

CAPE COAST: PROSPECTS FOR RENEWING A DECAYING CITY

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ABSTRACT

A Close study of a selected residential area in Cape Coast, in terms of its socio-economic attributes and the housing environment, revealed stagnation in the living circumstances of the residential families as well as a rapid deterioration in the historic physical structures in which they dwell.

This paper addresses some of the findings during a study of the Dawson Hill neighbourhood unit. These findings provide an insight into some of the problems in a historic town such as Cape Coast and looks at possible ways of using its liability as an old decaying city to revive it through the potential of Conservation and Tourism, with possible suggestions as to how this could be achieved.

Keywords:

Socio-economic, Housing, Environment, Neighbourhood Unit, Rehabilitation, Conservation, Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Cape Coast as an urban centre has experienced a gradual economic and physical deterioration over the years. This is evidenced by increasing unemployment, crumbling of buildings etc. This has consequently affected the socio-economic environment, leading to economic stagnation and decadence within the town. Although, the town is an embodiment of the glorious past which is associated with the nation as a whole in terms of administration, trading, education etc., the present state of its urban development is nothing to be proud of. A comprehensive study of Cape Coast conducted by the Department of Architecture, KNUST, came up with a lot of data which formed a basis for developmental plans to be drawn up for the town. However, this current study, focuses more on details within a typical historic residential neighbourhood within the town centre. Results of the study are expected to provide some guidelines for residential neighbourhood planning and design in the context of urban renewal.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH OF CAPE COAST

Cape Coast's original name under Portuguese colonisation was Carbo Corso which was transformed to Cape Coast by the English. It was a settlement, which was founded by migrants from the old Ghanaian Empire in Sudan in the 16th Century. In 1600 the Portuguese built a castle there which was taken over by the Dutch in 1637.

In the next 27 years it was occupied by the Swedes, the Danes and again by the Dutch. However, in 1664 the English took possession. This century saw the beginning of the slave trade until its subsequent abolition in the early 19th century. Cape Coast was by then a main trade port and as

such played quite an important role in the slave trade.

The importance of Cape Coast as an administrative and commercial centre was increased with the occupation of the castle by the English and this resulted in several merchants establishing their headquarters there. The town prospered and expanded until the Ashantis (a tribe in Ghana) conquered it in 1806. However, they could not take the castle, because according to Davis:

"After Dutch Elmina, Cape Coast was the largest, strongest, and the best garrisoned European Fort in West Africa....."[2] This threat of the Ashantis resulted in the building of two fortifications, namely, Fort Williams (formerly Smith's Tower) on Dawson Hill in 1820, which is still standing and Fort McCarthy which was built in 1822 and nothing remains of that. Fort Williams is popularly known by the inhabitants as "Lighthouse" due to the Railway and Ports Authority using it as a Lighthouse some years ago. The English acquired Danish properties in 1850 and in 1872 the Dutch ceded their possessions to the English. Despite a victory over the Ashantis two years later, Cape Coast started deteriorating. This was accelerated by the transfer of the seat of colonial government of the Gold Coast to Accra, the present capital city of Ghana. What sealed the fate of Cape Coast was the opening of a harbour in 1888 in Sekondi, a town about 52 miles west of Cape Coast, as well as a railway link between Sekondi and Kumasi in 1903:

"Until this time Cape Coast has been the most important port of the Gold Coast for the Exportation of cocoa, but after this event this importance dropped entirely. In 1963 the port was finally closed down."[9]

The deterioration of Cape Coast which set in after this back-breaking events can still be seen and felt to this day.

