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Citation (APA)
Franceschini, C., & Hanna, J. M. K. (2026). The Future is Always on the Other Side: A Visual Ethnography of Uneven Infrastructure Development in Ghana and Morocco. *Footprint*, *20*(1), 133-152.

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The Future is Always on the Other Side: A Visual Ethnography of Uneven Infrastructure Development in Ghana and Morocco

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How to cite

Franceschini C. and Hanna J., 'The Future is Always on the Other Side: A Visual Ethnography of Uneven Infrastructure Development in Ghana and Morocco', *Footprint* 38 (2026): 133-152, https://doi.org/10.59490/footprint.20.1.8820

Submitted 2 December 2024

Revised 1 December 2025

Accepted 19 May 2026

Published 30 September 2026

Abstract

This visual essay builds on collaborative and interdisciplinary research on infrastructure development as part of the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus project 'Sea-ing Africa: Tracing Legacies and Engaging Future Promises of "Big" Infrastructure Projects in Port City Regions in Ghana and Morocco', as well as on Costanza Franceschini's long-term ethnographic research on Sino-African infrastructural entanglements. The photographs were captured during four fieldwork trips to Morocco and Ghana between February 2023 and May 2025, and portray some of the infrastructures that are the object of our study and the subject of discussion with our research interlocutors. The analysis of infrastructure development as a socio-political terrain characterised by disconnection, suspension, incompleteness and disruption suggests that, rather than engendering distrust in a specific developmental model, infrastructural unevenness produces a constant mechanism of temporal shift, in which the future promised and dreamed of is perpetually out of reach.

Keywords

Infrastructure, uneven development, future, visual ethnography, Ghana, Morocco

One sentence summary

The visual essay illustrates how uneven infrastructure projects – marked by disconnection, suspension, incompleteness and disruption – produce a continuous temporal shift, keeping the promised and dreamed future perpetually out of reach.

ISSN: 1875-1504
p-1875-1490 e-1875-1504

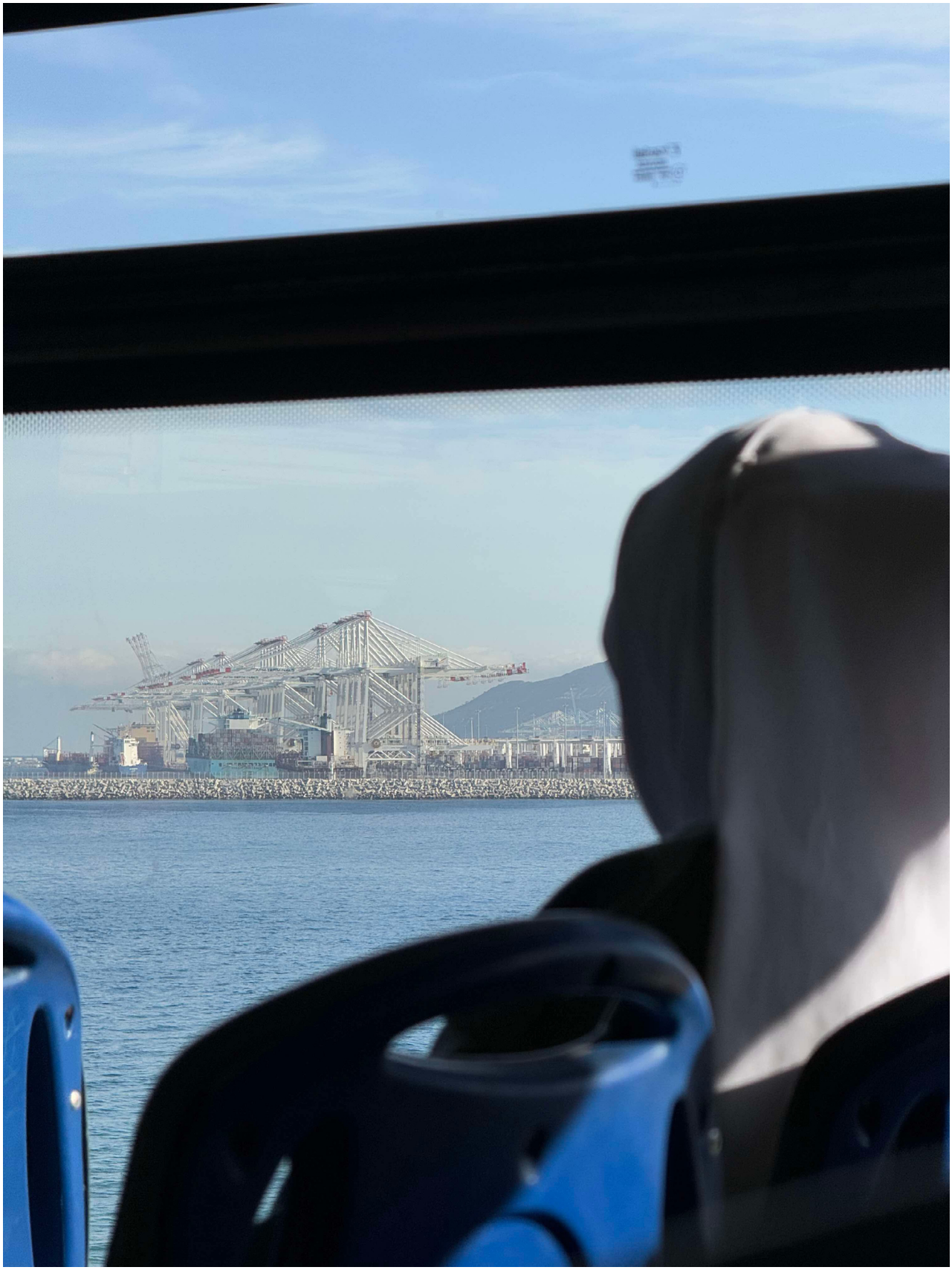
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Infrastructural Dreams

