ARTICLE

Building Classes: Secondary Schools and Sociopolitical Stratification in Ghana

Kuukuwa Manful 🆔

University of Michigan
Email: kmanful@umich.edu

Abstract

It is widely accepted that social class in Africa is defined not just by economic metrics but also by social perceptions and individual identifications. Yet less has been written about the mechanisms through which people form these class perceptions and identifications. This article explores how the sociopolitical and physical architecture of schools affects people's understanding of social class. Using participatory methods with students complemented by architectural studies, focus group discussions, and interviews, Manful shows how young Ghanaians find and place themselves in social classes and other hierarchies through their perceptions and usage of school buildings.

Résumé

Il est généralement reconnu que la classe sociale en Afrique est déterminée non seulement par des critères économiques, mais également par des perceptions sociales et des identifications individuelles. Cependant, il existe peu de travaux consacrés à l'exploration des mécanismes par lesquels les individus élaborent ces perceptions et identifications de classe. Cet article examine de quelle manière l'architecture sociopolitique et physique des établissements scolaires influence la perception de la classe sociale. En recourant à des approches participatives auprès des étudiants, associées à des études architecturales, à des discussions en groupe et à des entretiens, Manful illustre de quelle manière les jeunes Ghanéens se situent et se positionnent au sein des diverses classes sociales et hiérarchies, à travers leurs perceptions et leur utilisation des établissements scolaires.

Resumo

É amplamente aceite que, em África, a classe social não é determinada apenas pelos indicadores económicos, mas também pelas perceções sociais e pelas identificações

pessoais. No entanto, pouco se tem escrito acerca dos mecanismos através dos quais as pessoas formam estas perceções e identificações de classe. No presente artigo, analisa-se o modo como a arquitetura sociopolítica e física das escolas afeta a compreensão do conceito de classe social por parte da população. Com recurso a métodos participativos envolvendo estudantes, complementados por estudos arquitetónicos, debates em grupos focais e entrevistas, Manful revela como, através das suas perceções e da sua utilização dos edifícios escolares, os jovens do Gana se veem e se colocam nas várias classes sociais e noutros grupos hierárquicos.

Keywords: social class; architecture; secondary schools; education; politics of architecture; middle class in Africa; socio-spatial theory

Despite the conceptual vagueness of the middle class as a sociopolitical category, there is scholarly consensus that, beyond economic metrics and material wealth, perceptions of social status through formal education[1] and white-collar employment are important to understanding the category in African countries. Much recent research has highlighted the nuances of being and belonging in African middle classes by advancing that it is a "classification-in-the-making" (Spronk 2020), which is delineated by formality (Gastrow 2020) in opposition to informality, and is not necessarily a fixed and permanent status (Lentz 2020). These nuanced efforts to understand the complexity of middle-class dynamics constitute the frontier of the literature and yet, as Lentz (2020) notes, a vast assortment of "socio-economic situations and lifestyles" are encompassed under the category of middle class. Within this apparent chaos is an opportunity for deeper exploration.

This article contributes a new perspective to understanding class in African contexts by analyzing stratification within the Ghanaian middle classes using the sociopolitical and physical architectures of education. I position secondary schools as sites for the formation, inculcation, and reproduction of sociopolitical hierarchies—particularly those of social class but also gender, seniority, and religion.[2] I explore how people in the country learn to perceive their class status —along with other sociopolitical hierarchies—through the social and physical architectures of their secondary schools. I argue that through their perceptions and readings of architecture, their comparative perspectives of their school in relation to other schools, and their use and experiences of the physical environments and internal spaces of their schools, students understand that they are positioned in the lower rungs of the Ghanaian middle classes, mediated by their gender, religion, and seniority.

Scholarship on the relationships between architecture and society on the African continent has focused predominantly on state and public buildings, especially in urban areas. For example, much has been done towards interpreting the political symbolism of state buildings (Manful, Batsani-Ncube, and Gallagher 2022; Amutabi 2012), how power is deployed and interpreted through architecture (Tomkinson, Mulugeta, and Gallagher 2022; Elleh 2002), and how historical processes of colonization and decolonization have shaped public architecture (Hess 2000; Donkor 2017; Demissie 2012; Moshé 2005), among others. Though some of this literature considers the points of view of ordinary observers, there is

still a focus on grand buildings, architects, and other high-level actors. This study considers buildings as inextricable and co-constitutive parts of the societal contexts in which they are situated (following Yaneva 2016; Shields 1989; Fuller and Löw 2017; Till 2009) and, like Ferrell (2019), looks at the relatively mundane architecture of schools. In centering user perspectives rather than architect intentions or the desires of the people in authority who commission projects, I introduce a unique methodological and analytical framework for studying the sociopolitics of architecture. This framework does not focus solely on aesthetics and external appearance but also considers how ordinary people use and make meaning around their perceptions, usage, and comparative perspectives of the built environment.

My focus on secondary schools as key sites in the formation and consolidation of education-based social class stratification in Ghana is due partly to the high importance placed on secondary school associations—even above tertiary associations—in Ghanaian social networks and imaginaries. Secondary School Old Student Associations are arguably the most important and vibrant social associations among the myriad social groups that the educated classes form in Ghana. Practically every secondary school in Ghana has an old student association, some more engaged and vibrant than others, which even the most uninterested alumni are aware of even if they deliberately choose not to participate. In contrast, old student associations organized around primary education are few and far between, and those organized around universities do not have as much pull and widespread appeal. Another reason for my focus on secondary schools is because the period during which students are typically in secondary school—adolescence—is an important formative period in their lives (Blakemore and Mills 2014), making perceptions and notions developed at this stage vital to their futures.