CAPE COAST TODAY

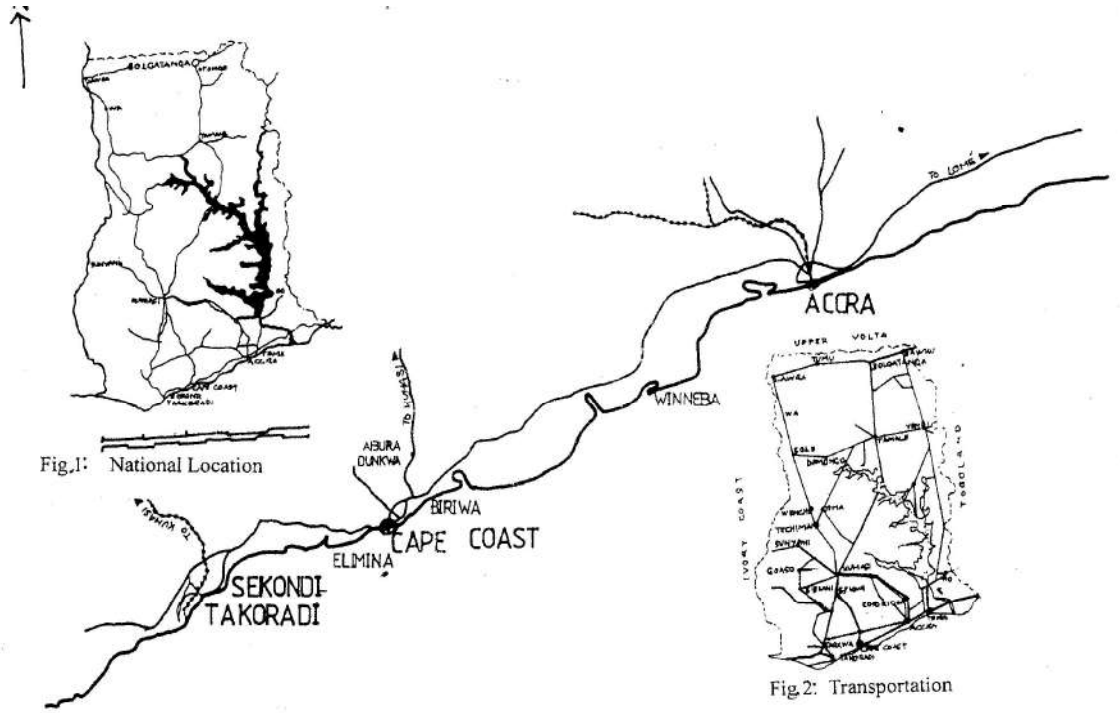
Cape Coast is at present the capital of the Central Region (see Fig. 1) with a total population of approximately 135,000.[8]. It is about 90 miles west of Accra and about 15 miles east of Elmina, another important historical town with the most significant castle on the West African coast.

The climate is relatively mild with salt laden sea-breeze from the south-west, which poses a threat to buildings due to its corrosive action on building materials. The town itself has a variety of low-rising hills with beautiful, historic buildings which, presently, are falling into ruins due to neglect.

The most important economic base of the town is the fishing industry with a few small - scale industries. However, the fishing industry is losing its importance due to the fast development of the industry in Elmina.

There is a highway which links some neighbouring African countries like Togo, Benin and Nigeria on the east

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and Cote d'Voire on the west (see Fig 2). It is also linked to other parts of the country by roads to Accra and Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city. There are services like electricity and water as well as a telephone and TV/ radio relay stations.

The town with its interesting history, picturesque townscape, a surviving fort and castle, has a great potential of being a tourist attraction.

C. Specialised Studies:
 This involved studies of areas such as the canoe berthing or fishing harbour and the Kotokoraba Market. In addition there was a study on conservation since both towns have a lot of historical buildings. Some of these buildings were selected for measured drawings. Their historical background and evolution were also documented. (For details of this study see [1]).

THE STUDY: BACKGROUND

The study was conducted in August 1991, over a period of two weeks. Dawson Hill, the area under focus was, however, just a part of the overall study of the Cape Coast township. Due to the intrinsic nature of the factors involving Cape Coast and Elmina, the latter was also studied. The following three basic areas were looked at:

- A. **A General overview of the two towns:**
 This dealt with the socio-economic as well as the physical environment of the towns in general.
- B. **Neighbourhood studies:** These were conducted to address some selected areas including an in-depth appraisal of the Block and Domestic Units. The former involved historical evolution of areas, land ownership, occupational structures, territorial boundaries etc., and the latter dealt with the study of some selected houses or structures, in terms of their plan forms, accommodation and material schedules, building condition as well as the number of households and families. (Dawson Hill falls under this category).

DAWSON HILL STUDY - BLOCK UNIT

Historical and Socio-cultural framework:
 The neighbourhood was named after one Mr. Dawson, who migrated from Komenda with his sisters. These sisters became married to a merchant and magistrate, Mr. Swanzy and Governor Jackson, respectively, in the middle of the 19th century.

Governor Jackson died at sea and a street, Jackson Street was named after him. Mr. Swanzy formed the Swanzy Company which later became the U.A.C. Mr. Dawson brought his stool from Komenda and made himself chief of the area after acquiring a piece of land from the chief of Cape Coast during the Gold Coast era. He then put up the first building in the area which has since been known as the DAWSON HOUSE (see map., Fig.3). Fig.3 also shows the Dawson Hill neighbourhood. The actual area is bounded by the Commercial Street on the east, Jackson Street on the south, Coronation Street on the west and Jerusalem Street on the north. On top of the small hill is Fort Williams, also

