

# Ghanaian Tropical Modernism between Adaptation and Control: **The Case of Accra's Community Centre**



**Aldo Mario Nozza**

AR2A011 Architectural History Thesis

Tutor - Serah Calitz

4479 words

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	3
<b>Introduction</b>	4
<b>Section 1</b>	7
<b>Ghana between the 1948 Riots and Independence</b>	
Colonialism in the Gold Coast	9
Social and economic issues in the 1940s	10
The 1948 riots and government response	12
<b>Section 2</b>	14
<b>British Colonial Architecture and Local Adaptations in Ghana</b>	
The Community Centre's Design	15
Accra's Community Centre in the British Colonial Agenda	18
The Role of Tropical Modernism in Ghana	19
Ghanaian Local Typologies and Their Influence on British Colonialist Buildings	21
<b>Section 3</b>	23
<b>Architecture and Social Re-education through the lenses of Accra's Community Centre</b>	
Ghanaian Societal Structure	24
Architecture as Infrastructure for Social Control	25
<b>Conclusion</b>	29
<b>Bibliography</b>	32
<b>Image References</b>	34

# Ghanaian Tropical Modernism between Adaptation and Control: The Case of Accra's Community Centre

## Keywords

Colonial Social Engineering, Accra Community Centre, Tropical Modernism, Ghana

This study examines the dual role of Tropical Modernism in colonial and postcolonial Ghana through Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry's 1951 Accra Community Centre. Constructed in response to the 1948 anti-colonial riots, the Centre embodied Britain's strategy to reassert control via architectural interventions. Blending modernist functionality with climate-responsive design, its spatial hierarchy camouflaged colonial dominance under the guise of civic progress. Archival plans and colonial records reveal how the Centre's layout enforced social divisions, marginalising local agency while projecting Eurocentric modernity. Post-independence, Kwame Nkrumah's government repurposed the site as the Young Pioneer Centre, transforming its colonial infrastructure into a tool for nationalist ideology. This duality underscores Tropical Modernism's entanglement with power: initially a vehicle for imperial control, later adapted to assert African sovereignty. Drawing on critiques by scholars like Iain Jackson and Ola Uduku, the paper positions the Centre as a battleground for political ideologies, where architecture mediated colonial governance and postcolonial nation-building. By analysing its design, socio-political context, and legacy, the study illuminates how built environments function as instruments of social engineering, shaping identities and hierarchies across regimes. The findings contribute to broader discourses on colonial architecture's enduring impact on urban landscapes and cultural negotiation in the Global South.

## Introduction

Understanding societal transformations requires an analysis of the pivotal moments that drive change. In the context of Ghana, the British colonial project, which began in the late 19th century, reflected a distorted version of itself through the imposition of colonial structures. This imposition of British culture, ideologies, and practices systematically erased Ghanaian cultural identity, serving as a tool of oppression and control (Boateng, 1978). Such colonial processes are not unique to Ghana; similar patterns of domination are evident across Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. The colonial agenda fundamentally reshaped the economic, social, and spatial conditions of these regions, also leaving a lasting impact on their built environments.

Tropical Modernism, while introduced in various colonised nations, stands as one of the most significant architectural expressions of colonial and post-colonial identity within Ghana's architectural heritage. Emerging in the mid-20th century under British rule, this style initially served colonial agendas through climate-responsive designs prioritising European comfort in tropical environments. However, following Ghana's independence in 1957, the newly sovereign state strategically reclaimed Tropical Modernism as a symbol of progress and national identity, transforming it into an architectural language of decolonisation. British architects Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry played a key role in defining the principles of the style through projects such as the University of Ghana (1949–1961). The parallels with other Indian and South American manifestations of Tropical Modernism are striking. Yet, Drew and Fry's work, while rooted in colonial governance, provided a unique framework that post-independence Ghana adapted to assert its modernity, charting a distinct path unlike that of other colonised nations.

As scholar Iain Jackson notes in *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence* (2023), the style became "*a battleground for political ideologies*", blending colonial-era technical innovation with African agency. Similarly, Hannah Le Roux highlights how Ghanaian policymakers and architects reinterpreted these structures to "*straddle global modernity and local traditions*" (Le Roux, 2003), as seen in public buildings like the Accra Community Centre. While Drew and Fry exported their designs across British colonies, including India and Nigeria, Ghana's appropriation of Tropical Modernism uniquely reflected its Pan-African aspirations under Kwame Nkrumah.

The style's duality, as both a colonial tool and a postcolonial emblem, underscores its embedded power dynamics. For instance, Drew herself acknowledged the tension, stating: "*We sought to build for the tropics, but*



Figure 1: Accra Community Centre, film capture of the video "Inside mid-century Tropical Modernist architecture", V&A Museum Archive, 2024

*it was Ghana who taught us how to build with the tropics".* (Drew, Fry, 1964)  
This shift mirrors broader Global South movements, such as Indian architect Charles Correa's critical regionalism, yet remains distinct in its socio-political context.

