

## **“From Shacks to Skyscrapers: Post-Political City Visioning in Accra”**

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## Introduction

The informal settlement of Mensah Guinea, located next to the shoreline in central Accra, was demolished in September 2014 by the local government after a three days' notice. The exercise rendered thousands of people homeless and further destroyed social networks and livelihood strategies that had been built up in the community over decades, yet the affected inhabitants were not offered any compensation. According to the local government, the demolition was necessary in order to stop the citywide cholera outbreak at that time. However, the exercise also coincided with the national governments' far advanced plans to redevelop the area to a (fenced) exclusive tourism enclave, which although not presented as an official reason to the demolition indicates that there is more to this exercise than an attempt to stop the spreading of a disease.

Demolitions of informal settlements similar to the one in Mensah Guinea are commonly taking place in the cities of the Global South, and this type of (state) intervention raises important questions of urban ideals, inclusion and exclusion in urban space, and the role of urban planning in the transformation of contemporary cities. In this paper, I set out to illuminate and discuss the underlying city visions and planning practices that enabled the demolition of Mensah Guinea and, perhaps more importantly, what this exercise tells us about the future direction of urban development in Ghana. I proceed to do this by exploring 1) how and by whom the demolition of Mensah Guinea was ordered, justified and performed; 2) how the residents perceived of the area before the demolition and how they were affected by the exercise; and 3) what reactions the demolition evoked in media and among civil society agents.

The analysis demonstrates that the future plans for Mensah Guinea correspond to globally circulating city ideals of the 'competitive city', and the demolition exercise resembles urban revanchism in several respects. These findings are explored further through an elaboration on how the emergent literature on the 'post-political condition', which to date mainly is used in Western contexts, can help explain urban processes also in the global South. Despite important contextual differences between 'Southern' and 'Western' societies, the case of Mensah Guinea shows that the 'post-

political' perspective has explanatory power beyond the West since processes of de-politicization and consensus seeking are highly present also elsewhere. Acknowledging the global circulation of urban ideals and policies, the paper also draws on assemblage theory in terms of data collection and analysis. The assemblage framework emphasizes how actors from both near and far engage in the constantly ongoing (re)production of urban space, and this perspective guides the analysis of the demolition of Mensah Guinea.

Below, the conceptual framework is presented and elaborated upon. Thereafter, the methods and data used in the study are introduced. Then, Ghana's new national urban policy is presented, followed by the case study on the demolition of Mensah Guinea. The paper ends with a concluding note.

## **A World of Competitive Cities**

Demolitions of informal settlements are commonly occurring in urban settings around the world, and these exercises can partly be explained by attempts by city administrations to live up to globally circulating ideals of the 'competitive city'. The ideal of the 'competitive city' is based on a neoliberal urbanism where "international competitiveness, marketization, and economic growth" act as primary principles guiding development (Larner, 2009: 385). Further, this city ideal holds several physical attributes, such as shimmering high-rise buildings, centrally located business districts, shopping malls, and waterfront developments (Amin, 2013; Pieterse, 2008). Urban order is also highly valued, and when city administrations in the global South seek to live up to this ideal informal settlements often become subject to formalization programs and/or demolition, simultaneously as street vendors are removed from public spaces (Pieterse, 2008).

Critical scholars drawing on political economy have demonstrated that efforts to create competitive urban environments seldom correspond to local desires and needs, instead the beneficiaries are those "who live beyond the immediate locality", such as tourists and travelling business elites (MacLeod, 2006: 605). The urban poor, in

contrast, are often disadvantaged by interventions inspired by these types of city visions. A telling example of this is when informal settlements are demolished and replaced by more spectacular real estates as land values are increasing in what David Harvey (2007) refers to as 'accumulation by dispossession'. This type of elitist development has evoked strong critique in academia and new concepts have been developed to describe and explore different mechanisms of neoliberal urbanism. The notion of urban revanchism was developed by Neil Smith during the 1990's as a response to the implementation of a zero-tolerance policy in New York which sought to remove certain "behavior" from the streets, such as "street peddling, panhandling, prostitution, squeegee cleaners, boom boxes, graffiti, public drinking, loud clubs, speeding cars, litter louts, public urination, street artists, and 'dangerous mentally ill homeless people'" (Smith, 2001: 69). This concept thus pursues to capture processes of socio-spatial segregation driven by an anti-poor urban aesthetics and refers to policies that seek to discipline urban space "so that the enhancement of a city's image is not compromised by the visible presence of those very marginalized groups" (MacLeod, 2002: 602). In 2001 Smith warned that the urban repertoire constituting revanchism seemed to be increasing in popularity across the globe:

The danger is that the New York model will, as in the 1970s, become the template for a global, postliberal revanchism that may exact revenge against different social groups in different places, doing so with differing intensities and taking quite different forms. (p.73)

A few years later Kate Swanson (2007) showed through a case study of urban policies in Quito, Ecuador, that urban revanchism had "headed South". Efforts made by Quito's city administration to attract international tourism, inspired by New York's zero policy, pushed marginalized groups out of the city, and to Swanson this was "a vengeful, right-wing reaction against the poor" brought forward by the dominant classes in an attempt to "tame the wild city" (2007: 709). The concept of urban revanchism has thus been used to highlight how certain types of urban policies, both in the global North and South, through an anti-poor discourse increases urban segregation, and in this paper I explore if it has bearing also on urban planning practices in Accra.

