

Accra's hidden treasures in public spaces

Is Accra a great city – or even a nice city? At a recent conference on architecture and the media, organized by Arts in Social Structures (AISS), a non-profit organization, a former minister of state described the Ghanaian national capital as not being a very nice city. She did not like it, she said, and compared it to other cities in the ECOWAS sub-region, like Freetown, which she said was more likeable. Opinions were divided for and against, and the argument was left there...

Like any modern African city, the national capital is defined largely by haphazard planning, many motor vehicles on very

few roads, night clubs, loud church sessions, open market places, scantily dressed young men and women trying to make sense of it all, disgruntled city dwellers who have lost faith in their city's systems and structures, a growing community of "roadside traders" dashing in and out of traffic to palm off all manner of consumables to unsuspecting motorists and of course many, many buildings – old and new. It is these buildings that actually give a city its character. Many negatives and positives contribute in making a city

what it is and form a substratum to the very foundations on which it is built. Those new glass and chrome private and commercial buildings and the growing real estate industry are fast catching up with the lengths and breadths of the city obliterating along the way many other structures that used to define the city. Accra, again like any other modern city, is an intricately interwoven web of the low, middle and high class residents who have stamped their different sub-cultures on the city's landscape. By the

way, high class neighbourhoods of days gone by have lost their status and find themselves very low down the line centuries or decades later. In this mix of low, middle and high classes is the historical class, whose antecedents go as far back as the 15th century. Inside parts of the capital lie a throng of carefully built edifices with long historical pedigrees; these buildings belong to the old class of edifices built by colonials for purposes, including, but not limited to human trafficking – slavery. The two-day

seminar was held from Tuesday March 30 to Wednesday March 31 and discussed the theme of architectural heritage and the media. Critical discussions on architecture in Ghana, its past, present and future and how to approach the subject came up for scrutiny. Discussions were led by the former Mayor of Accra Mr. Nat Amartefio, himself an architect, Professor Henry Wellington, retired Professor of Architecture, Miss Elizabeth Ohene, a former minister of state, Dr. Audrey

Gadzepko of the School of Communication Studies, Legon, Mr. Kofi Sethordzi, artist and many others including Professors John Palmesino and Ann Sofi Roennskog from European architectural institutions. Ms. Senam Okudzeto, founder and director of AISS coordinated the seminar. The first part was devoted to theoretical presentations and the second part was a daylong trip around the city of Accra to some sites of interest at James Town (old British Accra) and Osu (Danish Accra).

Story and pictures by: A.R. Harruna Attah & Obed Bofo with notes and insights from Nat Amartefio and Professor Wellington

The Scott House at Ridge, when it was built in the seventies must have equally been a

Architecture in Accra: Periods and Examples

Hon Nat Nuno-Amartefio Traditional Ga Architecture

Mudbrick walls roofed with thatch. Examples can still be found in the rural villages surrounding the city. Originally the buildings contained a single room. These were the earliest building types in Accra. European Castles and Forts There were three in the Accra Region: Christianborg (Danish) at Osu, Ussher Fort (Dutch) at Kinka, and Jamesfort (English) at Jamestown. They date from the 17th Century. These buildings introduced the use of stone, timber and new technologies in construction.

Pre-Colonial Afro-European

Dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. Examples are Richter House at Osu, Wulff House and Franklin House at Kinka. Mainly stone and wooden houses built for wealthy slave trading families. They used new building technology to add a second floor to the building.

Early Colonial Buildings

Dating from the end of the 19th century and the first

decades of the 20th century, these houses are characterized by a structure supporting a wood frame superstructure. They were built for wealthy merchant families. Many examples are found in Jamestown, Ussherstown and Osu. Of particular note are Teshie House at Jamestown and the Ankrah House at Korlewo.

Late Colonial Houses (European)

Dating from the 1920s and 1930s, these are mature colonial designs imported from Anglo-India and the Caribbean. Usually these are bungalows on stilts surrounded by screened verandas. These houses were built on large lots in racially segregated communities at Ridge and Cantonment.

