Experimental Afterlives: making and unmaking developmental laboratories in Ghana

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Introduction

This chapter traces the after-effects of an experiment in urban planning. In the wake of the construction of the Akosombo dam, following Ghana's Independence in 1957, 80,000 people were resettled under an ambitious scheme of planned development that aimed to turn rural peasants into modern citizens through the creation of model townships. As in other mid-century resettlement schemes, the language of 'experiment' was itself integral to the project. By the 1960s, the paradigm of 'science for development' had been largely superseded an understanding of development as an experimental science, oriented towards the 'improvement' of living conditions through the application of expert forms of knowledge (Bonneuil 2000). As an instance of a broader experimental logic of development, the Volta Resettlement Scheme, aimed to re-design rural life, and became an important site for the production and enactment of various forms of expertise. In this (Shapiro 2003; Miescher 2012), as in a variety of other post-colonial contexts (e.g. Holston 1989; Mbembe 2004; Roy 2007), the desire to be modern became axiomatically linked to the desire to be urban. Urbanisation was equated with development as a means of rendering rural populations more amenable to state-led industrialisation, and as the embodiment of modernist aspirations of efficiency and rationality in their own right. Framed by broader ideological currents, the post-independence Nkrumah government presented the project as a literalization of aspirations for the rapid achievement of a socialist pan-African modernity that would realise the benefits of western development, while obviating its associated problems through careful planning (Shapiro 2003). From the outset resettlement townships were imagined as exemplary spaces and were powerfully invested with a sense of future possibility. As experimental sites they were important less for what they were than for what they, as vanguards for the nation, would one day become.

Occupants of these townships today take the built environment as evidence of the failure of this experiment but continue to keep faith in the visions that inspired it. Images of urban modernity drawn from 1960s planning discourses intersect with a broader set of discourses

about the urban and the modern, orienting the ways in which resettlers imagine and act upon the built environments they inhabit. Urban modernism is thus constituted in a powerful yet ineffable sense of felt absence, and in an ontological orientation that constitutes these spaces through a series of negative contrasts, in terms of what they are not. The material remains of these experiments in resettlement evoke for their inhabitants people and processes that failed to materialise as hoped. The collapsing and decaying fabric of their houses recalls collapse of the vision that originally animated their construction, and elicits competing accounts of the history that led to this failure. Abandoned and ruined houses literalise an absence of the development that was promised. Lacking the money for cement, houses have been extended in local materials, leading to a proliferation of unplanned structures whose explicitly 'temporary' nature references a sense of arrested development and of a present in uncertain relation to the experimental futures of the past.

As an experiment in urban planning, the project was oriented towards the achievement of urban modernism and therefore anticipated a future that has failed to materialise in the terms imagined either by the officials and experts involved or by resettlers themselves. Yet the experiment left material and ideological legacies that remain imbricated in the lives of those who inhabit these townships today. The chapter is based on ethnographic work in two of the resettlement townships, archival research and interviews with planners and other experts. I start by tracing the experimental logics that were central to the project's inception, before examining how these persist both as a set of now decaying material infrastructures, and as a series of aspirations and ideologies. Through this I highlight the specific disjunctions that emerge between utopian framings of experimental futures, and the infrastructures of the projects involved.

The sociologist Borup has noted how new technologies foster an historical amnesia: 'hype is about the future and the new-- rarely about the past-- so the disjunctive aspects of technological change are often emphasized and continuities with the past are erased from promissory memory.' (2006: 208) While as much was true of the Volta Resettlement Project at the time of its inception, Africa is now undergoing a range of experiments in urban and low-carbon living (Marvin and Silver forthcoming) that produce a similar amnesia with respect to urban experiments of the past. In this context, the lens of the Volta Resettlement is useful as a reminder that present experiments are configured in relation to an infrastructural and ideological legacy of projects that persist, more or less palpably, even in manifest failure. New experiments are built not only on the crumbling infrastructures of mid-century large-

scale development schemes, but also on the aspirations and ideologies these earlier experiments set in train. Thus my focus on the material and ideological afterlife of experimental infrastructures rejoins recent work on post-colonial ruination, in highlighting how pre- and post-colonial formations remain visibly and viscerally present in the materiality of what (literally) remains (Stoler 2008). In conclusion I suggest that the particularities of the Volta Resettlement, in turn provide a lens that makes apparent some of the analytic limitations of recent work on ruination.

