

# **Remains of the Future: re-thinking space, time and ruination in Ghanaian resettlement townships**

## **Abstract**

Focusing on a planned scheme of resettlement undertaken in Ghana in the wake of Independence in 1957, this paper explores how mid-century plans for modernization exist in disjunctive relation to unrealized material infrastructures. Drawing on ethnographic research in resettlement townships, the account describes the contemporary after-lives of the plan, tracing how its promised futures shadow present understandings of contemporary and future life. The paper examines the distinctive form that ruination takes not as once functional, now decaying infrastructure but as the ongoing effects of an un-realized plan. Here experiences of ruination are associated with a set of spatial and temporal dynamics that emerge as the felt negation of linear time and Cartesian space. The central argument is that insofar as the recent ‘turn to ruins’ assumes the existence of modernization, it eclipses what is conceptually at stake in situations where modernization exists only as a promise.

[Modernization, Resettlement, Ruination, Time, Space, Development, Ghana]

## **Without Modernization**

Walking around the township of New Senchi, Ghana, the ghost of the original plan is still faintly discernible in linear rows of crumbling, single-story houses.<sup>1</sup> Constructed to resettle people displaced by a large hydro-electric power scheme in the 1960s, the town was at the vanguard of post-independence visions of national development, and embodied the high-modern (Scott 1998) aspirations of the time. Original plans show spatial zoning of industrial

and residential use. Architects' drawings depict rows of bungalows fronted by manicured lawns and fringed by neatly clipped hedges (figure 1). Artists' impressions of interiors show flushing toilets and modern kitchens. I am accompanied by Eric, an unemployed primary school teacher in his early thirties. Although born after the 1960s he has a vivid sense of the project's promised futures and describes these as we walk: officials told resettlers that well-paid jobs would be created through the industries that would develop, catalyzed by the cheap and plentiful power supplied by the nearby Akosombo dam; subsistence farming would be transformed through mechanization and industrialization; infrastructure – including railways, paved roads and a nearby airport – would be built.

<Image 1>

Eric points out a house in a particularly poor state of repair. In the absence of proper drainage, surface runoff has undercut the walls, which are sagging heavily. A temporary lean-to structure, built from mud and crudely thatched, has been added to the side, as a makeshift pen for animals. The tin roof, explicitly hailed by mid-century planners as the epitome of modern efficiency and hygiene, is rusting. To the front and rear of the single room nucleus there are roofed but open areas originally envisaged as spaces for further rooms. Built in anticipation of future development, these empty spaces now embody and elicit a broader sense of absence: 'there is no development here, we are living like animals', Eric pronounces with frustration and despair. His thoughts make evident the specific experience of ruination that emerges in these townships: myriad juxtapositions of actual circumstances with the unrealized plans of modernization.

**Ruins of an Un-realized future: rethinking the temporality of ruination**

In a landmark account of the modern experience, the political scientist Berman remarks: ‘One of the distinctive virtues of modernism is that it leaves its questions echoing in the air long after the questioners themselves, and their answers, have left the scene.’ (2010 [1982])21). This paper traces the ‘echoes’ of a mid-twentieth-century resettlement project, focusing on the un-realized promises of plans for modernisation as these frame a distinctive experience of ruination. Influenced by the critical theory of Walter Benjamin, a recent interdisciplinary literature has focused on the socio-material ruination of achieved projects of modernisation (see, for example, Dawdy 2010; Edensor 2012; Gordillo 2014; Schwenkel 2013; Stoler 2008). Conceptual interest in processes of ruination has correspondingly focused on the capacity for material decomposition to expose the conceptual limitations of modernisation, notably through processes that literally deconstruct ideas of ordered, Cartesian space and of linear progressive time. This paper, by contrast, traces ruination as the felt sense of decomposition and decay framed by the un-fulfilled promise of a plan that only ever partially arrived but which resettlers continue to want. Thus the paper explores the seemingly contradictory possibility of ruination of buildings and infrastructures that were, at most, partially completed, and which in many cases were never constructed at all. This paradoxical ruination entails a palpable sense of the failure of modernisation to arrive, associated with an unstable and unresolved relationship between the actuality of existing circumstances and the imagined futures that continue to be projected from the unrealised plan.

Focusing on the spatial and temporal dimensions of ruination, I highlight how the plan engendered promises of linear, progressive temporality and of ordered, Cartesian space are implicated in contemporary social practice (see, for example, Bear 2014; Latour 1993; Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2014). Rather than write against the teleology of modern infrastructure (Gupta n.d. ; Harvey forthcoming; Howe, et al. 2015), I focus on the practical

ways in which this temporal representation frames experiences of time as the negation of this teleological ideal. Likewise, I explore how spatial images of modernisation are enlisted to actively presence the absence of buildings and infrastructures. Unlike the negative spaces of buildings that once existed and are now destroyed (Buchli 2013; Edensor 2012; Gordillo 2014; Navaro-Yashin 2007), these ruins exist as the negative time and space made present by an ideal: of what might have existed, even might still, but which does and has not. These are not absences presented as the material remains of that which has gone (Berdahl 2010; Bille, et al. 2010), but as the remembered anticipation of a future.