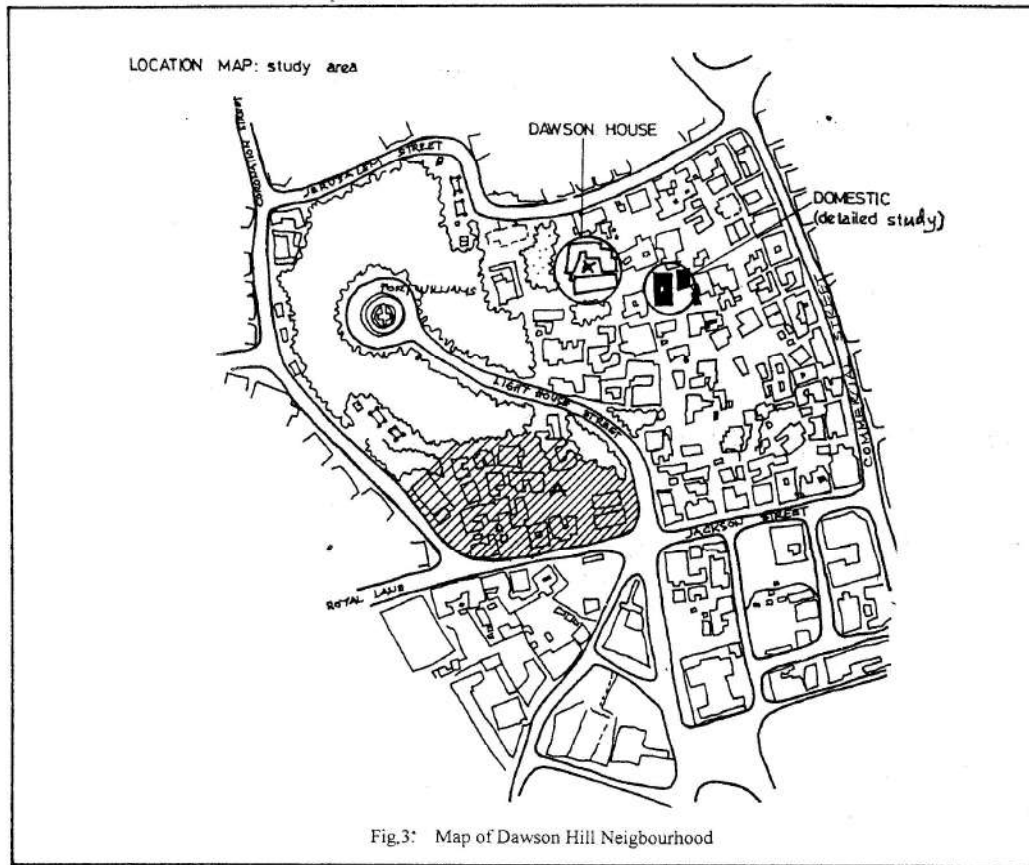


Fig.3: Map of Dawson Hill Neighbourhood

known as the Lighthouse. The land belongs to the Dawson family. (However, the part shaded and marked 'A' was given to the AKWABA family) Fig.4 and 5 show sections through the Dawson Hill neighbourhood giving an idea of the massing of buildings and topography).

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS OF STUDY

Demographic characteristics of Dawson Hill saw almost a doubling of the population over a period of 32 years.¹ The almost equal number of both sexes of the working force also refutes the idea that most of the males migrate to the other urban areas to look for work. This gives an indication that with the proper stimulation of the economy, there would not be a lack of competent and willing workforce within the neighbourhood. Environmental characteristics show a large number of houses built of mud/stone with the number of complete, habitable and UNMAINTAINED houses equal to the number of complete, habitable and maintained

¹ The total population of the area was 2568 in 1991 [10] as against a total of 1364 in 1960 [7].

houses. This issue of maintenance must be urgently addressed since within a short period the number of unmaintained houses falling into ruins will increase with the consequent loss of some of the houses of historic importance.

It was, however, observed that the apparent lack of funds was the primary factor for the negligence of these buildings. The problem is often more acute if various sections of the house (usually a compound house) is owned by different members of the family or tenants.

The lack of funds for maintaining or rehabilitating houses in Cape Coast is deceptive because most of the affluent people living in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, have family houses in Cape Coast and are willing to maintain them.

However, the ability and readiness to repair these family houses are frustrated by the matrilineal system of inheritance operating in the region. This has resulted in a lot of family members becoming part owners of these houses. There have been cases where some of these rich family members have been accused of trying to annex the ownership of the houses which they have tried to repair. They now prefer to build their own houses in the cities where they work since this would guarantee them their own private houses when they retire.

