

The Practice of Domesticity vs. The Ideal of Domesticity in Accra, Ghana

DAHLIA NDUOM
HOWARD UNIVERSITY

This paper builds on previous research surrounding the relationship between culture and housing and focuses on how this relationship shapes the practice of domesticity in Accra. Accra (the capital of Ghana), has faced the challenges of rapid urbanization including congestion in the city center, inadequate infrastructure, sprawl and of course lack of housing. Accra is the largest urban area in terms of population, with an estimated population of approximately 2 million people and a projected population of 4 million people by 2020.¹ The population has steadily increased over the years as people from the rural areas flock to the urban areas in search of jobs and better opportunities. In addition to the influx of people, land tenure issues, cost of living and access to financing have resulted in a severe housing deficit which government policy has been struggling to address.

Due to this housing deficit, many people in the capital city live in a multi-habitation solution. The research focuses on the multi-habitation occurring in compound homes in Ga Mashie (Ussher Town and Jamestown), Accra. It uses Amos Rapoport's model of the "dismantling of culture" as a framework for this study of the practice of domesticity. This framework provides a lens through which to analyze the complex cultural dwelling systems that occur. This analysis provides clues which can be used to develop housing in the area while maintaining the social and cultural practices typical to this spatial relationship.

Spatially, these compound homes are typically marked by rooms around a courtyard with shared facilities and are reminiscent of the traditional dwellings occupying this structure and social system. This research studies how residents utilize varying degrees of public, private and semi-private spaces within the compound analyzing how spaces are co-opted, privacy is carved out, how spatial interactions occur, and how residents make these spaces home in these shared facilities. The research juxtaposes this understanding of the way residents currently dwell with an imagining of their ideal home. The research aims to understand this relationship between current practices of dwelling and the dwelling ideal, assessing areas of overlap or discontinuity in residents' images and ideals. Understanding this dichotomy begins to shed further light on what it means to dwell in Accra, and provides information on how to approach housing design in the city.

METHODOLOGY

Amos Rapoport defines the built environment "*as the organization of space, time, meaning and communication, a system of settings within which systems of activities take place, the cultural landscape and composed of fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed elements.*"² Rapoport's definition of the built environment provides a foundation from which to build an understanding of interactions between environment and behavior.

These readings were an entry into beginning to analyze how to approach this complex issue of domesticity in Ga Mashie. Due to this complexity, the methodology for the research was a mixed method approach, combining historical research and existing literature review, field research and housing analysis and in-depth qualitative interviews with thirty respondents living in Ga Mashie, Accra (most respondents reside in Ussher Town). The thirty respondents were interviewed to understand how they practiced dwelling versus their conceptualization of an ideal dwelling experience. Questions asked in these interview sessions centered around an understanding of the relationship between current practices of dwelling and the dwelling ideal, offering an opportunity to assess areas of overlap or discontinuity in residents' images and ideals. For example, residents were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of their compound homes, how they used their current spaces and what they imagined their ideal dwelling to be.

Rapoport's model for the dismantling of culture was used as a framework for the analysis of the research, providing a way to understand the linkages between the dismantled aspects of culture and the built environment. The model also provided clues for how to approach the interview and fieldwork portions of the research. This project focused specifically on the elements of the role of kinship, family structure, social network and their relationship to the system of settings that shape housing in this particular locale. This was analyzed against the ideals, images and meanings which begin to shape and disrupt this practiced system of settings. The coded responses from the interviews were further analyzed against fieldwork conducted where the practice of dwelling was recorded and observed. Parallels and disconnects begin to emerge between the real and the fantasy, i.e. between the practice and ideal of domesticity. The results from this reading of the domesticity in Ga Mashie can provide useful clues to begin to approach housing design in Accra.