The rest of this paper is in three parts. The first takes a historical view to outline the specific visions of modernisation that animated the Volta Resettlement Project, and the ways in which the project fell short of expectations and stalled. The following three ethnographic sections examine from different angles the spatio-temporal experiences of ruination for those now living in the remains of the Volta Resettlement Project. The final ethnographic section examines these residents' individual and collective efforts to develop and improve the settlement, and the interweaving of hope and despair produced by the desire to bring a lost future to fruition. These dynamics are associated with specific spatial and temporal logics and, as I suggest in the conclusion, enable a broader critical reframing of the concept of ruination. My argument is that much of the existing literature is framed by a critical orientation to modernisation and more generally modernity that elides what is ethnographically at stake in forms of ruination configured through an orientation to these as un-realised but desired conditions.

### **Planning Modernization: The inception and failure of the Volta Resettlement Project**

Side-stepping normatively inflected critiques (e.g. Holston 1989; Scott 1998), I approach modernisation in this paper as an ethnographic category and concern (Dick 2010; Ferguson 1999; Rabinow 1989), central to a range of discourses, practical interactions and ways of seeing. In Ghana, these ideas emerged in the 1960s as rationalist development and planning ideology, synonymous with the desire for rapid social and economic ‘progress’ through linked changes in infrastructure, industry, society and economy, and hence through a break with ‘tradition’ (Meyer 1998). In the contemporary ‘after life’ (Benjamin 1982 ) of the project, as I will show, these ideas remain implicated in social practice as identity, process, event, and spatial category, sometimes elided with, at others distinguished from more general understandings of modernity as the condition, identity and experience of being modern. Thus I approach modernisation as a specific ‘ideology of aspiration’ (Karlstrom 2004), that intersects in contemporary discourses with ideas of ‘development’, ‘progress’ and ‘improvement’.

The Volta Resettlement Project was undertaken in the wake of the construction of the Akosombo Dam during the 1960s. Although plans for the dam were initiated in the colonial period, the project finally commenced following Ghana’s Independence in 1957 (Hart 1980; Moxon 1969; Shapiro 2003). As a flagship policy of Kwame Nkrumah, leader of the Ghanaian Independence movement and then Ghana’s first president, the physical construction of the dam became materially and symbolically central to the construction of the newly independent nation (cf. Mitchell 2002). As Africa’s first country to gain independence from British colonial rule, the project took on particular exemplary importance, both internationally and in Ghana, as a model for post-colonial development.

A newspaper editorial published in the *Ghanaian Times*, a conduit of government propaganda, gives a sense of the significance of the project as a testament to a broader commitment to modernization:

Step by step, as the heroes of the Nkrumahist labor, stone by stone, put the Volta River Project into shape, another giant Nkrumah monument is rising to the glory and foresight of the revolutionary emancipator and the determination of the great party he founded to lead the people of Ghana to the socialist paradise. Work and happiness for all takes a million steps forward with the good news of the progress at Akosombo.<sup>ii</sup>

The project directly indexed the personal agency of Nkrumah, and literalized his vision of a (figure 2) modernist pan-Africanist future, entailing a teleology of progress that sought to combine rapid modernization with the retention of existing traditions. In government propaganda, the dam's capacity to generate plentiful supplies of electrical power was often metaphorically conflated with the growing 'power' of the nation (Shapiro 2003). As a 'gateway to the future'<sup>iii</sup>, it would facilitate a movement from 'tradition' to 'modernity', laying the economic foundations on which the nation was to be constructed. While the project depended heavily on international financial support and the technical, planning and scientific input of development agencies and staff, this was routinely elided in state narratives of the project as a symbol of national independence and emancipation.

<Image 2>

At the vanguard of these nationalist aspirations, the 80,000 resettlers held an ambiguous position in the national consciousness. Following completion of the dam in 1966, an editorial in the state-owned *Ghanaian Times* praised their selflessness: 'Not least in the pride of place of honor and praise are those Ghanaians whose love for the motherland and the prosperity of mother Africa, sacrificed their lot to bring the project to fruition. History will not forget them.'<sup>iv</sup> While resettlement was celebrated in public discourses as a 'sacrifice', for the broader good of national development, it was itself associated with 'progress' (Miescher 2012). In a widely reported quote, frequently re-told by inhabitants of the resettlement

communities today, Nkrumah made a personal pledge that none of the resettled communities would be worse off as a consequence of the move.