Another theoretical approach that engages with (urban) neoliberalism, although from another perspective, is the one of 'post-politics'. Basically, this emergent body of literature argues that former political fields have been reduced to policy making procedures, where credence to technocratic expertise together with a strong consensus seeking culture reduce the possibilities of debate and conflict (Mouffe 2005; Swyngedouw, 2009). So far, the literature on the post-political condition mainly discusses Western societies, however I will argue that it has bearing on wider geographical settings. Just like the ideal of the competitive city and practices of revanchist urbanism have travelled at a global scale, the ideas holding up the post-political condition are also circulating, which implies that this theoretical strand offers important insights for non-Western contexts as well. In the following section I describe the main attributes of the post-political condition, explain why it has bearing also in the Global South, and discuss some of the potential challenges with using this concept in the South.

### Post-Political (Planning) Conditions in Europe and Beyond

The post-political condition is characterized by a reduction of political issues and processes to policy making procedures, where credence to technocratic expertise together with a strong consensus seeking culture reduce the possibilities of debate and conflict (Mouffe 2005; Swyngedouw, 2009). In the literature on the post-political condition, the meaning of the political is highlighted and problematized. To Chantal Mouffe (2005), there is an important distinction between 'the political' and 'politics'. She sees the political as "the dimension of antagonism ... constitutive of human societies", while politics is "the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political" (p 9). In Europe, Mouffe argues, a strong preference for consensus seeking has reduced the visible political alternatives of how society can and should be organized. This, she continues, has opened up space for antagonistic movements with racist and/or fascist agendas.

[A] consensual approach, instead of creating the conditions for a reconciled society, leads to the emergence of antagonisms that an agonistic perspective, by providing those conflicts, with a legitimate form of expression, would have managed to avoid. (p. 4)

What is needed, Mouffe argues, is an agonistic approach to politics, where friend-adversary relationships can develop within a democratic staging. In other words, there is a need for visible political struggles, and real alternatives. Erik Swyngedouw (2009) agrees, and states that “a postpolitical consensual policy arrangement has increasingly reduced the ‘political’ to ‘policing’, to ‘policymaking’, to ‘managerial consensual governing’” (p. 605). Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014) further show that the process of de-politicization, apart from making room for ultra-politics, leads to “exclusion and containment of those who pursue a different political-economic model” than that of dominant neoliberalism (p. 5). To Swyngedouw (2009), there is a strong link between the post-political condition and neoliberal governmentality:

The consolidation of an urban postpolitical arrangement runs, so I argue, parallel to the rise of a neoliberal governmentality that has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountability metrics and technocratic environmental management. (p. 604)

This proposed link is illustrated in Allmendinger and Haughton’s (2011) analysis of spatial planning in England. Urban planning is a practice that aims to organize the spatial dimension of human coexistence and thus meets Mouffe’s definition of politics. However, as Allmendinger and Haughton (2011) demonstrate, this practice can also be subject of de-politicization. In England, according to Allmendinger and Haughton, a “post-political planning condition” has occurred, which means that the practice of urban planning has become a tool in the maintaining of a wider post-political urban arrangement, in contrast to earlier periods when planning had an explicitly political function in mediating open conflicts regarding the use of urban spaces. Allmendinger and Haughton argue that the British planning system “...takes as foundational the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism as an economic system and the idea that conflict can exist, though within limits”, which points to the curtailing of potential disagreements characteristic of the post-political arrangement (p. 92). Further, they

state that a post-political nomenclature is used to generate consensus for urban (planning) interventions. For instance, popular but vague concepts such as “sustainable development” and “smart growth” are used to encourage support for specific urban programs, and to illustrate the post-political character of these terms, Allmendinger and Haughton rhetorically ask, “who could be ‘for’ ‘dumb growth’ or ‘unsustainable development’?” (p. 94). Thus, consensus is achieved through the use of fuzzy concepts and by this neoliberal agendas become intertwined in the post-political planning condition. Therefore, Allmendinger and Haughton continue, the “project of spatial planning” must be analyzed “at a more fundamental level, in terms of its very purpose and ways of (dis)engaging with the political” (p. 90), which means that research needs to be directed towards “...what is understood to be within the remit of planning, who engages with the system and under what terms” (Ibid 92). I agree, and through the case of Mensah Guinea I aim to explore the fundamental base of planning practices and visions in Accra, Ghana. In this exploration I also seek to elaborate on how the theories of the ‘post-political’ can be of use in a Southern context. If Swyngadouw is correct regarding the strong link between post-politics and neoliberal governmentality, this indicates that post-politics are to be found also outside the West, given the global spread of neoliberal (urban) policies. Yet, the ‘post’ prefix indicates that the post-political condition can exist only in societies previously characterized by a ‘political condition’, which might or might not be the case for Southern cities. Wilson and Swyngadouw (2014) suggest that “the situation is little different elsewhere [i.e. outside Europe]” (p. 9) and in Ghana, the structural adjustment programs clearly limited the space of political antagonism in preference for neoliberal policymaking. Brenda Chalfin (2010) captures this drastic reformation of the Ghanaian political landscape well:

Here, as later tried elsewhere in the developing world, market logics lay at the crux of reform with the Government of Ghana disavowing industrialization, subsistence provisioning, state enterprise, and other tenets of the developmental state in exchange for the supposed allocative guarantees of competition, comparative advantage and the market’s invisible hand (p. 6, with reference to the World Bank, 1994 )

However, so far few attempts have been made to explore the usefulness of 'post-political' theories beyond the West. One exception is Sangeeta Kamat's (2014) analysis of development policies in India. Kamat argues that to understand contemporary conditions and processes in the global South, it is necessary to account for the convergence of neoliberal growth strategies and discourses of democracy where "dissent is not suppressed but made irrelevant" (p. 68), and she concludes that post-politics are "constitutive of the new development architecture in the 'Global South'" (p. 67). Kamat does not account in detail for how the 'post' prefix fits to the condition of the global South (and most probably it differs between different places), however her conclusion suggests that post-politics do exist in non-Western societies, which indicates that these theories could be of use also for urban analysis across the globe. As I see it, the literature on post-politics might offer insights into how certain city ideals, including both those of the competitive city and those underpinning revanchist urbanism, have been incorporated into processes of urban visioning across the globe. If empirics in Southern cities show that urban policy and planning practices are depoliticized and a strong consensus culture exists, this might partly explain why and how policies that clearly disadvantage large groups of urban dwellers are incorporated in cities across the globe, at times without significant resistance.