Modernity, in other words, is, on this account,
always already displaced and deferred:
it is always on the other side of the river,
or up the stream – or up in the sky.
– Saree Makdisi, 'Postcolonial Literature in a Neocolonial World'[1]

Infrastructures are inherently associated with promises of development and modernity, thereby shaping visions and imaginaries of the future.[2] This sense of possibility is often anchored in material objects typically made of stone, bricks, concrete or steel.[3] When these infrastructures exceed a specific scale, embody distinct aesthetics or introduce new technological or construction practices, they also become physical and embodied icons that mediate values related to progress and advancement.[4] In contexts such as Ghana and Morocco (which are the topic of this essay), this sense of possibility plays a significant role, where it is often intertwined with Western forms and dreams of modernity. In these contexts, visions of development and the future emerge from a combination of global imaginaries and the demands for access to specific material conditions.[5] These idealised and grandiose visions are typically engendered by political discourses, which frequently utilise the promise of infrastructure, particularly highly visible projects such as transport infrastructure, as a central tenet of their electoral campaigns and political consensus.

Fig. 1: Tangier Med Port, Morocco, January 2025. Photo: John Hanna.



The politicisation of infrastructural development is not confined to African countries or the Global South; it is also pervasive in countries of the Global North, where iconic projects become the focus of metaphorical expressions of unrealistic aspirations, but also a site for contention.[6] While the promise of infrastructure is often associated with the creation of employment opportunities, economic growth and enhanced living conditions, the actualisation of such projects routinely deviates from these expectations. Such deviations tend to result in a disconnection between infrastructural projects and the people that use or operate them. This disconnection can manifest in different forms such as misaligned priorities, limited accessibility (seen in figure 3), or the disproportionality of infrastructural projects in relation to the human scale.