Resettlement as Experiment

The Volta Resettlement Project was undertaken in the wake of the construction of the Akosombo Dam, during the early and mid 1960s. Although plans for the dam can be traced back well into the colonial period, the project was finally initiated following Ghana's Independence in 1957. As a flagship policy of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, the physical construction of the dam became central to the construction of the newly independent nation of Ghana in ways that were indissolubly material and symbolic (cf. Mitchell 2002). The project entailed a package of linked changes that were imagined to set in train progress to a different and better future via a break with the traditional pasts of displaced peasants. Key elements of this high-Modern approach were the promotion of social and economic development, through the creation of planned urban spaces, technological modernisation of agriculture, and technologically driven industrialisation, notably linked to the power produced by the dam. This ideology drew explicit inspiration from other socialist contexts, specifically in an understanding of planned urban infrastructure as generative of modes of transformative modernity (Holston 1989; Alexander and Buchli 2007)

In various government discourses and in wider media coverage, resettlement was seen as a 'sacrifice' made by these inundated communities on behalf of the nation as a whole, but also as a form of development and improvement. Following completion of the dam in 1966, an editorial in the state owned Ghanaian Times praises the selflessness of inundated communities suggesting, 'Not least in the pride of place of honour and praise are those Ghanaians whose love for the motherland and the prosperity of mother Africa, sacrificed their

lot to bring the project to fruition. History will not forget them.'[1] . If resettlement was seen to entail 'loss' in terms of particular traditions and the disruption of 'organic' if 'backwards' communities, politicians, planners and government officials suggested that these would be outweighed by the corresponding improvements associated with the promised urban modernism. In a widely reported quote, frequently re-told by inhabitants of the resettlement communities today, Nkrumah made a personal pledge that none of the resettled communities would be worse off as a consequence of the move. As the subsequent discourses of planners, architects, journalists and politicians testify, the intention was for resettlement to bring about rapid and sweeping improvement, specifically through the construction of 'urban' and 'modern' townships.

The project was explicitly experimental, in a number of related respects (Shapiro 2003). The scientific approaches to development that pervaded in the 1960s, both assumed and produced a vision of society as an object with its own laws and which could be worked on through technical procedures. These, as Paul Rabinow observes in the context of Morocco (1989), were becoming the authoritative arbiters of what counted as 'real'. Development as an experimental science thus entailed a belief in the possibility of a different better future – 'improvement' and 'development' – through the application of various forms of scientific knowledge to social and economic problems. A paper by D.A.P Butcher, who oversaw the social survey makes evident the kind of assumptions that prevailed: 'Resettlement is largely a problem in human engineering and, as such, the 'engineers' -- in this case the Social Welfare Officers -- have to keep track of their materials, which, being people, will not keep still like cement and iron' (1970: 88). If society was a system governed by universal principles, its management required the kind of expertise that social scientists were able to provide.

The importance of these townships as experimental sites necessitated the physical and conceptual bounding of resettlement townships from the surrounding villages. Their national significance arose not from their typicality but rather in their distinctiveness from the social and economic characteristics of other parts of rural Ghana and from the villages from which the resettlers had been displaced (cf. Roy 2007). The scheme involved a range of experts including planners, architects, engineers and agronomists, including Ghanaian elites – many educated abroad as part of the colonial governments' plans for Independence – and ex-patriots from Europe and America. As 'living experiments' (Shapiro 2003) the aim of the

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[1] 'Editorial: Our Faith', Ghanaian Times, January 24 1966, p5

project was not only to transform the lives of the 80,000 resettlers, but to derive planning and design principles that would form templates for a broader process of national transformation.