The central goal of this article is thus to investigate how students of Kpando Secondary School (also Kpando Senior High School or Kpasec) make meaning of their positioning in sociopolitical structures (communal/national/global) through their experiences of school architecture. In the following sections, this is addressed from three angles, namely (1) perceptions of outward appearances of buildings, (2) external dynamics and comparative perceptions of buildings; and (3) usage, meanings ascribed to, and internal spatial dynamics. The article primarily uses evidence from participatory research channeled through an afterschool club—which came to be called the Architects, Investigators, Rapporteurs (A.I.R.) Club—based at Kpasec. Rather than use a class time slot offered as an option by authorities, I sought to address the inherent power imbalance between myself as researcher and students as research participants by allowing students to meaningfully opt in and out of my study by conducting the voluntary club during a free period in the timetable.[3] This evidence is used in combination with architectural studies, focus group discussions (FGDs), forty-seven interviews with students, staff, alumni, chiefs, elders, and members of the Kpando community and analyses of the spatial organization and architecture of thirty-four other secondary and post-secondary schools throughout Ghana.

Earlier literature on the middle class in African countries was preoccupied with emergence or apparent newness (Kracker and Heller 2010; Kroeker, O'Kane,

and Scharrer 2018; Ncube and Lufumpa 2014; Southall 2016); its composition, income, and expenditure (Budniok and Noll 2018; Kodila-Tedika, Asongu, and Kayembe 2016; Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer 2018; Phadi and Ceruti 2011; Sumich 2018), whether there was really a (growing) African middle class (Johnston and Abreu 2016; Visagie and Posel 2013), or middle-class people's relevance as economic actors (Melber 2013). This previous work made it clear that attempts at solely quantitative measurement or descriptions of the middle class are insufficient since it is a "multi-dimensional concept that refers to a socio-economic category, a cultural world, and a political discourse" (Lentz 2016).

Despite the difficulty in settling on easy definitions, one dimension that is universally accepted as correlated to and determinant of middle-class status is formal education (Budniok and Noll 2018; Fallon 1999). In African countries, this is typically a Western-style education.[4] "Higher education," referring historically to secondary school stages onwards, is viewed as particularly important in both academic and popular understandings of middle class and upward social mobility (Spronk 2020; Foster 1965; Budniok and Noll 2018). In this dimension of the middle-class category, the lines that separate those who are formally educated from those without formal education seem sharply delineated. Thus, this article is not concerned with hierarchies stemming from the dichotomy between having a formal Western-style education or not, but rather with how people with formal education process their places within the social hierarchies that exist among the educated middle classes. Internal variation among educated middle classes remains little explored as many authors do not make fine-grained distinctions about stratification within the middle class itself, and thus this article advances knowledge in this regard through its analysis of secondary school hierarchies.[5] It explores a crucial stage of life and the sociopolitical and physical spaces within which these differences begin to manifest.

Following this introduction and a section about the context, the article is organized as follows: The first section presents students' perceptions of the outward appearances of buildings and how these contribute to their ideas of belonging to lower "levels" of social classes. The second section examines students' comparisons of their school to other schools within and beyond the country to describe how they position themselves and are perceived to be positioned marginally within and beyond the country. The third section explores the ways in which internal spatial organization and the dynamics of space usage —hierarchical and controlled along lines of gender, religion, and status—are viewed by students as reflective of and in preparation for their places in society. I conclude by discussing the multifaceted picture of stratification that these three angles, along with their intersections and overlaps, form.

Kpando Senior High School

The data for this study comes primarily from field research in Kpasec, one of three public senior high and technical schools located in Kpando, a town in the Volta Region of Ghana. Kpasec was founded as "Kpandu Day Secondary School"

with all male students in 1953 as a community-led initiative as part of a mid-twentieth century wave of secondary school establishment led by African communities, traditional leaders, and private individuals across the Gold Coast. It was shortly included in the group of schools which received assistance in the form of grant-funding from the newly African-led education department of the Gold Coast and operated out of the town community center until it moved to temporary buildings on its current premises in 1955.[6] It is now a co-educational school with day and boarding students, and during the period of study (2018–22) students came from all over the country with a significant number from the Volta Region.

Some students and teachers informed me that Kpasec had recently been classified as a category "A" school by the Ghana Education Service (GES) at the time of my field research in 2018 due to recent good examination performance, but this may have been a short-lived classification and the general consensus was that it is not perceived as a top school at the national level.[7] Admission to second-cycle institutions, particularly senior high schools (SHS) or senior secondary schools in Ghana is competitive, and students are selected mainly according to the grades they achieve, where they live, and whether they are on "protocol" lists, although there are sometimes illicit payments and legacy admissions.[8]

In 2018, to tackle oversubscription of the most popular secondary schools, the Ministry of Education (MoE) instituted a new system of categorizing schools where the highest ranked schools were "popular and … oversubscribed … top institutions" (Bonney 2018). Their aim was to raise the profile of previously lower-ranked schools (both in official GES rankings and public opinion)[9] and also to make a wider pool of schools considered to be among the "very good," "popular" secondary schools (Wesley-Otoo and Anokye 2016). The ambiguous positioning of Kpasec—as a (former) category "A" school which some students and alumni thought did not belong with the top schools, or even a category "B" school—was among my reasons for selecting the school. Others more relevant to the broader project that this study is part of include its location in the former Trans-Volta Togoland, which was reluctantly added to the new nation of Ghana, and the experiences of marginalization expressed and recorded by the Ewe-speaking people who are the majority inhabitants of the region. The following sections explore the ways in which Kpasec students perceive sociopolitical positioning through school architecture.

Perceptions of outward appearances of (school) buildings

The external appearance of buildings is a powerful means through which students form perceptions about social positions and the characteristics of the people who use them. Using photo elicitation exercises where images were used "to generate verbal discussion" (Glaw et al. 2017), FGDs with participants from the A.I.R. Club, and "photowalks,"[10] during which we walked round the school and town taking photos of places, objects, and things that interested us, we discussed architectural identity, aesthetics, and the ideas associated with these. Student perceptions of architectural appearance and the built environment were

linked to their notions of "civilization," social status, wealth and poverty, modernness,[11] and "discipline" of (school) buildings and their users.

