

A photograph of an informal settlement in Accra, Ghana. In the foreground, a man wearing a white t-shirt with a graphic and dark pants stands holding a shovel. Behind him is a wall under construction, made of stacked bricks. The background shows a dirt road, utility poles, and several small, makeshift buildings. The sky is clear and blue.

## **A Self-Help Approach: Urban Design in Accra's Informal Settlements**

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An aerial photograph showing two distinct residential areas in Johannesburg, South Africa. On the left is the Bloubastrand Planned Neighbourhood, characterized by large, well-spaced houses with red and grey roofs, surrounded by greenery and trees. A paved road runs along the right side of this area. On the right is the Kya Sands Informal Settlement, a densely packed area of small, makeshift structures with corrugated metal roofs, situated on a sandy, unpaved area. A road also runs along the left side of this settlement. The two areas are separated by a clear boundary, a paved road, and a strip of sandy ground.

**Bloubastrand  
Planned Neighbourhood**

**Kya Sands  
Informal Settlement**

**Two adjacent neighbourhoods  
in Johannesburg, South Africa**

Photograph: Johnny Miller/Millefoto/Rex/Shutterstock

# Agenda

## Purpose:

To show how self-help urban design in Accra informal settlements is a form of social movement

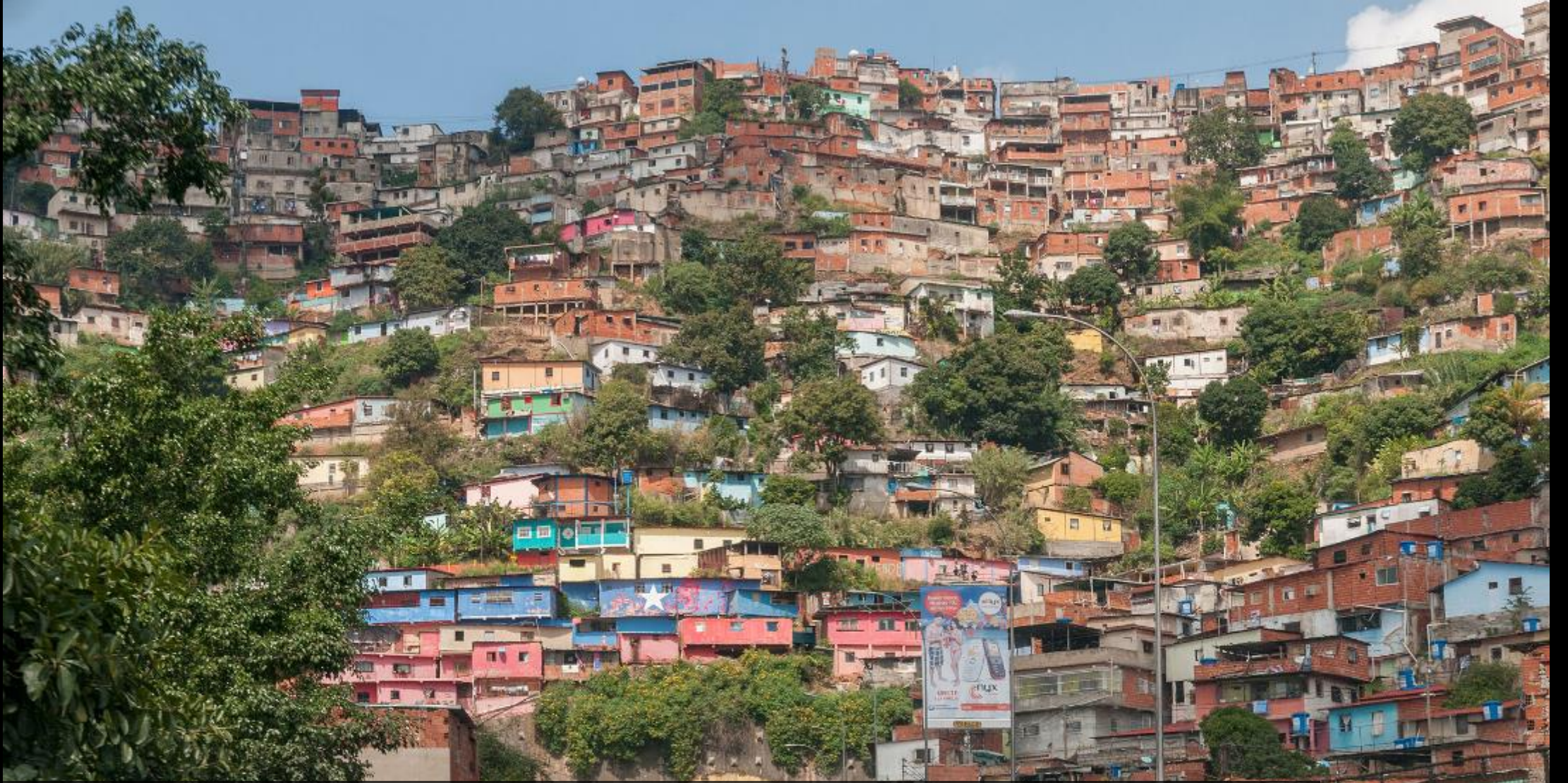
## Argument:

Residents in informal settlements act as “unknowing” urban designers by shaping public spaces through “self-help” projects. This work can be understood as a form of social movement.