Bonneul (2000) has argued persuasively that during this period, the logic of scientific experimentation was intricately implicated in the functioning and expansion of the state in various African contexts. Experimental discourses made authoritarian and productivist interests of colonial and post-colonial governments appear as a form of intellectual progress through the pursuit of knowledge (2000: 268). Where money was wasted or anticipated benefits failed to accrue, these could be justified as instances of experimental failure that did not undermine – and even ultimately bolstered – broader ideals of scientific truth and progress.

Resettlement in Ghana as elsewhere, helped to bring about a shift in the relation between government and rural populations. Previously beyond the reach of the state, resettlement entailed forms of geometricisation, standardisation and discipline, shaping agrarian societies to make them more amenable to intervention and control. Small scale peasant farmers were aggregated in larger, more 'urban' units which could be more easily administered. Bonneul notes in relation to the continent as a whole that 'Village layout and housing as well as social life were also designed from above, so as to turn villages into functional units of supervision and experimentation.' (2000: 269) Scientific experimentation and increasing state control went hand in hand insofar as both depended on and created similar forms of legibility and visibility: 'One can view the settlement schemes as crucial sites for aligning rural societies with the conditions and practices of the [research] station...They were hence 'experimental systems'...in so far as they constituted an arrangement of objects and people designed to produce experimental data.' (2000: 272-3). The infrastructures that accompanied the Volta Resettlement were experimental, ordering the conditions of social and economic life in ways that made control and hence measurement possible. They were also experimental in the additional linked sense, that they deliberately manipulated events to an anticipated but un-known outcome. In the context of the Volta Resettlement Project, urbanisation and experimentation were thus linked in two key respects. Planned townships provided the material infrastructures that made experimentation possible through order and legibility. At the same time, visions of urban life configured ideas about an anticipated future whose realisation was experimental and hence uncertain.

By bringing together previously distinct villages in planned townships, planners aimed for a more efficient use of resources as services were centralised in accordance with the tenets of Central Place Theory, an internationally fashionable modernising planning discourse influenced by the work of Walter Christaller. Under the Volta Basin Area Development Plan, hundreds of small subsistence villages, were aggregated into fifty four townships. As well as enabling the centralisation of services, such as schools, clinics, water pumps and public toilets, the agglomeration of previously distinct communities was intended to provide a compact labour force that would facilitate the mechanisation of agricultural production and provide a further impetus to economic growth. By contrast to the inundated communities, the regional plan was intended, in the words of the Chief Planning Officer 'for creating a more rational and economic pattern of settlements', in which 'the selection of suitable sites, the pattern of settlements and their sizes will be influenced by such technical considerations as health, sanitation and water supply.'[2]

If the logic of experimentation – and more broadly of science – participated more or less wittingly in the development of new forms of governmentality, these experimental spaces also created 'laboratories' through which new knowledge, new paradigms of thinking and even new disciplines were founded (Bonneul 2000). For researchers from a range of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, engineering, architecture, planning, and agronomy, resettlements made people and the environments in which they lived increasingly accessible and legible, providing a context in which various forms of intervention could be undertaken and monitored. The townships were thus differently constituted as experimental sites in relation to a range of epistemic interests. Resources from the Volta Resettlement Project, and the experimental possibilities this made available, helped establish a number of new university departments, through work undertaken at Kumasi and Legon. The Buildings Research Group at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, played a leading role in the development of building technologies that sought to combine modern principles with locally available materials and a sensitivity to existing social circumstances. A social survey, undertaken to aid the successful integration of different groups, contributed to the development of new methodologies (pioneering an early IBM punch-card system for analysis of data on an unprecedented scale); likewise anthropological work in these communities, contributed important new insights and helped develop new frameworks for the

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[2] Letter from the chief planning officer for the attention of Mr Wright (Environmental Sanitation Division),
EAK Kalitsi (resettlement officer) and George Nez (UN Mission to Accra), May 25 1962.

analysis of rural communities undergoing processes of 'modernisation'. If these kinds of knowledge participated in the emergence of new forms of governmentality, the academics who undertook this work were often explicitly critical of the government officials and the top-down methods espoused. Robert Chambers was involved in social research connected to the Volta Resettlement Project and edited the book that brought together key strands of the research supported by the project. His unease with the lack of community consultation is evident in his introduction to the book (Chambers 1970) and it is certainly possible that his later pioneering work on 'participation'(Chambers 1983), was at least in part built upon knowledge gained through this non-participatory process.