Figure 1: Survey Locations. Map Backgrounds: Google Earth

HOUSING IN ACCRA

Ghana, a country of approximately 24.2 million people in West Africa is currently grappling with a severe housing deficit. As previously noted, the population and urban extent of Accra has steadily increased over the years as people from the rural areas flock to the urban areas in search of jobs and better opportunities. In a 2011 study, UN-Habitat estimated that over 50% of the population lived in urban areas.³

The severity of the housing deficit was underscored by UN-Habitat where they estimated that 5.7 million new rooms are required by 2020 to meet current housing needs. The situation for self-contained dwellings is not any less drastic with two million houses (one per household) needing to be supplied by 2020 to meet the demand. Since this 2011 UN-Habitat report, there has been little progress in alleviating the housing deficit with both the public and private sector being unable to meet the needs of the lower income population. Cost of living in the city has increased and land, construction and housing costs have escalated, making the situation more dire, with no sustainable solution in sight.

The housing 'rules' in existence today are marked by large luxury townhouses, gated communities and multi-story buildings unavailable to the majority of the population. The affordable housing that is being built has its own set of issues. For example, the Saglemi Housing Project in Prampram sprawls across 300 acres and aims to expand to 11,000 units across 1200 acres (40 % of which will be low income). Where land is valuable and sprawl has resulted in infrastructure challenges, this model is not sustainable.

Due to this housing deficit, many people in the capital city live in a multi-habitation solution. Multi-habitation is by far the most common means of dwelling with 55 % of people occupying compounds and 24% occupying other forms of multi-occupied residential buildings.⁴ The compound home typology traditionally consisted of sleeping and living spaces around a courtyard with shared facilities. They were rooted

in an extended family network and social system where the courtyard marked the center of domestic activities where, cooking, socializing and family events took place.

Today, variations on the traditional compound homes exist with some being inherited through generations in a family, while others are subdivided and rented to non-family members. These compound homes have also evolved to include multi-story variations in Kumasi and other variations in their form based on how they cluster around the courtyard. However, no matter what form they take, usage of compound homes reflects the notion of strong kinship, social network and family structure. These homes are also marked by the collapse of public versus private space, the co-opting of courtyard spaces and interstitial street spaces and the unique spatial interactions that occur within the home. They are also marked by poverty, overcrowding, lack of sanitation and inadequate infrastructure and therefore the typology is often associated with negative connotations as the crowded multi-habitation synonymous with these homes often does not equate to a dwelling ideal.

Previous studies have shown that despite these disadvantages there are benefits to the social systems and kinship formed around this resulting architectural form. Studies conducted by UN-Habitat and Irene Appeaning Addo show that despite these negative issues associated with compound homes, there are benefits to be found in the social systems and kinship unique to this practice of dwelling. Residents appreciate the security and help gained from these informal social networks while advocating for more privacy to improve their level of resident satisfaction.⁵

GA MASHIE HOUSING STUDY

This project used this previous research as a starting point to discover 'clues' within the way the people of Ga Mashie use these spaces versus their ideal dwelling that could begin to shed light on potential ways to envision housing design.

Ga Mashie is one of the most traditional and historic communities of the Ga people (one of the many ethnic groups in Ghana). The Ghana Statistical Service estimates the



Figure 2: Network of Alleys, Streets, Courtyards And Homes, Google Earth

population of Ga Mashie to be about 125,000 people who are primarily Gas. It is a low-income densely populated community with a population density of approximately 250 persons per hectare with an estimated 56% of nuclear families living in single rooms and an estimated average density of 7 people per room.⁶ This makes it one of the most densely populated areas of Accra. Despite this density and poverty, the area has cultural, social and spiritual significance to the people residing there and therefore an understanding of how this shapes the way people live and envision their dwelling spaces is necessary to approaching housing design within the community.

The public street life in Ga Mashie is bustling as traders, festivals, and funerals jostle for space with vehicles and pedestrians. Recently there has been a push to engage tourists and other Ghanaians from outside of the community to visit through initiatives such as the Chale Wote Street Art Festival. Officials have also sought to capitalize on the many historic buildings in the area such as the Jamestown Lighthouse and Ussher Fort. International tour companies offer tours and local politicians see the marketing of the history of the community through tourism as a way to alleviate poverty and some of the infrastructure challenges plaguing the area.