## Content:

- The state of informal settlement
- Understanding urban design
- Social movement literature
- Infrastructural intervention (Nima Drain) and self-help urban design in Accra New Town
- Analysis: matching urban design cases with social movement literature
- Concluding remarks





**1 billion** people live in slums or informal settlements today; by 2030, **3 billion**

Adequate housing is **a human right**

Renewing policy attention and **increasing investments** to ensure housing for all

UN, 2019

# Understanding Informality

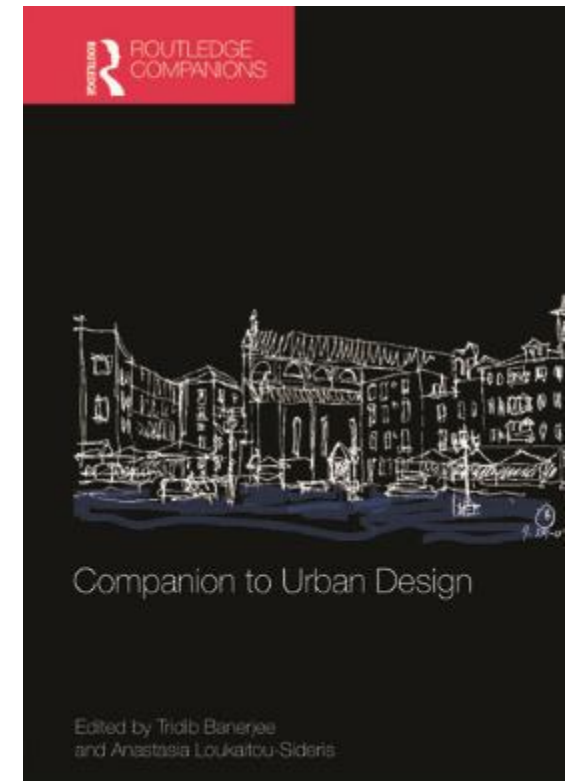
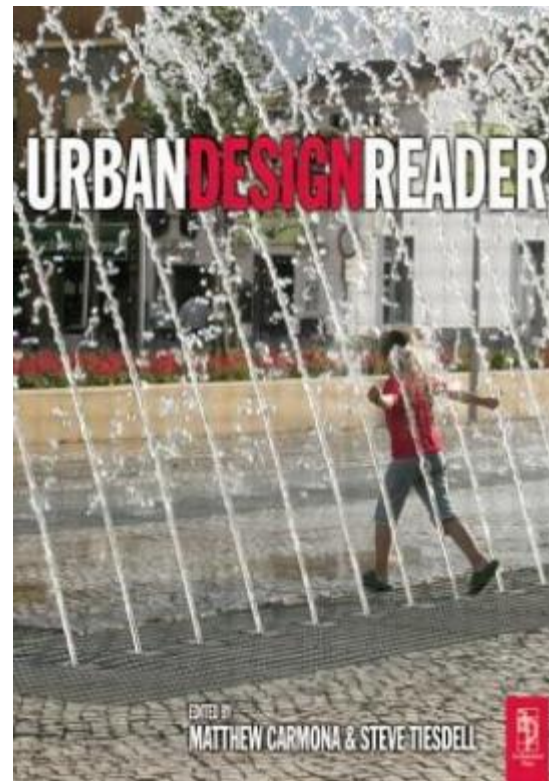
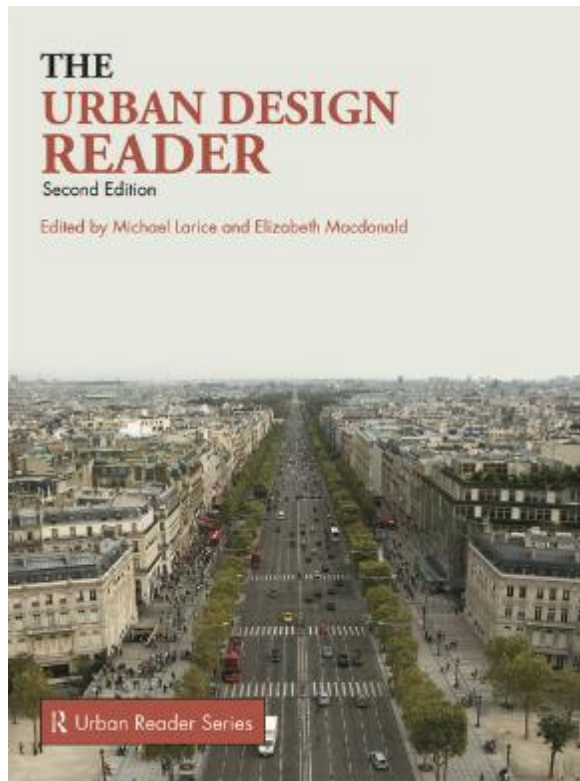
- Unregulated distributions or untaxed economic activities (Hart, 1973; Dovey, 2014)
- Informal settlement is a **visible** urban informality (Dovey & King, 2011)
- Informality and formality often **coexist** (Gouverneur, 2015)