As used by the students, "civilization" referred to what they perceived to be a set of behaviors and attitudes of people who had been educated in the formal, Western style of education they associated with schools. Examples of what they considered "civilized" behavior included "not shouting anyhow," "knowing how to dress in [a] modern manner," and living in "neat … tidy … modern facilities." They contrasted these markers of "civilization" with "bush behavior," "traditional beliefs," "worshipping in … shrines" and "not knowing how to comport" oneself in important places such as airports and parliament.[12] The unironic use of "civilized," "uncivilized," "civilization," and other related words by students of Kpasec is noteworthy given that one of the goals of education in the Gold Coast by various actors such as Christian missions, trading companies, and colonial governments was to introduce their "civilization" to Africans (Graham 1971). This usage connects to a significant body of literature on the term and its relationship to colonization and Christianity in Africa and is testament to the powerful aftereffects of colonization and Christianity.[13]

In discussions, students referred to buildings that they assumed were not located in Ghana or on the African continent as "outside" or "abroad" buildings. They described them as typically "pale-colored," "tall … mostly skyscrapers," which were "technologically advanced."[14] With statements such as "it looks like an outside school … it cannot be located in Ghana," they expressed where they thought such buildings could exist.[15] In their readings of the architecture, they imagined the people and buildings to operate much differently from people and even "ultramodern"[16] buildings in Kpando, Ghana, and Africa. Making direct comparisons between what they perceived to be "outside" buildings and Ghanaian buildings, they claimed that "outside" buildings were inhabited by "rich," "advanced," and "civilized" people. They thought that people like themselves could not just enter such buildings and worried about how difficult it would be to comport themselves enough to use such facilities.

To illustrate, school buildings that look like the Integrated Secondary School (ISS) in Berlin (Figure 1) were overwhelmingly associated with being "outside schools." Thus, the students were amazed to learn that the Ghana International School (GIS), in Figure 2, was in Ghana. I selected the photo of GIS intentionally to show the swimming pool area, and as they gazed wistfully at the image, they made statements such as "it's not just learning in this school. People can bring out their talent in this school … You can relax yourself very much here." And yet, there was always the feeling that they would not fit in or "be comfortable because [they] don't know how to swim."[17]

Staff and students of Kpasec alike viewed their school—and schools in general —as "civilizing" and "disciplining" spaces by virtue of their physical environment, rules and regulations, and the lessons taught. Outward appearances of school buildings and other buildings were linked to ideas of how "civilized" the users and the places in which they are located were. They extrapolated ideas of the presence or absence of "civilization" and relative "levels of civilization" from architectural appearance, noting that "civilized people" are also "disciplined" people who use and live in "civilized architecture," and in the case of schools,

Figure 1. Integrated Secondary School, Berlin, 2019.
Source: Thomas Mayer Archive.

Figure 2. Ghana International School showing recreation area.
Source: Anonymized student, 2025.

"disciplined schools" had "high ... level[s] of civilization" and therefore looked like "outside" schools.[18]

Of the images of glass-clad and "beautiful," "fancy," "ultramodern" architecture, as with the ISS and GIS, they were full of admiration and conflicting desires to be in those schools. One student said, "If you had not told us it [ISS] was a school, I would say it looks like a company."[19] They fantasized about how happy and relaxed they would be if they attended those schools, making statements such as, "If I went to school here, I would be happy" and "We will be so relaxed."[20] They also made extrapolations about the kind and quality of learning available in schools that looked like that, stating, "We will have a lot of technology in the

school; We will do much research" and "Learning will be faster in this school ... I would be advanced if I go there." They imagined discipline levels in the school with statements like, "If you are not disciplined, you will be scared to enter."[21]

Their notions of the "civilizing" power of schools and other buildings had much to do with the architecture and physical environment. They believed that a building could make you behave "in a civilized way ... before anyone has to tell you to behave" because of the "surroundings ... and where you yourself are standing."[22] Their school was a space in which one could not "just come and behave uncivilized" by "shout[ing] anyhow ... like they do in the village," or by "wear[ing] *chalewote* [plastic flipflops] to important events."[23]

> If you're civilized, you do not shout anyhow. Some people just shout "hey" anyhow. In a civilized place, you can't stand at a distant place and shout anyhow, but at a village, you can do that ... You learn to dress decently. You learn to have a decent haircut and dress decently. You don't just wear any kind of footwear.[24]

They thought that some schools were more "civilized" than others because of the type of buildings and facilities available, which in turn resulted in the likelihood that more "civilized" people would send their wards there. Although in their perception, "civilized buildings" were often "modern" and "new" in both the contemporaneous sense and the sense of architectural aesthetics, they could also be old and well preserved.

Yet students were also wary about the effects of that "civilization" on their psyches and enjoyment of themselves. As one student observed pensively after they had all excitedly spoken about how "the people there [at ISS] must be civilized," how "clean" it was, and how it "look[ed] like it is a place for rich people":

> But it will be boring ... It looks like you cannot have fun there. The environment looks like there are no trees for fresh air, and you will even be scared to pick stones to play because everything is in its place.[25]

The tension between yearning for "civilization" and not being able to be "free" (to be at ease with themselves) was a constant thread in many of our discussions. With statements such as "There will be too much discipline here. More than Kpasec," they compared their school to the schools they were looking at as they compared themselves and their lives to those of the imagined users of those schools. They associated behaving in specific ways with being in those (kinds of) buildings and attributed their exclusion from elite Ghanaian schools and state institutions such as Parliament House of Ghana and symbolic spaces such as airports with their "not know[ing] how to comport [themselves] well" "like rich people" in those places.[26]

Students also read economic status and social class from the physical appearance of schools. Schools that were perceived as "civilized" and "disciplined" places, with lush lawns and pristine-looking buildings, were always imagined to be populated by "rich people's children."[27] They shared concerns that their

guardians would not be able to afford fees as high as they imagined would be charged in those schools. Conversely, schools with a "low level of civilization," typically with simple buildings and bare earth compounds, were imagined to have lower school fees and poorer students and parents.