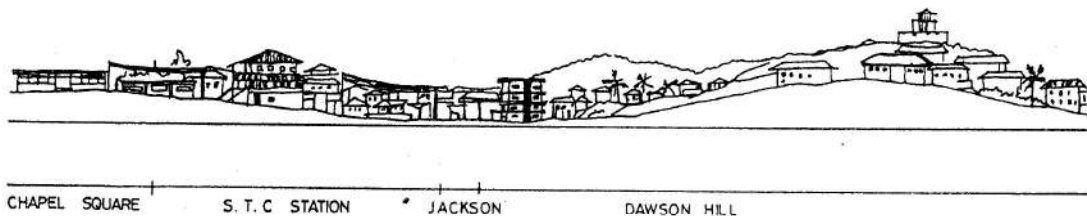
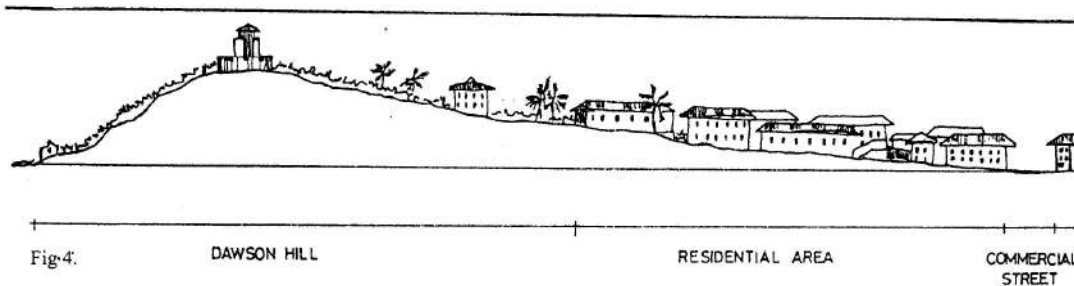
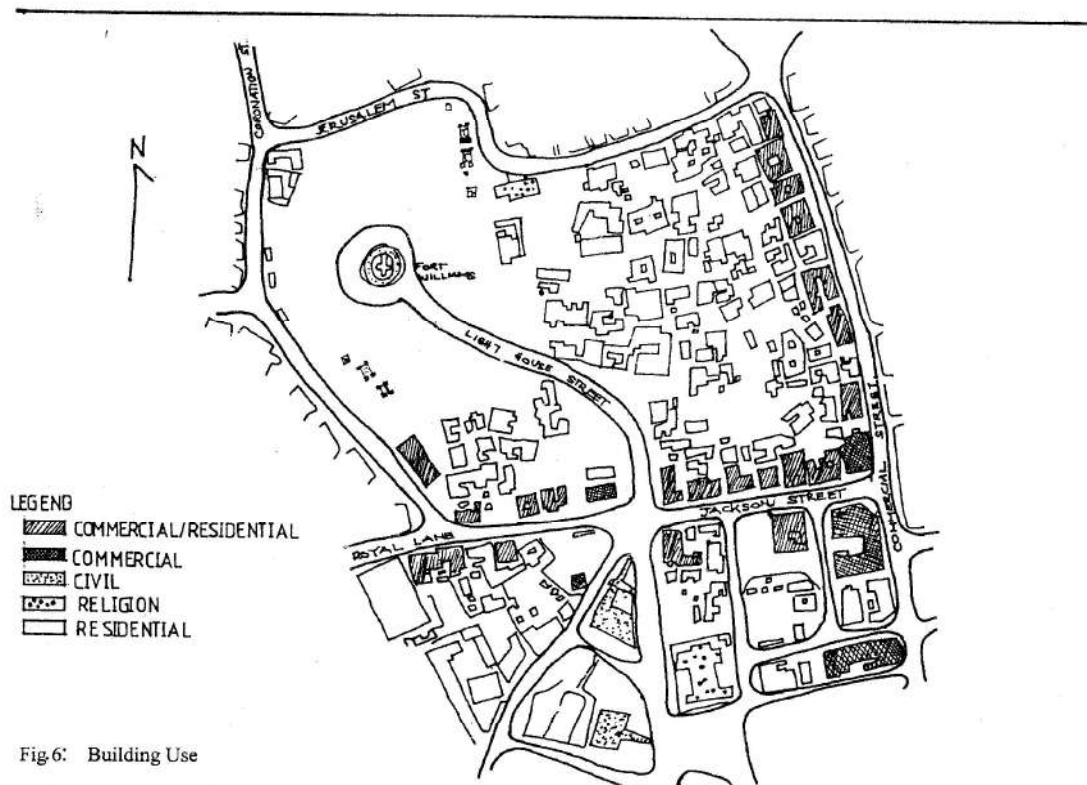


Fig. 5: Sectional Profile of Dawson Hill Neighbourhood



The migration of the affluent to other cities started right from the time Cape Coast lost its strong economic and administrative position:

"Most persons in the higher income categories left Cape Coast and settled in Accra or Takoradi. In addition the middle income category partly migrated to the latter towns". [3].

