A Self-Help Approach: Urban Design in Accra’s Informal Settlements

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Two adjacent neighbourhoods in Johannesburg, South Africa
Purpose:
To show how self-help urban design in Accra informal settlements is a form of social movement

Argument:
Residents in informal settlements act as “unknowing” urban designers by shaping public spaces through “self-help” projects. This work can be understood as a form of social movement.

Content:
• The state of informal settlement
• Understanding urban design
• Social movement literature
• Infrastructural intervention (Nima Drain) and self-help urban design in Accra New Town
• Analysis: matching urban design cases with social movement literature
• Concluding remarks
1 billion people live in slums or informal settlements today; by 2030, 3 billion
Adequate housing is a human right
Renewing policy attention and increasing investments to ensure housing for all
UN, 2019
Understanding Informality

- Unregulated distributions or untaxed economic activities (Hart, 1973; Dovey, 2014)
- Informal settlement is a visible urban informality (Dovey & King, 2011)
- Informality and formality often coexist (Gouverneur, 2015)
Objectivity

Urban design is the design of towns and cities, streets and spaces. It is the process of shaping the physical setting for daily life. Involves the design of buildings, groups of buildings, spaces and landscapes, and establishing frameworks and procedures that will deliver successful development by different people over time.
Subjectivity … in Conventional Wisdom

The architectural design of low-rise pedestrian environments, light rail-line stations, and other large elements

Five physical characteristics for urban life:
(1) livable streets and neighbourhoods;
(2) density of residential development and the intensity of land use;
(3) integration of activities (living and working) with ideal proximity;
(4) delineated public space;
(5) distinct buildings with complex arrangements (vs. few large buildings)

In conventional wisdom, urban design has certain expectations that must be met, and these expectations remain even today.
Two groups of urban designers:
- “Knowing” (self-conscious) urban design (see themselves as urban designers)
- “Unknowing” (unself-conscious) urban design (do not see themselves as urban designers)

Carmona (2003)

The literature has little discussion on placemaking by unknowing urban designers; or how these urban areas become what they are.
Defining Social Movement

• The sustained challenge to authorities in the name of a population that lacks advantages many other populations enjoy

Tilly (1989)

• A social movement is a complex set of different types of actions by different actors all oriented toward some general social change goals

Marwell and Oliver (1993)

• Consists of a group of people acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in their society or group

Alexander and Baker (1994)
Four Trends - Mario Diani (1992)

- Collective Behaviour (US) - Turner and Killian (1957) | Smelser (1963)
  - People are irrational | Why irrationally disrupting social order? | The “system” has no problem
- Resource Mobilization Theory (US) - McCarthy and Zald (1973)
  - People are rational actors | People mobilize due to their grievances, due to resource inequality
- Political Process Theory (US) - Tilly (1978) and McAdam (1982)
  - A political process, not a psychological one | Must protest on the streets because the conditions cannot be improved through formal channels (vote and campaign)
- New Social Movement (Europe) - Touraine (1981), Melucci (1980), and more
  - Post-industrial society, “conflicts are cultural and symbolic” (gender & ethnic – identity politics)

Some Gaps

- There should be “something” that the Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) are resisting
- Change won’t be achieved through formal channels
  - Are these events even considered social movements if no protest has taken place?
- Based on events in the US and Europe
Is it likely that a social movement could achieve its goals if mobilized?

The collective vehicles through which people mobilize to engage in collective action (SMOs)

Leaders frame the problem, the proposed solution, and the call to action to convince people to mobilize

How the movement attempts to achieve its goals (strikes, boycotts, protests, petitions, etc.)

These are the periods of time when the movement is at its most mobilized

A Glance at Ghana and Accra

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<tr>
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<th>Ghana</th>
<th>Greater Accra Region</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population (Million)</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density (p/km^2)</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>1,236</td>
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In Accra Metropolitan District:

- 80% of economically active population work in the private, informal sector.
- 58% of the population live in informal housing; there is an estimated backlog of 300,000 houses in Accra.

Source:
- 2010 Population and Housing Census
- 2018 AMA Medium Term Development Plan
The Nima Drain

- Ghana
  - Structural Adjustment Program (SAP)
  - Economic liberalization

- Accra
  - Urban expansion
  - Flood control
  - Settlement intervention

- Nima Stream
  - Public works and local employment

Nima Upstream
2004-
Accra Airport City Project – Govt. of Ghana

Kanda-Liberation Section
TBD
Remains in earth channel

Nima-Maamobi Section (Alhamdu Gutter)
2012-18
Govt. of Ghana

Nima Section
1988-92
Priority Works Project – World Bank

Odaw-Paloma Section
1963-65
Drainage Master Plan – Govt. of Ghana
"Making it straight!"
A labour-intensive channelization
Nima Drain Transformation

Photo by Elliott Bartrop-Sackey
The urban spaces that are planned, designed, constructed, operated, maintained, and even re-planned by the residents.
Second Self-Help Drain

A project owned by the residents

- Piecemeal contributions
- Local community members
- Broadly recognized
- Projects come and go with no specific timeframe, depending on the availability of labour and funds
People as the authority
- Contribution and benefit
- Communal life as the core value
- Communal orders – games, space management, maintenance and repair
- Microbusinesses
Contentious Repertoires?

- How the movement attempts to achieve its goals (strikes, boycotts, protests, petitions, etc.)
- Engaging the politicians
- Lobbying the neighbours
- Consulting skilled informal workers

And making it a public space
Producing Pedestrian Space and Framing Norms
Nima Drain & the Self-Help Cases

- **Settlement transformation:** attracts, allows, and facilitates the migrants to stay and prosper
- **Community participation:** then and now
- **Permanence:** materiality, ownership, authority, invisible obligation, and collective norms

The grievance is still there. However, it is not used on the streets, but on community building that leads to social change and norm shaping.
No one will stop you contributing to space shaping, but they will restrain you from doing harm.

Small contribution and labor; extending network.

Project owners reach out to formulate the project(s) and understand that these projects involve different stages.

Political Opportunity Structure

Mobilizing Structures

Framing Processes

Protest Cycles

Contentious Repertoires

An Invisible Social Movement?

Small chats with politicians; lobbying neighbours for funds; community services (no strikes or boycotts)

Construction, norms enforcement, identity consolidation (no one to protest)
Purpose:
Relating the self-help urban design in Accra’s informal settlements as a form of social movement

Argument:
Residents in informal settlements act as “unknowing” urban designers by shaping public spaces through “self-help” projects. This work can be understood as a form of social movement

Result:
These cases meet most components of a social movement; the difference is that their repertoires are far from the conventional mobilizations (protest and strike) in the US and Europe

Implications:
The invisible (but sensible) social movement leads to visible self-help urban design and social change
• Stakeholders mobilize to meet their needs
• Unstated rules are routinely followed

Informal settlement planning requires different ways of knowing how places are shaped; acknowledging self-help urban design is just the beginning of this learning process

Future Research:
Studying the fiscal conditions and the distributed infrastructural interventions in Accra

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