The Volta Resettlement Project entailed a package of linked infrastructural changes that were imagined to set in train progress to a different and better future via a break with the ‘traditional’ pasts (compare Meyer 1998) of displaced populations, mostly rural subsistence farmers and migrant fisher-folk. Key elements of this modernizing approach were the promotion of social and economic development through the creation of planned urban spaces, technological improvement of agriculture, and industrialisation, notably linked to the power produced by the dam. Powerfully inflected by Nkrumah’s pan-Africanism this ideology drew explicit inspiration from other socialist contexts, specifically in an understanding of planned urban infrastructure as generative of transformative modernity (Alexander and Buchli 2007; Holston 1989). Explicitly conceived as ‘model townships’, the resettlement communities represented an ideal of planned urban life. By bringing together previously distinct villages, planners aimed for a more efficient use of resources in accordance with the tenets of Central Place Theory, an internationally fashionable planning discourse of the time (Shapiro 2003). Under the Volta Basin Area Development Plan, hundreds of small subsistence villages were aggregated into 54 townships. As well as enabling the centralization of services, the agglomeration of previously distinct communities was intended to provide a compact labor force that would facilitate the mechanization of agricultural production and provide a further impetus to economic growth (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990). Resettlement townships were conceptualized as functionally integrated units, in which social, ethnic and economic differences were subsumed to a regional and national logic of development. As in a range of other African contexts (Bonneuil 2000; Mitchell 2002; Scott 2004), mid-century discourses of planners and politicians constituted a set of aspirations that were concretely embedded in infrastructures intended to literalize a new relationship between citizens and state, and which

carried forwards a set of hopes and expectations about the possibility of a different and better future.

From the outset, planners' sought to make the future knowable and controllable through visions that existed in unresolved and disjunctive relation to the material and social conditions they sought to change. While government discourses foregrounded the capacity to shape nature to human ends, realization of these required coordination of a vast and complex range of people, processes, materials and places that often evaded planners' efforts at control (cf. Mitchell 2002). Planners' letters and reports describe how buildings cracked, materials were stolen, cement caked, local workers failed to turn up and produced shoddy work, and resettlers retained 'traditions' understood to be contrary to the logic of the modernist plan. Even by 1965, the aim of providing a 'modern' home for all had given way to the provision of materials for resettlers to complete themselves. 'Failure' emerged in various public and planning discourses as a sense of disjuncture between promise and reality that widened as the project unfolded.

Following a military coup in 1966 in which Nkrumah was deposed, as well as international shifts in donor developmental priorities, there was little political support for a scheme that seemed to embody the more general failures of a corrupt and bloated state and a now unfashionably 'top-down' approach (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990; Hart 1980; Obusu-Mensah 1980). Project staff, including town managers, extension workers and welfare officers were laid off, compensation claims were often left unsettled, and support to complete 'core-houses' was largely withdrawn. In many cases houses were abandoned before they were completed, by residents who lacked funds and sought opportunity elsewhere. 'Urban' aspirations were confounded by net outward migration, as lack of economic opportunity led people, particular young men who lacked land, to move to larger towns (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990). Migrant fisher-folk resettled from seasonally occupied villages inundated by



the lake often returned to home towns on the coast (Lawson 1958). Ambitious plans for commercial, mechanized agriculture were abandoned, often before they began, as the new, politically conservative National Patriotic Party government re-allocated land as small plots for 'traditional' subsistence farming. Irrigation plans were abandoned before work started on grounds of feasibility and cost (Hart 1980). Public buildings including schools and clinics often remained un-started or partly completed (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990).

From the 1980s onwards, successive packages of neoliberal reform undertaken as part of the World Bank Structural Adjustment policy further exacerbated state retrenchment throughout Ghana (Brydon and Legge 1996), and was associated with further withdrawal of the state from resettlement communities (Tsikata 2006). While free electricity was a key promise of the Nkrumah plan, most resettlement communities were not connected until the 1990s as part of a rural electrification project. High electricity prices meant that uptake was limited. Most have continued to rely on kerosene and wood as the main energy source for cooking and light. Pipe-borne water, another key promise, remains largely absent. Today the situation in townships is mixed: a general atrophying of state institutions and infrastructure complexly intersects with a range of more specific factors, including proximity to transportation and larger towns, distinct livelihood strategies, differential support from external agencies, and varying forms of ethnic tension. Notwithstanding resulting differences in demographic, economic, social and infrastructural circumstance a broad contrast remains central and salient across the 54 resettlement townships: between the promise of modernisation set out in the plan and a set of circumstances, that, in Diaw's blunt, if simplistic, assessment, 'share the common plight of farmers in remote places all over Africa' (1990: 55). In this context, the architectural and infrastructural remains of the project exist in an un-realised or partially completed form, as 'accidental monuments' (Riegl 1982) to the memory of past plans. The following three sections trace how memories of the plan simultaneously arise from and

dramatize these contemporary circumstances. They focus, respectively, on memories of the promise of ‘Nkrumah’s time’; on the contrasting perspectives of modernity offered by contemporary city life and by the imagined utopia of the settlement as it might have been; and on ambivalent recollections and imaginations of a traditional pre-resettlement past.

### **Remembering the Future: Nkrumah’s time and the nostalgia for modernization**

Almost fifty years after the inception of the project, I speak with Alex, an elderly man resettled to the town of Npakadan in the 1960s, as he shows me his home, a core house given to him at the time of resettlement as compensation for property lost in the move. These pre-fabricated structures took three main forms, each providing a small ‘nucleus’ along with foundations and overhanging roofs intended to facilitate the future development of further rooms (Danby 1970). Provision of partly finished buildings thus anticipated the whole, not only of a completed modern building, but of a fully modern future (Shapiro 2003). As we are talking, the vision of his wife cooking on a charcoal fire at the threshold of the house brings to mind the memory of a promised future: ‘They had to give us a kitchen. That was the plan in Nkrumah’s time. They said they would put up kitchen, bathroom, toilet for every house. But this was not done. So this structure, this toilet, I put it here myself, the kitchen too, I put it there myself, bathroom too myself.’ Structural voids that once anticipated the end point of a modernizing process now literalize its failure (figure 3). His own modest additions index an absence of promised support, and the failure of modernization to arrive.