From the outset the aims and ideologies that informed these experiments were far from monolithic, even amongst the various experts responsible for its design and execution (Miescher 2012). Tensions emerged regarding the extent to which such spaces should be configured to conserve or to change the existing lives of resettlers, the degree to which 'tradition' should be accommodated or overturned, and the emphasis to be given to pragmatic as opposed to idealistic visions of what could be achieved. Initial plans for resettlement were relatively modest, entailing the re-location of villagers through 'aided self-help'. However the scale and scope of the plan increased as the project evolved, reflecting the increasingly ambitious developmental rhetoric of the newly independent government. As the lake waters started to rise, planners and politicians became increasingly concerned at the difficulties of resettling such a large number of people through self-help alone, particularly given the limited time available. Correspondence between planners architects and civil servants testifies to an increasing desire to 'modernise' these communities, through a process of planned urbanisation. In a memorandum produced by the senior assistant secretary to the Volta River Secretariat, he notes 'it is no good pushing Ghana 100 years back by giving the people the same old inferior buildings'[3]. This change of emphasis is reflected in the disappearance of the word 'village' from the vocabulary of those implementing the resettlement plans, and its replacement by the word 'town' (Chambers 1970).

If the increased size of communities was desirable for the modernisation of economic activity and the rationalisation of services, the creation of a more 'urban' feel to the townships, was also regarded as an end in itself. Commenting on the designs of the 'core houses' of which the resettlements were composed, Miles Danby, the British architect responsible for the

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[3] 'Problems of Housing in Connection with the Volta River Project Resettlement and Compensation: Memorandum', K.B.Mensah, 3 July 1961. (RMT-???)

design of one of these, positively remarks that 'this type gives a higher density…and had been used by planners to give a more 'urban' or 'town' feel.' (Danby 1970: 170). Over and above these 'rational' considerations, the merging of ethnically and linguistically diverse populations was also seen as a positive move, facilitating a movement away from 'traditional' affiliations of kinship, chieftaincy and ethnicity, towards more overtly 'modern' forms of relationship based on shared nationality and citizenship. In this way resettlement townships were conceptualised as functionally integrated units, in which social, ethnic and economic differences were subsumed to a regional and national logic of development.

While government discourses foregrounded human agency and the capacity to shape nature to human ends, realisation of these plans depended on complex and precarious alliances between a range human and non-human agents (Mitchell 2002). Planning files testify to the unruliness of the people and things they sought to change: buildings cracked, materials were routinely stolen, cement caked, local workers failed to turn up and produced shoddy work, and resettlers retained habits and 'traditions' understood to be contrary to the logic of the modernist plan. The Volta Resettlement Project was from the outset precarious and contradictory, holding out a multiplicity of promises even in its apparent singularity.

I have pointed to the ways in which planners in post-colonial Ghana naturalised a relationship between the urban and the modern, as intrinsically linked social forms. Such discourses constituted a set of aspirations that were concretely embedded in a range of infrastructures, including houses, planned townships, new roads and agricultural systems. These literalised a new relationship between citizens and state and carried forwards a set of hopes and expectations about the possibility of a different and better future. While this future has manifestly failed to materialise in the terms imagined, it leaves important material and ideological legacies.