At a political level, the construction of infrastructure – often used as a bargaining tool to obtain votes and consensus and promote a certain idea of development and modernity – can be a double-edged sword, since infrastructures arouse not only consensus but also discontent, indignation and conflicts. In response to a news article reporting the former Ghanaian president's speech announcing all the infrastructure projects realised by the NPP government between 2017 and 2022 and posted on the Ministry of Roads and Highways' Facebook page on 8 March 2023, for instance, a user commented: 'Under Mahama [the former president] NPP Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo said we don't eat roads, but now do we eat roads'[7]. This is only one example of statements that contrast new infrastructure with empty stomachs or dire living conditions, highlighting the critical role that infrastructure plays in political life and showing how infrastructure projects can easily turn from instruments of consent to symbols of protest. Moreover, the use of metaphors associated with stomachs and eating echoes what Jean-François Bayart describes as the 'politics of the belly'.[8] As he claims, in many African countries, 'both politicians and their fellow citizens share a particular governmentality together with the imaginary figures of power that are part and parcel of it … a system of power-through-eating'.

Fig. 2: Casablanca Port, Morocco, January 2025. Photo: John Hanna.



Similarly, in September 2025, following the deaths of eight women in a maternity ward in Agadir, protests erupted, exposing deep fractures in Morocco's infrastructural politics.[9] A movement led by a group called Gen Z 212 emerged, demanding that the government prioritise accessible public healthcare, affordable housing and improved public transport over other types of monumental infrastructure projects, such as the construction of stadiums. Morocco is currently preparing to co-host the 2030 World Cup and is building what is set to become the world's largest football stadium.[10] However, according to citizens, this stands in stark contrast to the absence of basic services and essential needs. Through slogans such as 'No World Cup, health comes first' and 'We want hospitals, not football stadiums', protesters highlight how decisions about which infrastructures are prioritised – and for whom – are deeply political.[11]

Broken Promises

Infrastructures are often unnoticed when they deliver, while their breakdown or partial realisation is what makes them strongly visible.[12] In many cases, infrastructures become subject to a 'politics of suspension'.[13] Their temporal or permanent status of incompleteness, which leaves them unbuilt and unfinished, illustrates how the unevenness of infrastructure development is intrinsically connected to neoliberalism and the relationship between capital, state and labour forces.[14] Indeed, unevenness is often caused by the fact that the promise of infrastructure is, in practice, economically unsustainable.[15] While the inability of states and governments to finance or repay the promised infrastructure, which leads to suspension, is to the detriment of citizens and workers employed in the infrastructure development sector, it simultaneously fuels alternative financial flows through credit and debt restructuring schemes that benefit banks, credit institutions and large multinationals.

Fig. 3: Tangier Med Port, Morocco, February 2023. Photo: John Hanna.





Fig. 4: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, September 2022. Photo: Costanza Franceschini.



Fig. 5: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, 5 February 2025. Photo: Costanza Franceschini.



Fig. 6: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, 5 February 2025. Photo: Costanza Franceschini.



Fig. 7: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, January 2024. Photo: John Hanna.

The Takoradi interchange project in the twin city of Sekondi-Takoradi has been a point of heightened interest and debate among the city's residents and Ghanaian citizens more broadly. The project was financed through a contentious barter deal, signed in July 2018, between the Chinese state-owned company Sinohydro and the government of Ghana. This agreement stipulated the construction of a series of transport infrastructures by the Chinese company in exchange for Ghanaian raw bauxite worth two billion dollars.[16] However, the construction of these infrastructures has been hindered since Ghana defaulted on its external debt obligations in December 2022.[17] The government of Ghana is currently in the process of restructuring its debt and attempting to reach an agreement on the repayment of the infrastructure already constructed by Sinohydro between 2020 and 2022, which has not yet been repaid through mineral resources or other means.

Following the initial suspension of construction work in January 2023, which led to a critical breakdown of the road network in the vicinity of the site, Sinohydro consented to complete a section of the work to alleviate traffic congestion around the newly constructed interchange. However, the subsequent dismantling of the scaffolding, signifying the company's departure from the site and leaving behind a suspended bridge leading nowhere, made the situation more complex. The promise of infrastructure and development around which the local public discourse had been shaped in preceding years, was broken.[18] Clearly, this promise as shaped in discourse and political campaigns was not only about assemblages of concrete, steel and asphalt, but about a new regional identity, shaped by aspirations for gaining ground or even progressing beyond other Ghanaian regions.[19] Not only was the interchange never completed, but connectivity and mobility were never improved either. Today, the half-built structure stands as both a marker of failure and a reminder of a half-lived dream.