Their readings of belonging, levels of "civilization," discipline, wealth, and more from the architecture established that the outward appearances of buildings have meanings to the students as observers. They framed these meanings in the context of sociopolitical and cultural phenomena and issues, drawing comparisons between their schools and other schools in Ghana and beyond, noting the different experiences of life they had compared with known and unknown peers. By projecting other Ghanaian students as more "civilized," "modern," "wealthy," and "disciplined," they placed themselves lower than those in elite schools but still higher than others in what they perceived to be more deprived "village schools." Far from seeing this as necessarily unfair, most students took it in their stride that these would be their expected and accepted statuses, especially as they related to ideas discussed in the next sections.

External dynamics and perceptions of other schools

Although many public secondary school buildings in Ghana have a similar design language[28] of architecture and physical environment, there are differences in architectural style, building façades, decoration and ornamentation, the appearance, and layout of the school grounds. Reasons for this include the fact that elite schools constructed before the 1950s, especially those included in the colonial government education grants, have a markedly different look and feel, especially from those built after the 1980s. The former tended to be bespoke architectural designs by world-famous architects with generous funding, whereas the latter were often delivered through the Architectural and Engineering Services Limited and Public Works Department with limited budgets. In between these were schools constructed entirely under the Nkrumah-led government, which adopted the modernist aesthetic of the elite schools but with less funding and thus less space for bespoke design. Currently, most new public schools are designed and delivered through public tender and procurement processes, funded through the Ministry of Education, Ghana Education Trust Fund, foreign government aid, or World Bank programs. This results in new (2000s and beyond) school buildings being more generic, with little attention given to unique aesthetics and design innovation. Examination of tender documents show that these projects typically construct many secondary schools at a time and designing bespoke buildings is usually not a priority for the firms that typically win these kinds of bids.[29]

Kpasec students perceived their school as relatively "low-class[ed]" and lower positioned in relation to other secondary schools, reflecting a general view noted earlier. Their perceptions and real experiences informed how they found and placed themselves in Kpando, Ghanaian and even global societies—in the lower rungs of sociopolitical hierarchies. Unlike the less financially endowed public secondary schools that rely primarily on the state for new school buildings, elite

schools with strong alumni associations often construct new school buildings with funds raised by their wealthy, relatively upper class, and politically connected alumni. These buildings, such as the new Mfantsipim School library complex (Figure 3) are designed in unique ways befitting the cost and status of the projects. Students associated the existence of this kind of bespoke, purpose-built architecture in some secondary schools with their long-standing category "A" and "high-class" status, noting that:

> A Class schools—the schools that [have] high achievement in academics ... in terms of architecture is really high—it's very nice—their buildings everything—Just to make the students feel comfortable to study.[30]

Although Kpasec students took great pride in their school buildings and frequently described how they were much better than the "village schools" they were "coming from,"[31] they were very aware and vocal about the relatively lower status of their school's appearance compared not only to other public secondary schools in Kpando but to many others in Ghana and around the world. They referred to these other schools with the GES "A" categorization, as with terms such as "high class," "highly civilized," and "more advanced."[32] They compared the external appearance of their school buildings and the extent of infrastructural development in their school to other schools in Ghana, noting that students from other schools usually "classify [their school] as inferior." According to the students, this was because Kpasec was "not popular," and did not "have much facilities."[33] As one student put it:

> Schools that are of high excellence have more facilities ... So, they think they are having the facilities and everything to achieve their goals. But we also

Figure 3. Mfantsipim School's new library complex, completed in 2019 and called the largest secondary school library in West Africa.
Source: Author, 2024.

here we have our facilities (as they are), but we still manage it, and we will come out as among the best.[34]

One source of recent pride was when the quiz team exceeded expectations by beating two "high-class" schools in the previous year's National Science and Maths Quiz competition. They thought that by continuing to make the most of their limited school infrastructure by performing well in examinations and quizzes, the government, alumni, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), the Evangelical Presbyterian (EP) Church, and the Kpando elders and community would be motivated to "help" them with building projects.[35]

However, they were keenly aware that their alumni associations, church, and community were not as wealthy as those that support other secondary schools. Thus, they were limited in the amount and type of "help" they could give. Even the government could be excused because "the government builds according to its resources ... They don't build luxurious blocks so that ... every society will get one."[36] They thought that:

> The government is helping A-schools because of the high performance of the school ... But C-class ... they don't have much facilities like A-Schools ... so they cannot perform highly. Some of the teachers and schools are really suffering.[37]

They linked their academic and extracurricular performance to the extent of the physical architectural development of their school. And yet "A" schools, which usually perform well academically and already have "high levels of facilities," get even more facilities given to them. These facilities are given not only by the government, which in the students' view rewards excellence with architectural development, but also by wealthy and politically connected PTAs, alumni associations and surrounding wealthy communities. But this did not discourage or deter the Kpasec students because they believed they would "manage [their limited range of facilities], and ... come out as among the best."[38]

This sentiment was reinforced during an intergenerational FGD—which included alumni and current students—where the students asked the elders when the first "storey building" was built in Kpasec. Multi-storey buildings were significant markers of the extent of architectural development and progress in the school and were associated with "high-class" schools. Alumni from the 1960s did not remember as they were no multi-storey buildings during their time, but alumni from the late 1970s recollected construction beginning on the much-beloved 15-unit block just after they graduated. This revelation was marked by a round of applause and cheers from the students because, in a previous interview with their headmaster as part of A.I.R. Club activities, he told them that the 15-unit block was a reward from the government at the time for excellent performance in the regional final examinations by the 1978 Year Group. The students thanked the two members of the 1978 Year Group that were present at the intergenerational FGD for their efforts and stated that they were inspired to

perform well in their final exams to attract more infrastructural development for their school.[39]

Students were aware of being positioned in the lower rungs of sociopolitical hierarchies and the margins of cultural systems by other people in their community and beyond by virtue of their schools. In interviews and discussions, they shared stories of encounters with students from other schools—during vacation or at interschool events—where they had been dismissed or disrespected. Yet even as they lamented being dismissed and disrespected by schools such as Wesley Girls' High School, Kumase High School, Archbishop Porter's Girls' Senior High School, and Aburi Girls' Senior High School, they disparaged the neighboring Kpando Technical Senior High School by claiming the students there did not dress as well as they did, did not behave as well as them and "find it difficult to speak English fluently compared to us."[40] By rejecting their low positioning based on the fact that they are categorized as an "A" school and positioning themselves as higher up in these school hierarchies than other schools, they negotiated their positioning in national hierarchies of secondary schooling.