Informal housing in Taiwan



Life in a "cage" - overcrowding in living quarters



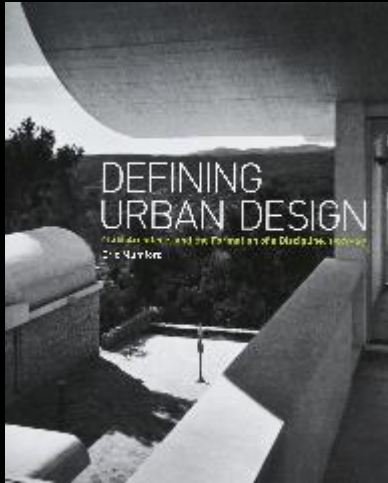
## Objectivity

Urban design is the design of towns and cities, streets and spaces

It is the process of shaping the physical setting for daily life

Involves the design of buildings, groups of buildings, spaces and landscapes, and establishing frameworks and procedures that will deliver successful development by different people over time

# Subjectivity ... in Conventional Wisdom



The architectural design of low-rise pedestrian environments, light rail-line stations, and other large elements

Five physical characteristics for urban life:

- (1) livable streets and neighbourhoods;
- (2) density of residential development and the intensity of land use;
- (3) integration of activities (living and working) with ideal proximity;
- (4) delineated public space;
- (5) distinct buildings with complex arrangements (vs. few large buildings)



In conventional wisdom, urban design has certain expectations that must be met, and these expectations remain even today.



Two groups of urban designers:

- “Knowing” (self-conscious) urban design (see themselves as urban designers)
- **“Unknowing”** (unself-conscious) urban design (do not see themselves as urban designers)

Carmona (2003)



Uptown Normal Renewal Court

The literature has little discussion on placemaking by **unknowing urban designers**; or **how these urban areas become what they are**



# Defining Social Movement

- The sustained **challenge to authorities** in the name of a population that lacks advantages many other populations enjoy

Tilly (1989)

- A social movement is a complex set of different types of actions by different actors all oriented toward some **general social change goals**

Marwell and Oliver (1993)

- Consists of a **group of people** acting with some continuity to **promote or resist** a change in their society or group

Alexander and Baker (1994)

## Four Trends - Mario Diani (1992)

- Collective Behaviour (US) - Turner and Killian (1957) | Smelser (1963)
  - People are irrational | Why irrationally disrupting social order? | The “system” has no problem
- Resource Mobilization Theory (US) - McCarthy and Zald (1973)
  - People are rational actors | People mobilize due to their grievances, due to resource inequality
- Political Process Theory (US) - Tilly (1978) and McAdam (1982)
  - A political process, not a psychological one | Must protest on the streets because the conditions cannot be improved through formal channels (vote and campaign)
- New Social Movement (Europe) - Touraine (1981), Melucci (1980), and more
  - Post-industrial society, “conflicts are cultural and symbolic” (gender & ethnic – identity politics)

## Some Gaps

- There should be “something” that the Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) are resisting
- Change won't be achieved through formal channels
  - Are these events even considered social movements if no protest has taken place?
- Based on events in the US and Europe

Is it likely that a social movement could achieve its goals if mobilized?

**Political Opportunity Structure**

**Social Movement: Five Components**

**Contentious Repertoires**

How the movement attempts to achieve its goals (strikes, boycotts, protests, petitions, etc.)

