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[Review of: B. Chalfin (2023) *Waste Works: Vital Politics in Urban Ghana*]

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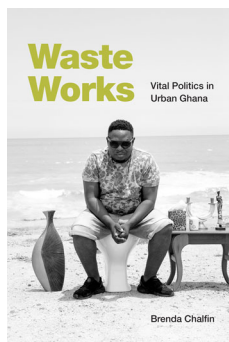
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BOOK REVIEW

Infrastructural Decay and Urban Politics in West Africa

Review of *Waste Works: Vital Politics in Urban Ghana*, by Brenda Chalfin, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2023, 376 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4780-1958-9.



Public toilets, sewage systems, pumping stations and septic tanks are at the centre of Brenda Chalfin’s new book, *Waste Works: Vital Politics in Urban Ghana*. Chalfin explores the “sanitary underground” of Tema, President Kwame Nkrumah’s ambitious project for a modernist port city in decolonising Ghana. While the book joins a growing body of research on the urban politics of waste in Africa—ranging from Rosalind Fredericks’ *Garbage Citizenship: Vital Infrastructures of Labor in Dakar, Senegal* (2018) to Jacob Doherty’s *Waste Worlds: Inhabiting Kampala’s Infrastructures of Disability* (2021)—what makes this study particularly interesting for scholars of architecture is its focus on the afterlives of the physical infrastructure built as part of one of

the most radical urban experiments in West Africa. With sections of the city designed by the British architects Jane Drew, Maxwell Fry and Alfred Alcock during the transition to political independence, and completed by the Greek firm Doxiadis Associates who took over in 1961, the linking of individual houses to a municipal sewage system was ambitious, novel, and an important part of Nkrumah’s vision for Tema. Contrary to Accra, where construction of an underground sewage system was repeatedly discussed by colonial officials in the early twentieth century but just as frequently abandoned, Tema was “a city built on, around, and through large-scale infrastructure,” Chalfin writes (79). Yet even before the deep water port and the township were completed, the city’s substrata started to breakdown due to unforeseen population growth and the subsequent overburdening of the system, but also a lack of routine maintenance.

Through extensive archival and ethnographic research, *Waste Works* demonstrates how, in the absence of adequate state or municipal intervention, the management and maintenance of waste and sanitary infrastructure become “vibrant sites of political negotiation” (xi). Chalfin, an anthropologist at the University of Florida who has previously published on issues such as border regimes and maritime sovereignty in neoliberal Ghana, reveals how different parts of Tema’s failing system for the disposal of bodily waste have been modified or replaced by residents. In areas outside of Tema’s core, such as Ashaiman, an unplanned settlement that emerged in the 1950s for migrant labourers, Chalfin examines how inhabitants turned to other solutions in the absence of a communal sewage system. Infrastructural decay or the lack of adequate infrastructure, she demonstrates, offer opportunities for innovation. At times, they could also lead to revenue generation, as exemplified by a vast privately-run toilet and bath complex that currently doubles as a hostel. Leaning on Bruno Latour’s notion of networks or assemblages constituted by human as well as material agency, Chalfin coins the idea of “infrastructural intimacy” to describe how the management of excremental waste gathers residents, or residents and municipal organisations together. Contrary to Fredericks, who emphasises the labour involved in the management of waste, what interests Chalfin is how sanitary

infrastructure offers insight into the functioning of urban governance in everyday spaces. Toilets and their associated infrastructure elucidate the continuous “tug-of-war” between state or municipal authority and residents’ self-determination.

The book’s first chapter, most relevant for architectural historians, serves as a historical introduction. Rooted in archival documentation from the Tema Development Corporation—the public organisation responsible for managing the township—the chapter discusses how Nkrumah’s ideals of economic progress and modernisation, but also social order manifested in a decentralised city. While Tema was initially conceptualised as a British “New Town” in the tropics by Alcock in the early 1950s, Nkrumah appointed Doxiadis Associates several years after independence in order to sever ties with the country’s colonial past. The new masterplan from 1962 consisted of twelve residential communities bordering an extensive industrial zone, in addition to the deep water port. Public space was limited to avoid the risk of mass political mobilisation. Divided based on income (rather than ethnicity or race), each community was imagined as a self-sufficient unit, and sometimes resembled a company town—a section known as “Kaiser Flats” was named after the American company Kaiser Aluminium, which established a smelter in Tema.

