

Editorial

Millennium City: Different Shades of Green

One hundred square kilometers of prime real estate on the Atlantic coast, not too far from cosmopolitan Accra in Ghana is a place dedicated to what is reputedly Africa's first planned "green" sustainable city, better known as the "Millennium City." Cities such as Ile-Ife, in Nigeria, Djenné in Mali, and Mogadishu in Somalia are reputed to have been inhabited continuously for the past several centuries; therefore it is doubtful that whatever becomes of the new Millennium City, it cannot possibly be the first African city to be "sustainable," to optimize "recycling," or to depend on "renewable" energy sources. In fact these features of the new green revolution and sustainable development may have been invented in African villages where self-sufficiency and repeated utilization of locally available resources have not been optional.

But how do we build environmental sustainability into the behavior of people inhabiting cities of one million or more people, densely packed, with astounding gaps between the affluent and the destitute? Accra is a "new" city, built a century ago to accommodate half a million people. Presently at 3 million inhabitants, and growing, the city is estimated to have more than half a million people in desperate need of housing. The situation in "neighboring" cities such as Lagos is more desperate. Anyone who questions the need for major urban reform in Africa should see the documentary entitled "Lagos" by acclaimed architect Rem Koolhaas¹. In a seminar entitled "*Dilemmas in the evolution of the city*" presented to the British Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in January 2006, Koolhaas stated that:

"We all know about the statistics which state that the city has become the dominant environment in which people live. At the moment of this triumph, our thinking has stopped, and the public sector's participation in the definition of cities has diminished."

And he went on to say specifically about Lagos:

"Lagos is an incredibly dense, but structured city; it is also clear that people living there have a much wider range and repertoire of possibilities and expression."

The group working to develop Millennium City near Accra know too well of the repertoire of possibilities and expression, but very little seems "home grown" or to utilize rich indigenous knowledge. The principal architect of the project, Gary Heathcoate who lives in California, and how has established an African presence by participating in the design of Abuja, Nigeria, says the following about the Millennium City project in Ghana:

"We want to make this a self-sustaining community that will not have to depend on the government's resources. Although a price tag has not been attached to Millennium City, it is expected to be in the billions of dollars, and the project could take 15 to 20 years to complete."

Water desalination, solid waste incineration, and solar panels for energy generation are part of the "green" strategies for Accra's Millennium City². If realized, this dream city promises to be a rather costly boon for the local environment.

The "new" Millennium City planned by real estate developers and investors is somewhat different from the designation of "old" Accra as part of the "Millennium Cities Initiative" (MCI) sponsored by the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York City. The MCI aims to assist cities in sub-Saharan cities to attain the United Nations Millennium Development Goals by 2015³. Here, the city will not be constructed of brick and mortar, but of research and policy analysis. . As Jeffrey Sachs, director of the project said: "*We are on the ideas side.*"⁴ And MCI promises to tap into indigenous knowledge by developing partnerships and investors to stimulate local economy and stabilize social infrastructures.

Concrete ideas meet concrete bricks. These are different shades of green development. Hopefully the two projects will find opportunities to converge, rather than spreading scarce resources too thin over two different "Accra cities." As

¹ Lagos/Koolhaas: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d08QX83dpyE>

² Millennium City – Century 21, Ghana: <http://millenniumcitygh.com/global/>

³ <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

⁴ Ghana News Agency: "Accra declared millennium city" http://www.ghananewsagency.org/s_social/r_11410/

the Mayor of Accra, Dr. Alfred Oko Vanderpuije said in January 2010:

"The new Accra is to see the end of further slum development while existing slums would be upgraded. Although it would affect some people....we call for cooperation."

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