The transitional period from the colonised Gold Coast to the independent Ghana was significantly influenced by political shifts. As nationalist movements gained traction, the British sought to maintain control through infrastructural investments framed as social welfare initiatives, such as community centres, tribunals, police stations, and educational facilities. Notably, these facilities were also intended to function as mechanisms of political governance (British Colonial Office, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast, 1948). Accra's Community Centre, designed by Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry in 1948 and completed in 1951, was part of this broader strategy and was constructed in response to the violent 1948 riots led by Kwame Nkrumah's independence movement, as stated in George Padmore's "Facts Behind the Gold Coast Riots" (1948), which details these political tensions and the colonial administration's strategies to suppress nationalist aspirations.

In Accra, the city's morphology reflects the enduring influence of Western colonialism, revealing an urban landscape shaped by control and governance, as documented in various British Colonial Office reports (1843–1957). A case in point is the East Ussher Town neighbourhood, planned by British urbanists to accommodate newly established government facilities.

Within this framework, the Community Centre functioned as an architectural instrument of colonial administration. Therefore, this research positions the Centre as a focal point for analysing broader societal shifts, political agendas, and architectural implementations during Ghana's transition to independence. The photographer Iwan Baan and researcher Alexia Webster (*African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence: Ghana, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia*, 2005) have explored the links between architecture and independence, yet this thesis introduces a new perspective by examining architecture not merely as a physical artefact but as an active medium of political mediation and cultural negotiation.

British publisher and editor Peter du Satoy observed that "*a community centre [...] established exactly on the British pattern is likely not to be patronised in an African village [...]. A village hall, however [...] fits into the pattern much more closely, reiterating local culture.*" (*Community Development in Ghana 1958*) His insight underscores the incompatibility between British colonial and Ghanaian socio-cultural frameworks. Ola Uduku further critiques the Centre as "*a tool for pacification*" in the unstable pre-independence era. (V&A Museum Archive, 2024)

This paper commences by examining the historical context of Ghana, with a focus on the early colonial periods and the resulting political instability that accompanied the nation's path to independence. It further investigates the colonial office's strategies for mitigating this instability. In addition, the research highlights Accra's Community Centre as a pivotal instrument of colonial social engineering. This analysis will be framed within the broader discourse on colonial and post-colonial architecture, thereby contributing to existing scholarship on the influence of architecture in social transformation and cultural negotiation. Finally, the study explores the demographic makeup of Ghanaian society and examines how colonial architecture influenced the formation of social roles.

## Section 1

# Ghana between the 1948 Riots and Independence

<b>1471</b> —	The Portuguese first arrive on the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana), marking the beginning of European interest in the region.
<b>1670s</b> —	The British establish trading forts and begin active involvement in the slave trade.
<b>1821</b> —	The British government formally takes control of the Gold Coast after decades of British traders' influence. The region becomes a British colony.
<b>1874</b> —	The British officially declare the Gold Coast a crown colony. This marks the start of direct British rule over the area.
<b>1900s</b> —	The Ashanti War (also called the Yaa Asantewaa War) occurs. The British defeat the Ashanti Empire, effectively bringing the Ashanti Kingdom under British control.
<b>1930s</b> —	The rise of educated elite and early nationalist movements, particularly led by individuals like Kwame Nkrumah, begins to challenge British colonial control.
<b>1947</b> —	The United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), the first political party in Ghana, is formed with the aim of achieving self-government. Kwame Nkrumah becomes a key figure in this movement.
<b>1948</b> —	The 1948 Accra Riots, spurred by protests over economic conditions, lead to the British authorities suppressing the nationalist movement. However, this event strengthens the resolve of those seeking independence.
<b>1951</b> —	Kwame Nkrumah is elected Leader of Government Business (Prime Minister) after leading the newly formed Convention People's Party (CPP) to victory in elections. The Community Centre is inaugurated.
<b>1954</b> —	The Gold Coast gains full self-government, though Britain still retains control over foreign affairs and defense.
<b>1957</b> —	Ghana becomes the first African nation to gain independence from colonial rule, with Kwame Nkrumah as its first Prime Minister. The country is renamed Ghana, after the ancient Ghana Empire.

## Colonialism in the Gold Coast

To understand how Accra's Community Centre evolved in Ghana between two significant moments in the country's history, it is important to examine the historical and social context that transformed the Gold Coast, a British colony, into the first independent African nation.

The Gold Coast, present-day Ghana, was first colonised by the Portuguese in the late 15th century. In 1482, the latter established Elmina Castle as a key hub for the transatlantic slave trade. Over the following centuries, the Dutch, Danes, and Swedes also claimed parts of the region, laying out the foundations for Accra's centre and other coastal settlements (Gocking, 2005). Eventually, by the 19th century, Britain had asserted full control over the region, consolidating its rule in 1874 with the creation of the Gold Coast Colony (Boahen, 1975).

British colonial rule profoundly reshaped the economy through the 19th century, creating significant disparities that favoured European interests. Although the region was rich in natural resources, particularly gold and cocoa, economic policies prioritised British trade networks, extracting wealth while restricting local reinvestment. The gold mining sector, largely dominated by European firms, received substantial government backing. However, most of its profits were repatriated to Britain, contributing little to the local economy (Boateng, 1978). In contrast, the cocoa industry, pioneered by African farmers, faced neglect and regulatory challenges, despite becoming the colony's economic backbone (Akurang-Parry, 2010).

