2004). *Ecological Footprints and Sustainable Urban Form.* *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment.* 19:91-109

<sup>4</sup> Hald, M., (2009). *Sustainable Urban Development and the Chinese Eco-city concepts, strategies, policies, and Assessment.* Fridtjof Nansen Institute. FNI Report. 5/2009

<sup>5</sup> T CPA. (2004). *Biodiversity by Design. A Guide for Sustainable Communities. Homes and Communities for Sustainable Future.* Town and Country Planning Association. London p6. [http://www.tcpa.org.uk/data/files/bd\\_biodiversity.pdf](http://www.tcpa.org.uk/data/files/bd_biodiversity.pdf). 18/12/2012

<sup>6</sup> Treib, M., (1992). *Modern Landscape Architecture: A critical review.* MIT Press. P1-15

<sup>7</sup> Wu, J., (2010). *Landscapes of Cultures and culture of landscapes: does landscape ecology need culture?* Springer Science and Business. Media BV

<sup>8</sup> Santa Barbara-Family Foundation (2003). *Ecological Footprint. The*

*Sustainable Scale Project.* Santa Barbara Family Foundation.

<sup>9</sup> Locatelli, F. and Nugent, P., (2009). *Competing Claims on Urban Space.* p1-3. In. F. Locatelli and P. Nugent. Ed. *The African Cities: Competing Claims on Urban Space.* Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands. p3

<sup>10</sup> Condon, P.M., (1988). *Cubist Space, Volumetric Space and landscape Architecture.* *Landscape Journal.* March 20, 1988. 7:1-14. Doi: 10.3368/lj.7.1.1

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, J.B., (2002). *How to Study the Landscape.* In. S. Swaffield (Ed.). *Theory in Landscape Architecture: A Reader.* Univ. of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia. p12

<sup>12</sup> Giroto, C., (2008). *Landscapes of the Metrozone. The Swiss Case.* In IBA\_HAMBURG (Hrsg). *Metropolis, Metrozones.* Band 4 der IBA- Schrift-enreihe. JOVIS, Berlin. S. p99.

<sup>13</sup> Spens, M., Ed. (2007). *Landscape Architecture Site/Non site. Profile No. 186. Vol.77.* John Wiley and Sons Ltd. England. p 77.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, J.B., (2002). *How to Study the Landscape* p12. In. S. Swaffield (Ed.). *Theory in Landscape Architecture: A Reader.* Univ. of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia.

<sup>15</sup> Asensio, P., (2002). *Garden Design/ Garten Jardins.* Te Neues Publishing Comp. New York. p 11-13

<sup>16</sup> von Seggern, H., (2008). The Right to Public Space. In: IBA\_HAMBURG (Hrsg.). Metropolis, Metrozones. Band 4 der IBA-Schriftenreihe. JOVIS, Berlin. p141

<sup>17</sup> Condon, P.M., (1988). Cubist Space, Volumetric Space and landscape Architecture. Landscape Journal. March 20, 1988. 7:1-14. Doi: 10.3368/Ij.7.1.1

<sup>18</sup> Asensio, P., (2002). Garden Design/ Garten Jardins. Te Neues Publishing Comp. New York. p 11-13

<sup>19</sup> Clemmensen, T.J. (2012). The Garden and the Machine. In. Czechowski, D., Hauck, T., Hausladen, G. (Ed.) (2012). Designing Nature as Infrastructure. Faculty of Architecture, Graduate Center of Architecture. Technische Universität München. p44