Tema’s origin story has already been narrated by numerous architectural historians such as Viviana d’Auria, Michelle Provoost, and Iain Jackson and Rexford Assassie Oppong, who have examined different aspects of the city’s design, including Doxiadis’ experimental housing units ranging from single-story family housing with verandas to prefabricated flats.¹ Key to Chalfin’s account, however, is the connection between the city’s development above ground to its subterranean infrastructure. According to Chalfin, Tema’s sewage system, built by British civil engineering firm Balfour and Sons, acted as an “equalizer” within Doxiadis’ otherwise stratified plan. While housing location and size were tethered to the residents’ incomes, the inclusion of a flushing indoor toilet and bathroom in each unit, regardless of income, is interpreted as an attempt to accommodate people’s basic needs across class boundaries.

One of Chalfin’s key arguments—and most interesting contributions with this book—is that the breakdown of sanitary infrastructure leads to a reconsideration of the boundaries between what is “public” and what is “private,” in terms of who is responsible for its maintenance, but also in terms of who uses it. In the remaining four chapters of *Waste Works*, Chalfin considers a wide array of sanitary arrangements in and around the city that illuminate how private needs become public concerns, and the grey areas between the public and private domain; from private houses connected to Tema’s failing public sewage system, to public toilet facilities managed by a collective of residents or a private entrepreneur, and private toilets for commercial use.

The second chapter focuses on middle-class residents in the township’s core struggling with a blocked and leaking sewage system, serviced by an understaffed municipal repair team. Chapter three looks at the resettlement village of Tema Manhean, built for two thousand Ga fishermen- and women displaced by the construction of the new port—people who Chalfin describes as “not qualified for full membership in the new city” (141). Contrary to Tema’s centre, Tema Manhean was built with public toilet and bathroom facilities designed by Fry and Drew who were also responsible for the village’s compound housing. During the 1980s, after years of neglect from the Tema Development Corporation, these blocks were successfully taken over by an assembly of residents who now maintain the facilities in exchange for a small user’s fee. An unplanned, off-the-grid shantytown next to Tema Manhean, enveloped by the port, the industrial zone and a wetland, Zigginshore, is the subject of chapter four. Here, within a largely transient community, lacking all municipal services, a local entrepreneur has set up a large toilet and bath complex known as

“Floshin Taifi,” with additional spaces serving as a hostel able to accommodate up to two thousand people daily. Finally, chapter five explores the phenomenon of “private commercial toilets” in Ashaiman, Tema’s labour reserve; today, a settlement of self-built cement-block houses home to nearly 300,000 inhabitants. Within Ashaiman’s compounds, residents have established toilets for public use, like madame Halina, who manages several toilets fitted with porcelain sinks and neatly tiled floors in her backyard. But instead of romanticising these bottom-up arrangements, Chalfin argues that, while far from ideal, they represent functional solutions to a persistent urban problem across West Africa.

In *Waste Works*, Chalfin moves with a certain fluidity between past and present, and archival material and ethnographic observations. Just as easily, she ties a description of an ablution block to an insight from Hannah Arendt, Achille Mbembe or even Thomas Hobbes (albeit that, at times, the multitude and incredible variety of references makes *Waste Works* hard to read). A minor point of criticism is that while urban space, and more specifically the relationship between sanitary infrastructure and urban morphology, is at the centre of Chalfin’s account, *Waste Works* would have benefitted from more and improved visual material. The schematic diagrams of, for instance, the private commercial toilets in Ashaiman and the resident-operated toilet complexes in Tema Manhean are helpful. However, to properly understand the ways in which these sanitary arrangements became important public spaces within a community, as Chalfin argues in her chapters on Tema Manhean and Ziggishore, maps that locate these complexes within the neighbourhood and in relation to the surrounding area could have offered valuable contextual information for the reader. Likewise, while the photographic material provided by Chalfin and her collaborators makes a great addition to the book, architectural historians will lament the quality of some of the historical plans included in *Waste Works*. The grainy quality of, for example, Doxiadis’ masterplan, or the reprint of Fry and Drew’s plan for Tema Manhean make it hard to follow some of Chalfin’s descriptions. Nevertheless, this substantial, well-researched study presents an engaging account of the vitality of West African urbanism and the resourcefulness of Tema’s inhabitants. Moreover, by documenting the afterlives of Tema’s sanitary infrastructure, Chalfin makes an important contribution to the growing scholarship on the urban politics of modern architecture and planning in West Africa.

Note

1. Viviana d’Auria, “From Tropical Transitions to Ekistic Experimentation: Doxiadis Associates in Tema, Ghana,” *Positions* 1 (2010): 40–63; Michelle Provoost, “Tema, Tema (GH): Constantinos Doxiadis,” *DASH | Delft Architectural Studies on Housing* 7, nos 12–13 (2018): 194–205; Iain Jackson and Rexford Assasie Oppong, “The Planning of Late Colonial Village Housing in the Tropics: Tema Manhean, Ghana,” *Planning Perspectives* 29, no. 4 (2014): 475–99.

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