

Photo essay



The fabric of urban change

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The city of Cape Coast, in the West African nation of Ghana, is referred locally by the name Oguuaa—a word thought to be derived from the Akan word gua, meaning market. At the heart of this city sits an impressive complex of newly constructed story buildings carefully encompassed by a wall of concrete and wrought iron. The triangular site at the branch of two of the Old Town area of Cape Coast's main arteries, where these structures sit, was formerly home to the city's most popular and bustling commercial space: The Kotokuraba Market. While urban scholars frequently identify Africa as the most rapidly urbanizing continent on the planet, conjuring images of heavy traffic choking urban cores and the blurring of boundaries between city and hinterland, these tropes paint only a half picture of the urban processes underway across the continent. The reality of urbanization and more importantly the socio-spatial dimensions of urban change has a much different consistency in both its material qualities and in its imaginaries.

The photos in this visual essay present a closer look at the texture and hue of this change by offering a closer look at this historic West African market in the aftermath of its relentless and destructive march toward modernity. Captured in 2020, just a few years after its transformative redevelopment, these images tell a story of the stark contrasts and subtle harmonies that comprise one's experience of urban change on the level of the everyday. Looking at these snapshots of a place frozen in time, we see hints of political and economic structures beyond the market walls as well. Their shadows tell us that the community of market vendors, who in December of 2014 were ordered from shops in the old structure that many had inhabited for generations, have now begun to carve out new spaces and strategies for their ever-evolving entrepreneurial endeavors. A forgotten planter box overtaken by a nearby vendor's attempt to attract passing customers in one of the market's plaza (Photo 10), and a forgotten and muddied fountain (Photo 3) both serve as evidence of not only the way in which people create and in turn are created by the spaces around them (Lefebvre 1984), but also how state led attempts at creating more modern, legible spaces ultimately highlights the impossibility of actualizing political and economic promises of modernity (Scott 1998; Ferguson 1999).

From the ubiquitous tans and purples of a woven basket spilling Violet de Galmi onions onto to the new market's white tile floor (Photo 9), to the bright red paint on the market's prominent atrium dome shadowed by the haze of the Harmattan winds (Photo 2), the shapes and colors of this chapter of the Kotokuraba Market's history begins to write a new story of market life in the city of Cape Coast. The photos presented in this essay offer a glimpse of the important details of contemporary life in this urban market while also reflecting individual's own ideations of possible futures.

Woman entering market.



A woman enters the Kotokuraba through its West gate, passing through a corridor of day traders who have struggled to make permanent claims to selling space in the redeveloped market.

Atrium dome detail



The regional director of public works explained that students from local technical training colleges shadowed the Chinese engineers and contractors as they constructed the market's most prominent feature—its glass dome. He identified this kind of transfer of knowledge as one of the critical benefits of the market's construction to the city and people of Cape Coast.

Sweatshirts near fountain



Sweatshirts from a second-hand clothing vendor hang near the market's now neglected fountain. A lack of regular maintenance and cleaning services has become one of the vendors' primary criticisms of the municipality's management of the space.

Smoked fish & red gate



Wooden trays of smoked fish rest on buckets near one of the market's brightly painted red gates. Unlike in the previous market, each evening at sundown, the market is cleared and the gates are locked, limiting the hours during which vendors have access to their shops and goods.

Empty market stalls at dusk



Added to the interior of the market after its initial construction phase, these *bambas*—open selling spaces designed to accommodate additional traders—sit unoccupied in the haze of a Harmattan afternoon reminding passersby that this space is still in a state of becoming.

Busy plaza scene



Shoppers and vendors gather near a main entrance. Spaces like these contribute to the bustling kinetic energy of the market's ground floor making it the most desirable place to do business.

Top choice travel consult



A young college-educated entrepreneur transformed a second-floor market store into a travel consultancy for Ghanaian students wishing to study abroad. The office boasts many modern amenities not found elsewhere in the Kotokuraba.

Streetscape from market



Cars and people form the urban fabric of Cape Coast's Old Town along Governor Rowe Rd. This street is one of the main arteries flanking the Redeveloped Kotokuraba Market.

Violet de Galmi onions



Violet de Galmi onions imported from Niger spill from handwoven baskets onto the market floor. These onions will be sorted, bagged, and distributed among a network of onion vendors throughout the market for a small profit.

Market plaza with planter



Vendors' shops line the interior of a market plaza where a large concrete planter previously boasted an array of tropical plants. The planter has since become daytime storage and display area for a nearby seller of styrofoam "takeaway" containers.

Curtains



Curtains hang from market windows in the intense mid-day sun inside a seamstress's shop on the second story of the market. A refrigerator serves as storage for worker's purses during the workday as the electricity to run the fridge regularly is more than most vendors can afford.

Wooden crates & parking garage



Wooden crates typically used for transporting tomatoes lean against the white and red painted exterior of the market's three-story parking garage ramp. While many shoppers do drive to the market, few choose to park in this garage siting its inconvenient location far from the most popular vendors.

Dresses on railing



A second-floor vendor displays dresses and flowers on the balcony of a market foyer to entice customers to her upper-level store. Railings, ramps, and gates are all used as convenient display infrastructure for vendors lucky enough to be near them.

Bowls



Melamine plates and bowls imported from China sit on a woven bag printed with an American flag trying to entice customers as they pass. Imported goods like these are a much more popular commodity in the new market.

Aerial market view



An aerial view of the Kotokuraba Market complex. The long rectangular buildings in the foreground were intended to serve as temporary structures to house vendors displaced from the old market during the construction process. They remain occupied even though the new market opened almost 5 years ago.

Kotokuraba road



A motorcyclist speeds down Kotokuraba Rd. away from the market towards the ocean. The iconic faded pastel colonial-style story buildings that comprise the majority of Cape Coast's architecture are visible in the background.

References

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Authors



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Aubrey Dawne Edwards is a veteran photographer, visual anthropologist, storyteller and educator with an Associate of Applied Science in Photography, a Bachelor of Journalism, and a Master of Science in Urban Studies. She has been the recipient of numerous grants and residencies and has exhibited and published work extensively nationally and internationally.



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Arianna King is a Doctoral candidate in Urban Studies in the City, Culture, and Community Program at Tulane University. Prior to doctoral study, she earned a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Fine Arts from Brandeis University and a Master's degree in Urban Anthropology & Urban Planning from the University of New Orleans. King is committed to the use of interdisciplinary approaches which combine historical, geographical, and anthropological theories and methods. Her past and current research projects leverage a wide range of these approaches to explore the intersections between urban studies, market trading, urban redevelopment, and public space. Arianna's forthcoming dissertation is titled: **Beyond the Market Walls: An Ethnography of Market Modernization in Cape Coast**. She is a current member of the African Studies Association, Urban Affairs Association, the American Anthropological Association, as well as the Ghana Studies Association.