

Light and Space-Making in the Accra Airport City, Ghana

Naomi Samake

Sterile, modern, bright. These were my first impressions of Ghana's Accra Airport City (AAC) during my research stay in November 2019. Zooming out, those three adjectives may very well describe the typology of airport cities across the globe. Airport complexes are often described as iconic and self-contained non-places (Augé 1995) severed and shielded from their host cities (Pirie 2007). AAC's brightly lit blue and white hues create an atmosphere that is on the one hand moderately familiar and, at the same time, quite different from the rest of Accra. The production of spaces through lighting techniques "diverts attention from the 'real'" (Lefebvre 1991: 389) and, in doing so, warrants our attention because of the way it affects the experience of architecture and urban landscapes.

Airport cities, like AAC, commonly use lighting technologies to govern the flow of interactions between time and space. By addressing the influence of light infrastructure on the vitality of AAC, this contribution explores the meaning of luminosity, the affect it has on daily patterns, and how light becomes a tool that leaves behind social and spatial consequences. This essay will first unravel the everyday politics of light and the ways such politics influence local perceptions of AAC in Ghana. I then

examine how light creates spaces of exclusion in order to explore certain practices that challenge the normative and intended plan of AAC. The article concludes by deconstructing common understandings of light and, on a larger scale, the plan and ideology of an airport city.

Politics of light

The politics of light interweaves infrastructural development in AAC with Ghana's colonial past and contemporary political and economic agendas. During World War II the airport was used by the British Royal Air Force and by 1956 a reconfiguration of the existing structure was launched to meet the global travel demand. With the independence of the Gold Coast (colonial Ghana) in 1957, completion of this project was signaled with the launch of a national airline, Ghana Airways, and the renaming to Kotoka International Airport in honor of a member of the National Liberation Council. To enable fast and affordable yet luxurious travel experiences, by the turn of the twenty-first century airports across the world were expanding their complexes, including in Ghana. In 2001, policy reform promoted private-sector involvement in national economic development (Arthur 2018). Similar to other airport cities, such development allowed AAC to become an "outpost [for] powerful, globally networked alliance[s] of property developers and transport enterprises" (Pirie 2007: 29).

AAC currently represents itself as a "planned miniature corporate and commercial business city complex ... characterized mostly by privately owned, high-density, mixed land-use infrastructure" that, in addition to travel logistics, aims to provide office complexes, banks, hotels, restaurants, and shopping centers (Arthur 2018: 264). It is overseen by a fully state-owned enterprise, the Ghana Airport Company Ltd, and divided into twenty-two self-contained property projects. By using real estate to target commercial and business development, AAC intends to create a city-like environment and bring aspects of urban modernity into Accra.

Although the Ghanaian government has routinely voiced its commitment to provide all citizens with reliable electricity, lighting infrastructures and various levels of luminosity symbolically trigger local forms of inequality and instability. A lighting technician from the Ghana Dance Ensemble pointed out in a personal conversation that "you can tell the [socio-economic] status of certain neighborhoods by looking at the brightness of their streets." In 2015, the country experienced persistent, irregular, and unpredictable periods of electricity outages and, because of these power cuts, inherited the name *Dumsor* – an expression in the regional language Twi meaning "turn the lights on." In contrast, the luminosity that exudes from AAC epitomizes the inequalities embedded in the built environment and local memories.