However, these initiatives have not impacted the housing situation which is marked by a dense, seemingly chaotic network of compound homes which blur into alleys which blur into roads. Figure 2 captures this network and how the labyrinth of alleys, streets and paths dissolve into homes and semi-private courtyard spaces and connect and intersect homes, creating a blurring of public and private spaces.

While the network of homes seems unplanned, there is historical significance surrounding the development of this intricate weaving of public versus private spaces. The former Mayor of Accra, Mr. Nat Amarteifio, an architectural historian, states that this seemingly chaotic network was intentional as it was envisioned as a way to confuse slave raiders during the era of the slave trade.⁷

This network has since evolved to be a feature of the practice of dwelling and crucial to the social systems and kinship unique to this typology. It forms the connective tissue of the housing fabric which consists of the following housing types:

1. Two-story family house passed down through generations (single family residing or multiple families renting).
2. One-story compound house (single family residing or multiple families renting).
3. Infill informal dwellings in alleys or streets.

Each of these types has different formal configurations, but several common features exist. They all have a courtyard that is a semi-private space connecting the public street to the private interior living spaces.

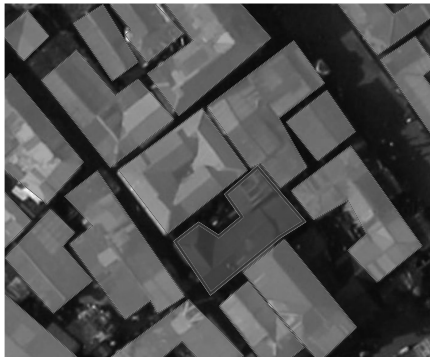
The two-story family houses stand out in the network of streets and alleys due to their scale and dominance in the landscape (see Figure 3). They are usually passed down through generations, but some are sub-divided and rented to non-family members. The sizes of courtyards vary with most providing a space for communal events. They are usually marked by a discrete door or gate which provides a boundary between public street and private space. These doors frame a semi-enclosed foyer leading people from the street into the courtyard. Despite this demarcation between public and private, due to the sizes of some courtyards, some public activities still spill out into the streets. During fieldwork, some funerals were witnessed taking place in the streets while in other cases members of households chose to sit in front of homes and interact with neighbors instead of within the confines of the semi-private courtyard.

The one-story compound home has similar features to the two-story home. However, in some cases, these homes are typically not historic family homes and are smaller in scale (see Figure 3). As a result, they are not as dominant in the landscape and often become an extension of the alley system between dwellings. In some cases, alleys bisect homes where one has to travel across the public thoroughfare to get to another part of the private dwelling space. These homes have smaller courtyards or none at all causing the network of alleys to become a part of the living space blurring the boundaries between public and private. As in the two-story dwelling, these homes could be family homes occupied by one or more families or rented.

» 2 STORY HOME



» 1 STORY HOME



» INFILL HOME



Figure 3: Housing Typology. Housing Photographs: Dahlia Nduom, 2018 .
Map backgrounds: Google Earth.

Lastly, the infill homes are more informal with a lack of defined courtyard space (see Figure 3). They are part of the 90% of homes making up the informal sector in Accra and developed as an extension of family homes to accommodate more people or are informal structures developed by migrant families. Sometimes these additional infill structures accommodate a business or trade which is of economic importance in the area. These homes make use of the alley and spaces surrounding them as an extension of the living space.

It is important to understand while looking at these typologies that the Ga people “*practice the extended family system with strong social ties and strong dependency on the local economy.*”⁸ This substantial family structure, social network and kinship shape how the people of Ga Mashie practice domesticity.

As families have grown and migrants have settled in the area, the population has swelled and the housing stock has been unable to keep up. This has led to the crowding previously mentioned where a shift can be seen in how these spaces are used. The boundary between private and public becomes more tenuous with everyday domestic activities, formerly housed in the home or seclusion of the semi-private

courtyard spilling out into the public alley or street. This results in activities such as sleeping, cooking, washing and bathing now occurring in the public sphere.