<image 3>

Later, as he escorts me on a tour of the town, we pause for a moment to take in the scene: an unpaved road, fringed by houses, mostly unfinished and in poor repair, some completely abandoned. Alex explains that in the absence of well paid jobs many people have moved elsewhere. Today the place is occupied by only a thousand or so residents, and can be walked

across in a matter of minutes. Agricultural produce, including yams, cassava and tomatoes, are stacked and stored in rooms that planners intended for expansion as kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms. In places people have constructed makeshift boundary fences, but for the most part the delineated space of the plan, never realized as envisaged, remains only as the memory of a promise. As he takes in the scene, Alex reflects with obvious pathos on what might have been if history had taken a different path:

‘Life would have been really good – happier. Today we would have had an aerodrome, and Nkrumah also thought of making some rail lines from Kpong – many, many good things. The minute Nkrumah died all his plans and all that he wanted to do for the resettlement was stopped... So that is why we are suffering. Other than that, this town would be a very nice town.’

Alex’s invocation of the plan is situated through a specific history of resettlement and his own personal circumstances: located away from the main road, economic opportunity has been limited, out-migration is correspondingly high, and building completion rates low; alive when resettlement took place he remains keenly aware of what was lost.

Beyond these specificities his narrative exemplifies a form of ‘infrastructural imagination’ (Nielsen and Pedersen 2015) more widely pervasive in these communities. Through a range of everyday encounters, existing circumstances are imaginatively juxtaposed with images of the promised possibilities of modernization. Partially completed or entirely absent infrastructures do not prompt recollection of actual people and events (cf. Crang and Travlou 2001; Edensor 2012; Stewart 1996) but of a set of unrealized possibilities and promises. Plans for modernization are both the retrospective memory of a promised future and the prospective anticipation of what still might be.

The un-completed or never started elements of the plan exist as ruins of the future, in the sense that decay and decomposition is experienced relative to an image of what these townships could have been. Through explicit discourses and as a less articulated ‘visual aesthetic of progress’ (Scott 2004: 254), the plan is made imaginatively present, offering visions of social, economic and infrastructural completion that constitute the sense of failure and deficiency. These present absences are encountered through myriad everyday interactions: abandoned houses are understood to index a failure of modernisation, as evidence of a town that has failed to develop; incomplete structures are apprehended as unrealised versions of the modern homes they might have been; bodies are spoken of as a withered versions of the healthy bodies that could have resulted from a more prosperous way of life.

Understandings of infrastructural ruination and material decay have their counterpart in temporal orientations that emerge as negations of linear progress and development. Born in Awura Hae, a small village resettled to New Senchi, *Nana* (‘chief’), moved to Accra to work as a security guard before returning. Now in his sixties, he lives in a small core house, adapted for the purposes of his current role as a locally respected but relatively powerless village sub-chief. By contrast to neighboring houses, the plot is demarcated by a picket fence. By the gate there is a shrine, a conical cement structure with protruding empty beer bottles. Nana refers to the house as a palace (*ahemfi*), a term that conveys its distinctive nature as a locus of chiefly authority and a space of secrecy (McCaskie 1995). The term is also associated with a level of grandeur that highlights through stark contrast the small, decaying nature of the building. Bemoaning the inadequacies of his ‘palace’ for the purposes of an office, Nana connects his impoverished status to the wider problems of the resettlement townships: ‘If we were to be during Nkrumah’s time, by this time here would be very different... We don’t get anything after Nkrumah’s time.’ Imagining a set of circumstances in

which Nkrumah had not been overthrown, he described an alternative developmental trajectory: ‘If it was Nkrumah [still in power], you would find it difficult to enter my palace. You see, I will be growing tall and fine. But now, see, I am poor in everything.’ As he speaks he gestures to himself, as if to highlight his own embodiment of a wider state of poverty: he is wearing a t-shirt that has holes and is heavily worn. Though withered with age, his arms have a sinewy musculature, the literal embodiment of his ongoing dependence on farming.

The utopian terms in which the project’s modernizing aspirations are now routinely recalled resonate with contemporary national discourses in which Nkrumah emerges as a focus of collective nostalgia, arising from disenchantment with the ‘corruption’ of subsequent governments (Hasty 2005) and a pervasive sense of post-colonial developmental failure (Nugent 1996). As in Kilroy-Marac’s account of Senegalese memories of Senghor, nostalgia works retrospectively and prospectively, ‘looping back’ to a hope, that directs itself to a present ‘that was lost before it ever came into being’ (2013: 11) Inhabiting the infrastructural remains of a project that once situated them at the vanguard of national development, resettlers experience the linked senses of developmental failure and high-modern nostalgia in particularly acute terms. Imagining an alternative trajectory in which development occurred according to the modernizing ideals personified by Nkrumah, existing social and infrastructural realities are understood in relation to an alternative parallel present projected from the expectations of the plan: how life would or might have been had the planned modernization occurred.

