

A portrait of Oxford Street, Accra's most globalised high street – part 1

This is the first in a series of guest posts from Ato Quayson, Professor of English and the Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. Here, he profiles Osu RE in Accra, which has adopted the name Oxford Street after its London counterpart.

Accra's Oxford Street is widely considered as the city's most globalised. The name Oxford Street is partly an improvisation and a fanciful projection of popular desire, as it does not appear on any official maps of Accra. Rather, it lies in the neighbourhood called Osu RE and is part of a much longer road, officially known as Cantonments Road on city maps.

This is the first in a series of three blog posts which will take us on a walk of the street before posing some questions about the ways in which a reproduction of the global form of the high street experience serves in this context to effectively obscure the inequalities engendered by globalisation. As I will be suggesting, these inequalities are often spatialised on the streetscape itself, so that special attention is required in the spatial logics of town planning to discern the nature of globalisation's less savoury effects.

As you enter the Street from the north end, you are immediately struck by how crowded it looks, with both vehicles and people, many large commercial buildings, and a proliferation of huge billboards advertising everything from mobile phone companies (MTN: "Everywhere You Go"; TIGO: "Express Yourself") to the airline, Emirates; from Nescafe coffee to sanitary pads and the satellite company, DStv with the face of Jennifer Lopez staring coyly from the billboard, among others.

You are also confronted by a range of features recognisable from high streets everywhere in the world and yet with a decidedly mixed local character. Regular banks sit cheek-by-jowl alongside vendors of football paraphernalia, which increase exponentially when Ghana participates in international football tournaments such as the World Cup or the Africa Cup of Nations.



Papa Ye fast food restaurant on Accra's Oxford Street

Papa Ye has to contend with the vendor promising exactly the same "chicken-and-fried-rice-with-Coke" right across from the local fast food giant, with the added enticement of a ghetto blaster with full-on Bob Marley music to accompany your food, while Woodin (retailer of beautiful print cloths) contends with ready-made (i.e. pre-sewn) variants of dresses and shirts made from the same print cloths but available much cheaper from the street vendors.

Electronic goods stores abound, as do jewellery stores, along with the offices of the major cell phone companies such as Zain, MTN and Tigo. Koala, a grocery store to rival Trader Joe's or

Tesco is also on Oxford Street, while the huge edifice to American fast food retailing that is KFC opened recently to add a further international dimension to the food offerings on the Street. Several large Chinese and other high-end restaurants, internet cafes, hotels, B&Bs, forex bureaux, and a large and luscious Italian-themed ice cream parlour make this commercial stretch a visitor's dream and the local dispossessed's a mouth-watering nightmare.

(As an aside, even though Accra does not have a large or even substantial Chinese population this has not prevented the establishment of quite popular Chinese restaurants, some of which date from the late 60s and early 70s. The Chinese restaurants in the area include Chikin' Likin', Tsing Tao, Noble Chinese Restaurant, Peking Restaurant, and Dynasty, perhaps the best known of them all).

On adjoining streets and byways off Oxford Street and within a roughly 500-metre radius are various embassies and high commissions, the Goethe Cultural Institute and Ryan's, reputed to be the best Irish pub outside Dublin, along with several other such watering holes and dance venues. And since at least the summer of 2006, a mega-sized television screen has been permanently mounted in front of the Osu Food Court streaming live TV advertisements and reality shows such as Big Brother Africa on a 24-hour basis.

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