### Cities as Urban Assemblages

Parnell and Robinson (2012) urge us to move beyond generalizing explanatory assumptions of how neoliberalism impacts on cities and emphasize the importance of including also other theoretical perspectives in urban analysis. To see cities as *assemblages* helps reveal *how* globally circulating urban ideals are incorporated, reworked, and contested in specific urban settings since it urges researchers to analyze the specific histories, contexts and relationships that continuously (re)shape the cities of today (Ong, 2011). The concept *assemblage* was initiated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in 1984 who defined it as a territory seen as "...both, and inseparably, on the one hand, machinic assemblage and, on the other hand, assemblage of enunciation" (p. 9), which suggests that both the material and the linguistic construction of a



territory together make up the meanings and practices of it. Following this initial work, the conceptualization of cities as *urban assemblages* has recently gained increased popularity among urban scholars seeking to understand the complexity of rapidly transforming cities of our time (McFarlane, 2011). To McCann and Ward (2011), three characteristics define urban assemblages. First, assemblages work dialectally with “wider flows /.../ thus continually reconfiguring geographies of territoriality and relationality” (Ibid: xvi). Globally circulating city ideals could thus be part of an urban assemblage, importantly however dichotomous conceptions of local/global and fixity/mobility are abandoned in this school of thought that emphasizes how different actors, materials and flows, active on different scales, together make up urban spaces. McFarlane (2011) clarifies that “It is the *interactions* between components that form the assemblage, and these interactions cannot be reduced to individual properties alone” (p. 653, emphasis in original). Thus relations, and not actors, are in focus and both human and non-human elements are brought into the analysis of how the city is constantly (re)produced (McFarlane, 2011). Second, urban assemblages are to be understood as constantly on-going processes, implying a ubiquitous possibility of transformation (McCann and Ward, 2011). Assemblages are thus not understood as fixed units; they are seen as inherently fluid in their composition. Also McFarlane (2011) emphasizes the essential processual character of this concept which “signify doing, performance, and events” (p. 655), and the city is thus always in the mode of (re)construction. Third, following the ever-present possibilities of change, urban assemblages are made up by politics and policies, and are thus “achievements with uneven consequences” (McCann and Ward, 2011: xvi). This last point is important and it is crucial to explore how (post-)politics and policies are assembling in particular moments to enable urban interventions such as demolitions of informal settlements.

## Methods and Empirical Data

This study builds upon 10 weeks of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Accra, Ghana, during May-June 2014 and February 2015. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the community leaders of Mensah Guinea and 15 inhabitants who lost

their homes in the demolition exercise. These interviews have been complemented with observations in the area. Semi-structured interviews have also been conducted with twenty development- and physical planners, and other civil servants involved in urban development, at local, regional, and national state offices. I have also engaged in participatory observation during public meetings, conferences, and work-shops where urban development in Accra/Ghana have been discussed. Further, representatives of six NGO's working with housing and/or livelihoods issues in Ghana's "informal settlements" have been interviewed. The interviews and observations are triangulated with a policy analysis of Ghana's national urban policy and Accra's development plan for 2014. Lastly, a text analysis of the news articles related to the demolition of Mensah Guinea that were published in Ghana's two leading daily newspapers; *Daily Graphic* and *Daily Guide*, during September 2014 adds to the empirical data.

### Inclusivity and Spatial Order in Ghanaian Urban Policy

Before the case of Mensah Guinea is presented and analyzed, the new national urban policy of Ghana will be introduced in order to contextualize the policy environment in which the demolition took place. In 2012 Ghana presented its first national urban policy, which aims to take a comprehensive hold on cities and coherently guide future urban development across the nation. This document is both a sign of the (nation) state's recently increased interest in urban development, and an indication of the new direction of urban planning where *spatial order* now add to former goals of *socio-economic development*. The new urban policy engages broadly with urban development and aims to:

...promote a sustainable, spatially integrated and orderly development of urban settlements with adequate housing and services, efficient institutions, sound living and working environment for all people to support rapid socio-economic development of Ghana. (p.3)

In this aim, both spatial order and socio-economic development is emphasized, and it is stated that the whole urban population should benefit from the urban condition.