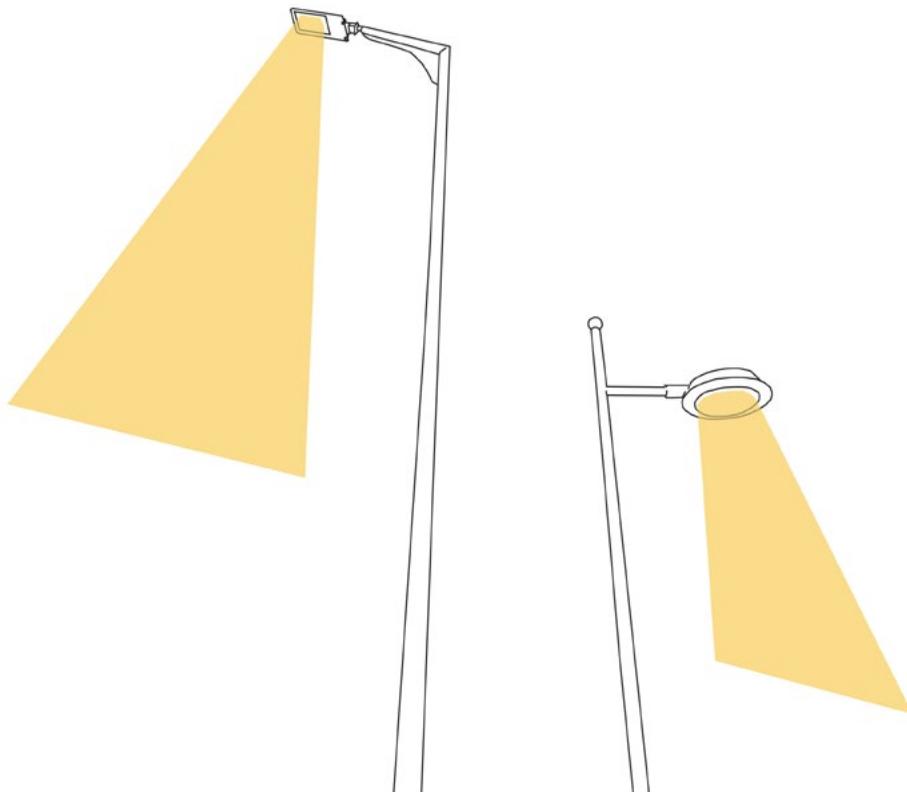


Spaces of exclusion

While lighting technologies can create an ideal atmosphere for travelers' experiences, light infrastructure also, and even more importantly, materializes spaces of exclusion. With the phrase light infrastructure, I refer to the intended and planned street, decorative, and security fixtures in use during the day and the luminosity that exudes from these fixtures and from the planned complexes of AAC during the night. Light fixtures border AAC's circumference, only stopping at the few gates where vehicles may enter. Streetlights along the boundary face inward, creating an additional barrier alongside the barbed-wire fences, walls, and height extensions that already exist. All this infrastructure separates AAC from its surroundings and creates a closed container logic (Taylor 1994). Lighting techniques also mark different property lots; the sidewalks are illuminated by different fixtures than those found on private properties. Light stitches together the various paths and spaces intended for people to move and interact in. And at night, as the lights turn on, each property no longer stands in isolation but becomes part of this overall fabric of an exclusively modern airport city.

There are variations of lighting fixtures. Streets and sidewalks, for instance, are illuminated by different fixtures than those found on properties.

Sketch and photo: Naomi Samake, November 2019.



By looking at how people interact with and dwell within light infrastructure, the following two examples demonstrate everyday practices that contribute to the functioning of AAC.

Waiting areas

Where light shapes space and disciplines the notion of time, unfinished property lots enable new purposes in the absence of light fixtures – as in the case of an abandoned post office. Streetlamps are spread along the boundaries of this property, facing toward the street. Those that are lit only illuminate the property’s fringe, yet social life is found in its shadows. Cars are parked in the dark with drivers waiting into the later end of the evening. Larger kitchen appliances are seen fading into the skeleton of the building. An intermittent cell phone light swoops along with the movement of an unidentified body. This property awaits connection to the grid. In the meantime, it serves as a space for personal drivers who wait for their clients, for delivery trucks who rest while waiting for their orders to be unloaded, for street vendors who wait for passer-buyers to sell a water sachet to, and it is where workers from neighboring buildings rest, eat, and meet one another as they wait for their next shift to begin.

An unfinished property lot with the skeleton of what is intended to become a post office – now a place to take a quick break or get a snack from local street vendors.

Drawing: Naomi Samake, November 2019.



Waiting is a normative description but it can also signal a critique of the current context of global capitalism and late liberalism (Olson 2015). Waiting in non-lit spaces in AAC emphasizes that “waiting ... produces hierarchies which segregate people and places into those which matter and those which do not” (Ramdas 2012: 834). Approaching the places that light infrastructure leaves behind opens a perspective beyond the shiny global allusions of an airport city. Although they were not planned, repurposed spaces like these engender productive areas and nourish the daily functioning of AAC.