**Mobilizing Structures**

The collective vehicles through which people mobilize to engage in collective action (SMOs)

**Protest Cycles**

These are the periods of time when the movement is at its most mobilized

**Framing Processes**

Leaders frame the problem, the proposed solution, and the call to action to convince people to mobilize

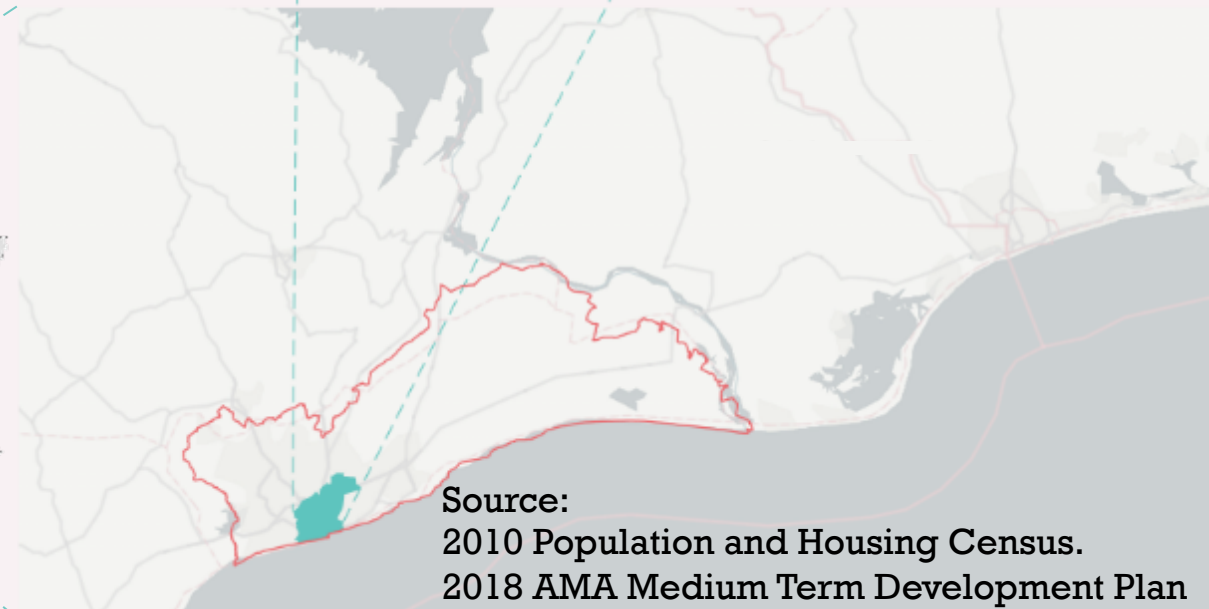
Neal (2007) | McAdam (1982)

# A Glance at Ghana and Accra

	Ghana	Greater Accra Region
Population (Million)	30.8	5.4
Density (p/km <sup>2</sup> )	129	1,236

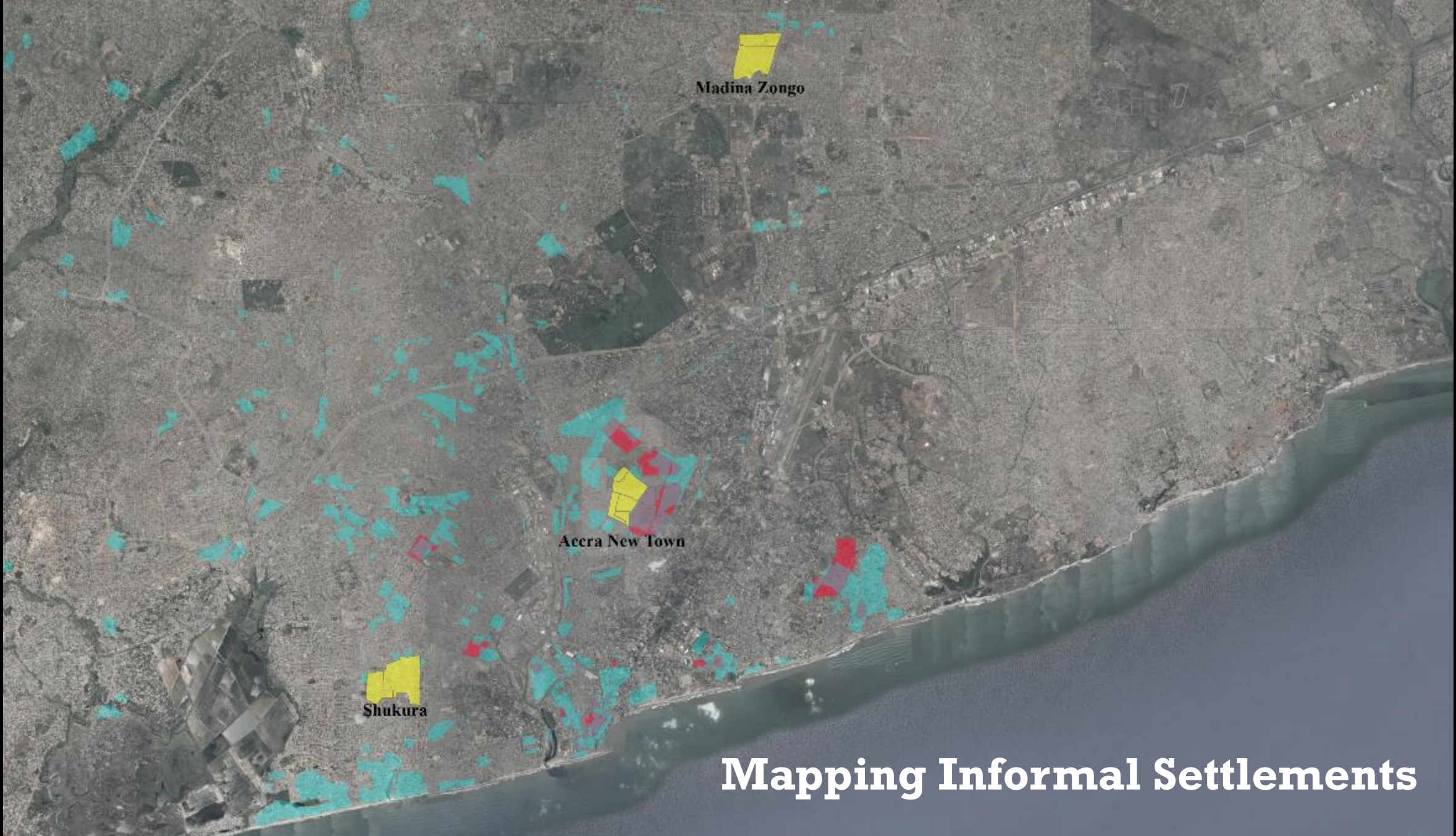
## In Accra Metropolitan District:

- 80% of economically active population work in the private, informal sector.
- 58% of the population live in informal housing; there is an estimated backlog of 300,000 houses in Accra.



Source:  
2010 Population and Housing Census.  
2018 AMA Medium Term Development Plan

	<b>Accra Sub-metros</b>
<b>Africa</b>	<b>Greater Accra Region</b>



Madina Zongo

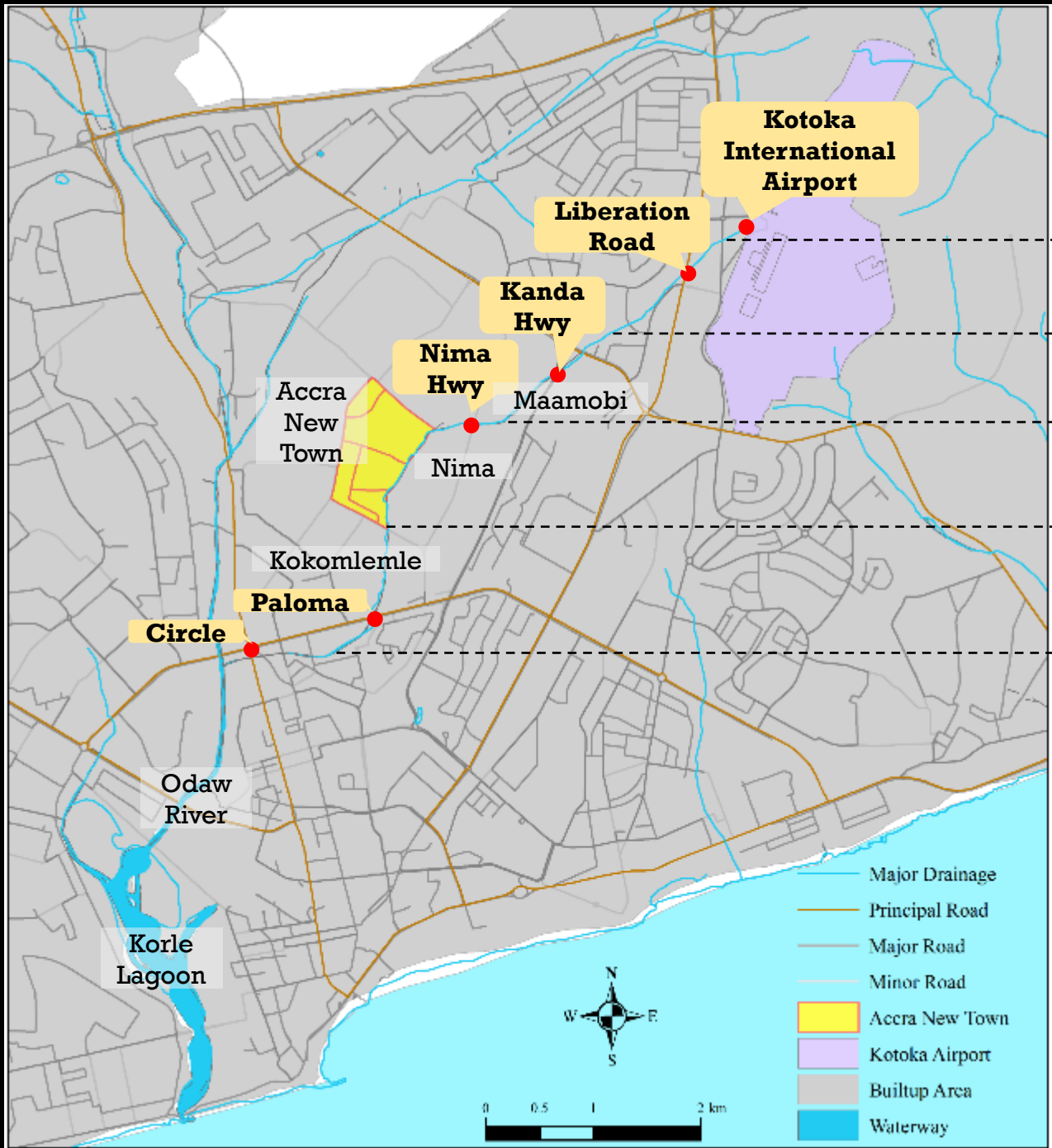
Accra New Town

Shukura

# Mapping Informal Settlements

# The Nima Drain

- Ghana
  - Structural Adjustment Program (SAP)
  - Economic liberalization
  
- Accra
  - Urban expansion
  - Flood control
  - Settlement intervention
  
- Nima Stream
  - Public works and local employment



- Nima Upstream**  
2004-  
Accra Airport City Project – Govt. of Ghana
- Kanda-Liberation Section**  
TBD  
Remains in earth channel
- Nima-Maamobi Section (Alhamdu Gutter)**  
2012-18  
Govt. of Ghana
- Nima Section**  
1988-92  
Priority Works Project – World Bank
- Odaw-Paloma Section**  
1963-65  
Drainage Master Plan – Govt. of Ghana