The next section explores the afterlife of these experimental spaces. I use the term 'afterlife' borrowing from Benjamin's conceptualisation of ruination, in his work on the arcades projects (Dawdy 2010; Gordillo 2014). For him, as for other critical theorists, modern ruins, act as reminders of the hubris of modern linear time, revealing its contradictions particularly powerfully as a consequence of their effaced functionality. The perspective provides a useful position to consider how experimental infrastructures continue to literally matter, even and indeed because they have 'failed'.

Experimental Afterlives

Though the resettlement took place over fifty years ago, beyond the memory of the majority of residents of resettlement townships, ideas of urban modernity embodied in planning and public discourses of the 1960s, remain central to the understandings and practices through which people today occupy these spaces. Resettlers frequently complain about the conditions within resettlement communities but rarely question the visions that informed these. High-modern developmentalist ideologies integral to the project's inception constitute a lens through which existing conditions are seen and found wanting. Assessments of today's circumstances relative to the standard of living prior to resettlement remain contested. However resettlement communities are characterised by a pervasive sense of present conditions in a disjunctive and hence 'failed' relationship to the visions and promises that accompanied the project's inception. As an experiment in the development of a specific form of modern urbanism, the project entailed the promise of a future that persists in the memory of inhabitants of these townships, and which animates a range of engagements with the now decaying infrastructure of what is widely seen as a failed experiment.

Abstractly this absence is understood in terms of 'development', 'modernity', 'progress', 'civilisation' and 'urbanisation.' More concretely such ideas are literalised in various aspects of the built environment. Buildings in poor repair are described as 'ramshackle' and 'un-civilised'. The 'temporary' nature of makeshift kitchens and bathrooms, fashioned from 'swish' and corrugated iron is similarly highlighted as evidence of a gap between vision and reality. More generally, the 'bushy', 'weedy' and 'chaotic' nature of the town are imagined as evidence of 'backwardness' and 'under-development', that highlights the failed promises that attended resettlement.

Such discourses evoke an understanding of ruination and decay that is partly elicited by the material remains of these infrastructures but which do not deterministically arise from these (Stoler 2008; Edensor 2012; Johnson 2013; Schwenkel 2013). Rather these relate to an ontology that enlists archetypes of the modern and the urban, and as the flip side of these visions sees the environment to hand in terms of a relative deficit of those attributes. The physical remains of the resettlement project emerge in shifting disjunction with the ideological remains of visions that originally sustained it.

Walking round the resettlement township of Senchi with one of the town elders, he pointed out a core house that was being undercut by heavy erosion, causing it to sag heavily on one

side: 'there is no development here, we are living like animals', he commented with frustration and despair. The house exemplified a wider predicament. In many of the resettlement townships, outward migration, to larger urban conurbations and to 'home-towns' in other parts of the country, have led to the abandonment of large numbers of the core houses that resettlers were allocated. Many of these structures now lie empty. Built in anticipation of future development by their occupants, these structures now appear as empty shells, that are seen to literalise an absence of the 'modernity' and 'development' they initially stood for. Materially deteriorating infrastructures, including collapsed walls, rusted tin roofs and rotting doors and windows symbolically index a wider sense of decay (cf. Stoler 2008). As literally empty structures, their material traces evoke the metaphorical absences of the promised modernity, and the emptiness of the promises of planners.

Resettlers come to see their own lives through the lens of these modernist visions, which, in their manifest disjunction from contemporary realities, inspire both hope and despair. Modernist visions continue to circulate in nostalgic recollections of Nkrumah's plans, kept alive through various forms of oral history and memory that engender widespread consciousness of the project's promised futures. Born in Awura Hae, a small village resettled to New Senchi, Nana moved to Accra to work as a security guard, before returning to be installed as a local chief. Now in his sixties, he lives in a small 'core house', adapted for the purposes of his role, through the construction of a shrine and a small picket fence. Bemoaning the inadequacies of his 'palace' for the purposes of his office, he connected his impoverished status to the wider problems of the resettlement townships: 'If we were to be during Nkrumah's time, by this time Akosombo here would be very different…We don't get anything after Nkrumah's time.' Imagining an alternative trajectory in which Nkrumah remained in power, he described an alternative that in turn evoked the problems of present realities: 'If it was Nkrumah, you would find it difficult to enter my palace. You see, I will be growing tall and fine. But now, see, I am poor in everything.' Echoing these sentiments, an elderly man in the resettlement township of Npakadan linked the townships lack of development to the overthrow of Nkrumah: 'Life would have been really good – happier. Today we would have had an aerodrome, and Nkrumah also thought of making some rail lines from Kpong – many, many good things…The minute Nkrumah died all his plans and all that he wanted to do for the resettlement was stopped…So that is why we are suffering. Other than that, this town would be a very nice town.' Such sentiments articulate a broader sense, in which present realities remain framed by the anticipated but unrealised promises of planners.