The policy thus has an “all-inclusive” approach and already in the prologue it is stated that:

This National Urban Policy document makes a bold statement to promote socio-economic development of Ghanaian urban centres – a development process which is *all-inclusive and takes account of the needs of the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups*. /.../ ...it makes far reaching proposals in an Action Plan for implementation in order to *arrest rising inequalities in socio-economic and spatial terms* and advance towards sustainable development.” (p.12, emphasis added)

The policy thus explicitly target “disadvantaged and vulnerable groups” and seeks to prevent socio-economic and spatial inequalities in cities. Alongside this broad development agenda, this policy also puts emphasis on physical planning and spatial order, as indicated in its aim. Among 17 challenges/problems listed in the document, two clearly relate to the unplanned character of Ghanaian cities, and reads; 1) “Land-use disorder and uncontrolled urban sprawl”; 2) “Urban poverty, slums and squatter settlements” (p. 15f.). While the first “problem” clearly points to spatial disorder, the second one does the same given the definition of a squatter settlement stated in the introducing part of the document: “[Squatter settlement] Refers to housing that is either the result of illegal occupation or has been developed in an unauthorized fashion.” (p. 10). This definition, which is coherent with Ghanaian law, implies that that the majority of Ghanaian urban populations’ homes and livelihoods are represented as “illegal”, and something that should be removed. Planning is seen as the instrument that can achieve this desirable orderliness, and one objective of the policy is: “To ensure effective planning and management of urban growth and sprawl, especially of the primate cities and other large urban centres” (p. 22). Also in the conclusive chapter the spatial aspect of urban development is emphasized: “Government policies and investment programs will be coordinated and they will have a spatial dimension...” (p. 30). Thus, this policy urges the city administrations to focus more on the spatial dimension of urban development, which at least partly equals the counteracting of urban informality. At the same time, this policy also conveys a strong emphasis on improvement of living conditions for the urban poor.

Important in relation to the discussion on whether planning in Ghana can be described as a 'post-political' practice, this policy conveys a strong desire for consensus seeking and participatory planning. It is stated that the policy was developed together with "the people": "Finally, my acknowledgement go to the good people of Ghana for their effective participation and contribution to the entire process." (p. 8). However, it is unclear if and how "ordinary people" actually have contributed to this policy writing. The policy also emphasizes the importance of public participation when discussing how to reach its goal and states that it seeks "...to promote public ownership to facilitate the implementation of the policy" (p. 12). Yet, there are no indications of how this should be done in practice and in the case of Mensah Guinea no participatory planning has been practiced.

### **Mensah Guinea – from Shacks to Skyscrapers**

The rest of this paper is devoted to the analysis of the demolition of the settlement Mensah Guinea which took place in September 2014. I start with an account on how the former residents remember the area as it was before the demolition and how they describe their experience of the demolition exercise. Thereafter, the state's perceptions of Mensah Guinea, and its future plans for this area, are presented and compared to those of the former inhabitants, and analyzed in relation to the ideal of the competitive city, revanchist urbanism and the post-political condition. This section is followed by an analysis of written news articles on the demolition and the reactions of local NGOs working with housing issues. Together these parts demonstrate that urban processes and events, such as the demolition of Mensah Guinea, are the result of multiple rationalities assembled by state and non-state actors at multiple scale levels in numerous geographical settings.

### **Stories from Down Town**

When I visited the area where Mensah Guinea used to be located five months after the demolition, I found that hundreds of people still lived in the area. Or, to be accurate they had left Mensah Guinea and moved to 'Down Town': "This place, here, is Down

Town, we call here Down Town” as one of my respondents explains. While the area called Mensah Guinea was situated on the plateau above the beach, Down Town is located literally on the beach and has now become the home for those who did not have any other place to move to after the demolition of their former homes. In Down Town, provisional shelters made up by wood and cartons are built up on the beach, just a few meters from the sea, and every-day life has become a struggle for making ends meet in a place where electricity, piped water, and social services are absent.

According to the respondents, the area of Mensah Guinea has been inhabited by the Ga people since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the family named Mensah Guinea decided to move the few kilometers from Ga Mashie to the beach area between Ga Mashie and Osu. This in-between location was then undeveloped, but attractive because of its good fishing water, and the local government of Accra has approved the family’s construction of a few buildings for housing and fishing activities. Still today the family holds papers that confirm their rights to occupy the land, although this meant nothing on the day of the demolition.

A woman in her early 50’s who belongs to the Ga family who settled in the area generations ago tells that she was born in the area and has been living there ever since. Like her ancestors, this woman and her family make a living on fishing and she cannot imagine moving somewhere else; “We were born here, so we cannot leave this place. Also, we work here.” The demolished community, however, did not only encompass the Ga people. During the last decades Mensah Guinea has attracted migrants from all over Ghana and other West African countries, and before the demolition the population was roughly made up by two groups: first, the Ga people making a living by fishing; and secondly, the “migrants” who mainly made their living through petty trading. The cost for renting or building a house or room in Mensah Guinea used to be low, and this was one of the main reasons for settling in the area according to the respondents. Highly important is also the geographical location. The fishermen and fishmongers are dependent on the proximity to the sea, and the local knowledge of the fishing water outside Mensah Guinea, which has been passed on from generation to generation, makes this location especially valuable. Also for the

other group, the petty traders, the location was of great importance to their livelihoods. The main markets of Accra can be reached by foot from Mensah Guinea, which implies that the traders were not dependent on the transportation system and this saved them time and money. The closeness to the main markets further implied that whole-sale agents were nearby, as were good trading locations. Also the community itself was seen as a good place for trading, as one woman relates: "This place, when you are trading, this place is like a business place. Before, when people were living here, anything that you sell they buy it, quickly, and you get something small to save, and some to feed yourself".