Recent commentators describe how nostalgia arises as a positive desire for ‘traditional’ pasts, projected from disenchantment with modern progressive time and experiences of rapid change (see for example Berman 2010 [1982]; Boym 2001). As an inversion of this logic, nostalgic yearnings for the modernizing visions of Nkrumah arise as a reflex of the sense of its absence: in Berdahl’s terms (2010; after Stewart 1987) a fluid and open ‘once was’, that

arises from and dramatizes the sense of a static 'now'. Experiences of unwanted temporal stasis, emerge as the presenced absence of the linear, progressive temporality of modernization. Frustrations at a lack of development prompt nostalgic recollections of modernization and the desire to return to a time in which the future seemed open, hopeful and full of promise (compare Boyer 2006).

### **Modernity elsewhere: the city and the utopia**

Planned visions of modernisation are situated alongside contemporary images of modernity, to compound this experience of stasis. Rose moved to Senchi to live with her husband, whose parents were resettled to the township in the 1960s. With two young children, they rent a partly completed house. Electrical wires remain exposed, blockwork unplastered and windows unfitted. She cooks on a solid fuel stove, in the shell of a room intended at some point to house, in her own terms, a 'modern kitchen'. Unsure when, if ever, these plans will be realised, she describes this condition as 'permanently temporary', and connects her domestic situation to problems in the town more generally:

When we Ghanaians go abroad we like it! But here there are no jobs. There is no money. My husband wanted to work at ATL [a large local textiles factory]. He has applied, applied, applied, but he doesn't get work. So he is thinking about getting a job, getting money. Everyone in this town has plans that they want to get money, want to build a house, want to buy a car. But the money is not there.

In a context in which rural migration is common, understandings of life in the capital city constitute another powerful referent to a spatially dislocated modernity (Manuh 2003). Peter, now in his early thirties, spent some time working away in Accra as a mechanic but was forced to return to his family home in the resettlement township of Senchi following the loss of this job:

The abroad of Ghana is Accra. Everything can be found over there. So we the youth prefer living in Accra than here. But you see, if you want to go to Accra, like me here, you have to sit down and analyse the issues – whom am I going to stay with? Where am I going to sleep? What am I going to eat? Because of lack of those things, that's why we are here. But if the opportunity is created for you to go to Accra then it's good. Because those places you can make life. Those places you can make a living. So it isn't our desire, we are not so happy to be here.

Whether or not people actually migrate, understandings of modernity 'there' inflect understandings of its absence 'here', so that, as Dick describes in the context of transnational Mexican migration, 'present life [is refracted] through the prism of possible lives inhabitable somewhere else.' (Dick 2010: 276).

Images of contemporary modernity, and of the past futures of high modern planners, share a temporal logic of rupture and progress that allow for elision and slippage in the ways these are discursively and imaginatively evoked (Dick 2010; Koselleck 2004). While both are drawn into experiences of these spaces as deficient, they entail distinct imaginative possibilities. Images of contemporary modernity locate the temporal opposition between modern and non-modern in various spatial contrasts, so that the presence of modernity 'there' makes evident its absence 'here'. Conversely, the past futures of modernisation are experienced as spatially contiguous but temporally dislocated: modernisation promised, 'then', presences its absence 'now'.

Whether or not people have experienced city life themselves, narratives of urban life celebrate economic possibility, excitement and 'civilisation', alongside a more ambivalent understanding of cities as places that are morally corrupting, lack the support of kin, and in which economic possibilities are heavily constrained. By contrast, existing only as aspiration

and promise, Nkrumahist visions of modernisation carry a heightened sense of imaginative possibility, verging on the utopian, relating to their lack of a tangible referent (compare Boyer 2006; Koselleck 2004). Younger residents share in a positive evaluation of this ideal, even as they lament the older generation's continued preoccupation with this, 'living in the past', as is often remarked, and so unable to imagine futures of more viable kinds.

### **After tradition, before modernity: recalling the pre-resettlement past**

Larkin highlights how in Nigeria senses of temporal stasis are constituted through routine interactions with poorly functioning infrastructures, so that 'even as life speeds up, the experience of technological marginalisation intensifies, and the gap between how fast society is moving and how fast it could move becomes a site of considerable political tension' (2004: 305). In resettlement townships, partly realised, crumbling or non-existent infrastructures are encountered alongside precariously functioning and failing technologies of more recent origin, engendering a similar sense of 'falling behind'. Linked ideas about development and modernization inflect experiences of time as a negation of these: a pervasive sense of temporal stasis and regression arises in this gap between ideal and actuality. Temporally speaking, ruination emerges as the felt sense of anachronism not as the presence of the past in the present (Lucas 2015) but of a present out of kilter with itself: of buildings, infrastructures and circumstances that appear 'behind' where they should have been had expectations materialised.