Food stands



As AAC continues to expand, for employees, security guards, and construction workers, as well as businesspeople who visit regularly, it is becoming evident that some local economic practices were not part of the overall plan. This includes the supply of affordable food. Temporary food stands and street vendors have negotiated their way into unlit spaces within AAC to fill this gap in the market. Amelia, for instance, is the daughter of a female street-food vendor. Amelia has learned her mother’s recipes and inherited her network. Although she herself is Hausa, she serves her daily customers with ethnic Akan food. Two employees from the nearby Vodafone

From Monday to Saturday, by eleven o’clock in the morning plantains are roasting on a wire grill, heated by charcoal, while beans and rice keep warm on a portable propane stove.

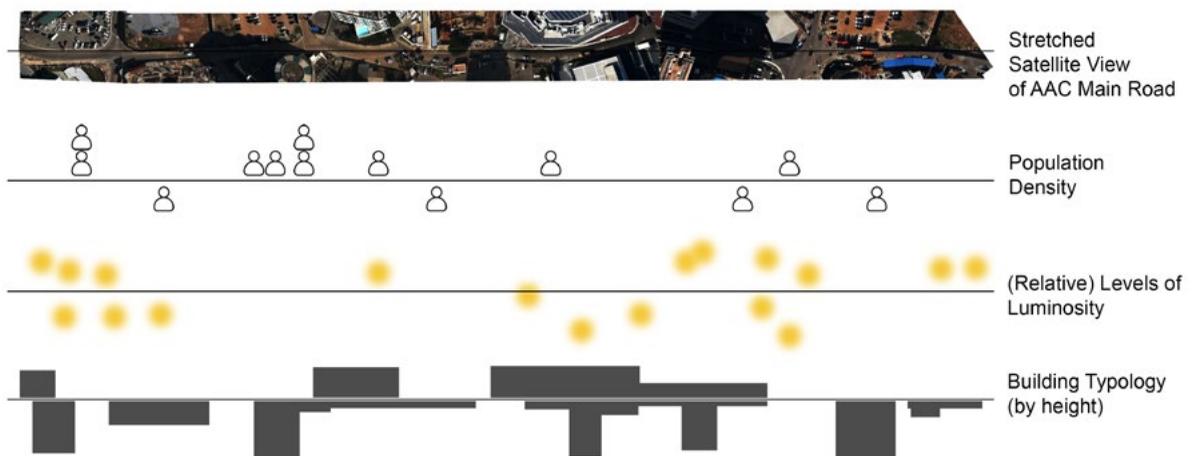
Drawing: Naomi Samake, November 2019.

offices said that they come to this stand two or three times a week for her roasted plantains. Wooden planks, aluminum sheets, and chicken wire hold her stall together. Although Amelia’s temporary stand is not directly under streetlights and her space does not have electricity, across the road beam bright white LED lights that ‘survey’ the Silver Star Tower property. In sequence to AAC, as the lights turn on around six to seven o’clock in the evening, nightlife begins. Yet this is when Amelia, along with other vendors, leave. Amelia has appropriated this space for a little less than a year, but once construction on the site is finished, she will need to find a new location to work.

Conclusion

AAC’s artificial lighting technologies advertise this space as a realm of economic and commercial transactions, marking signs of life, livelihood, and valuable human activity. Yet the true distribution of activity throughout AAC in relation to levels of luminosity shows a different story. And while light becomes an essential design component of architecture for the creation of an idealistic place of modernity, we also see the variations between airport cities, as they are predisposed to local norms, practices, and conditions (Pirie 2007). Quiet encroachments (Ballard 2014), such as the practices sketched here, within and beyond the existing light infrastructure challenge on a micro level the planned AAC. It is the array of these practices that reflects the essence of daily life in Accra. So, while light technologies often stand for a modernity that attracts business and development, there are still limitations to light infrastructures and their ability to influence certain processes. In the example of AAC, local conditions and practices seep in to patch the holes in its planned space. Yet these local practices and norms are small contestations of the ideology promoted by a world-class development like AAC.

A compilation of several walking surveys along AAC’s main road. Each level represents the same path taken during these observations and distinguishes the distribution of people, luminosity levels, and height of the building complexes.
Figure: Naomi Samake, November 2019.



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