RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conservation and character defining elements of historical towns: A comparative study of Cape Coast and Elmina streets and castles

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Abstract
The concept of historical conservation and character definition is reflected in the Liverpool Street of Elmina and Kingsway Street of Cape Coast in Ghana. The features of these streets are changing owing to urbanization and to the development of commercial retail. In this study, we investigated the character-defining features of Kingsway Street and Liverpool Street within an 800 m radius relative to the Cape Coast and Elmina Castles, respectively, which are known for their landmark roles as historical artifacts. We adopted a combination of mapping, philology, and fractal geometry to assess the character-defining features of each street. The key changes in the features of the two streets and the similarities between these features are emphasized in our results. The features of both streets have undergone rapid changes in terms of economic retail activities, which represent the central element defining the characters of these streets. Furthermore, the 18th and 19th century architecture along these streets is gradually losing their original features because of undocumented and unguided renovations, as well as retrofitting works that are based on the discretion and taste of building owners.
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1.   Introduction

The individual features that define the Kingsway Street of Cape Coast and Liverpool Street of Elmina are investigated and compared in this study. These cities are selected because they are previously colonial towns and of great historical significance. We also seek to understand the mapping of these towns to their principal street, compare the current features with those in the 19th and 20th centuries, and identify the conservation practices observed for historical buildings on the two streets.

Whereas street characteristics is the uniqueness of an element that shapes and highlights a street (Lindsay et al., 2009), the characteristics of a place relates to history because places are built in specific eras and the physical feature of a place is a historical product (Kropf, 1996; Ja'afar et al., 2014). The character-defining features of a town tend to portray history and culture, and they mostly tell a story of the town's richness and density in the social, economic, cultural, and historical environment (Warnaby, 2009; Ja'afar et al., 2014). Studies by Kropf (1996) portray these features as the pertinent character of a place, particularly the physical structure of the street character, spatial organization, and architecture of the people.

A city and its constituent element are explored through urban design, particularly through the inventive mapping of its physical structure and condition (Peterson, 1979). A street is a principal element within an urban space (Peterson, 1979; Lynch, 1960; Jacobs, 2013). A street characteristic can be measured with respect to uniqueness, distinction, and importance of its elements. Details, such as shops, gates, kiosks, sidewalks, street lights, signs, buildings, monuments, and users, contribute to the quality of a street (Jacobs, 2013; Fruin, 1971; Ekawati, 2015). A principal street is one of the key elements that define an urban space (Shamsuddin et al., 2007). The use of a principal street serves as an attraction to the locality (Hillier et al., 1993). The Royal Mile of Edinburg, George Street of Sydney, Downing Street of London, and Oxford Street of Accra are examples of principal streets whose features shaped urban communities. These streets are known for their commercial, social, and cultural points for encounters and exchanges.

In historical environments, tensions exist between past and present cultures and between familiarity with the old and notion of progress attached to the new (Orbasli, 2002). Cravatte (1977) attributed this tension to changes for urban growth, with towns being in constant evolution. These changes affect the issue of conservation, in which historical heritage is protected for posterity, tourism, and economic impact. However, these constant changes occurring in historical towns affect the building styles, skyline, and street edge features.

The central idea for the present study is based on three principles. First, streets are abundant, and every street has its own unique history. Second, people make places, and character is about people, communities, and the physical fabric. Third, street character is a dynamic concept that changes over time.

Central to the desire to conserve the history of a place is the issue of character (Kropf, 1996). According to Sonoda and Hidaka (2008), theories on conserving cultural and historical assets to which a community attaches value date back to more than two centuries ago. Various thinkers, including the late Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879) and the late John Ruskin (1819–1900), reported different approaches to the conservation of buildings and other historical heritage and areas of interest for posterity. According to Kalcic (2014), Viollet-le-Duc postulated that the loss of originality in character is the consequence of the lack of analysis; thus, to arrive at a synthesis, documentation must be established because only quality documentation provides a sound basis for further or future work. However, Kalcic (2014) suggested that John Ruskin argued that it is through architecture that we recognize our past and roots. Ruskin's approach was aimed at preserving uniqueness, originality, and truth; hence, it was designed for the anti-restoration movement.

The concept of historical conservation and character defining is reflected in the cases of Cape Coast and Elmina, both of which have strong historical roots in Ghanaian history that are parallel to colonial rule and slave trade. The imposition of Western rule over African traditional rule when Europeans first encountered Africa dominated the total environment of the region, including its social, cultural, economic, historical, religious, and architectural areas (Mimiko, 2010). The encounters of Cape Coast and Elmina with Europe bear similar features. These features include a sheltered bay in the rocky and promontory leeward side, series of hills, a large lagoon located west of the hills, and slave castles (Hyland, 1995). The castles in Cape Coast and Elmina are among the great medieval structures, and they have been designated as World Heritage Monuments under UNESCO (Bruner, 1996; Lawrence, 1964). These castles have principal streets connecting them to the main townships, and these streets are lined with many historical buildings. These buildings interpret the loosely expressed ideas of Europeans who came to trade along the coast (Arowolo, 2010). The principal streets are characterized by major commercial activities, historic buildings that testify to the past colonial and post-colonial rule (Addo, 2013), and other services and street features.

Today, Cape Coast and Elmina as historical towns have seen changes in their principal streets from the pre-colonial era to the post-colonial era. Thus far, no study has explored the individual characteristics of their principal streets (Liverpool Street, Elmina Street, Kingsway Street, and Cape Coast) connected to the castles. Changes in the physical environment and subsequent shift in the users' perception continue to translate into interventions that alter the urban fabric and disrupt the sense of place. Moreover, retail activities along the principal streets are multiplying, serving as attractions for the future development of structures along the streets for needs of the people.

2.   Theoretical framework

2.1.   Urban design and architectural perspective toward the character of principal streets

Streets are enclosed spaces designed to allow movement between buildings. They form a part of the elements that