Mensah Guinea is described by the former inhabitants as a well-functioning community with a mixed population in a good location. They are well aware of the bad reputation that the area has in the city, but forcefully contest descriptions that characterize the area as one of violence, prostitution and criminality. A young woman explains: "Here it is peaceful, there are no burglars around and prostitution and others things here, if they say such things they are lying". In terms of infrastructure and services, the community had access to piped water, electricity, a kindergarten/school run by a local church, public toilets and public bath houses. At times, however, these services did not work properly and this made some hesitate to recommend the area to family and friends. Another woman who lived in the area for about ten years states:

Even though we like here, we do not like here because of the gutter and other things, and the water. The water is a kind of water that is not neat, and this is not a place that you can tell your sister or brother to come and stay with you. If you are staying here you know you are staying here because of work.

The area's representative in the local government agrees that there were problems with the gutters and he describes the area as "a slummy place" where "people had put up their buildings haphazardly". However, he also argues that the community was willing to improve its physical structure and explains that the community started up a cleaning exercise as soon as they heard of the plans to demolish the area:

When I heard the news I told them [the local government] they should wait for us, and show us what to do, so that we ourselves can do what they want us to do for them /.../ To

upgrade it, where this structure is not good, just remove it, let us do this, let us do that, and we started before they came to demolish the place.

This story is confirmed by the community leader who also emphasizes that the community on a regular basis organized cleaning exercises. However, the local government did not change its mind because of the community's efforts and three days after the notice the government's task force arrived with bulldozers, accompanied by the police. The community perceives of the demolition as highly unjust in several regards. The Ga people claim that they have the right to stay in the area and refer to the approved building permits that they hold. Hence, they condemn the exercise and state that they will take it to court. The migrants, in contrast, are mainly upset over the short notice that they were given and state that they tried to postpone the exercise: "the elders went to the office to beg them [the local government] that they should give us like six months, so that everybody will search for a place to go. They said no". Despite the perceived unjust procedure of the local government, the community did not protest openly against the intervention. Some adhered to the local state's appeal of not making the demolition a political issue, a young lady explains: "The reason why the people did not protest is because big men came to talk to us, the Accra chiefs and Vanderpuije [the Mayor] came to inform us that we should not politicize the demolition exercise". According to the community leader, fear of the police also explains the lack of resistance: "they fear that in case they are arrested, who is coming to their aid, so that is all". The lack of protests indicates that the former residents perceived of their chances to be able to make an impact on the decision as small or non-existing.

## State Perceptions

The state's descriptions of Mensah Guinea and the demolition exercise differ in many respects from the inhabitants perceptions as the following section will demonstrate. The decision to demolish the community was made by the Mayor of Accra with support from several departmental chiefs at the local government. The official motivation for the exercise was that cholera was spreading from this perceived

“unhygienic” area, and therefore the government had to level the settlement to the ground. One of the physical planners in the city describes her experience of the community like this:

I personally went there. We walked through before the demolition took place. I wanted to have a look at what was going on /.../ and it was horrible! Horrible! I’m telling you. /.../ No places of convenience so people were doing it anywhere, they don’t have access to any water, nothing. So you could just imagine, the population there at that time if I’m not exaggerating could be more than 20 000. I am not too sure, but the people we saw there were so many. /.../ We found that many of the people who hawk on the streets, that is where they are sleeping and staying and the conditions were terrible. So the city said no, we cannot allow this to continue, so notices were served and then they were cleared. So that was it.

Also the Director of Accra Works Department emphasizes that the lack of hygiene in the area justifies the demolition:

There were a lot of health issues that were happening in this particular area. We had an outbreak of cholera, and cholera is a disease that is linked to unhygienic conditions. When you have people who despite all that is going on, and despite all the education that we give them, still go back and prepare food in commercial quantities for sale, to other people who are not aware of the conditions under which the food was prepared, then as a local government you have to sit up and make a decision ... there is no option.

These statements demonstrate that the civil servants perceive of unacceptable living conditions as a justified reason for demolition exercises, even though no compensation or assistance is offered the affected citizens. This attitude is reminiscent of urban revanchism since it aspires to clean the city from unwanted, i.e. poor, environments in a fundamentally anti-poor way. Furthermore, by framing the demolition in a discourse on hygiene and disease control, underlying political questions of what counts as desirable urban development, including for instance issues of urban land uses and wealth redistribution, are concealed. This medicalization of space, which resembles the ‘sanitation syndrome’ in colonial Africa, frames the demolition as a rational and necessary intervention supported by medical science, which de-politicizes the exercise (see Swanson, 1977, on the sanitation syndrome). The Director of Works continues his



description of Mensah Guinea by stating that the community “has become a den for criminals, it has become an area where a whole lot of things, I mean bad things, go on. It's a no-go area at night you cannot go there if you don't stay there”. Also the Director of Accra Town and Country Planning Office describes Mensah Guinea in similar words, to him it was “dirty, unhygienic, and the home of thieves and prostitutes”. These statements point to how the authorities, in addition to the medical discourse, assign immoral behavior - theft, prostitution and ignorance - to the inhabitants, which indirectly is used to justify the demolition. Again, this description of the area and its inhabitants resembles revanchist policies since it rationalizes the removal of a certain group on basis of their assigned ‘immoral behaviors’. This rationality also implies that the exercise is presented as a necessary, non-political, intervention that will counteract criminality, and the local governments’ argumentation behind the demolition could thus be interpreted as ‘post-politics’. Importantly, the statements above are not unique for Mensah Guinea, but reflect a general perception of informal settlements and their inhabitants among civil servants in the city administration. For instance, the Director of the Works Department claims that if he was in charge “every place that does not fit into what we meant it to be [i.e. the planning schemes] should go”.