Infrastructure projects, particularly railways, were developed mainly to facilitate the export of raw materials rather than promote local trade. This deepened economic dependence on Britain and marginalised African producers. Furthermore, colonial policies failed to support internal commerce, leaving vast regions, especially the North, underdeveloped and economically isolated (Hymer, 1969).

## Social and economic issues in the 1940s

Between the 1920s and 1930s, the Gold Coast experienced rising social and economic disparities. Exacerbated by the collapse of global commodity prices during the Great Depression, the Gold Coast's export-dependent economy was crippled (Austin, 2005). The colonial administration prioritised extractive industries like gold and timber while neglecting investments in education, healthcare, or diversified agriculture. This left the region structurally unprepared to compete with Europe's industrial boom, as skilled labour and infrastructure remained underdeveloped. African farmers and entrepreneurs faced systemic barriers, including land alienation policies and restricted access to credit, which concentrated wealth among European firms and a small African elite (Austin, 2005).

After 1940, while conditions began to improve superficially thanks to post-war British investments under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (1940), colonial policies continued to obstruct equitable local development, causing widespread frustration. For instance, the government initiated new infrastructure projects, such as railway expansions and port upgrades,



Figure 2: Cocoa drying station, 1932, Basel Mission Archives

especially in the southern regions; however, these primarily facilitated resource extraction for export rather than promoting sustainable growth or local industrialisation (Hymer, 1969). Cocoa cultivation remained the primary economic activity which deeply influenced the development of cultivation settlements in the Gold Coast, as exemplified by **Figure 2**. Yet the colonial administration exploited farmers through fixed pricing schemes and heavy taxation via the Cocoa Marketing Board, established in 1939 to monopolise profits (Hopkins, 1973). This practice diverted an estimated 70% of cocoa revenue to colonial coffers, stifling African capital accumulation and business expansion (Ward, 1983). Combined with persistent underinvestment in social services, these policies deepened anti-colonial grievances, laying the groundwork for postwar nationalist movements (Gocking, 2005).

Meanwhile, British authorities neglected to address the escalating economic inequalities, especially in rural areas. Education and healthcare faced severe underfunding, leaving a substantial portion of the population in poverty. The North continued to operate primarily as a labour reserve for mines, while in the South, both the capital, Accra, and Sekondi Takoradi, the second biggest city, fuelled economic expansion by hosting colonial bank offices and central government buildings (Akurang-Parry, 2010).

The economic hardships imposed by colonial rule, combined with growing nationalist sentiments and frustrations over British economic exploitation, resulted in increasing unrest. By the late 1940s, ex-servicemen returning from World War II faced high unemployment rates and felt betrayed by the colonial government, which had promised economic opportunities that never materialised. Their discontent, along with widespread dissatisfaction over high taxation, low wages, and food shortages, culminated in a series of harsh riots in every big settlement, especially in the capital, Accra (Padmore, 1948).

## The 1948 Riots and the Government Response

The Accra Riots of 1948 marked a pivotal moment in the Gold Coast's colonial history, revealing the deep fractures in British rule and leaving a lasting imprint on both the social and physical landscape of Accra. The unrest began when colonial police shot and killed unarmed ex-servicemen protesting unfair pensions, igniting widespread demonstrations across the city (Arnold, 2019). The riots shown in **Figure 3** were not merely a spontaneous outburst of anger but rather a manifestation of long-standing economic frustrations, racial discrimination, and political exclusion under British rule (British Colonial Office, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast, 1948)

The ensuing violence involved widespread looting and the targeting of European-owned businesses, government buildings, and symbols of colonial authority, reflecting the growing resentment towards British economic dominance and urban segregation policies (Arnold, 2019). Socially, the riots shattered the illusion of colonial stability, uniting various social classes, such as workers, traders, and intellectuals, under a common nationalist cause, accelerating demands for self-ruling and fuelling anti-colonial movements.

In response to the situation, British authorities aimed to reestablish control not through political reforms, but through architectural and urban projects



Figure 3: People protesting in Accra in front of Fort James, Ghana, 1948, The Internet Archive

intended to maintain order. They fortified government buildings, expanded police barracks, and implemented urban planning modifications to enhance surveillance and regulate movement throughout the city (Ward, 1983).

The riots intensified colonial anxieties concerning the spatial organisation of Accra, prompting initiatives aimed at further segregating European and African communities.

Although these measures sought to consolidate British dominance, they unwittingly stirred nationalist resistance, illustrating a preference for colonial security over the legitimate grievances of the populace. Consequently, the riots and their aftermath underscored the limitations of colonial governance, suggesting that British rule on the Gold Coast was becoming increasingly untenable (Boahen, 1987). Within this context, the government prepared the groundwork for future community-oriented colonial initiatives. This process eventually culminated in the establishment of a series of community centres, such as Accra's, in 1951, designed by Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry. However, this centre did not represent unity; rather, it functioned as a mechanism for re-education, aimed at reinforcing colonial narratives and maintaining control over the Ghanaian population amid escalating colonial tensions (Du Sautoy, 1958).