The now crumbling remains of resettlement continue to be haunted by the alternative possibilities of the plans that initially prompted their construction.

Current social practice also acts to re-make the modernist planned spaces, that resettlement created. In various ways, the activities of resettlers exceed the possibilities that planners intended (Lefebvre 1991).Their day to day activities literally and conceptually extend these built forms in a range of ways that more or less subtly transform the modernist logics through which they were initially conceived. Planners sought to instate 'zones', in which 'business', 'commercial', 'domestic' and 'recreational' activities would be spatially segregated. In this way, the townships were imagined as a patchwork of areas in which social and economic 'function' coincided with particular spatial and built forms (Holston 1989; Lefebvre 1991).

Such spatial distinctions are obviated through a range of practices. The designation of resettlement houses as 'domestic' spaces is routinely transformed in the uses to which these houses are put. Core houses are extended and opened-up onto streets so that they can function as shops, whilst others turn their houses into sites of commercial activity as makeshift 'chop bars', hair salons and bakeries. Spare rooms are used to store surplus produce such as corn and yams.

Architectural plans reveal the towns as a series of discrete 'plots', laid out along a regular grid system of interconnecting roads. The movements and activities of resettlers confound this segregation of space into 'public' and 'private' areas. Over the intervening four decades, many of these public rights of way have been eroded through illegal development, or fallen into disrepair through lack of use. Whilst public rights of way have thus been effectively privatised, private space has also been made public. Commenting on the series of paths that cross-cut the township, a man living at the resettlement township of New Senchi joked to me, 'everyone's home is a path'. Architectural drawings depicting neatly trimmed boundary hedges thus depict a form of spatial segregation that in practice is rarely maintained.

If resettlers have thereby dissolved many of the distinctions that planners hoped to enact, they have also imposed socio-spatial distinctions that planners sought to erase. Planners, architects, resettlement officers and state bureaucrats saw resettlement entailing a movement from a 'traditional' past to a 'modern' future. Today, by contrast, resettlers understand the resettlement townships as a composite of temporally distinct elements. Houses, along with other aspects of the built environment, are described in terms of their relative 'modernity' or 'under-development' (Yarrow 2011). Spatial distinctions are thus presented in terms of

temporal distinctions that in turn make apparent differences between the various groups of people of which the township is composed. In this sense modernising narratives continue to inflect resettlers understandings of these spaces, even as their use of these terms calls into question the homogenous empty time of the modern nation state.

In these and other ways, the daily practices of resettlers have acted to re-assert social processes and cultural values that the plan intended to deny (cf. Holston 1989). What resulted was not an 'old' way of life, still less the hangover from tradition that planners and town managers have subsequently claimed. Neither, however, was it the imagined urbanism of planners and architects. Existing theories of modernist planning help to reveal how the production of the 'abstract space' (e.g. Lefebvre 1991) of planners and architects is implicated in the consolidation of new forms of state power and governance. By the same token, these illuminate how space is literally produced through a range of social practices that confound the logic of the urban modernity that planners and architects intended to enact (de Certeau 1984). Yet in order to properly capture the dynamics at play in these resettlement townships, it is necessary to qualify these theories, with respect to their formulation of the political (Nielsen forthcoming).