There are other layers of argumentation behind the demolition of Mensah Guinea as well, and the assigned illegal status of the settlement is a recurrent theme when discussing the demolition with civil servants. According to the Local Government Act from 1993, physical development is not allowed “without prior approval in the form of a written permit granted by the district planning authority” (Act 462:49). The same law states that the local authority has the right to “carry out the prohibition, abatement, alternation, removal or demolition” of unauthorized buildings, however such an intervention should be preceded by a written notice to the land owners (Act 462:52). Also the Town and Country Planning Act from 1945, which still is in use, provides for the demolition of buildings “which are inconsistent with or obstruct the operation of a scheme”, and further this law provides for “slum clearance in specified areas” (Cap.84:2) However, the majority of Accra’s residents live in informal settings (Obeng-Odoom, 2011) and most often these areas are ignored by the local government, which

indicate that the illegal status in itself is not sufficient for ordering and justifying a demolition.

While the local government claims that the sanitary conditions were the reason behind the demolition of Mensah Guinea, the national government presents a different story. A senior official at the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Creative Arts states that there are advanced plans to transform Mensah Guinea and its surroundings into a high-class waterfront development for tourists:

That is what we have indicated here; team parks, hotels, night clubs, restaurants, a clinic, a football park, service apartments, children's amusement park. So that this area becomes a tourism enclave!

Most buildings will be high-rises, around ten stories, and the senior official claims that this area “will make Accra”. Market principles guide this development project, which will be fully financed by the private sector, and the economic value of the land is what will attract investors: “everything is being generated from the land” (Ibid). According to the planners, land use should mainly be guided by land values set by the market, and with regard to Mensah Guinea the Director of Works in Accra asks “Why should we sit and let a prime land like a beach front be used for such a purpose [informal settlement]? You move them.” This project thus corresponds to the competitive city ideal both aesthetically and in terms of underlying logics of urban development.

The official at the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Creative Arts also admits that the plans on a tourism enclave partly explain the demolition of Mensah Guinea, but emphasize that the tourism enclave is a “sustainable project”. To this official, consensus seeking is important and he highlights that *all* stakeholders should have a say in the planning process:

So it is a question of bridging the gap, or bringing all these ideas of the people, and see how you can harmonize it and make sure that at the end of the day you are satisfying the interest of all stakeholders. What is the public interest? What is private sector interest? What is the tourist interest? What is the civil society interest? And what is the community interest? Because if you are not able to satisfy the interest of all these groups, and make them play a role, then the project will not be sustainable.

This strong belief in consensus is in line with the ideas holding up the 'post-political condition'. Furthermore, the decision to build the tourism enclave is already made and thus sets the frame for what is possible to discuss, i.e. the details of how to design this tourism enclave. Also, the consensus that the national government seeks to achieve do not include all actors affected. The former inhabitants of Mensah Guinea have not been asked to participate in the preparation of the new plan, and the participation agenda thus seems to be restricted to groups that are willing to support the project. The participatory process is thus not open for everyone and the political space of urban development is in practice reduced to 'post-politics' directed by neoliberal city visioning.

Behind the rationalities of the demolition presented by the local and national government prevails a strong desire to achieve *spatial order* in the city. This aspiration is in line with Ghana's national urban policy, and stems from a strong discursive coupling between 'development' and spatial order and/or spatial planning, made by politicians, civil servants, the international community (with the World-Bank at the forefront) and local NGOs. Urbanization is portrayed as a main challenge to the cities of Ghana, and spatial order is seen as the solution that will be reached through spatial planning practices. The World-Bank, for instance, states that "To meet the challenges of urbanization today and tomorrow, Ghana will require much stronger spatial and land use planning and management in municipal and metropolitan areas" (World Bank, 2014: 15). The same mantra is reproduced during conferences and work-shops on urban development where spatial planning repeatedly is presented as a non-political instrument that can achieve "international competitiveness", "sustainability", "resilience", "SMART cities", "affordable housing", "reduction of poverty", and/or "inclusivity". Drawing on Swyngedouw (2009), Allmendinger and Haughton (2011) show that the use of vague buzz-words is an important ingredient in the post-political condition and in the discussion on the future urban development of Ghana, these kinds of concepts that promise a 'better future' are frequently used and often linked to the practice of spatial planning. There thus exists a broad consensus that understands spatial order/planning as the key for progressive urban development, and this strong

associative relationship makes it difficult to question planning-led interventions like the one in Mensah Guinea, since this would imply the questioning of development. The spokesperson of the local government assured in the news a few days after the demolition that “any activity that is inimical to the development of our capital city would not be tolerated” (www.spyghana.com, 2014-09-10). Implicitly, this means that settlements like the one of Mensah Guinea are understood as the anti-thesis of ‘development’. By pointing to the need for ‘development’, the spokesman further explicitly urged the public to not make the demolition into a political issue:

We want to state here that the development agenda of A.M.A. [the local government] should not be trivialized and politicized, again the operations of the AMA requires the honest and sincere support of all stakeholders to develop Accra. [sic] (Ibid.)

This quote also shows that he encourages consensus by asking for support from *all* stakeholders. Just as Swyngedouw (2009) accounts for the de-politicization of (urban) environmental issues in Europe and the U.S., in Ghana urbanization and urban development are political fields that have lost their ‘proper political’ framing and now instead are discussed in techno-managerial terms within a strong consensus culture assembled by NGO’s, governmental offices, and the international community. Planning is depicted as a technical solution to the complex problem of urbanization, and no one is questioning this ‘truth claim’. The result is that the practice of urban planning, including its strategies, techniques and goals, seldom is debated. Important political questions about what kind of city is desirable, and who will benefit and not by dominant city visions, seem to be absent from the public discussion.