Another observation worth mentioning is the conversion of most of the residential buildings along the major commercial routes into commercial facilities, e.g. offices, shops. (see Fig.6) With environmental sanitation and services, serious efforts are needed to put in place effective waste management machinery as well as up-grading of the present number of public facilities e.g. Public baths/toilets.

FROM WEAKNESS TO STRENGTH

From the studies of the other neighbourhoods, it appears the houses in the Dawson Hill neighbourhood are characteristic of the older part of the town, and the neighbourhood as a whole is representative of the overall situation in the town; a demonstration of the stagnating economic conditions against a background of high quality architectural heritage of no mean value.

To give a picture of the stagnated nature of Cape Coast in terms of development, the conclusion drawn from the earlier study of the town on the same neighbourhood in 1972 could be revisited:

"The area enjoys a very favourable location in the vicinity of the town centre and architectural environment of high quality, although it shows clear traces of deterioration. As other areas of Cape Coast it witnesses the declined importance of the town within the context" [9].

Twenty years after the study things have still not improved. It is at this point that one would like to ask exactly what is wrong and what has to be done? Is it a problem of lack of residential accommodation, public facilities or development projects? The problem in Cape Coast is not that of housing when compared to other urban centres.

The socio-economic activities are modest in scale owing to a variety of reasons, especially financial. However, these activities could be re-vitalised within the context of the local urban economy. To achieve this, clear-cut planned policy for the town should be developed and the various facets that make up the overall policy taken in phases in a concerted effort to revamp the economy.

Even though there is a need for more public facilities, the solution to the socio-economic stalemate in the town is the provision of a properly planned and defined development scheme which would act as a catalyst to induce the inhabitants into productive activities. Recent upsurge in tourism in the country has finally given the government an indication that what was thought to be the weakness of Cape Coast - old and dilapidated structures within an old town with a history nobody is interested in - has become its strength. The attitude of most Ghanaian governments towards the

preservation and rehabilitation of ancient buildings and historic sites has not been very favourable. Most governments come into power with very grandiose building schemes on their agenda, since their objective is to put up structures that would appeal to the general public, as well as enhancing their image in the eyes of foreigners. For example, the oldest quarters of the Cape Coast town behind the castle has been demolished to make way for very imposing modern buildings made up of a Post Office, a Commercial Bank and a High Court. Ironically, the Post Office could not survive the action of the salt-laden sea-breeze due to the lack of consideration in the choice and specification of building materials, while buildings more than a hundred years old are still standing!

Most people in Ghana, until recently, did not appreciate old historic buildings. Their concept of urban development was usually a vision of new or modern buildings. Consequently, politicians, in a bid to please and fulfil the aspirations of their electorate, act accordingly. This trait of the people may be due to the fact that they usually saw these old buildings as obsolete relics of a primitive past, and were even ashamed when foreign visitors came to see them. This could be the direct result of the first President of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah's vision of building Ghana as a "show piece of Africa".

There is a popular story in the country that during the visit of The Queen of England to Ghana in the late 1950s, the President had some buildings bordering the route the Queen was led during a town ride in Cape Coast covered in tarpaulin. He is alleged to have told the Queen when asked about it that they were stacks of cocoa beans!² Whether the above story is true or not, it reflects the mentality of the leaders towards ancient historic structures. Due to this attitude towards these old "architectural identities", architects and planners in Ghana have still not come to grips as to the proper marriage of Modern architectural developments within the ancient urban milieu. This is observed (and rightly too) by Hyland:

"The problem of relating modern architectural development to ancient urban surrounding is one that architects are only now just beginning to face in Ghana".[4]

It took a singular occurrence to bring awareness to the damage being inflicted on the ancient sections of the town. This took the form of an unauthorised demolishing of Swanzy Mill, "one of the most important secular buildings from historical and townscape points of view, after the castle in Cape Coast". [4] The planning controls at that time was not enough to prevent demolition of this building which was the former headquarters of the old trading company of F & A Swanzy Brothers.

The government then took the first step in the right direction by instituting a committee (Ghana National Committee of ICOMOS), whose duty was to educate the public to appreciate and value these historical relics which give a sense of identity to the country.

² This writer personally heard this story from some elderly residents of Cape Coast during his school days on more than one occasion.

To facilitate the work of this committee, a National Register of Historic Buildings and Monuments has also been compiled and these would be protected by law. Further to this, some architectural and urban studies have been carried out by students and staff of the Department of Architecture, KNUST, Kumasi (of which this study is part), to help identify the possible building sites for future rehabilitation, urban renewal, restoration and conservation.