The absent, partly realised and decaying infrastructures of resettlement are seen as indicative of unrealised modernisation, but also prompt ambivalent reflections on the more 'traditional' ways of life that prevailed prior to the move. Now living in the resettlement town of Senchi, EK (the initials by which he is locally named), a young adult when the move took place, reflects on the changes resettlement has brought:



By that time there were no lorries. There were no communication facilities. There was no development. No post office. No proper road. And farming was with crude implements. We would just weed – weed, weed, weed. There were no tractors: Nothing there!

Ideas about actual or promised modernisation are implicated in negative characterisations of pre-resettlement life as ‘undeveloped’, but also inform a more positive orientation to this time. EK exemplifies a wider ambivalence: ‘Before we had fishing and trapping and hunting. But here things were not like that. Where are you going to weed?’ he asks rhetorically, highlighting the lack of farmland. ‘Where are you going to get grasscutter [a large rodent referred to outside Ghana as the Greater Cane Rat]?’ he implores, recalling a time when bush meat was freely available. For EK, the failures of the plan are compounded by the diminishment of a more ‘traditional’ way of life. Ruptured from the promised futures of modernization, he also feels ruptured from a past that is positively associated with greater freedom, and ‘traditional customs’ now lacking. While things in the present are understood relative to things as they might have been had modernization occurred, contemporary problems are also experienced relative to the possibilities of things as they were in the pre-resettlement ‘traditional’ past.

Younger people share in these narratives of ruin, but are often more willing to see the benefits of the move. Born shortly after resettlement, Emmanuel lives in Accra earning a good wage as a policeman but regularly returns to the resettlement township of Apeguso, where he owns a house and continues to provide material support for relatives in the place he considers his ‘home town’. Though he laments the failure to deliver on Nkrumah’s vision, he is sanguine about the changes resettlement entailed:

In those days the school was far from the villages and the children had to walk about a mile or two before they go to school. But now we have resettled, schools are around us. So those are the benefits we have actually got. Because if we were staying at the old place, I would not have been able to become a policeman. I would have been a farmer or a fisherman. But because we were brought here, everyone's children now go to school. Education is the key to what we have now. So in fact we the youth, we the children, we have benefitted.

He acknowledges the relative poverty of his parents and the personal benefits of resettlement, even as he is also laments the unrealised promises of the plan.

Differences in access to farmland, paid employment and the ability to leverage funds from urban relatives, relate to differential abilities to modify, 'improve' and 'modernise' these houses. Through contemporary interactions, 'the plan' is projected from different resettlement contexts and the myriad circumstances of people now occupying these. Distinct understandings of the problems and possibilities of these spaces are situated through the specific relations drawn by resettlers: between existing material and social conditions and distinct visions of the alternative possibilities of the project's modernising promise.

Experiences of ruination are multiply located, as distinct ways of imagining the gap between these. These differences emerge in more or less sharply differentiated visions in ways that reflect, refract and constitute social difference of various kinds.

In a recent discussion of the temporality of infrastructure, Gupta suggests that 'the temporality of suspension is not between past and future, between beginning and end, but constitutes its own ontic condition just as surely as does completion.' (Gupta n.d. : 2). In the wake of resettlement, mid-century plans are integral to an experience of ruination that engenders a particular temporal orientation: suspension is a permanent, though differently

experienced, ontological state configured as a relation between the promises of a still unrealised plan, and contemporary material and social conditions. Where the developmental timeline is ‘cracked apart’ into its constituent parts (Ferguson 2006) ‘stasis’ is the status of being in-between: the tradition that is lost and the modernisation that has yet to arrive. The last three sections have examined the varieties of experiences of ruination and lost promise. In the next and final ethnographic section, I focus on residents’ active attempts to remedy this situation and the paradoxical interweaving of hope and despair entailed in these efforts.

### **Building the Town: hope, despair and collective effort**

How is the future made in the wake of these collapsed promises? Visions of modernisation are re-animated in the present in various diagnoses of the problems and possibilities of resettlement townships. Widely held ideas about the unfulfilled promises of the plan frame different understandings of who is to blame and what is to be done. Wisdom, a primary school teacher in his early thirties, lives in the resettlement town of Apeguso, in the ‘core house’ he inherited from his parents, migrant fisher folk. In a narrative common amongst his generation, he describes how the problems of the town stem from the actions of this older generation:

You see people who were here and then left for greener pastures. Most of them have forgotten this place. Those who have built their homes and settled there, they don’t care about this place any longer. If they were to have that thinking, ‘I came from there and there are still people living there, so the development of the place is my priority’, then they can come in, organise themselves and contribute.

Many of those resettled to Apeguso were Ewe fishermen with ‘home towns’ in the South East of Ghana to which they returned. Attached to an existing village of Twi speaking Akans, discrimination and ethnic tension are widely reported, most pronounced in the early years but continuing to this day (Yarrow 2011). Wisdom tells me of his own decision to stay and of the need to learn the lessons of these failures:

It is very important to study the past and compare it to the present so that you see where you have fallen short and correct them for development. If you don’t think of the past, you will never progress. It is not just a matter of studying the past and leaving it, you also have to compare it to the future. Then you look at the measures to take so that you see that the future will be very bright.