## Section 2

# British Colonial Architecture and Local Adaptations in Ghana

## The Community Centre's Design

The architectural design of Accra's Community Centre reflected the intersection of colonial control and modernisation, blending rigid symmetry with functional openness to convey both authority and accessibility. Its layout revolved around three core elements: a central hall seating approximately one hundred people, flanked by two courtyards.

The northern courtyard, designated as the formal entrance, featured a reflective pond, a lime tree planted during the opening ceremony by Governor Arden-Clarke, and pavement of local marble—a curated aesthetic meant to evoke order and “civilised” tranquillity (Njoh, 2007). In contrast, the southern service courtyard accommodated a secondary entrance for staff and children, reinforcing spatial hierarchies through segregated access. Surrounding the northern courtyard were reading rooms, a cafeteria (linked to the kitchen), administrative offices, and toiletry spaces, while the southern courtyard housed spaces for local commerce, children's reception areas, and a women's committee wing with dedicated facilities. This bifurcation clearly mirrored colonial social divisions, separating public leisure from labour and governance (Evenson, 1973).

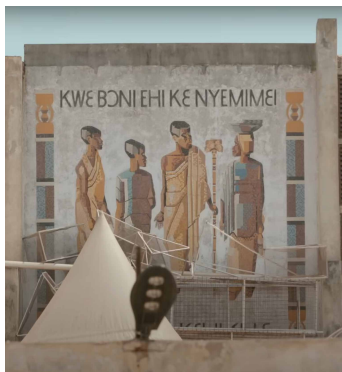


Figure 4-5: Kofi Antubam mosaic over the main entrance of the Community Centre, Accra, Video capture, 2024, V&A Museum Archive

Overlooking the northern courtyard and covering the entrance's double height, as shown in **Figure 4-5**, a mosaic created by Ghanaian artist Kofi Antubam depicts four figures in traditional garments stylistically similar to Russian Socialist representations of the same period. Antubam, educated under Russian émigré artist Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz at the West African Institute of Industries, Arts and Social Science at Achimota, as well as at Goldsmiths, London, treated the elevation as a giant 'canvas' for this mosaic mural. The mural features an inscription in traditional Ga: "It is good we live together as friends and one people," capturing the spirit of unity that the Community Centre was designed to promote.

As Evenson (1973) notes, key features such as the hall's raised platform, brise-soleil shading, and geometric landscaping emphasised discipline, while the symmetrical layout mirrored British civic architecture to project institutional gravitas. Archival plans in **Figure 6** reveal how this vision materialised: the central hall and administrative wings were elevated on a concrete plinth disguised as traditional earth-block construction—a material sleight-of-hand that masked modernity beneath a veneer of local familiarity (Fuller, 2014). Yet this appearance of cultural harmony concealed the Centre's underlying hierarchical purpose. Administrative offices overlooked communal areas, enabling surveillance of gatherings and commerce (K. Adu-Ampong, 2017),

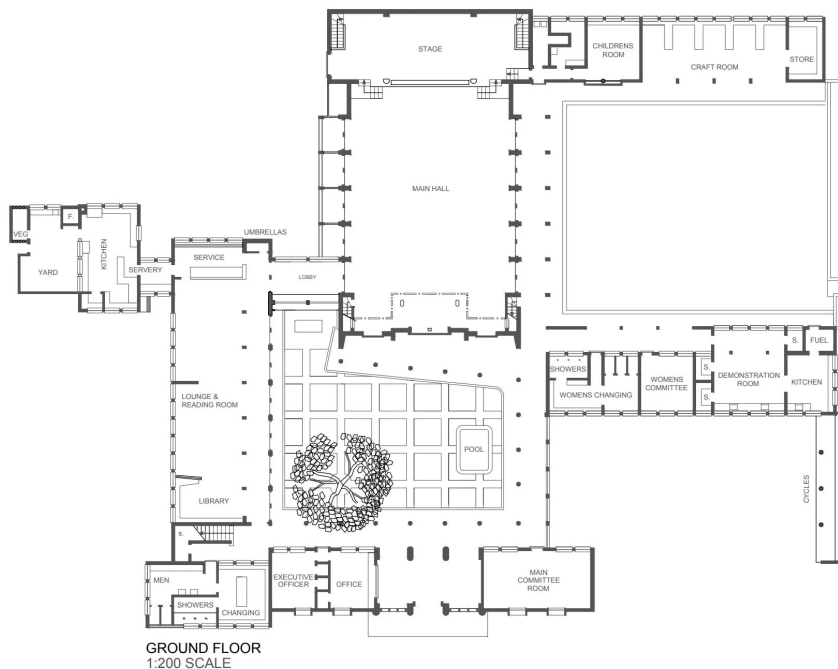


Figure 6: Groundfloor plan of the Community Centre, Accra, reproduced by David Grant, 1964

while guards stationed at the main gate monitored access, contradicting the façade of inclusivity, as exemplified in **Figure 7**.

The spatial segregation extended to gendered and class-based zones. The women’s committee wing, tucked behind the service courtyard, required discreet entry, marginalising their participation despite the Centre’s purported communal ethos. Similarly, the separation of local commerce from the marble-paved entrance courtyard relegated economic activity to a peripheral zone, framing British-modernised spaces as the locus of civic “progress”.