Fig. 8: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, January 2024.Photo: John Hanna.


中国水电
SINOHYDRO

The future is always on the other side

Comments on videos and social media posts depicting Sinohydro dismantling the construction site of the Takoradi interchange echo those of our research interlocutors, who claim that the newly installed government, instead of completing ongoing projects, immediately began promising and commissioning new ones.[20] This demonstrates how, in contexts of visible failure and disruption, the promise of infrastructure-led modernity is neither denied or abandoned: it only takes on new forms. This phenomenon was observed not only in the political sphere but also among numerous residents in Takoradi and across other areas of Ghana where the research was conducted.

In Axim, a small coastal town located near Takoradi in the Western Region of Ghana, for instance, many interlocutors exhibited a temporal shift in perspective regarding the expected associated benefits derived from infrastructure development projects, reallocating these expectations from existing – and failed – infrastructure projects and associating them with new infrastructural development plans. At the end of January 2025 Costanza Franceschini, one of the two authors, returned to some of the coastal infrastructure development projects she had been researching over the past four years, eager to learn of their afterlife.[21] Some fishermen and local residents accompanied her, demonstrating some of the problems the project encountered. These included: the challenge of access for canoes within the harbour, the difficulty for fishermen to access the sea where the breakwater was too high, and the lack of sewerage and water drainage systems near the new protective barrier.

After walking through the infrastructuralised landscape and a detailed discussion reiterating the impact of the projects on local fishermen, some people began to describe, with great optimism, a proposed sea defence that they had heard was about to be built.

They expressed confidence in the proposal, with the expectation that it would bring tangible benefits to the community. This sentiment appeared to contrast with their perceptions of the existing failed infrastructure. In the days following that visit, other residents and the chief fisherman mentioned the same project, which appeared to be the focus of all the community's hopes and expectations for future development.

Fig. 9: Sea defence, Axim, Ghana, 30 January 2025. Photo: Costanza Franceschini.



Such shifts and the constant reallocation of expectations can also be observed elsewhere. In Morocco, while some communities have yet to experience the economic benefits of mega-projects like the Port of Tangier Med and the high-speed rail connection (TGV), attention is already turning to the anticipated economic impact of the 2030 Football World Cup and the proposed tunnel between Tangier and Paloma, Spain.[22]

The complicated dynamics surrounding the implementation of mega-infrastructure projects in the Global South, often marked by incomplete realisation, failure to serve the originally targeted communities, or continuous shifts towards newer projects, highlight how their development extends far beyond technical concerns. These projects are frequently entangled in complex issues involving financial structures,midentity-building, shifting alliances, changing governments, local infrastructural politics, competing priorities, sensitivity to global economic and geo-political conditions, or weak economic resilience.[23] These dynamics suggest that mega-infrastructure projects in the Global South cannot be understood merely as means of service provision or economic growth, nor should they be read only through their failure to deliver at a specific moment or against closed and solid timelines. Instead, the development of mega-infrastructure projects needs to be approached as an open-ended process requiring attention to issues such as anticipation, endurance, and the ongoing negotiation of dreams, aspirations, and claims over space and time.

Fig. 10: Rabat, Morocco, January 2025. Photo: John Hanna.



Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research was funded by the LDE Global and LUF Impulse Grants for the project 'Sea-ing Africa: Tracing Legacies and Engaging Future Promises of "Big" Infrastructure Projects in Port City Regions in Ghana and Morocco'.

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Biography

Costanza Franceschini is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University. Her research focuses on the ethnographic study of Africa-China and Ghana-China relations, with a particular attention to Sino-African infrastructural entanglements, the localisation strategies of Chinese firms, and everyday Afro-Chinese encounters, labour relations, linguistic formations and brokerage practices.

John Hanna is an architect, lecturer and researcher. His research addresses the spatiality of urban conflicts with a focus on Paris and Beirut. John’s wider research interests include Mediterranean and Red Sea port cities, quarantine spaces, architecture and literature, and urban histories of Africa and the Middle East, particularly in relation to colonialism and nationalism.