Hopeful developmental futures continue to be projected from the plan, even in light of discourses that highlight persistent and long-term failure (compare Miyazaki 2004). While post-Nkrumah governments have largely sought to abrogate responsibility for these townships (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990), resettlers continue to make claims on the basis of this history. Efforts to enlist support from NGOs and government agencies take shape through discourses that presence the history of resettlement and the broken promises of the plan. Organisations have been set up to advocate for the rights of resettlement communities. Calls for sanitation, water and repairs to houses are voiced in discourses that recall the ‘sacrifices’ of resettlers and Nkrumah’s claims that nobody would be worse-off as a result of the move.

As well as prompting calls for help, the felt absence of modernisation is connected to a range of personal and collective efforts to improve circumstances within these townships.

Inhabitants of resettlement townships echo narratives common in other parts of southern Ghana (Geest 1998; Yarrow 2011) which connect the act of building or improving a house

with a range of positive virtues. People build to provide a legacy for their children and attach importance to houses as a literalization of a commitment to ‘home-towns’, traced through kin ties. In resettlement townships the moral imperative to build is explicitly configured as an effort to contribute to the collective ‘development’ of the town. Now in his seventies, EK lives in the resettlement township of Senchi. After the move, the house his family was given was too small and many of the children scattered to other parts of Ghana. Recently he returned and through money earned as a cocoa farmer was able to expand the core-house given to him by the government as compensation for possessions and land lost in the move. He described his own building project as part of a trajectory of the town’s development through the successive acts of future generations:

When you are in your town and there is no job, you travel to go and acquire money to come back to develop. So when your children, when they also go, they too acquire land and build. Then the town will be large.

Economic migration is not only understood in terms of personal advancement, but also as a source of wealth through which the whole town benefits (Geest 1998). James spent time working in Somanya, the district capital of Krobo, but recently returned to his home town of Senchi where his parents were resettled. Drawing a contrast to life in Somanya, he describes the ‘backwardness’ of Senchi, highlighting the lack of paved roads and absence of street lighting. Correspondingly, he explains his intention to build there as a contribution to ‘development’:

‘The place is not good, but some people are building their house here, making development...I didn’t build in Somanya because I want my home town to grow. I could build there but I want here to develop.’

Personal acts of building are imagined as part of a broader process of ‘development’ and ‘progress’ that is celebrated as a contribution to the realisation of a more ‘modern’ form of life. Through home-town associations, money and resources are donated by migrants to assist with community development projects, including the construction of schools, bore-holes and efforts to generate local employment.

As a series of interlinked images, mid-century plans intersect with images of urban life in the capital and the West, eliciting efforts to ‘improve’ and providing benchmarks against which the in/adequacy of these are assessed. Lacking electricity, illegal connections are often established. Without money to extend houses in the concrete block-work and corrugated iron that is widely desired, these are built in mud ‘swish’ and thatch. In the absence of money to renovate the decaying fabric of resettlement houses, these are patched up, using whatever materials are available. These improvised alterations may in practice last long periods of time, but are explicitly understood as ‘temporary’. While residents of these townships seek to accommodate themselves to present circumstances as best they can, they remain keenly aware of their failure to bring about the futures they desire. In this context, where the plan is manifestly un-realised and the State almost totally absent, deviations from the spatial regularities of the plan are not in De Certeau’s influential formulation ‘tactics of resistance’(de Certeau 1984). Quite the opposite – they stem from an internalised desire for order, discipline and regularity whose perceived lack leads to lamentation and despair. Ideas of accommodation, locally connoted through the terms of ‘making do’ and ‘managing’, emerge as a recognition of the limitations of their efforts, as inflected by mid-century infrastructural imaginations of different, better futures. Images of planned modernisation animate a negative experience of time and space that is associated with efforts to redress this through ‘development’, but which also prompts a more fatalistic orientation to living with things as they are.

In these resettlement communities narratives of ‘failure’ and despair are common, as a relationship to images of modernisation that are also sources of hope: in the possibility and anticipation of ‘moving on’ or ‘catching up’, even in the knowledge of previous failure to do so (Miyazaki 2006). Elsewhere ruins have been theorised as sites of hope, engendering alternative logics to the hubris of modern time and space (e.g. Dawdy 2010). In post-Soviet Ajara, Pelkmans (2013) foregrounds the imaginatively productive dimensions of ruins, as literally empty spaces that open up sites for the imagination of open futures, and hence for collective hope. Dawdy suggests that ‘...there is hope in ruins, in the suggestion that modernity can be surpassed’ (2010: 777). Situated temporally and conceptually after the fact of modernity ruins draw their socially and imaginatively productive force from their subversive orientation to these. By contrast, the Volta Resettlement Project shows how hope is directed towards the possibility of modernisation itself, in ways that are also powerfully associated with despair at a gap to a future that appears out of reach.