An analysis of *The Architect and Building News* (1950) reveals new insights into the technical composition of the Community Centre’s structure. Internally, it comprises a structure of poured concrete supported by shallow foundations, while the roof is constructed from oak beams beneath a bitumen-covered shelter. The sectional drawing in **Figure 8** illustrates the external wall where the aforementioned mosaic is mounted, as well as the internal double-height space above the entrance. In the elevation, the window frames act as a brise-soleil across the lower portion of the façade, where they help filter sunlight—particularly effective against the intense midday sun.

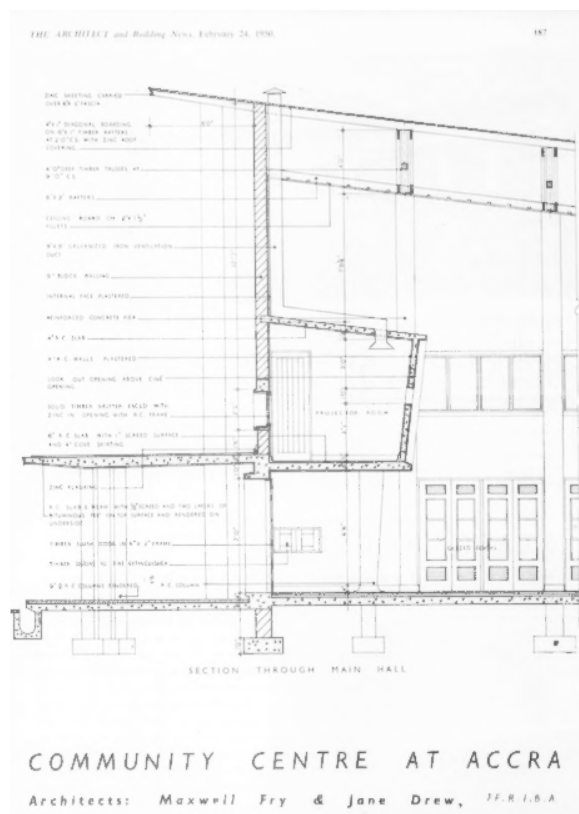


Figure 7: Main property gates of the Community Centre and the guard checking the access, 1954, RIBA Archive  
 Figure 8: Technical section through the Main Hall, Concrete structure and external earth-like cladding, *The Architect and the Building News* Vol. 197, 1950, The Internet Archive

## Accra's Community Centre in the British Colonial Agenda

The design and construction of Accra's Community Centre in 1951 were not just a reaction to growing nationalist sentiment and colonial anxieties but also part of a broader British strategy to maintain control over the local population in the face of increasing unrest. Instead of addressing grievances through political reform, British authorities focused on physical interventions to reinforce their dominance. This included urban planning and architectural projects designed to control, monitor, and regulate movement—using buildings like the Community Centre as instruments to promote colonial narratives of "*civilisation and modernity*" (Crinson, 2003).

The Colonial Office presented the Centre as a "*laboratory for social progress*" (Jackson, 2013), aimed at instilling Western civic values while discouraging anti-colonial unity. British publisher and editor Peter du Satoy (1958) observed that "*a community centre [...] established exactly on the British pattern is likely not to be patronised in an African village [...]. A village hall, however [...] fits into the pattern much more closely, reiterating local culture*". His insight underscores the incompatibility between British and Ghanaian socio-cultural frameworks, revealing how the Centre's design prioritised colonial propaganda over genuine community needs.

## The Role of Tropical Modernism in Ghana



Figure 9: Northern Courtyard of the Community Centre, brise-soleil and portico, 1953, RIBA Archive

Emerging in the mid-20th century as both an architectural and political response to colonial imperatives, Tropical Modernism fused modernist principles with climate-responsive adaptations. British architects Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew spearheaded this movement in Ghana, designing structures such as Accra's Community Centre to embody functional authority while addressing environmental demands. Their work, informed by earlier projects in India and Nigeria, featured brise-soleil sunshades, raised pilotis, and open-plan layouts as observable in **Figure 9**—innovations that balanced airflow and shade and codified a Eurocentric aesthetic (Drew, Fry, 1964). Architectural historian Mark Crinson (2003) critiques this approach, arguing that the geometric concrete forms and "*neutral*" functionalism of Tropical Modernism masked its ideological role, sidelining indigenous building traditions like adobe construction and timber-framed courtyards in favour of a visual language signalling colonial permanence.

Similar contradictions marked Fry and Drew's Accra projects, such as the Ghana National Museum (1957), which blended cross-ventilation techniques with austere modernist lines, framing colonial rule as progressive while marginalising Ghanaian architectural heritage. Tropical Modernism's ideological foundations further underscore its role as a cultural imposition. Marketed as a pragmatic, apolitical style, it subtly reinforced Western superiority by positioning colonial buildings as symbols of "*civilised*" progress (Njoh, 2007). As Crinson (2003) notes, even climate

adaptations like elevated foundations, practical for airflow, doubled as metaphors for British technological and moral ascendancy. This paradox epitomised colonial modernity: while Tropical Modernism adapted to local conditions, it erased indigenous agency, privileging Western aesthetics as the universal standard.

Ultimately, the movement served as both an environmental solution and an ideological tool. Merging functionalist design with symbolic authority naturalised the notion that colonial governance and aesthetics were inherently superior, perpetuating power imbalances long after independence.

