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Habitat International 29 (2005) 399–419

HABITAT
INTERNATIONAL

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Urban redevelopment, cultural heritage, poverty and redistribution: the case of Old Accra and Adawso House[☆]

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Received 28 March 2003; received in revised form 9 August 2003; accepted 5 December 2003

Abstract

There is a complex relationship between cultural heritage and poverty. This relationship is particularly evident in the depletion of historical centers. In addition, when considered along with the impact of the intertwined forces of urbanization and modernization, it may result in the dangerous threatening of the cultural tracts, social structure and urban patterns of the poor living in historical centers. All this seems to have happened in old Accra, the historical center of the capital city of Ghana.

The paper tries to analyze this complex relationship as it is manifested in Ga Mashie and its impacts on the poor indigenous population. It also suggests some policy recommendations, in particular, the fact that urban redevelopment projects of dilapidated historical districts have to genuinely consider the delicate and peculiar environment in which they are based. The financial elements of the intervention, for instance, might have to be differentiated from the typical ones used in peripheral slum upgrading projects, opening new rooms for a substantial redistribution of wealth.

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Keywords: Historical centers; Urban redevelopment; Cultural heritage; Poverty; Ghana

1. Introduction

City centers are places where historical buildings of various uses and natures are located: private houses, palaces, monuments, storehouses, headquarters of former important companies and administrative offices such as post offices and customs. “City centers are rich in cultural

[☆]The views expressed in this paper are strictly those of the author, and do not reflect the views of the UK Government or the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

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magnets, remarkable buildings, attractive streets and public spaces that can be economic as well as social assets”, writes Power (2001), referring to Britain’s cities, but this is also valid for developing countries’ city centers.

In developing countries, city centers are also places where the poor live, simply because their livelihood there is more sustainable. The proximity to market places and access to a vast range of informal activities are essential components of their survival strategies, especially of unskilled women and children. Moreover, many indigenous communities have historically settled and lived in what are now city centers. Old Accra represents just one case in point.

Historical districts in poor countries are generally experiencing rapid physical depletion, not least because of a high concentration of poverty within their boundaries. Poor communities find it very difficult to allocate meager resources to the maintenance of buildings or other public spaces and utilities, which are considered to be luxury. The lack of resources adds to the city’s development policies taken without consideration of poor residents’ wills and needs. Decisions taken on the development of cities are vital for the survival of their historical centers. This is even more relevant for African cities, rapidly urbanizing places inhabited by indigenous communities.

The broader impact of urbanization and globalization—(“you do not find many *dotcom* people in rural areas!”)—on the cultural elements of these places and the indigenous communities, have also significant reflections on many aspects of their life.

The case of Old Accra, Ghana, and Adawso House in particular, are used in this paper to express the linkages between cultural elements and urban redevelopment and to show how well-defined participatory approaches can offer viable solutions for preserving the cultural tracts of the community, redeveloping the area and institutionalizing redistributive policies, trying to reverse the failures of previous decisions.

This paper is only marginal to the vast literature on urban poverty in developing countries. Instead, it tries to contribute to the more recent literature on the redevelopment of historical districts in developing countries, which is mostly based on Latin America, Asia and Middle East and, to a much lesser extent, Africa (Serageldin, Shluger, & Martin-Brown, 2000). The redevelopment of historical districts entails the analysis of the links between culture and development, a link that has only recently secured more attention, in particular after the World Commission on Culture and Development published the report *Our Creative Diversity* (UNESCO, 1996).

It is interesting to note that studies on redevelopment of historical districts are relevant to the link between culture and development not only because of the tangible aspect of culture (such as monuments and historical buildings) but also, and especially in African cities, because of its intangible cultural assets, so vivid within the indigenous communities that populate these districts. This is certainly the case in old Accra and the paper also touches this element, trying to show how intangible culture can represent a valuable economic resource to be properly used in the redevelopment of historical districts. Indeed, as Rojas (2000) notes, old cities are new assets.

The paper, however, does not analyze the much-debated issue of partnership and funding sources for the regeneration of historical districts (*International Social Science Journal* (2002); the UNCHS campaign on urban governance, Cities Alliance’s projects; Rojas, 2002) except for a few comments on the possibilities of cost recovery for the preservation of Adawso House.

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