Internal dynamics of space, spatial control, and hierarchical usage of school buildings

The usage of internal school spaces and meanings ascribed to them is essentially gendered, hierarchical, and fluid—sometimes in contradictory ways that change over time. Through the ways in which school space is organized, structured, and used, the perceptions of internal spaces, and the various, sometimes contested, meanings ascribed to these school spaces, students both position themselves and are positioned in sociopolitical hierarchies and spheres in school. Yet even as school authorities exerted control, students pushed back overtly through petitions and protests and covertly through disobedience and "breaking bounds." Ultimately, students viewed their usage of school space as both reflective of and in preparation for their roles in broader society.

Three spaces in Kpasec speak to hierarchies of spatial organization and usage within the school. These in Figure 4 are what staff and students refer to as "The Big Hall," the "Mosque," and "Parliament." In these spaces, some of which have multiple uses over immediate and prolonged periods, students are literally and figuratively controlled and positioned according to their status of rank, seniority, and sometimes religion. They are aware of some of these positionings as unfair and arbitrary at times. Still, they accept an internal logic of hierarchies of access to and control over school space and see this as reflective of life outside school.

The Kpasec Big Hall is typical of the hierarchical and fluid nature of spatial organization and usage in the school. Students typically sit in the Big Hall according to their class levels and their "houses" of affiliation.[41] During assemblies and church services, the most junior students sit in front and most directly in the staff's view from the dais. This raised dais where teachers and administrative staff sit during morning assembly becomes the "high table" for prefects[42] and select senior (form three) students when the hall is used for dining. Access to
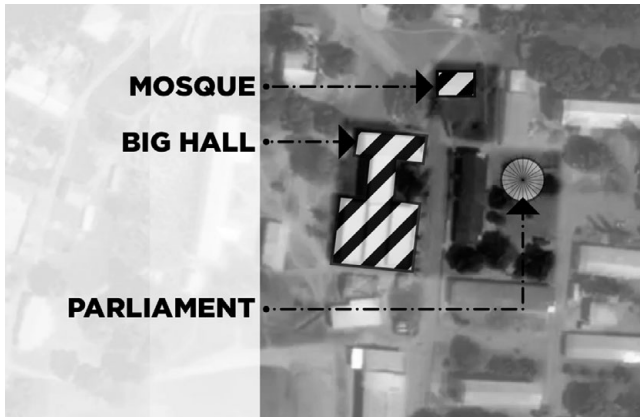
Figure 4. Map of Kpasec showing the positions of "The Big Hall," the "Mosque," and "Parliament." *Source:* Author, 2022 on base map from Google Earth.

this area is typically off-limits for junior (form one and two) students unless they are summoned. Apart from the prefects, senior students who sit upon the dais are mostly executives of clubs and societies.[43] Most of the junior students I interviewed, rather than feeling that the current hierarchies of space usage in the dining hall were unfair, typically aspired to times when they would have seniority in the school so as to gain and control access to those spaces.

"Parliament," (Figure 5) on the other hand, is not a building at all. On hot and sunny days in Kpando it is usual to see groups of people—typically men—gathered under the shade of large trees conversing as they watch people go by or playing board games. Therefore, it was not surprising to find a mango tree with teachers sitting in the shade conversing on one of my first visits to Kpasec.

In Parliament, as in the Big Hall, the hierarchical and fluid nature of school space can be seen. The teachers claimed this unbounded yet clearly separate outdoor space and used it in a way that made it a site of fear and apprehension among the students, who could only access it if they had been sent or summoned by a teacher. As one student put it, "Even though there is common room there, they always sit here ... discuss issues ... they make their decisions ... if students are making noise, here they punish them."[44] Although many students are summoned to Parliament when they are in trouble, it can be a place to be praised as well, when "sometimes ... they will call you and congratulate you."[45] But Parliament was not always what it is today. An old student who attended Kpasec in the late 1970s described it as a highly sought-after leisure area for students during break times, noting that "when it [was] break ... if you [did not] rush [to Parliament],[46] you will not get a seat."[47] Once an outside common room for students, this space is now claimed by teachers, and students are excluded from it. Even on the hottest days and when Parliament is empty, no student sits there to escape the heat.

The existence, rules of usage, and meanings ascribed to the two spaces were seen by the students as both reflective of and in preparation for life outside of

Figure 5. Image from a photo walk showing "Parliament" in the background.
Source: Anonymized A.I.R. Club member, 2019.

school. In our discussions students drew parallels to spatial regulation and order in the *real* Parliament, stating "in Ghana, some places you can't just walk and go … like Accra Parliament … and that's just how things are!"[48] And although they thought it was "not fair" to be excluded from certain spaces because of their status or "level," they were assertive that those who were allowed access to those spaces were included because they "know how to behave and comport themselves." In contrast, people like them "don't know" and "will just go and be touching anything … everything … things that [they] don't deserve to be touching."[49]

Muslim students have had to work hard, first to be given and then to be allowed to retain access to the space they use for group prayers—their "Mosque," as they call it. Although the Ghanaian constitution guarantees freedom of religion and public schools are required to respect students' religious practices, many secondary schools are attached to a Christian denomination. For instance, when Kpasec was established as a non-denominational school, there were representatives from the Catholic Church and the EP Church on the board.[50] Muslim students reported that they were often threatened with losing access to the Mosque—a small building situated near the boys' dormitory—because of suspicions and accusations possibly fueled by Islamophobia. Of all the activities I saw the Big Hall used for in my time there, Muslim prayers were not included. In one interview, a student told me that they had to seek help from outside their school just to be allowed to keep praying in the space.