## Ghanaian Local Typologies and Their Influence on British Colonialist Buildings

Despite British attempts to impose their architectural vision, Indigenous building traditions deeply influenced colonial structures, revealing a tension between colonial modernity and resilient local practices. Indigenous techniques—such as earth-based materials, courtyard layouts, and passive cooling—were selectively incorporated into various projects in the Accra region, as exemplified by Accra’s Community Centre. For example, the Centre’s open verandas, porticos, and courtyards drew inspiration from the Ga compound houses. (Asomani-Boateng, 2007).

The latter refers to locally constructed vernacular buildings. These comprise the majority of structures in the Greater Accra area, which are made from concrete blocks and roofed with metal sheets, alongside the more sporadic yet traditional earth-block houses that utilise vegetative materials for roofing. (Figure 10)

Similarly, British architects’ engagement with local craftsmanship remained extractive. Although Ghanaian artisans crafted the Centre’s intricate latticework using Odum wood—a material traditionally reserved for royal stools (Edusah, 2021)—their contributions were subordinated to European design principles and rarely credited. This paradoxical reliance on indigenous



Figure 10: Example of vernacular compound houses in the Ga district, Accra, 2018, The Metropole Blog of Urban History Association

knowledge, while dismissing its cultural significance, epitomised colonial exploitation.

Even projects that seemed to honour local traditions often served colonial objectives. The use of passive cooling methods such as adjustable louvres, wide eaves and brise soleils, as well as wooden based structures, as Le Roux (Modern Architecture in Post Colonial Ghana, 2003) notes, was framed as a pragmatic adaptation, yet it subtly reinforced British authority by presenting the "*modernisation*" of indigenous practices as a colonial achievement. This resulted in a hybrid architectural style that incorporated Ghanaian spatial and material vocabularies but stripped them of their communal and symbolic meanings.

Finally, while Accra's Community Centre superficially integrated Ghanaian traditions, its underlying logic prioritised colonial dominance. The selective use of courtyards, materials, and craftsmanship demonstrates how British architects instrumentalised Indigenous knowledge to project an image of cultural sensitivity while reinforcing power imbalances.

## Section 3

# Architecture and Social Re- education through the lenses of Accra's Community Centre

## Ghanaian Societal Structure

Pre-colonial Ghanaian societies were organised around decentralised kinship networks, with authority vested in chiefs and councils of elders who governed through consensus and oral traditions (Akyeampong, 2006). Communal land ownership and shared public spaces, such as palaver grounds (traditional Ghanaian meeting spaces) fostered collective decision-making and cultural rituals (Arhin, 1983). British colonisation dismantled these systems, replacing them with centralised governance, wage labour, and rigid hierarchies that prioritised colonial administrators and cash-crop elites (Mamdani, 1996).

Architecture and urban planning emerged as crucial instruments for establishing and reinforcing this new order. Segregated neighbourhoods divided Europeans from Africans—as in the case of the Ga expansion district bordering Accra’s city centre—while civic structures like courthouses, schools, and community centres materialised colonial notions of “civilisation” and control (Njoh, 2007). These buildings often employed European design principles—axial symmetry, raised platforms, and institutional layouts reminiscing Western Modernism—to visually assert authority over indigenous spatial practices (Wright, 1991). Colonial architecture redefined social interactions by replacing fluid communal spaces with regimented zones, privileging compliance over organic collectivism (K. Adu-Ampong, 2017). The Accra Community Centre epitomised this spatial reordering, embedding colonial hierarchies into daily life while masking its disciplinary function under a veneer of modernity.



Figure 11: View of the gardens and main gates of the Community Centre and two Ghanaian men sitting in the coastal park , 1953, RIBA Archive

## Architecture as Infrastructure of Social Control

In colonial contexts, architecture functioned as a dominant tool of social engineering, and Accra's Community Centre was no exception. Through its spatial organisation and symbolic positioning, the Centre reproduced colonial hierarchies by regulating movement, access, and social interaction. As Ferguson (2006) argues, physical infrastructure in colonial and postcolonial settings often constitutes "*politics by other means*", shaping populations not through overt coercion but via mundane spatial routines and institutional logics. The deliberate segregation of the Centre into formal northern spaces and service-oriented southern courtyards reinforced spatial hierarchies that mirrored the colonial state's governance apparatus, demarcating zones of authority, leisure, labour, and domesticity.

British planners strategically situated the Centre near East Ussher Town, where colonial administrators were based, forging a geographic connection between civic life and state control (Njoh, 2007). **Figure 13** illustrates this proximity to colonial government offices along the coast, visually and geographically anchoring the Centre within the sphere of British authority. This siting was no accident but part of a broader imperial strategy to embed



Figure 12: Cover page of the Article "Community Centre at Accra Gold Coast" issued in *The Architect and the Building News* Vol. 197, 1950, The Internet Archive



Figure 13: Map of Accra, Ghana, 1963, Accra Archive  
 Focus on the location of the Community Centre, referred as "Young Pioneer Centre"

state power into daily urban rhythms (Mabin and Smit, 1997). Echoing King's (1976) assertion, the colonial city itself operated as an instrument of domination, with zoning, building typologies, and public institutions designed to entrench racial and administrative segregation under the guise of civic modernity.