The discursive link between spatial order and development also has a strong dimension of aesthetics, which made it possible for the local government to motivate the demolition of Mensah Guinea by invoking the Millennium Development Goals. A few years ago the Earth Institute at Colombia University launched the “Millennium Cities Initiative”, which according to their webpage seeks to attain the millennium development goals in selected African cities (Colombia University, 2015). Accra was one of the chosen cities, and “a series of community upgrading profiles, scenario planning guides and GIS maps” were produced to improve the spatial organization of

the city and its amenities, in particular schools (Ibid). This initiative is thus another example of how the ‘problem’ of urbanization is de-politicized through a techno-managerial approach that understands the solution to the urban condition as technocratic expertise. However, these original ideas of the millennium city initiative developed in Colombia have been transformed when landed in Accra, and today the initiative is interpreted by the local government as a strategy to “beautify” the city. As one planner at AMA reflects:

Millennium city Accra, like one of the up and coming cities in Africa; so if somebody talks about Africa, Accra should be a place that somebody will want to look at or somebody wants to come to. If you think of Africa, Accra should be a place somebody will want to visit. /.../ The Mayor is interested in getting a very beautiful Accra, nice Accra with all the nice things you can think about.

This association between the millennium development goals and urban beautification enabled the local government to also justify the demolition as part of the “millennium city initiative” (Spokesman AMA, [www.spyghana.com](http://www.spyghana.com), 2014-09-10). ‘Accra - the millennium city’ has thus become another slogan used to de-politicize urban development in Ghana and gain support for different kinds of urban interventions.

The new meaning appointed to the millennium development goals in Accra is probably linked to the local development goals that the city has set up. “Decongestion and Beautification of the City” is one of seven focus areas in Accra’s latest development plan (AMA, 2014). To reach this goal, the city will among other things “continue with the removal of unauthorized structures and prevent reoccurrences within the city”; “continue with the removal of traders and squatters operating on the streets”; “continue with the prosecution of traders and residents who violate the AMA bye laws on selling on pavements” (Ibid). Evidentially, the physical appearance of the city is important to the city authorities and in line with the competitive city ideal one main priority issue for the future development of Accra, according to the planning community, is to raise the skyline of the city, since “high rises are what makes a city a city” (Director of Accra Physical Planning Dept., Interview, May 2014).

This section has demonstrated how the local and national governments use different types of rationalities to legitimize the demolition of Mensah Guinea. The next sections will demonstrate that the demolition also indirectly was approved by non-state actors, which point to the existence of a post-political urban condition comprising an assemblage of different stakeholders that share similar views on urban development.

## Perspectives from Media and NGO's

In this section the news on the demolition in Ghana's two leading newspapers will be presented and analyzed, followed by a short review on how some of the NGO's working with housing issues perceive of informal settlements and the demolition of Mensah Guinea. These accounts, I argue, are important for the analysis in that they demonstrate how media, civil society and the state together create an assemble that make up a consensus culture on the direction of urban development in Accra, where the demolition of Mensah Guinea is naturalized and de-politicized.

During September 2014 Ghana's two leading daily newspapers, state owned *Daily Graphic* and independent *Daily Guide*, together published eleven articles related to the demolition of Mensah Guinea. According to Jennifer Hasty (2005), *Daily Graphic* functions as the state's extended arm:

Through a public rhetoric of state journalism grounded in the discourse of national development, journalists for the state press are rhetorically summoned into the hegemonic project of the state and positioned to reproduce its daily ceremonies of legitimacy and consensus. (p. 33)

In contrast, she continues, Ghana's independent press, including the *Daily Guide*, "have been mobilized against the discursive regime of state news" (Ibid: 86). However, in the case of Mensah Guinea these newspapers present similar stories. In both newspapers, Mensah Guinea is consistently referred to as a "slum" built up of "illegal structures" and the inhabitants are simply referred to as "squatters". The day the demolition exercise started, the *Daily Guide* reports that Mensah Guinea is "labeled as one of the areas surrounded with filth" and notes that "the area is being blamed for the recent cholera outbreak" (2014-09-06a). The following articles reproduce the

hygiene discourse of the local authorities and much effort is put in describing the unsanitary conditions of the area:

Their bodies have built resistance over the years to the common diseases as they nightly lay their heads in a place where hygiene is a stranger; with rats and mice scampering for pieces of leftover food. That is not to say that they are totally immune to the ailments associated with the absence of basic hygiene. (Daily Guide, 2014-09-06b)

The newspapers further portray the inhabitants as others through the “squatter” labeling, a portrayal that is contrasted to the label of the “innocent” people that represents the rest of the urban population. In one of the articles describing the demolition, the author also refers to the simultaneous demolition of food courts in Accra’s largest informal settlement, and asks: “Of what use is the exercise when other food joints continue to produce food in the same slum – some of which would be taken to other parts of the city for sale to *innocent* people?” (Daily Guide, 2015-09-27, emphasis added). These newspapers thus adhere to the standpoint which sees the demolition as necessary, and reproduce anti-poor ideas that resemble urban revanchism. Yet, the *Daily Guide* also asks for a more “human face” of future demolition exercises:

We appreciate the importance of taking drastic measures to hold at bay the mounting incidence of cholera, but these should be undertaken with a human face and a large dose of reasonableness. (2015-09-09)