All the above measures taken to help preserve and maintain the building and sites worth conserving are admirable but here certain questions start cropping up:

- (a) Is the government going to finance the rehabilitation of old houses worth conserving?
- (b) Are the buildings chosen for rehabilitation or conservation to be repaired using modern traditional building materials and craft skills?
- (c) Are the rehabilitated buildings, like the Cape Coast Castle to be adopted for re-use or to be left as museum pieces?
- (d) How is the government going to acquire family properties for conservation?

These and many other questions are what the study of Dawson Hill neighbourhood could help answer. If funds were limitless it would have been good to preserve almost all the old buildings since it would have given a setting and favourable milieu to the castle and fort. But even if this were possible it would not be advisable since:

"We must distinguish, however, between degrees of value, otherwise we shall end up saving absolutely everything. To do so would not only fossilise our environment but also stifle any natural development". [6]

ARCHITECTURAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE REHABILITATION/CONSERVATION OF DOMESTIC BUILDINGS

It is, therefore, recommended that the government should find possible ways of helping the poor economically, in order to generate income to enable them rehabilitate their houses themselves, since the study came out with the fact that lack of funds was a major cause of the state of the houses. In this case, emphasis should be put on the fishing industry since Cape Coast is basically a fishing town. The occupational structure of Dawson Hill shows that about 53% of the inhabitants are self-employed with 30% of them being fishermen and fishmongers.

However, people rehabilitating their houses themselves should be advised and guided since it was observed during the study that most of those who tried to rehabilitate some parts of their houses sometimes did not follow the original plan form: they either added to or took parts of it away and ended up mutilating the building and thereby losing the spirit of the whole exercise of conservation. They should be encouraged through incentives to follow the original designs and also keep the unique architectural features which give the town its character. This could be achieved by the government setting up a local technical office

within the town, probably under the Museum and Monuments Board, to provide free technical help and advice to residents and landlords wishing to rehabilitate their dwellings. This outfit would also decide on the kind of incentives to be provided as well as oversee their disbursement.

Conventional building materials could be introduced but it may be necessary, in some cases, to use the original building materials and methods. This is advocated since 'Architectural Conservation' should be looked at, not only the plan form and characteristic features of a building, but also traditional building materials and craft skills as well. This is advocated by Hyland:

"I advocate a much wider interpretation of the term 'Architectural Conservation' to include the conservation of traditional building materials and craft skills"

The harnessing of these traditional building craft would not be a problem since there are people in the rural areas who are still using them. (see Figs.7, 8 & 9). On the question of adaptive re-use of some of the most significant buildings, some of them could be put into use as hotels, offices, museums, etc. For example the Elmina castle was earlier used as a police Training Depot and the former C.H. Bartels' house, built in 1827, is currently a post office in Elmina.

The next important stage is to encourage the people to use the increased earnings from the revamping of the fishing industry to rehabilitate their houses. Most of these are family houses and are basically occupied by family members, as such it may not be difficult to convince them to do so. In this light, the compilation of the National Register of Historic Buildings and Monuments should include a comprehensive documentation of the history, ownership and nature of occupancy. Buildings of specific interest to the government should be indicated.

House-owners should be encouraged to rehabilitate their houses by the provision of certain incentives. These could be in the form of property tax concessions as well as encouraging them to form rehabilitation Co-operatives in order to make them accessible to subsidized building materials and technological advice and equipment. However, specific buildings in which the government is interested in conserving should be prioritised into those it would like to buy outright, those it would like to rent, rehabilitate and conserve without buying and those it would help the owners to rehabilitate themselves.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Finally, one of the most sensitive points of conservation in Ghana has to be addressed. The Ghanaian is not one of disposing of landed property as can be found in other cultures, especially old buildings such as can be found in Cape Coast due to its link with family inheritance. However, with a good price and the possibility of re-housing them some of the families MAY decide to sell. A more acceptable way would be for the government to rent and rehabilitate or have a leasehold on it for some number of