Regarding the interviews conducted there were parallels concerning how respondents practiced domesticity versus their ideals that warrant mentioning. The living arrangement of the thirty persons interviewed varied with 19 living in a family home and 11 residing in rented rooms within the bigger compounds. As previous studies have shown, many respondents found advantages within this typology due to the family structure and social network that this living arrangement affords. Of the thirty respondents interviewed, 24 noted that family structure, social interconnections and kinship were essential and an advantage that compound homes exhibited. It should be noted that even if respondents were renting a space in the home as opposed to living within an extended family network, they still saw value in the social network and kinship.

For example, Respondent 22 (R22) who is renting a room noted, “*When you are paying for electricity and you don’t have money other people will pay and the next time you have money you will pay.*” Respondent 15 (R15) who is also renting reiterates this sentiment stating, “*It is a peaceful area. Nobody imposes anything on you because we are all tenants. If you are not feeling happy, you can go out and talk to others. You can get help from other people.*”

Similar advantages were found in a family house setting with Respondent 11 (R11) stating, *“People around are very friendly. Can get food from others. We are each one’s keeper and we share with others what we have. If you are not around someone can take care of your children. We care for each other and people always check on you and share advice.”* Respondent 28 (R28) expands on this concept stating, *“That sense of oneness and that sense of interdependence. I mean, what one lacks will not be a total lack because I’ll fall on the next person and you get that support you need. So that support is for us, it’s an inherent thing. It’s not like a government policy or enforcing support system.”*

This support system and the notion of being each other’s keeper expands to security with many residents citing this as another advantage afforded by the multi-habitation arrangement of the compound home.

While most respondents appreciated these advantages, many were also grappling with some of the many issues previously mentioned facing these compound homes. The crowded nature of the homes was a significant problem with many respondents sharing a single room with multiple family members. The shared facilities of these homes also resulted in conflicts which 21 respondents cited as a major disadvantage. Disagreements over bills, cleanliness of shared facilities and noise were discussed as issues affecting the quality of life in these compound homes. Respondent 23 (R23) who lives in a family home summarizes this stating, *“Maybe for instance, you have come back from work, you want to have your peace of mind, you want to sleep. All of a sudden, when you get to the house, they are doing maybe naming ceremony, or they are doing a party. I mean, how can you sleep? You don’t have any other option.”* This notion of lack of “peace” was often mentioned by respondents and became a key concept when searching for the ideal.

By extension, the crowding and shared facilities result in a lack of privacy for many respondents. This was a recurring theme throughout the interviews with some respondents expressing that they were able to retreat to the privacy of their rooms when they needed to escape the public realm while others not being able to find privacy in their shared rooms due to multiple people sharing a single room and shared bathing and toilet facilities. These respondents were unable to carve out moments of privacy by possibly erecting partitions due to space constraints or limitations put in place by the landlord or head of household (in the family home). As a result whether in a family home or rented home the need for more privacy in the dwelling was a concept that greatly informed how respondents imagined their dwelling ideal.

Respondent 27 (R27) expresses this search for privacy in his dwelling space stating, *“In the family house, you know you are with your family members. So shouldn’t miss anything, nothing. They are around. But sometimes in the family house, you don’t have your privacy. You cannot live the way you feel like living.”*

Respondent 16 (R16) elaborates stating, *“We have no privacy. We bring other people to come and stay with us. We like the people, so anybody who comes around that don’t have a place to stay we accommodate them.”* This is an interesting dichotomy because even within the confines of the crowded space, Respondent 16 still opens up his home to people who need a place to stay.

While investigating their ideals against their practice of dwelling respondents were asked to respond to existing housing projects in Accra. They were shown detached, semi-detached, gated communities and multi-story apartment buildings. Their responses began to tease out the fantasy of their ideal home. Their reactions to these homes saw the peace and privacy within some of these typologies while considering them through the lens of how they could accommodate the extended family network and social system.