> Like even the place they gave us as Mosque. The chaplaincy told us that this school is not for Muslims, so we are not supposed to pray there. So, we went to call one of our Mallam[s]. They came to talk to them, and they said now we can pray there, but we should be careful otherwise, they can take the place from us.[51]

Female students have even more restricted access to the Mosque, as they are prevented from accessing it at most times because of suspicions that sexual

activities may take place between unsupervised students in this place of worship. To compound this, the female students additionally sometimes feel uncomfortable about going there to pray, even when they are permitted to, because of the scrutiny and suspicion that follows. Just as with the continued perception of schools as sites of civilization, these fears of the imagined hypersexuality of African teenagers are holdovers from the colonial and Christian origins of education in the Gold Coast.[52]

More emphatically, there is no space allowed in the school—figuratively or physically—for other religious practices, especially those referred to as African Traditional Religions. It is essential to note that no students—to the knowledge of my staff and student informants—had practiced or sought the freedom to practice African Traditional Religions at school. Staff expressed fears of what they referred to as "uncivilized behavior," "villager behavior,"[53] and "some occultism things"[54] refracted through Christian religious thought. In a FGD about policing and control of school spaces, the students told me about a group of male students who were punished for "chanting":

> Last year, when it was time for inter-house, the <redacted> boys ... they went for training at dawn, and they were just motivating themselves and singing Jama [cheer] songs ... making noise. They brought them here [dining hall] morning assembly. They punished them. They said they are chanting.[55]

The "chant" that the boys were punished for is a traditional Ewe cheer song, typically sung at festivals, funerals, and in other sociocultural settings and events. This song was almost certainly known to the predominantly Ewe-speaking staff of the school, who punished the students both because the song was perceived as "undisciplined behavior" and as unchristian because Kpasec "is a Christian school."[56]

The Big Hall, Parliament, and Mosque exemplify the hierarchical, segregated nature of spatial organization and usage in Kpasec as well as the ways in which school authorities and sometimes students (attempt to) exert control through spatial organization. The multiplicity of uses of the Big Hall, though out of necessity, and the change in use of Parliament by students to teachers in later years also show that often the use of school spaces is in flux, adapted to different needs and contexts. Yet these spaces are sometimes highly monitored and regulated along disciplinary lines refracted through desires for "civilization," Christianity, and fears around students' sexuality. Regardless of this control, there is sometimes subversion and resistance as the continued struggles over access and use of the Mosque show, as well as the multiple and sometimes secret uses of the Big Hall.

The siting of dormitories in Kpasec is one strategy of controlling student sexualities by school authorities, as are internal dormitory rules such as "no four legs on a bed" and the imposition of curfews for female students. Staff express determination to "protect the girls," and this is reflected in the spatial layout shown in Figure 6. The Girls' Dormitories area is surrounded by five staff bungalows and is close to several others, compared to the Boys' Dormitories

Figure 6. Map of Kpasec showing the location of girls' dormitories, classrooms, and boys' dormitories. *Source:* Author on base map drawn by Maamesi Manful, 2022.

which only have one—the senior housemaster's residence—nearby. Additionally, the Girls' Dormitory Blocks are further away from the main entrance to the school, and unwanted visitors are less likely to stroll to that area without being seen. This spatial configuration is reminiscent of and likely inspired by spatial configurations of mission schools constructed in the first half of the twentieth century reviewed for this study such as Agogo Girls' School and Wesley Girls' High School. The reasoning and effect behind the arrangement is similar—by "protecting" the girls from (sexualized) access of outsiders to the school, the configuration ultimately performs a gendered spatial mode of control.[57]

For example, stemming from this strict control of female students and their movement through space and time, they felt physically and mentally distant from the classrooms, noting that "the classrooms are closer to the boy's hostels."[58] They were also restricted from going to the classrooms to do extra studies at night after prep.[59] The male students, in contrast, could go to the classrooms all through the night and often did so. Both sets of students cited this as a reason why they thought male students outperformed female students in academics. One female student lamented that "it ... affect[s]" their chances of "making it," into university and in life generally. Yet although a few male students thought the female students should be allowed do after-prep studies, most agreed with the rule because "some of the girls they come out not to come and learn ... [but] to go to town ... to have sex."[60]

School authorities enforced gendered control through school rules and physical spatial organization, and students reinforced them in their own ways. "Kpasec Valley," a woodland to the north of the campus, is considered "out of bounds" to all students regardless of gender. And yet male students who admitted to regularly "breaking bounds" through the valley insisted that female students should not attempt to exit the school through the same channel because "they would go and meet their boyfriends."[61] Some female students had ways of subverting and navigating the rules but requested that these not be published in my study to keep them secret.
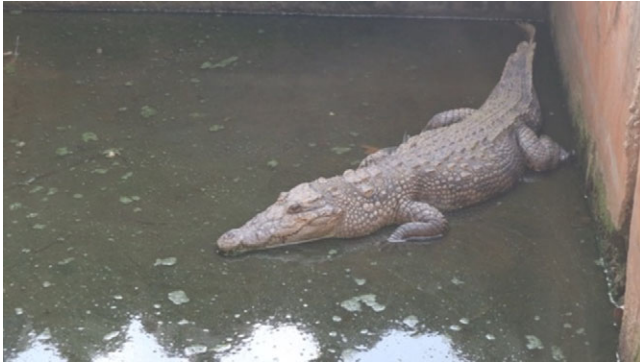
Figure 7. Suzzy the crocodile in her pond.
Source: Anonymized A.I.R. Club member, November 2019.

The gendered exclusion of female students from specific spaces in Kpasec combined with the hierarchical nature of spatial organization and usage to take a somewhat spiritual turn with Suzzy's Pond (Figure 7). Suzzy is a crocodile who students and some alumni consider a guardian of the school. Some refer to her as a god, and a few others as a strange pet. There has been a protector/god/pet crocodile there since the mid to late 1970s, as alumni from those groups confirm, but the name "Suzzy" came after their time, and they thought it unlikely that it was still the same crocodile. There is a lot of lore around Suzzy and her pond—which sits in a significant location in front of the much-prized 15-unit classroom block—such as people wearing red must not go near the pond as she abhors that color. This is especially remarkable because all female first-year students wear red frocks during their first weeks of school because official school uniforms usually take about a month from when students are first enrolled to be made and delivered.