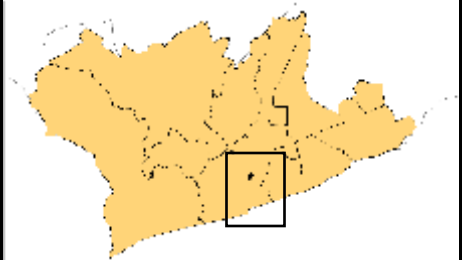


Photo by Ala Adjetey



**“Making it straight!”**

**A labour-intensive channelization**



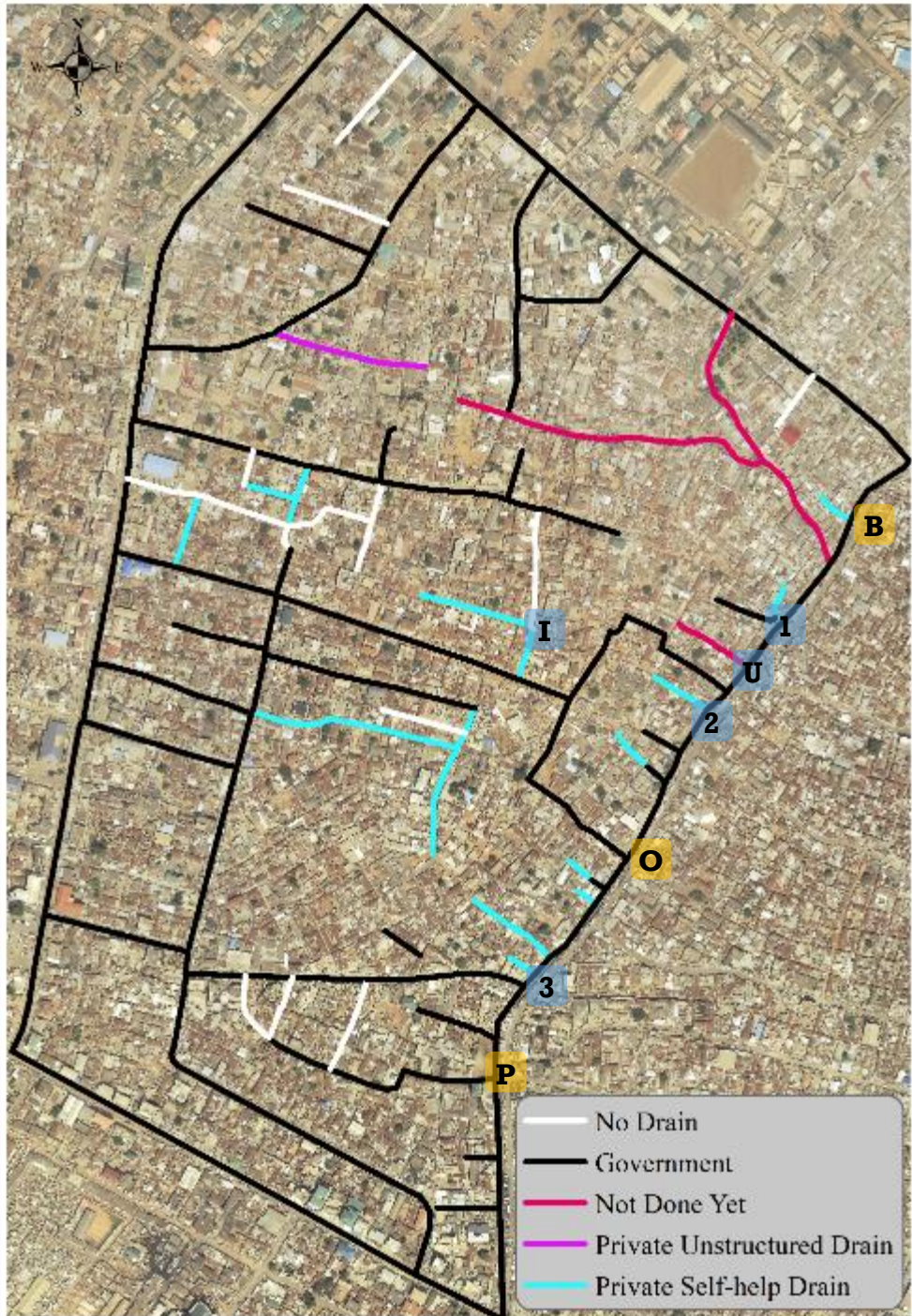
1970

1990

2020

# Nima Drain Transformation





The *urban spaces* that are **planned,** **designed,** **constructed,** **operated,** **maintained,** and even **re-planned** by the residents

## Second Self-Help Drain

### A project owned by the residents

- Piecemeal contributions
- Local community members
- Broadly recognized
- Projects come and go with no specific timeframe, depending on the availability of labour and funds



# Playground



## People as the authority

- Contribution and benefit
- Communal life as the core value
- Communal orders – games, space management, maintenance and repair
- Microbusinesses