Late Colonial Houses (African)

During the 1920s and 1930s, these houses were built in places like Adabraka and Asylum Down by a new African middle class of professionals and merchants as a response to the segregated European communities. Due to improved technology, they were two-storey buildings decorated

with a porch. They were big mansions with a vaguely Mediterranean character.

Colonial Ecclesiastical Buildings

Dating from a few years after the capital was transferred from Cape Coast to Accra at the end of the 19th century. The Holy Trinity Cathedral and the Methodist Wesleyan Cathedral are the outstanding examples. Both were built of rough stone in a high Victorian style.

Colonial Educational Structures

Sir Gordon Guggisberg built Achimota Secondary School in 1927 as an African version of the British public school. The college was lavishly endowed with land and infrastructure. The architecture is uniquely late 19th century Anglo-Indian. Other examples include Mfantsipim Secondary School and Adisadel Secondary School.

Post-Independence Educational Structures

In the 1950s, the Nkrumah government instituted a school building program in all the regions of the country. The style was based on modernist design popularized by the

British firm, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. Examples are Labone Secondary School and Accra Secondary School.

Post-Independence Public Monuments

*Scott House, residence designed by Kenneth Scott in a modernist style
*The National Museum, designed by Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew
*Headquarters for the C.P.P. designed by Victor Adibitey.

Colonial Monument to commemorate the delivery of pipe-borne water to Accra (1910, Jamestown)

*Monument to commemorate the fall of the West African Frontier Force in the First World War (1920, Jamestown)

Post Colonial '24th February Column' monument to honour veterans shot by the British for demonstrating for better pensions

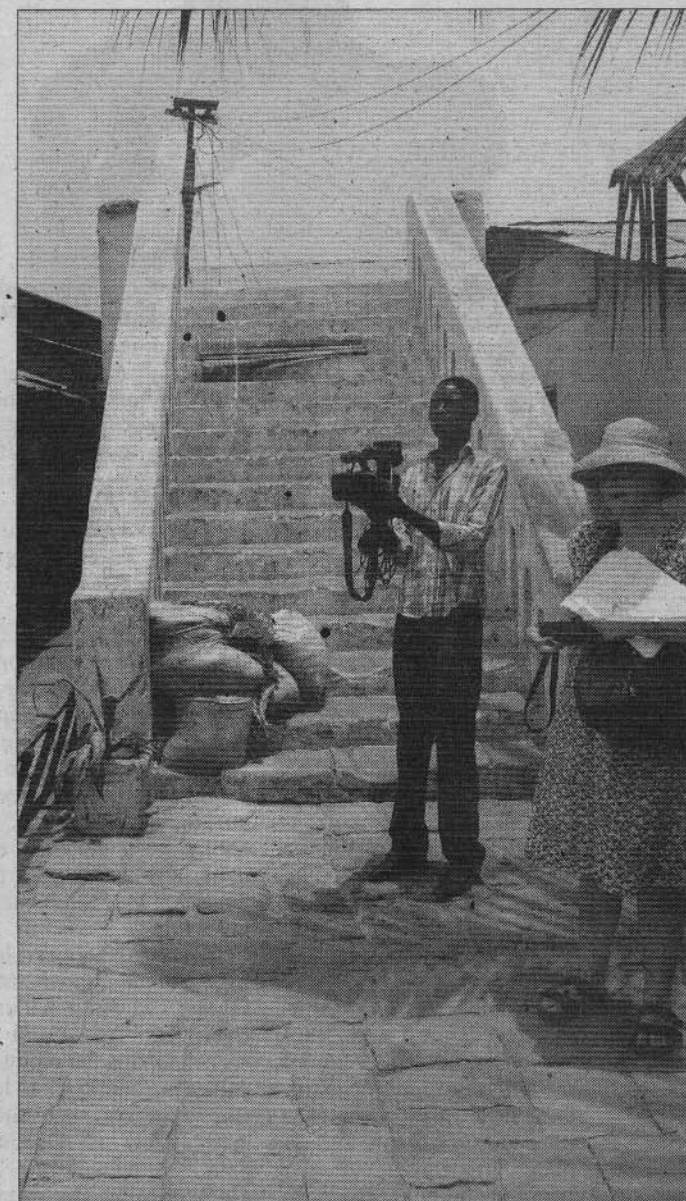
*'Black Star Arch', Roman arch erected by the Nkrumah government in 1960 to commemorate national independence