The cleaning of Suzzy the crocodile's pond is considered a "special ... ritual" task and is strictly only done by *male* grounds prefects.[62] This practice is interesting because prefects ordinarily do not participate in cleaning and other grounds work as their role is to allocate the work to other, usually junior, students and supervise them. Although they described the cleaning process to me, they would not tell me why it should only be male prefects who cleaned the pond or what would happen if a female prefect or student cleaned it.[63] These rules around cleaning the pond have been entirely made up and enforced by the prefects to the best of the knowledge of my staff and alumni informants. Although there has been a crocodile kept in the school for over 50 years, the rules about the maintenance of the pond and the crocodile's aversion to red appear to be more recent developments that bear testament to changing meanings and activities on the part of students without staff interference,[64] and their formation and enforcement of sociopolitical strata on their own.

Through the spatial organization and usage of the internal school spaces—explicit through school rules and the gendered and otherwise restrictive siting and allocating of buildings for use, and implicit through norms widely accepted

and unspoken but often protested by female students—students of Kpasec are both positioned and position themselves in sociopolitical and cultural roles. Several of these—such as the various restrictions of girls' movement through space and time—are imposed societal gender roles, but others—such as the lore around Suzzy the crocodile—are constructed and enforced by the students themselves but still support wider conventional sociocultural gender norms.

As school authorities attempt to police, regulate, and exert control over student bodies and sexualities, the students resist by petitioning, pleading, and disobeying through actions such as "breaking bounds." They also reflect and reinforce these rules in their engagements with students of different statuses—such as male students to female students and senior students to junior students. In some cases, such as with restrictions and exclusions based on seniority, students are more accepting because they know they will eventually be able to access those spaces. Thus, they do not often seek to challenge or resist those restrictions. Others, such as those based on gender and religion, are less sanguinely accepted, with some students challenging, contesting, or simply refusing those restrictions. Many students, however, ultimately comply, noting the unfairness of those exclusions but not seeing any way around them while they are still in school.

Conclusion

In this article, I set out to show how the architecture and physical space of secondary schools work as part of the sets of structures and processes that serve to stratify and demonstrate stratification in Ghana. Students of Kpasec found and placed themselves in lower rungs of sociopolitical hierarchies by virtue of their perceptions and experiences of the architecture of their school, other secondary schools in Ghana, and around the world. This serves as a tangible, contemporary case of how secondary schools lead students to find and place themselves in social class and other sociopolitical hierarchies.

In reading concepts such as "civilization," "modernness," and "discipline" from the external appearances of buildings and spaces and imagining the users as "civilized" and "disciplined," students self-excluded themselves from such places because they felt that they were not "civilized," "high-class," or "disciplined" enough to belong in those spaces. Although, to them, school spaces were civilizing, modernizing, class-elevating, and disciplining spaces, the extent of transformation was dependent on factors such as the location and the wealth of the school, meaning that there was only so far they could go beyond the remits of their towns, schools, and country. Therefore, although schools are perceived to impart civilization, discipline, and class, to the students of Kpasec, there were limits depending on factors such as how "high-class" the school is, where it is located, and the socioeconomic status of the students and their guardians.

Students associated different levels of "civilization," discipline, class, and modernness with the architecture of schools in Ghana and applied corresponding beliefs about who belongs to or deserves to access spaces. This finding of their levels was reinforced and reflected by the internal usage and spatial organization

of school spaces—which is fundamentally structured and strictly controlled along the lines of gender, religion, and hierarchies of status. As with the mission-run secondary school era in the country's history, female students have suffered the most from this and continue to be most disadvantaged regarding access to school spaces and ensuing sociopolitical and academic outcomes. And because enrolment in secondary school is not typically done on a religious basis, non-Christian students—male and female—who find themselves in Christian institutions come under additional forms of regulation and control.

Although students reacted to the control and internal organization of space in different ways—sometimes by pushing back against the tight bounds of spatial control and regulation through the breaking of bounds, more often they reflected and reinforced them with students who had a different or lower status than them. For instance, male students reflected and reinforced the exclusions and strict regulation of female students, and senior students reflected and reinforced the exclusions and strict regulation of junior students, keeping the systems alive and thriving. From their experiences of disrespect and dismissal by students from other schools to their comparison of the physical state of their school to other schools, they gleaned that they were placed as "low-class" by other students from other schools and marginalized by their government. Though they realized they were not at the top of Ghanaian class hierarchies, they believed they could rise by working hard, excelling in school, and achieving success in post-secondary education and employment.

Although this article has focused mainly on a single school, its findings about the ways in which secondary schools in Ghana serve as sites for the formation, inculcation, and reproduction of sociopolitical hierarchies can easily be extended and applied to similarly positioned secondary schools around the country, forming fascinating avenues for further research. Interviews with staff and alumni of other schools that were recently reclassified as category "A" revealed similar themes of class hierarchies, feelings of marginalization, and ideas about levels of discipline and modernness. I further suggest that these findings may have relevance across the African continent in other former British colonies, and perhaps even other countries with broadly similar colonial and education histories where there are groups of "elite" secondary schools established by colonial governments and Christian missions, and lower-ranked schools founded later by communities and postcolonial governments seeking to expand access to education. Secondary schools were instituted to prepare students for their future roles, in colonies and independent nations, and continue to serve their purposes. And through their architecture, spatial organization, usage, and operations, they also contribute to preparing students for their positioning in social classes. In lower-ranked or lower-placed schools, the places that students are prepared for are essentially as lower-class citizens who are limited in how far they can advance in their nations and the world, and how much they matter to their governing authorities.

ASA Graduate Student Prize Committee for their selection of the article for the award, and the editors and reviewers of *African Studies Review* for their careful reading and valuable feedback. Finally, my thanks go to the students, staff, and alumni of Kpando Secondary School who welcomed me and enthusiastically participated in this research. This study was part of the African State Architecture project, which received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 772070).