Though the Centre presented itself as a beacon of progressive governance and civic engagement—through amenities such as reading rooms, cafeterias, and public halls—it simultaneously functioned as an apparatus of surveillance and pacification. Ola Uduku condemns it as "*a tool for pacification*" during the politically volatile pre-independence era (V&A Museum Archive, 2024), aligning with Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary architecture, where buildings mould docile bodies and regimented behaviour. The imposing administrative structures overlooking public courtyards reinforced control dynamics, enabling discreet surveillance without overt policing (Adu-Ampong, 2017).

This spatial logic of control endured beyond colonialism. Under Kwame Nkrumah's government, after 1958, the Centre persisted as a hub for managing civic life and propagating state ideology, repurposed to forge social consciousness and national identity. A 1961 Accra map redesignates the site as the 'Young Pioneer Centre' (Figure 13), explicitly tying it to Nkrumah's youth movement, which sought to instil socialist and nationalist values. Earlier accounts, such as in "The Architect and Building News" in Figure 12, however, retain the 'Community Centre' label, underscoring its institutional reinvention under Nkrumah. Figure 14 confirms this symbolic shift, depicting the building's façade rebranded with its new title.

Thus, the Centre's role as a disciplinary and ideological instrument transcended regimes. While its ideological focus shifted from colonial paternalism to postcolonial nationalism, the architectural mechanisms of surveillance, centralisation, and social engineering remained intact. It continued to function as a site for cultivating compliant citizens, illustrating how post-independence governments repurposed colonial infrastructures to serve their political agendas.

Such spatial governance was not unique to Accra. Across the British Empire, analogous architectural strategies regulated social life. In Nairobi, the McMillan Memorial Library enforced racial hierarchies through segregated reading spaces and entrances. In India, colonial cantonments isolated



Figure 14: Ghana Young Pioneer Centre in Accra, 1961, Photographed by Harrison Forman, American Geographical Society Library Digital Photo Archive

European residents from “*native*” populations using buffer zones and strategic road networks (Hosagrahar, 2005). These spaces, as Lefebvre (1991) contends, were not passive containers but active producers of social and power relations.

Public architecture also naturalised imperial ideologies. Mitchell (1988) observes in colonial Egypt how representations of order and progress through architecture obscured the coercive underpinnings of imperial rule. Similarly, Accra’s Community Centre—with its symmetrical layout, monumental mosaics, and brise-soleil façade—aestheticised power while disciplining subjects through spatial logic.

For all its veneer of civic benevolence, the Community Centre epitomised how colonial and postcolonial regimes exploited buildings to engineer consent, regulate sociability, and reaffirm dominance. It materialised a space where aesthetics and politics converged, encoding the ideals of empire and, later, the nation-state into its very fabric.



Accra's Community Centre, conceived during Ghana's anti-colonial struggle, encapsulates the contradictions of modernist architecture in the colonial era. Envisioned after the 1948 riots as a beacon of progress—a space to cultivate civic life and unity—its very existence was rooted in colonial anxieties. It represented a strategic effort to disrupt burgeoning nationalist solidarity by substituting political reform with architectural intervention (British Colonial Office, 1948). Tropical Modernism, with its fusion of functionalist aesthetics and climate-responsive adaptations, became the ideal vehicle for this agenda. The Centre's design projected an image of benevolent modernity, masking its role as an apparatus of social control proliferating across the Gold Coast (Crinson, 2003). Yet its spatial configuration laid bare its ideological foundations: segregated access points, administrative sightlines, and isolated courtyards reiterated colonial hierarchies, privileging surveillance over spontaneity (Adu-Ampong, 2017). Here, architecture emerged as a conduit for transporting control and segregation, its spatial logics adaptable to shifting governmental regimes, whether colonial or postcolonial.

Even gestures toward Indigenous culture, such as Kofi Antubam's mosaic and allusions to Ga compound houses, were co-opted to legitimise colonial narratives rather than celebrate Ghanaian identity (Edusah, 2021). As Peter du Sautoy (1958) observed, the British conception of "*community*" clashed with African social organisation, and the Centre's failure to accommodate grassroots practices betrayed its true purpose: pacification, not empowerment. Professor Ola Uduku's condemnation (V&A Museum Archive, 2024) of the Centre as a "*mediating institution*" for colonial tensions underscores its role in deflecting dissent rather than fostering cohesion. Its design codified segregation into the built environment, a strategy replicated across imperial contexts to naturalise hierarchies under differing political guises.

Post-independence, the Centre's legacy epitomised architecture's dual capacity to symbolise both liberation and subjugation. While Ghana repurposed colonial structures as emblems of sovereignty, the building's endurance reflects the fraught interplay between imposed modernity and residual local agency. Its innovative style ultimately legitimised colonial rationalities of "*civilising*" through spatial discipline—a framework that reorganised social interaction at the expense of political autonomy (Njoh, 2007). This illustrates how architectural forms transport control mechanisms across governmental environments, retaining disciplinary frameworks even as ideological justifications evolve.