James Fort

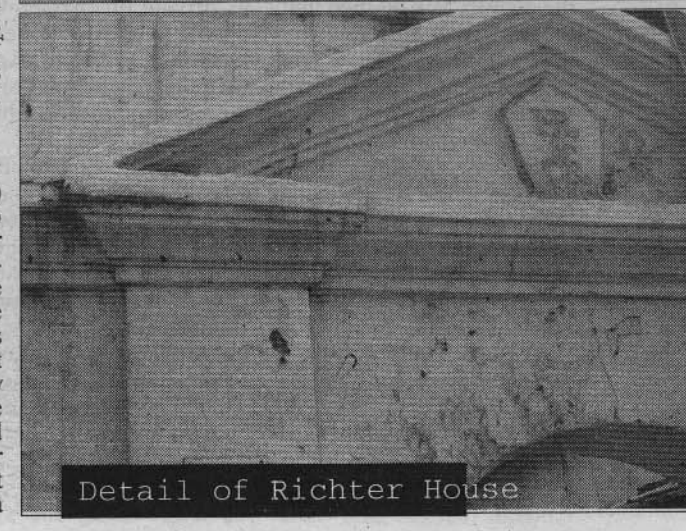
The Original seat of British governance, it is now a prison. James Town itself, named after King James I was established around the same time as James Town in Virginia, USA. Whereas many colonial buildings from that time are still preserved in the James Town of Virginia, the Accra James Town is now a collection of derelict crumbling buildings with all their history shorn off.

Brazil House (Tabon House)

Built in the 19th century where freed slaves (Tabons) from Brazil were repatriated to Ghana to start life all over again. Brazil House is a historical edifice which portrays the various trades and commerce engaged in by freed slaves mostly of Tabon descent. It lies over a rocky area a few meters above sea level, at the edge of a slope situated between James and Ussher Forts. Apart from the fact that it was refurbished in 2001 as a



Stairway of Richter House



Detail of Richter House



Old Tabon House



Refurbished Brazil House

major tourist site, on entry, it becomes evidently clear that the location was a beehive of intense economic activity years back. Today, Brazil House stands sparking close to its crumbling relatives of yesteryear. Some of the decaying buildings have traces of another kind of history, the earthquake of 1939 showing.

Frederiks Minde House

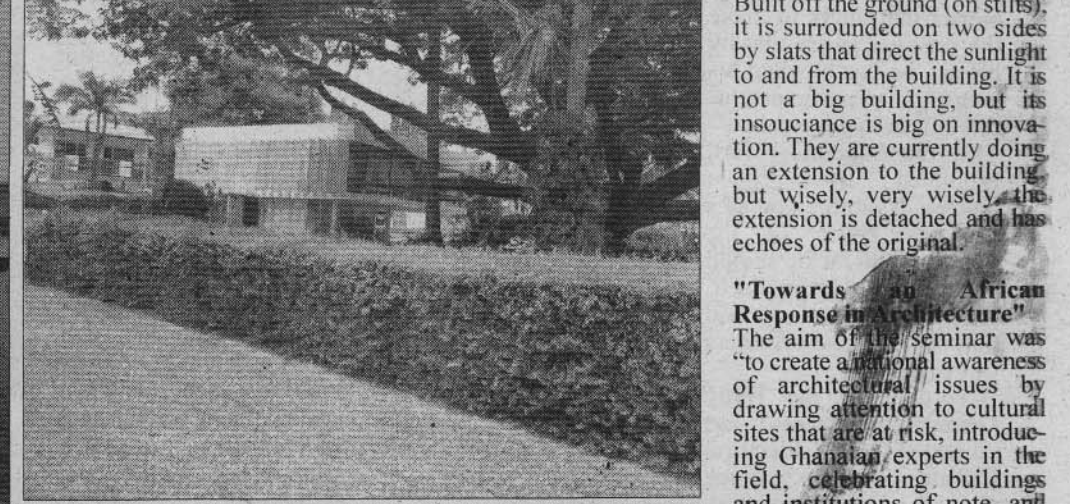
The Frederiks Minde House has a very unique history that sets it apart, in terms of history to all others. Built in 1840 by Wulff Joseph Wulff, then a Reserve Assistant to the Danish establishment at the Christiansborg Castle between 1836 and 1842 (out of his frustration at that time at the hands of his own Danes), he made for himself a large Wulff home to house his growing family, descendants of whom are alive to tell his history today. Wulff Joseph Wulff himself is buried in the house, his mortal remains standing upright in his grave since his death in 1842 – a dying wish to reflect his Jewish ancestry. His wife the Euro-African Sara Malm, however is buried in the more conventional horizontal position close to him. The house was then named after King Frederik VI of Denmark. It stands very close to the Christiansborg Castle, Ghana's seat of government and frustratingly, is more or less out of bounds to the ordinary citizen of Accra, tourists and even academics. Please see editorial on page 3.