Author Biographies.   **Kuukuwa Manful** is a trained architect and researcher who creates, studies, and documents the histories, theories, and politics of architecture in Africa. She is an assistant professor of architecture at the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, writing a book about "The Architecture of Education in Ghana."

Notes

1. I use formal education to refer to instruction delivered through institutions and personnel regulated by the state, compared to "informal education" (Die 2011; Kwamena-Poh 1975) which typically takes the form of apprenticeships or cultural instruction.

2. I frame *schooling* not in reference to curricula but rather to the often indirect but no less critical "education" that students receive in and around the space of school, including from their staff, peers, and communities.

3. See Manful (2022) for an extensive discussion of my use of the after-school club.

4. I use "Western-style" to refer to the type of education which has developed through the influence of European nations through trade, Christian missions, and colonization (Bartels 1951; Graham 1971).

5. A notable exception is Budniok and Noll's (2018) study in which they discuss the status of teachers and lawyers in Ghana at lower and upper ends of the middle class respectively.

6. *Education Report for the Year 1956*, Ministry of Education, Government Printing Department, Accra, Ghana.

7. In the 2020 GES Second Cycle Schools Register, Kpasec was listed as a category B school. "Second-cycle" institutions in Ghana are formally grouped by the GES into seven alphabetically named "categories." Categories A, B, C, and D are specifically for secondary schools, where A is the top-ranked. The classification, according to GES informants, is also based on student performance in standardized exams and historical reputation. Although there is no definitive list, there is a accepted group of "elite," "well-endowed," or "first-class" public secondary schools considered so by virtue of how well-resourced they are, the wealth, fame, and power of alumni from the school, how well they perform in the West African Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) examinations, other academic competitions, and the caliber of students who usually attend them. It includes schools attributed to the founding of European Christian Missions in the first half of the twentieth century. The 1952 Annual Colonial Report listed thirteen "leading secondary schools" as: Aburi Girls' Secondary School, Accra Academy, Adisadel College, St Augustine's College, Holy Child High School, Mfantsipim School, St Monica's Senior High School in Mampong, Odumase Secondary School (now Presbyterian Boys Secondary School), Wesley Girls' High School, Mawuli School, Prempeh College, Tamale Secondary School, and the government-endowed, "autonomous" Achimota College. The current GES category "A" ranking lists 55 schools including the aforementioned.

8. Anonymized interviews with GES and Computerized School Selection and Placement System staff. Protocol lists allow for preferential admission of wards of alumni, traditional leaders, and various politically connected people whose grades fall below the cut-off points for schools or courses. See Adu-Gyamfi, Donkoh, and Anim Adinkrah (2016) for an overview of the Ghanaian Educational System.

9. *Ghana Senior High Schools Annual Digest*, 2020, Ministry of Education.

10. "Photowalking" is "a communal activity of camera enthusiasts who gather in a group to walk around with a camera for the main purpose of taking pictures of things that interest them" (Wikipedia 2022). Having participated in photowalks before, I found them generative for discussing objects and ideas through photographs and what people choose to photograph.

11. I use "modernness" here to refer to the quality of newness in the sense that the students explained it.

12. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019.

13. See Coe (2005).

14. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019 to November 7, 2019.

15. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019.

16. The term "ultramodern" is commonly used in Ghana to refer to new and flashy-looking buildings rather than the technologically advanced constructions the term denotes.

17. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. A.I.R Club FGD, October 31, 2019.

27. Ibid.

28. This refers to similarities in the layouts, massing, and aesthetics of school buildings. They're often instantly recognizable as schools and when this design language is absent, people struggle to see a building as a school. Used after "pattern language" in Alexander et al. (1977).

29. Interview with architect, MoE, September 2021.

30. A.I.R Club FGD, October 16,2019.

31. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019.

32. A.I.R Club FGD, October 16–31, 2019.

33. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18 to November 7, 2019.

34. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019.

35. A.I.R Club FGD, October 31, 2019.

36. A.I.R Club FGD, October 16, 2019.

37. Ibid.

38. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019.

39. Intergenerational FGD, October 20, 2019.

40. A.I.R Club FGD, October 30, 2019.

41. Students in boarding schools are organized into residential houses which compete internally in sports, cleanliness, examination results, and the like.

42. Senior students in positions of authority over other students.

43. Interview with student, October 2019.

44. A.I.R Club FGD, October 17, 2019.

45. Ibid.

46. It was not called parliament in her time, because as she put it "that time Rawlings was in power so all we knew of parliament was from books" (Interview, July 2022). Her guess was that the "Parliament" name comes from a trend after 1992, when Ghana was returned to democratic governance and people would name any place where people could talk freely "parliament."

47. FGD, October 19, 2019.

48. A.I.R Club FGD, October 30, 2019.

49. Ibid.

50. E.Y. Dogbe (1978). "A Short History of Kpandu Secondary School." *The Kpasecan*, Silver Jubilee Edition: 6–21.

51. Interview with student, Kpasec, October 18, 2019.

52. For instance, Alexander Fraser, one of the founders of Achimota School, wrote in the Round Table (1925) that "over-indulgence in sexual thought" was "almost inevitable among boys brought up in the isolation of primitive conditions" (p. 89) such as in the Gold Coast. "Achimota" (1925), The Round Table, 16 (61). See May (1995) for de-anonymized articles.

53. Morning assembly, Kpasec, October 7, 2019.

54. Interview with teacher, October 31, 2019

55. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019.

56. Interview with teacher, October 2019.

57. Report on Secondary Education for Girls (January 1943) Synod of Methodist Mission. SOAS, University of London Special Collections, MMS.257.

58. FGD, October 18, 2019.

59. Prep is short for preparation, a period after supper where students go to classrooms to study or do assignments.

60. A.I.R Club FGD, October 18, 2019.

61. Ibid.

62. Interview with prefect, November 2019.

63. It was their secret to keep, and I respected the rules of their institution.

64. The lack of staff interference around Suzzy is strange considering the strict preclusion of activities associated with African Traditional Religious beliefs, which was what I presumed the activities and lore around Suzzy stem from. Yet when asked, most staff were dismissive about it and saw no harm as she was essentially "a pet."

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