

## INTRODUCTION: THE ANTE-LIVES OF URBAN FORM

### ANTE-LIVES

If you leave Anyaa-Awoshie Road<sup>1</sup> at Ablekuma Junction, just after FanMilk Junction, and continue to follow the road north-west, you will, if travelling by car, reach Ashalaja Bridge in no more than 15 minutes (see fig.1). This concrete bridge will allow you to glide over the Densu River, that, at certain months of the year, races beneath you. Following the only road ahead – somewhere between densely urban Accra and the region’s rural edges – you will, in a matter of minutes, reach the growing town centre of Ashalaja. Ashalaja appears as both its own place and yet hardly distinguishable from places around it. It morphs into the surrounding landscape as neither village, nor urban, nor rural. Its defining space is a junction, allowing you to pass north towards Hobor, or past West towards Danchira and the Central Region. The junction’s edges are lined with items for sale: fried yam, building blocks, spare parts of cars – while both taxi and motorbike drivers occupy station posts, calling out for custom.

In a compelling conversation, a town elder vividly evoked the history of this town, recalling that it had but a passing place on the path to the Eastern Region. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, he explained, this passing place was synonymous with a man who brought fish from the nearby Densu river to sell – hanging his goods from the branches of the surrounding trees. ‘Everyone knew, if you wanted to buy fish, you could find it here,’ he reiterated. The elder continued his story, explaining that the fisherman’s name was Ashale. Ja – the Ga word for market – was added to form Ashale-ja. Over time, and through the passing of the word through many mouths, the name was corrupted to Ashalaja. As he reflected on the history of the town, the elder expressed that Ashalaja had until recent decades remained small and was an area characterised by fishing and the farming of vegetables, cereals and maize.

Today, Ashalaja is a place in transition. A local politician, Mr Frimpong, described Ashalaja as a ‘hotcake area. When you go to Ga South, it’s Ashalaja. Everybody wants to come to Ashalaja. In those days, if you mention Ashalaja, people say they won’t come. But things have changed. Ashalaja is now open.’ The phrase *hotcake* denoted a product or service in demand. Freshly baked

<sup>1</sup> The road that stretches from Awoshie to Pokuase.

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and ready for sale, a *hotcake* is highly demanded and, would soon be bought. Advertisements presenting plots for sale in Accra would often read 'hotcake plot of land for sale,' indicating that the plot of land is likely to be highly desirable and thus a prospective buyer should move fast. Mr Frimpong placed this demand into historical context, explaining that, 'it was around 1998-2000 when land started to be sold for building. At that time, there was no road, there was no bridge and the cost of land was low. You could get a plot out here for 50-70 Ghana cedis' [at the time of research, the cedi to US\$ exchange rate averaged at 5.69]. 'But today', he continued, 'a plot will cost somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 Ghana cedis. At the roadside, a plot will be 35,000 [US\$ 6151.00] but plots at the roadside are all taken in this area now. You know, at first, the building was slow, but it became rapid around 2010, when the estate developers came in. Before then, companies would come and buy land for their workers, as rewards for their workers, like the Fire Service or the Cocoa Board. And individuals too were buying land and building. But it's picked up since around 2010.'

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*Image 1- Blocks, sand and homes near Ashalaja.*

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Ashalaja is one of many growing towns in the Greater Accra Region. Here, there is a sense of things taking off, or to rephrase Mr Frimpong, of 'opening up.' When I returned to Ashalaja in December 2018, just three months after leaving Ghana in July, Ashalaja's central taxi point had transformed from a small commercial zone to a central spot which now hosted the quintessential sounds of the city. This new soundscape owed its transformation, in large part, to the arrival of *trotros*, which up

until then, had not included a town like Ashalaja in their operating landscape. With *trotros* came the distinctive station megaphone which called out the destinations available for sale – Pokuase, Danchira, Kasoa, Amasaman – enwrapping Ashalaja into a stretching urban fabric of mobility, labour and sociality. While Ashalaja had a much longer history, there was a sense that these changes marked the beginning of something – an urban beginning. This sense of beginning was symbolised most aptly by the number of building blocks which littered the landscape. Indeed, in both Ashalaja and across the Greater Accra region more broadly, building blocks lined the sides of roads. They were arranged like dominoes in the quarters of block factories and they were stacked at the edges of plots of land. Stood among the ant hills of Greater Accra – themselves ‘seen as microcosms of human activity and as nodal points between the known world and world of the dead’ (Parker, 2000) – the stacks of building blocks which littered the shifting edges of the city performed their own kind of symbolic mediation, as that between the now ‘bush’<sup>2</sup> and the ‘city yet to come’ (Simone, 2004). Indeed, these building blocks made the city materially possible. They would be arranged upon the earth’s surface, from which homes, roads and commercial enterprises would take shape. In fact, building blocks, by definition, are ‘the basic things that are put together to make something exist.’<sup>3</sup> They are ‘a unit of construction or composition’ – as ‘something essential on which a larger entity is based.’<sup>4</sup> In this way then, the building block may well be interpreted as the underlying unit through which the city – as a thing, idea, process – is made. Yet, this thesis contends that building blocks symbolise more than simply a beginning to urban form. Rather, this thesis argues that building blocks signal a set of before lives – or ante-lives – to urban form. Indeed, the materiality, the labour and the spaces implicated in the production of these building blocks point to significant, yet under-acknowledged facets that undergird the production of the city. I argue that by splitting these blocks into their elemental composition, we begin to expose the ante-lives of urban form and in turn, the material making of urban beginnings.

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<sup>2</sup> By bush, I refer to the meanings that were attributed to this word throughout my fieldwork, ‘with its implication of land that has not yet been claimed for settlement and cultivation’ (Quayson, 2014:41). Despite the fact that large tracts of land surrounding Ashalaja are farmed, ‘bush’ is used here to refer to un-urbanised land more broadly.

<sup>3</sup> ‘building block’ (dictionary.cambridge.org, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> ‘building block’ (merriam-webster.com, 2019).