The Richter House

The Richter House in Osu is also one establishment with a rich historical antecedence. Like the Fredrik Minde House, it also has a lot to show for its existence after it was put up in 1809 by the brothers Heinrich and Richter, who were the African sons of Johan Emanuel Richter, later Governor of the Danish establishments. The story is told of how the establishment was used to carry out slave merchandising. At a time in its history, the Richter House housed 400 slaves, mainly Ashantis. Richter House also saw trade in palm oil and gold which made that family very wealthy. Later, in 1849, Henry Richter died and like Wulff Joseph Wulff, it passed down to his descendants, some of whom still live there. Walls and pavement stones (imported from Denmark) are still visible. The defining feature of this building, a central stairway was the only structure to survive intact the earthquake of 1939. It stands, or sits, rather like some forgotten totem in Richter House rising upwards with nowhere to go



Scott House



Detail of Joe Addo's House



Detail of Joe Addo's House

The Scott and Joe Addo residences

Two modern icons, The Scott House, built by Australian Kenneth Mackenzie Scott in the seventies and the residence of Ghanaian architect Joe Addo at East Legon completed the tour. The Joe Addo residence described by former Accra Mayor, Nat Amartefio as "eccentric" is certainly in that mould, because it is "one of a type". A labour of love, no doubt, it incorporates mostly wood, bamboo, some glass. At its East Legon location, it stands all alone amidst all the newfangled clones of the new building styles all around.

showpiece and landmark. Built off the ground (on stilts), it is surrounded on two sides by slats that direct the sunlight to and from the building. It is not a big building, but its insouciance is big on innovation. They are currently doing an extension to the building, but wisely, very wisely, the extension is detached and has echoes of the original.

"Towards an African Response in Architecture"

The aim of the seminar was "to create a national awareness of architectural issues by drawing attention to cultural sites that are at risk, introducing Ghanaian experts in the field, celebrating buildings and institutions of note, and through the media ask the nation to reflect upon past and future dreams for social environments and urban possibilities from a more informed perspective." The project, according to AISS "hopes to create a national interest in Ghanaian Architecture by helping to spark a lively discussion of architecture and its vital role in nation building." It achieved all and more. Against a backdrop of his iconoclastic home in East Legon, Architect Joe Osei Addo led a discussion on "Towards an African Response in Architecture" which also asked the question: "What is African Architecture?" African architecture, like African art, African music, African cinema or for that matter anything "African", can often lead to convoluted theorizing that end up in contrivances. Any debate on African architecture can stretch as far back as the Egyptian pyramids to Zimbabwe, to the Dogon, to the round huts of Northern Ghana to these modern times of new building materials. At the end of it all, the question really is how Africans have used their environment and its resources to create the space and structures to live comfortably and work productively. With that, the jury is still very much still deliberating!



Fredrich Minde

The

Mail

Six and counting...



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NPP's primaries gathering pace...

Vol 10 No.3 118 FRIDAY, APRIL 9, 2010 GP70

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