For example, Respondent 5 (R5) notes in response to a 1960s Tropical Modernist detached home with a large yard, *“The building is nice, the design is also nice. You will have space for social activities and other activities.”* While critiquing townhouses in a gated community with very little space between buildings, R5 comments, *“It is well arranged, but there is no compound for programs.”*

In response to multi-story apartment buildings, some respondents saw the verticality associated with this typology as providing more space not found in compound homes. Some saw the multi-story building as exhibiting similar social networks which occur in the compound home with Respondent 7 noting, *“You can easily get help from other neighbors because it accommodates a lot of people like compound houses.”*

On the other hand, other respondents questioned the social network of multi-story apartment buildings and the absence of the social core, the courtyard. *“It doesn’t make that social cooperation. Yeah, you don’t have it. Something like this, I climb up, I go into my room, I lock up. So, you might even be in the same apartment, you might not even see your neighbor. Compared to the way we built ours here. The moment I step out into the compound, definitely, I’m going to see somebody,”* remarks Respondent 24 (R24).

This need to incorporate the social structure and familial networks unique to the compound home became more

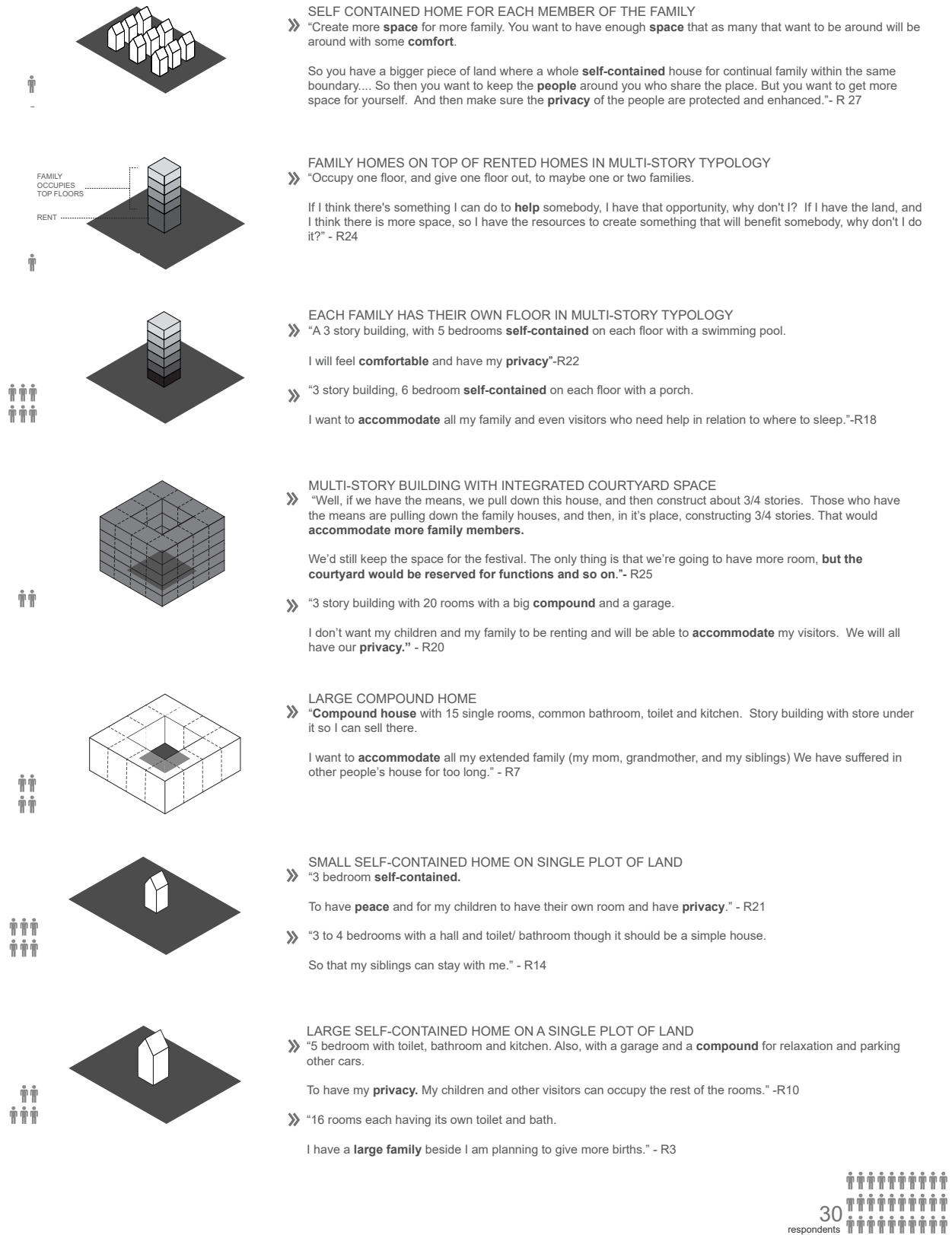


Figure 4: Ideal Diagrams, Dahlia Nduom, 2018

apparent when questioned about the ideal dwelling home. Respondents gave varying formal ideas for their fantasy home, but regardless the form there was still overlaid on the ideal this notion of an extended family, kinship and social network. This idea of interconnections while maintaining privacy was crucial to the conception of the home for most respondents. As previously noted, this maintaining of kinship and social network was also a factor in the description of the ideal for the people who weren't living in a family house but were tenants in a home. They relied on other people in the compound in various ways even though conflicts and arguments arose.