### **Conclusion: re-thinking ruination**

In a recent paper, Howe et. al. propose an important distinction: between ‘infrastructure that has gone to ruin and infrastructure that never was.’ (Howe, et al. 2015). While a considerable literature has focused on the former, accounts of the latter remain scant. In this paper I have sought to trace the distinctive form of ruination that emerges, not as the absence of something which was once present (Buchli 2013; Edensor 2012), but as sense of decay, fragmentation and degradation, relative to the memory of a promised future. In his landmark account, Koselleck traces the emergence of a conception of irreversible, directional time to eighteenth century Europe, as distinct from the cyclical notions of revolution that prevailed to this point. He proposes this ‘appears to unchain a yearned-for future...[which] robs the present of

materiality and actuality' (Koselleck 2004: 23). I have sought to outline forms of immateriality and absence that are likewise configured as a relation to a future image of completion. Here, however, it is not that a shifting present is constantly out-paced by a moving horizon of expectation, as new futures emerge from novel transactional presents. Rather absence is made present as radical incommensurability, in Koselleck's terms: between plans that persist as expectation, because they were never realized and so have no tangible referent in experience. How might these enable a critical reframing of the concept of ruination?

Since the Enlightenment, linked ideas of progress and modernity have existed in complex relation to romantic strands of thinking that attach positive values to the past as embodiments of the irrational and inchoate. In nineteenth century Britain, ruins were venerated as exemplars of the accidental, natural and irregular, as disenchantment with modern rationalism in the form of industrial mechanization grew, most notably through the Arts and Crafts movement and specifically the work of William Morris and John Ruskin (Lowenthal 1985). Building more or less directly on the critical theory of Walter Benjamin (1982), the recent interdisciplinary 'turn to ruins' (Dawdy 2010) marks a departure from these earlier romanticisms, critiquing the reification of ruins as sites for aesthetic contemplation, the preoccupation with remains from the distant past, and the desire to fix and sanitize them (Buchli 2013). Even as this directs attention to ruins of more recent origin, with a distinctive theoretical agenda, a broadly romantic sensibility remains pervasive: in a conceptual antipathy to modern ordering and disciplining, and the corresponding celebration of logics that allude, complicate and question this (Buchli 2013; Pelkmans 2013). Building on Benjamin's Arcades Project (1982), much of this recent work starts from the illusory but given fact of the spectacle of modernity, and looks to ruins, in Gordillo's terms, to highlight 'the critical power of negativity to disintegrate the positivity of the given, of things as they



seem to be, and thereby to undermine any reified fantasy of a complete seamless whole' (2014: 6). Ruins undermine the 'self-deception' (Dawdy 2010) of modern representations of time as linear and progressive. Likewise, material decomposition reveals the conceptual limitations of Cartesian understandings of planned space, and of a western metaphysics of presence. Edensor suggests that ruins, conceptualised as 'rubble', highlight how 'modern attempts to cleanse, banish ambiguity, and order the memory of space are always disturbed by such disorderly spaces and by the ghosts they contain...' (2012: 844).

Much of the recent work on ruination therefore has a critically deconstructive orientation, aiming to highlight the manifest but illusory sense of modern self-representations of time and space. After the fact and critical of modern self-representations of modernity, this deconstructive orientation eclipses the logic of others' practices wherever these are oriented by the felt sense of its lack and of the positive hope of its presence.

The Volta Resettlement Project foregrounds a set of spatial and temporal dynamics that have received little attention in existing work on ruination and enables a critical re-framing of this literature. Where, to paraphrase Gordillo, the 'positivity of the given' (Gordillo 2014) is manifestly not a given, modern representations of time and space exist as self-evidently un-realised ideals, that configure a series of negations. In these circumstances it is not that ruination exposes the hubris of linear time, but that hope in the possibility of 'progress' frames a pervasive sense of stasis and regression (compare Ferguson 2006; Larkin 2004).

Crumbling infrastructures do not elicit the memory of people and places that once existed and have now gone (Edensor 2012; Gordillo 2014; Navaro-Yashin 2007; Schwenkel 2013), but of a promise of what might have been. Un-realised plans are associated with a bifurcated experience of time, whereby the present is shadowed by images of things as they might have been had modernization occurred. Nostalgia, does not take the form of the longing for a static

‘traditional’ past from the perspective of a ‘progressive’ present (Boym 2001), but of the melancholic recollection of an earlier progressive promise in conditions of apparent temporal stasis. Ruination in these conditions involves a series of temporal negations that are linked to a distinctive experience of space. In the remains of resettlement, ruination is not a process by which the manifestly whole forms of an earlier modernity are decomposed, exposed and surpassed; it emerges, instead, as a pervasive and self-evident sense of the fragmentary nature of built environments and lives, when seen through the lens of promised plans.

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<sup>i</sup> The paper builds on two periods of ethnographic research, totalling four months undertaken in 2007-8. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews focused mainly on the resettlement Townships of Apeguso, Senchi and Npakadan, all located towards the South of Lake Akosombo but with contrasting ethnic composition and resettlement histories. In order to trace the historical development of the plan, archival research was undertaken at the Volta River Authority archives in Tema.

<sup>ii</sup> 'Editorial: The Giant Monument Rises', *Ghanaian Times*, Thursday 21st Feb 1963.

<sup>iii</sup> 'Volta: Gateway to the Future', *The Cooperator*, February 1962

<sup>iv</sup> 'Editorial: Our Faith', *Ghanaian Times*, January 24 1966, p5