## Self-Help Bridge

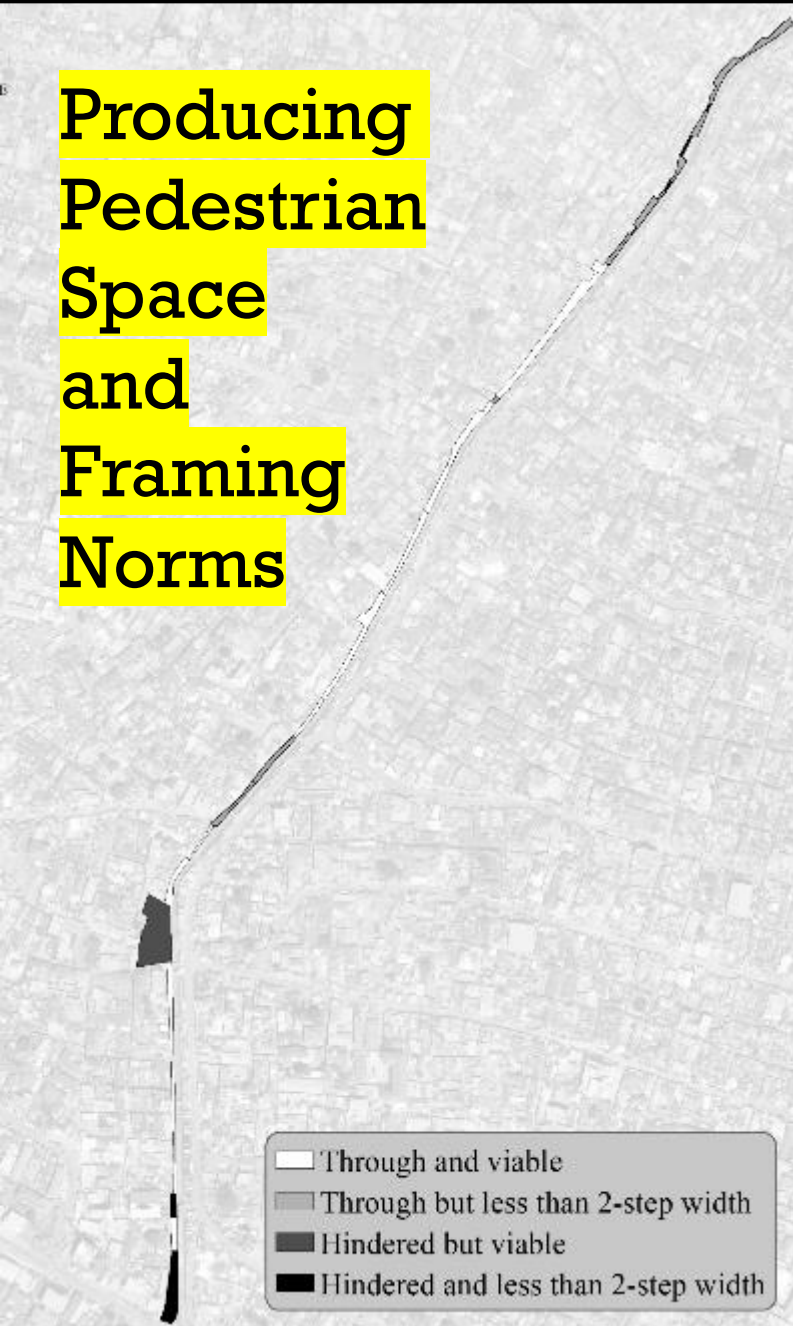


## Contentious Repertoires?

- How the movement attempts to achieve its goals (strikes, boycotts, protests, petitions, etc.)
- **Engaging the politicians**
- **Lobbying the neighbours**
- **Consulting skilled informal workers**

**And making it a public space**

# Producing Pedestrian Space and Framing Norms



- Through and viable
- Through but less than 2-step width
- Hindered but viable
- Hindered and less than 2-step width



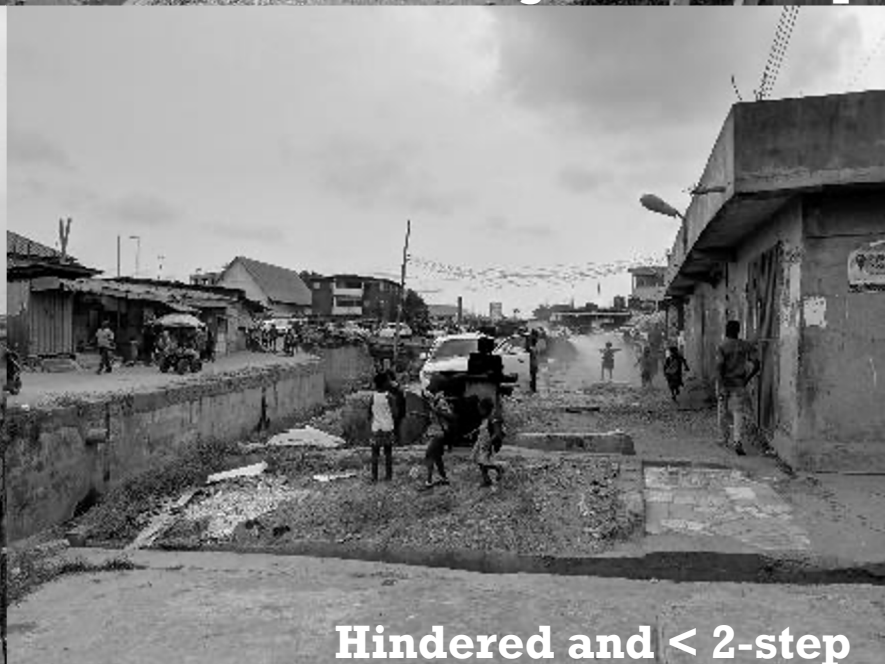
**Through and Viable**



**Through but < 2-step**



**Hindered but Viable**



**Hindered and < 2-step**



## **Nima Drain & the Self-Help Cases**

- **Settlement transformation:** attracts, allows, and facilitates the migrants to stay and prosper
- **Community participation:** then and now
- **Permanence:** materiality, ownership, authority, invisible obligation, and collective norms

**The grievance is still there. However, it is not used on the streets, but on community building that leads to social change and norm shaping.**

No one will stop you contributing to space shaping, but they will restrain you from doing harm

**Political Opportunity Structure**

**Social Movement: Five Components**

**Contentious Repertoires**

Small chats with politicians; lobbying neighbours for funds; community services

(no strikes or boycotts)

**Mobilizing Structures**

Small contribution and labor; extending network

**Protest Cycles**

Construction, norms enforcement, identity consolidation

(no one to protest)

**Framing Processes**

Project owners reach out to formulate the project(s) and understand that these projects involve different stages

**An Invisible Social Movement?**

## Purpose:

Relating the self-help urban design in Accra's informal settlements as a form of social movement

## Argument:

Residents in informal settlements act as “unknowing” urban designers by shaping public spaces through “self-help” projects. This work can be understood as a form of social movement

## Result:

These cases meet most components of a social movement; the difference is that their repertoires are far from the conventional mobilizations (protest and strike) in the US and Europe

## Implications:

The invisible (but sensible) social movement leads to visible self-help urban design and social change

- Stakeholders mobilize to meet their needs
- Unstated rules are routinely followed

Informal settlement planning requires different ways of knowing how places are shaped; acknowledging self-help urban design is just the beginning of this learning process

## Future Research:

Studying the fiscal conditions and the distributed infrastructural interventions in Accra

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