The ideal diagrams outlined in Figure 4 were drawn from the respondent's descriptions of their ideal dwelling. They begin to show the range of possible typologies for dwelling spaces with new notions of public and private and economic implications for renting aspects of the home. An analysis of these ideal diagrams reveals a notion of connecting to a more extensive social network common throughout the responses. In many cases, respondents envisioned enough rooms or spaces for their entire family to fit, with some replicating the compound home typology while others were adopting multi-story solutions where each family could have their own floor. Others saw a need to incorporate the courtyard to maintain its current value as a place for communal activities and exchange. Some respondents mentioned large self-contained homes on their own plot of land, but the image here was not replicating a suburban McMansion ideal but was based on the fact that they wanted to accommodate their extended family network in a more private arrangement than their current configuration. These diagrams and key quotes show the tension, dichotomy and areas of overlap between the practice and ideal of dwelling.

CONCLUSION

This practice of dwelling or the way in which residents navigate the system of settings of the compound home was challenged against the respondents' dwelling ideals. Although crowded with poor infrastructure, when challenged to communicate their ideal dwelling image, many envisioned a continuation of the strong social and family network unique to the compound home even if the formal parameters had evolved. The research shows some overlap between the practice and ideal of domesticity and spatial relationships but some discontinuity in how this is realized. This study can begin to provide clues to how to envision housing in this community while remaining true to the notion of the home for the people of Ga Mashie.

ENDNOTES

1. R. Grant and P. Yankson, "City Profile Accra," *Cities* 20, no. 1(2003): 65.
2. Amos Rapoport, "Theory, Culture and Housing," *Housing, Theory and Society* 17, no. 4 (2001): 146-147.
3. UN-HABITAT, *Ghana Housing Profile* (Nairobi: UNON, 2011).
4. UN-HABITAT, *Ghana Housing Profile*, xxiii
5. UN-HABITAT, *Ghana Housing Profile*, xxii
6. Irene Appeaning Addo, "Perceptions and Acceptability of Multihabitation as an Urban Low-Income Housing Strategy in Greater Accra Metropolitan Area, Ghana," *Urban Forum* 24, no. 4 (February 2013).
7. Abibata Mahama, Ama Acheampong, Oti Peprah and Yaw Bofo, *Preliminary Report for Ga Mashie Urban Design Lab* (2011), 2.
8. Mahama, Acheampong, Pepra and Bofo, *Preliminary Report for Ga Mashie*, 7.
9. CHF International, *Ga Mashie (Old Accra): Housing Improvement Survey* (2010), 7.