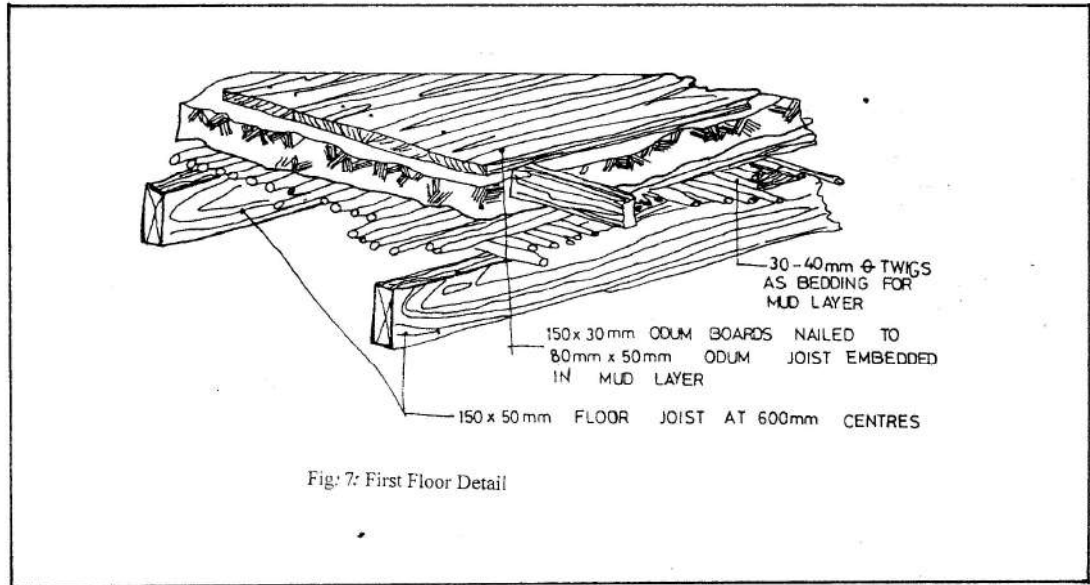


Fig 7: First Floor Detail

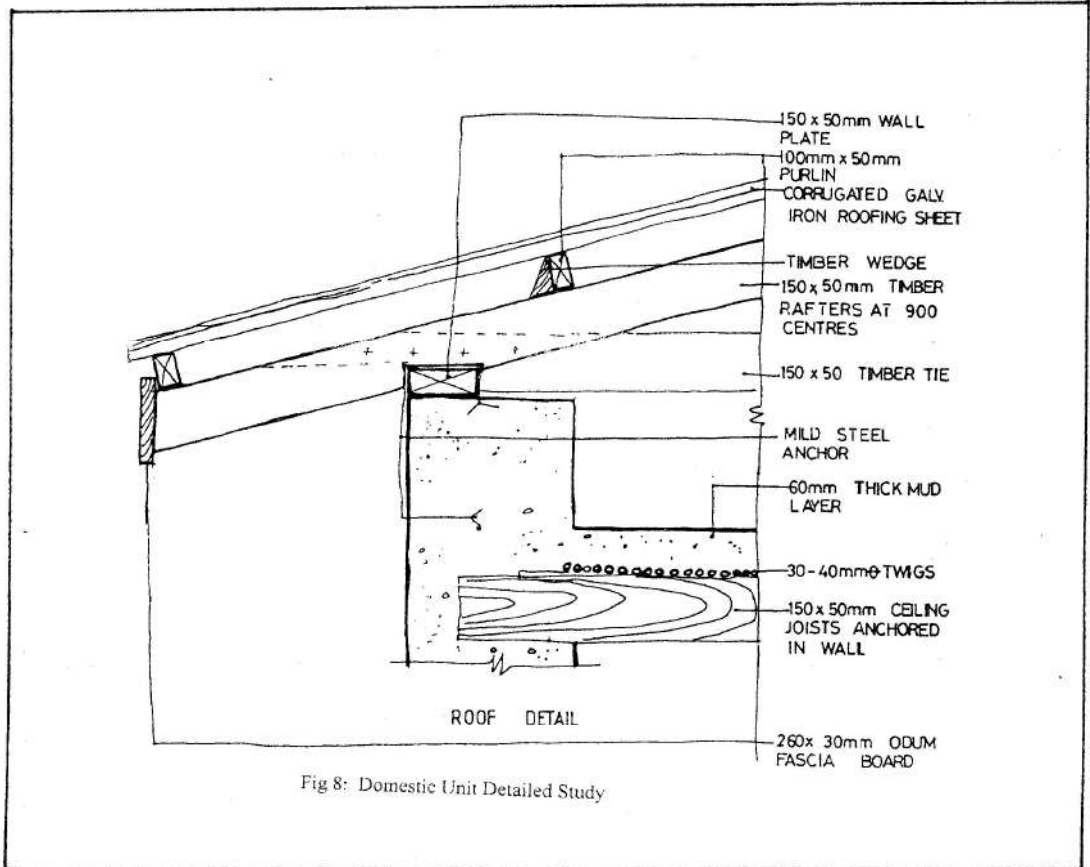


Fig 8: Domestic Unit Detailed Study

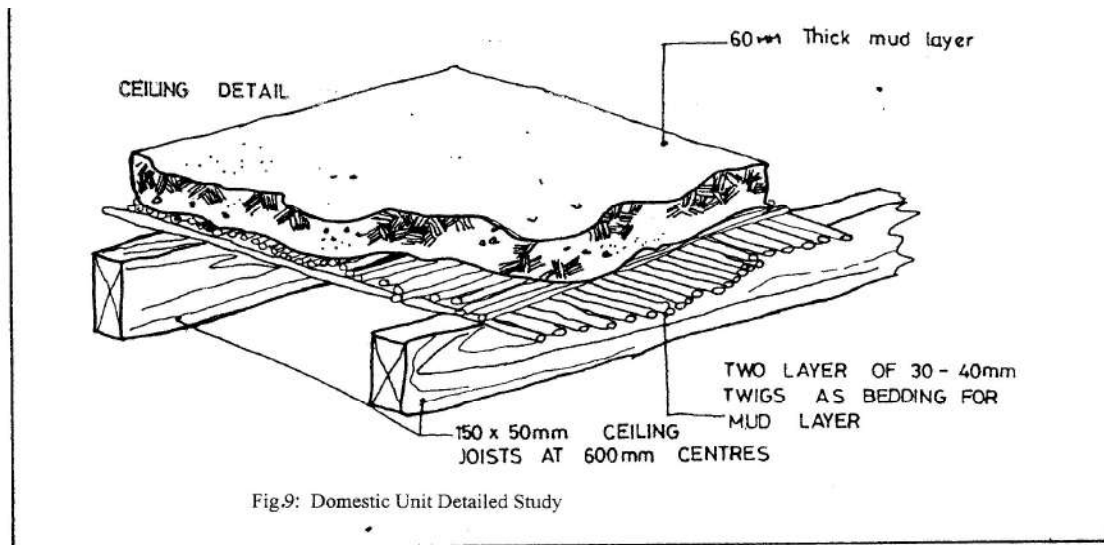


Fig.9: Domestic Unit Detailed Study

years. Rent payments could then be used to defray some of the rehabilitation costs. After that the building would be able to pay for itself through the promotion of tourism which I deem to be the greatest potential of Cape Coast.

This then brings into sharp focus the issue of TOURISM and CONSERVATION. For a town such as Cape Coast the two are bedfellows. It is, therefore, gratifying to learn of the government's recent grant for the rehabilitation/conservation of castles and forts in Cape Coast and Elmina. However, as mentioned earlier, the execution of development projects on piece-meal basis should be discarded. A more holistic approach should be adopted. Here, the government should not just go into rehabilitating and refurbishing castles and forts on impulse. There should be a properly planned policy and execution since conservation of these two types of buildings alone would not satisfy the immense tourism potential of this great historic town.

From the above, it becomes imperative that appropriate buildings and building sites with spatial affinity to Cape Coast and Elmina Castles and forts must be preserved, restored, rehabilitated and possibly adapted for use and general enhancement of both local community benefit and visitor attraction and experience. This could be only done by:

- (i) Surveying and documenting available data on buildings and sites which have socio-historic value. These are usually within a zone of influence created by proximity of the castles and forts.
- (ii) A concerted effort to come up with urban planning strategies which address conservation issues as well as the attendant positive and negative socio-economic 'ripples' that might be caused at both local and regional levels.