The Centre's life history compels us to interrogate whose unity such spaces were designed to forge, and at whose cost (Baan & Webster, 2005). As Ghana transitioned from colony to nation, the building became a material

testament to this transformation—proof that even ostensibly liberal designs could be weaponised in hegemonic struggles (Crimson, 2003). Yet its afterlife also demonstrates the durability of architectural forms, as communities appropriated and reinterpreted colonial infrastructures on their own terms (Asomani-Boateng, 2007). In this control-creativity dialogue exists architecture's paradox: an instrument of domination that can never fully suppress, nor resist being appropriated by, the communities it sought to control, even as its structures perpetuate legacies of segregation across political eras.

## Bibliography

Adu-Ampong, Kofi. 2017. *Colonial Spaces, Postcolonial Narratives: Architecture and Power in Ghana*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers.

Akyeampong, Emmanuel. 2006. *Race, Identity and Citizenship in Colonial Ghana: The Politics of Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Akurang-Parry, Kwabena O. 2010. *Imperialism, Reform, and the Making of Colonialism in the Gold Coast, 1874–1939*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.

Arnold, C. 2019. "The 'Cat's Paw of Dictatorship': State Security and Self-Rule in the Gold Coast, 1948 to 1957." PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley.

Arhin, Kwame. 1983. *Traditional Rule in Ghana: Past and Present*. Accra: Sedco Publishing.

Asomani-Boateng, Raymond. 2007. "Bridging the Gap in Urban Planning Traditions: Indigenous and Colonial Architecture in Accra, Ghana." *Planning Perspectives* 22 (3): 275–295.

Austin, Gareth. 2005. *Labour, Land, and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.

Baan, Iwan, and Alexia Webster. 2005. *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence: Ghana, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia*. Zurich: Park Books.

Boateng, E. A. 1978. *A Political Geography of Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boahen, A. Adu. 1975. *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. London: Longman.

Boahen, A. Adu. 1987. *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. Oxford: James Currey.

British Colonial Office. 1948. *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office.

Crinson, Mark. 2003. *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

- Drew, Jane, and Maxwell Fry. 1964. *Tropical Architecture in the Dry and Humid Zones*. London: Batsford.
- Du Sautoy, Peter. 1958. *Community Development in Ghana*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Edusah, Samuel. 2021. *Crafting Colonialism: Indigenous Labor and Material Culture in Ghana, 1920–1960*. Legon: University of Ghana Press.
- Evenson, Norma. 1973. *The African Metropolis: Urban Architecture and Colonial Governance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Fuller, Mia. 2014. *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism*. London: Routledge.
- Gocking, Roger S. 2005. *The History of Ghana*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Hopkins, A. G. 1973. *An Economic History of West Africa*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hymer, Stephen. 1969. *The Political Economy of the Gold Coast and Ghana*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Economic Growth Center.
- Jackson, Iain. 2003. *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence*. London: Architectural Association.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell. Originally published 1974.
- Le Roux, Hannah. 2003. "Modern Architecture in Post-Colonial Ghana." *Journal of Architectural Education* 57 (3): 6–14.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Njoh, Ambe J. 2007. *Planning Power: Town Planning and Social Control in Colonial Africa*. London: UCL Press.
- Padmore, George. 1948. *Facts Behind the Gold Coast Riots*. London: Pan-African Federation.
- Ward, W. E. F. 1983. *A History of Ghana*. Revised by L. H. Ofose-Appiah. London: George Allen & Unwin.

## Image References

Figure 1: Accra Community Centre, film capture of the video “Inside mid-century Tropical Modernist architecture”, V&A Museum Archive, 2024

Figure 2: Cocoa drying station, 1932, Basel Mission Archives

Figure 3: People protesting in Accra in front of Fort James, Ghana, 1948, The Internet Archive

Figure 4-5: Kofi Antubam mosaic over the main entrance of the Community Centre, Accra, Video capture, 2024, V&A Museum Archive

Figure 6: Groundfloor plan of the Community Centre, Accra, reproduced by David Grant, 1964

Figure 7: Main property gates of the Community Centre and the guard checking the access, 1954, RIBA Archive

Figure 8: Technical section through the Main Hall, Concrete structure and external earth-like cladding, The Architect and the Building News Vol. 197, 1950, The Internet Archive

Figure 9: Northern Courtyard of the Community Centre, brise-soleil and portico, 1953, RIBA Archive

Figure 10: Example of vernacular compound houses in the Ga district, Accra, 2018, The Metropole Blog of Urban History Association

Figure 11: View of the gardens and main gates of the Community Centre and two Ghanaian men sitting in the coastal park , 1953, RIBA Archive

Figure 12: Cover page of the Article “Community Centre at Accra Gold Coast” issued in The Architect and the Building News Vol. 197, 1950, The Internet Archive

Figure 13: Map of Accra, Ghana, 1963, Accra Archive  
Focus on the location of the Community Centre, referred as “Young Pioneer Centre”

Figure 14: Ghana Young Pioneer Centre in Accra, 1961, Photographed by Harrison Forman, American Geographical Society Library Digital Photo Archive

I would like to sincerely thank Serah Calitz for her guidance and patience throughout the entire process of writing this paper. Her support and valuable feedback have played a key role in helping me develop this work, and I truly appreciate the time and effort she invested in assisting me.