Conceived as an instrument of state power, it has become increasingly common to celebrate if not romanticise practices and relationships that appear to deny, evade or reformulate the submerged intentions of planned spaces. Yet this perspective seems misplaced in a context in which, following over two decades of Structural Adjustment, the state is now almost entirely absent. Here resettlement townships now represent the material expression of a statist vision that has almost entirely evaporated. In this context, in which a totalising order is now manifestly absent, it seems unhelpful to imagine the practices through which people inhabit these spaces as 'subversive'. In clinging to a past vision of a planned urban modernity resettlers render its absence as problematic. To the extent they seek to re-define their relationships to the bureaucrats and planners they take to be responsible for this predicament, this is not by subverting their plans. Rather, broken promises are highlighted in calling for their realisation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the afterlife of a mid-century experiment in resettlement, highlighting how continued enchantment with a modernist experimental vision persists in disjunctive relation to an infrastructural reality, perceived to lack these qualities. My

discussion of the contemporary practices and understandings through which people now occupy these spaces makes evident how the project inflected ideas about urban life with utopian visions that continue to resonate. Thus the 'failure' of the project is not understood as a matter of the experimental vision itself, but rather of the inadequacy of the physical, organisational and political infrastructures intended to support it.

The account builds on recent work on ruination, in order to highlight how the infrastructures of urban experimentation persist as literally and symbolically significant elements of the quotidian experiences of people now inhabiting these spaces. The ruins of resettlement remain powerfully significant because, not despite the project has failed, as a series of interlinked ideas about the gap between the possibility of the different, better, future anticipated by experiment, and the actually existing circumstances that resulted from its failure. In some ways these experiences resonate with accounts from other parts of the continent (Ferguson 1999; Larkin 2004), where modernity exists as a constitutive absence: idealised visions of how life is elsewhere make apparent the deficit of life as lived here. However the experimental context of the VRP give these dynamics a specific and arguably more pronounced form. As vanguards of what the nation could have become, the gap between post-independence promise and present reality is acute and intimate: residents of resettlement townships encounter it daily in their interactions with now crumbling infrastructures that make simultaneously apparent what they could have been, and what they are not. Possibility and problem; ideal and reality are mutually elicited through daily encounters with experimental remains.

The recent 'turn to ruins' helps to highlight these dynamics to the extent these accounts the complex imaginative, temporal and affective dynamics that arise through interactions with literally decaying materials. Helpful, also, is the insistence in recent work on the contextual specificity of these encounters. However, while the analytic lens of ruination opens up interpretive possibilities, the lens of the VRP calls attention to a universal and limiting assumption of much of this work. In an influential paper, Dawdy suggests that '...there is hope in ruins, in the suggestion that modernity can be surpassed' (2010: 777). Likewise the celebration of ruination entails a critique of Cartesian planned space, and of a western metaphysics of presence. Edensor suggests that ruins highlight how 'Modern attempts to cleanse, banish ambiguity, and order the memory of space are always disturbed by such disorderly spaces and by the ghosts they contain...' (2012: 844). Gordillo suggests processes

of ruination reveal 'the critical power of negativity to disintegrate the positivity of the given, of things as they seem to be, and thereby to undermine any reified fantasy of a complete seamless whole' (2014: 6). In various ways, recent work celebrates the social, cultural and imaginatively creative possibilities that result from ruination, as a counterpoint to the assumed hubris of modern concerns to order and discipline (Buchli 2013; Pelkmans 2013). In various ways these and other accounts ntail a broadly celebratory orientation to ruination that derives from a critical orientation to modernity. . Recent work on ruination provides an important corrective to the Eurocentric assumptions of social theorists and planners. However, in line with broader critiques of modernist urbanism and planning, explicit or implied critiques of modernity eclipse what is ethnographically at stake in contexts where modernist visions retain their allure, as unrealised and idealised aspirations. Likewise romantic understandings of ruination, popular and academic, derive from antipathy to the elusive promises and hubris of western modernity and have less to say about experiences of modernity as a desired but un-realised condition.

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