- (iii) Realising that conservation cannot be done in isolation of the urban environment as such, detailed technical and financial schemes should be worked out to help upgrade specific areas in the core-areas of the selected historic sites of the two towns.

Studies conducted by others suggest Elmina even has a greater potential as regards tourism than Cape Coast, as such the two towns must necessarily be developed along this line in tandem. Some researchers wrote:

"Elmina has a lot of historic and architecturally pleasing buildings. It attracts more interest to the tourist than any other castle in the country partly because in addition to being the oldest, it is one of the most magnificent and partly because of the role it played in the Slave Trade".[5]

After more than 12 years they were proved right when the Cape Coast and Elmina castles were declared World Heritage monuments in 1980.

CONCLUSION

From the results of the study, it is clear that Cape Coast, as a town, has a rich historic stock of ancient houses and monuments, but is gradually and systematically falling into oblivion. Apart from the castle and fort most of the historic buildings are residential or commercial/ residential and some of them lack basic amenities like water and toilets. These should be seriously considered during rehabilitation, especially buildings targeted for adaptive use.

It is here advocated and reiterated that in addition to the government's and other agencies' efforts to rehabilitate, preserve and conserve the major identified buildings, there should be policies made to initiate effective and lasting

solutions to improving the economic base of the town since the residents would only give their whole-hearted support if there are symbiotic benefits to be reaped from this exercise.

Also helping the people to improve their houses would make them act as a back-drop to the castle and forts since it is the totality of all this that would give credence and identity to this exercise of conservation.

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