Importantly however, the demolition itself is neither questioned nor problematized and none of the articles engage with the underlying political issues of the future direction of urban development in terms of, for instance, urban land use, poverty, housing shortage, and wealth redistribution. Worth noticing is that a third of these articles actually focus upon the arrest of two journalists whom the Mayor accused of creating propaganda against the government by filming the people becoming homeless in Mensah Guinea during the exercise. The journalists’ attempt to report on the consequences of the demolition is an example of how a post-political condition never fully succeeds in making proper politics disappear (see Swyngadouw, 2009). However, in the analyzed written news this arrest raised the issue of the working

conditions of journalists, while the demolition itself ended up outside the spotlight. In sum, a close reading of the news produced by Ghana's leading newspapers reveals that the state's narrative of this community is reproduced rather uncritically by media, while voices from the settlement are few and other perspectives and criticism are almost absent.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the demolition of Mensah Guinea did neither draw much attention among NGO's working with housing rights active in the capital, despite the fatal consequences it had on the community and its inhabitants. Partly, I will argue, this is because of the recruitment of NGO's into the post-political assemblage that understands urban development in Accra in a particular way. Amnesty International, which not is against forced evictions per se but demands a specific procedure of these exercises, did not pay attention to the demolition of Mensah Guinea. They say they heard of it, but choose to not engage with it. Housing the Masses, a local organization that aims to "cater for low income areas" and work with "slum upgrading and prevention, low income housing, inclusive urban development and citizens participation" (Chairperson, interview, 2015), in fact backs up the demolition. The chairperson states:

I don't think anybody needs to be squatting there and littering the place and making the place dirty, no I don't think that is a good thing, it is not a good sign. If you leave them, they are going to squat there for a long time and we have this adverse possession clause, in our land laws that tells us that if you don't evict the person after 12 years you can't evict them, once they start gathering, you need to disperse them, you don't have to sit down for you to get to that level and now there is litigation and now you have to go court when you could have done it easily earlier.

The only direct critique of the demolition was put forward by the Slum Union, a relatively new grassroots movement that works to improve the living conditions in poor settlements across Ghana. The Slum Union claimed in local media that the demolition violated international conventions, and stated that "the relocation of persons who have stayed in a place for more than 20 years must be made as smooth



as possible” ([www.ghanaweb.com](http://www.ghanaweb.com), 2014-09-11). Again, the critique is directed towards the execution of the demolition, while the exercise itself is not questioned.

### Concluding Note

This paper demonstrates that although urban planning in Ghana according to governmental policy documents is supposed to improve the living conditions of the urban poor, the demolition of Mensah Guinea was highly *revanchist* in nature. The way the demolition was carried out, including the short notice; the threat of violence during the exercise; the patronizing comments about the area and its inhabitants during and after the demolition; and not least the non-existing compensation to the affected people illuminate the anti-poor agenda of this exercise. Also the future plan for the area, to build a luxury waterfront development for tourists, demonstrates how the desire for certain urban aesthetics and functions are prioritized over the livelihoods of the urban poor, which is characteristic of revanchist urbanism. However, in contrast to the zero policy in New York and the urban renewal program in Quito, Ghana’s national urban policy and the development goals of Accra are not revanchist per se. Instead, these documents emphasize the importance of improving the livelihoods of the urban poor, which contrasts revanchist policies. However, the complementary goals of achieving spatial order and urban beautification seem to open up for revanchist interventions.

The incorporation of urban beautification in Ghanaian planning policy and practice is also an example of how globally circulating ideals of the ‘competitive city’ has influenced urban visioning in Ghana. The future plan of transforming Mensah Guinea into a tourism enclave with high-rise hotels, luxury restaurants, shops, team parks and a golf court fits perfectly well to the ideal of the competitive city, both aesthetically and in terms of underlying ideology. The physical appearance of this centrally located beach area will shift drastically if the former shacks are replaced by exclusive high-rises, and the authorities hope that this transformation will put Accra ‘on the map’ and enhance economic growth in the city. Ideas of marketization, international competitiveness, and economic growth, constitutive of the competitive city, are thus

clearly present in this urban development project, which literally pushes the urban poor out of the inner city. At the same time, the national government presents the plans to transform Mensah Guinea and its surroundings as sustainable and states that a consensus seeking approach is adopted in order to include the interests of all affected stakeholders in the project. However, the former residents of Mensah Guinea are excluded from the planning process and this demonstrates that participation and consensus seeking is restricted to certain groups. Hence, the governments' framing of this project can be interpreted as a post-political nomenclature that is used to de-politicize the (neoliberal) direction of urban development in Accra. Also the local government partakes in the de-politicization of the redevelopment of Mensah Guinea by framing the demolition as a non-political intervention necessary to counteract the spread of disease and criminality and to enhance 'development'. Several NGO's and the leading newspapers share this understanding, and therefore the critique directed towards the demolition focuses on details such as the short notice of the exercise while the demolition itself, including the rationalities behind it and its consequences, is not questioned or debated.

The de-politicization of the demolition and remaking of Mensah Guinea, I argue, is part of a wider post-political planning condition in Accra that understands spatial planning as a techno-managerial instrument fundamental for progressive urban development. This understanding implies that the practice of urban planning is de-politicized and its methods, visions and goals are thus taken for granted and seldom questioned, which is problematic since it reduces the political space where agonistic views on urban development agendas can be raised. Importantly, this post-political planning condition is upheld by a complex web of power relations that involves not only state actors, but also media, civil society agents, the international development community and citizens. These actors have assembled in a post-political visioning for Accra, which enabled the demolition of Mensah Guinea to pass as a rational and necessary intervention that enhances development, despite its devastating consequences for the inhabitants. This post-political framing of urban development indicates that the future

visions for Accra are filled with hope for those aspiring to make the city 'competitive', while the majority of the population risk experience these visions as highly violent.

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