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Building permanence: fire outbreaks and emergent tenure security in urban Ghana

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A fire burned for more than two hours, and the large open space was covered in ash. Materials and implements of daily living – a half-burned water tank, charred tin roofs and ash-covered footpaths – had been devastated or destroyed. Cooking pots were submerged under burned residue, while frayed electrical wires littered the ground. For many, the destructiveness of the May 2012 fire in Accra's largest squatter settlement validated the neighbourhood's nickname of Sodom and Gomorrah. It also bore out residents' worst fears, as local leader and resident Bright Dzila had told me several months earlier: 'Throughout the night I wake up whenever I hear a noise because I think it is a fire. It is not a way to live.'[1]

Dzila had arrived in the settlement, officially called Old Fadama, a few years earlier with his wife and children as internal migrants from the Volta region. Dzila rented a shack made of thin wooden sheets that lacked legal title. But the plot housed something of value: a water tap. Neighbours from the area depended on him for water, which brought him daily cash income.

His ICT skills, although limited, enabled his involvement in National Democratic Congress (NDC) party politics. But he was primarily oriented toward his home town, striving to gain the attention of party elites in Accra so that he could secure an appointment in his district assembly back home. The precarious nature of his wooden walls and the fears that dogged him at night symbolized the temporary character of his status as a squatter in Old Fadama. For leaders such as Dzila, the goal was to make a living and move on. Although the settlement had great economic and political value and offered numerous opportunities for daily survival, entrepreneurial activities and recognition by political parties, its drawback was its lack of permanence. In this article, however, I show that fires in squatter settlements can be moments of emergence, through which abstract social conditions take on concrete, repeatable and habitual forms. Residents and their leaders attempt to construct permanent futures in settings deemed temporary by the authorities.

More than 80,000 residents live and work in Old Fadama, but it remains unrecognized by city authorities and its residents are therefore unable to secure public services or be reckoned as contributing to the GDP (Afenah 2012; Stacey and Lund 2016). It is a dumping ground for garbage, and even surrounds a scrap recycling operation made infamous internationally for its e-waste dump (Grant and Oteng-Ababio 2012). For most non-residents, the settlement has negative

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[1]Interview, 5 December 2011.

connotations: it is seen as a stain on the city, unfit for human habitation (Obeng-Odoom 2011; Gillespie 2016), and a place fittingly known as Sodom and Gomorrah.

This article tells an alternative story. It shows that squatter settlements offer new opportunities to experiment with governance and ways to construct the future that are hidden from official view. Paradoxically, fire outbreaks that are seen as emblematic of precarity can offer a much needed 'break from the past'. They provide the opportunity to reimagine daily life by creating the possibility of a more permanent future.

While some scholarly attention has been paid to demolitions and evictions in African cities (Macharia 1992; Klopp 2008), there is less research on fires in squatter settlements (exceptions include Chance 2015; Selmeczi 2009). Globally, fires cause over 300,000 deaths annually and leave millions more injured or displaced (Twigg *et al*. 2017). Residents of informal settlements are particularly susceptible to injury because many live in poorly constructed, unregulated and highly dense neighbourhoods. Charcoal stoves and pirated electricity contribute to these precarious living arrangements (Birkinshaw 2008). The experience and process of rebuilding after a blaze – what I call *building permanence* – are even less well documented, but they are important aspects of governance in informal settlements. Building permanence entails both a physical claim to the urban space residents inhabit and a more existential sense of entitlement to create environs that will last and remain unharmed. Neither of these is legal or formally political, but they can serve as the basis for rights of 'adverse possession' in the future (based on the claim that using or improving land provides inhabitants occupancy of it) if actors and organizations pursue this strategy (Kohn 2016).

These strategies of emergence are illuminated by Asef Bayat's notion of the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (2013) and Anne-Maria Makhulu's theory of making freedom which depends on everyday 'strategies for staying put and making home' (2015: 10). In addition, I draw from theories of the everyday to emphasize the importance of the spontaneity of daily decision making and how opinions and emotions can shift in real time. These real-time moments of decision making can have significant implications for the development of new rules and norms, and can place urban neighbourhoods on a new trajectory towards permanence.

To make the argument about building permanence, I document four fire outbreaks in Accra – three in the settlement of Old Fadama itself – that changed the physical trajectory of the neighbourhood and shifted residents' emotional state of permanence. These fires represent daily events that expose people's shifting social practices, emotions and behaviour in moments of crisis. By studying real-time events, I show how people respond to them and become agents of institutional change (Berk and Galvan 2009), here with specific reference to property rights and tenure security. I demonstrate how residents redraw property lines and develop a sense of permanent residence in extralegal settings, without gaining any formal rights. Crises such as fire outbreaks can structure local politics and affect decision-making pathways. Through this 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat 2013), they open up new possibilities of a permanent future.

I draw on twelve months of ethnographic research conducted from August 2011 to August 2012, and follow-up trips to Accra in 2013 and 2016. I participated in daily affairs with a select group of community leaders who had loose alliances with

the NDC political party, the Old Fadama Development Association (OFADA), and other occupational groups within the area. I also conducted interviews and focus groups with residents, leaders, politicians and bureaucrats.

Building permanence

Informal settlements in Africa have great political and economic value (Durand-Lasserve and Royston 2002; Gulyani and Talukdar 2008; Fox 2014). They are sites of practical political action (Li 2007), where the 'particular representations of community can be used strategically to strengthen the property claims of potentially disadvantaged groups' (Li 1996). The urban poor can contest their citizenship rights by making claims and seizing illegal property, as well as attempt to unsettle the status quo (Holston 2008; Skuse and Cousins 2007; LeVan and Olubowale 2014). Informal settlements, especially those with large migrant populations, can be 'estuarial zones' that emphasize mobility and fluidity, drawing on the political value they have in larger municipal and national politics (Landau 2014).

Yet they are also sites of temporariness, characterized by depositories of labour and material scarcity that encompass vulnerability in everyday life (Standing 2011; Munck 2013; Denning 2010; Harris and Scully 2015). Anna Tsing's reflections on the everyday provide a useful description: 'Life without the promise of stability' (2015: 2). Similarly, Chalfin describes these contexts as a precarious and marginalized 'condition of bare life' (2014: 95).

These opposing interpretations of life in Africa's squatter settlements can be reconciled by treating them as vibrant arenas of emergent politics. They constitute what Kathleen Stewart calls 'ordinary scenes in which a form of sensing, thinking, or perceiving is emergent' (2012: 518). By focusing on the 'intensities and durations' of daily life (*ibid.*: 524), she brings dynamism and contingency to the study of precarity. These forms of insecurity create conditions for 'new forms of collective coming-together' (Allison 2012: 349), or everyday recomposition – 'conditions of possibility for new forms of relationality and socialization' (Campbell 2016: 259). The dynamism of everyday life exposes the moments of crisis and points of rupture when new future possibilities emerge (Berlant 2011).

This approach requires an examination of social 'non-movements' or the squatters' daily struggles to remain in their neighbourhoods (Bayat 2013). These are disparate acts of claim making that can coalesce into changes in institutions and government policy. The process can be long, slow and drawn out, encompassing 'the discreet and prolonged ways in which the poor struggle to survive and to better their lives by quietly impinging on the propertied and powerful, and on society at large' (*ibid.*: 15).

In this process, residents use their homes to create value in otherwise insecure and violent contexts. As Anne-Maria Makhulu demonstrates in Cape Town squatter settlements, the connection to the home is an intimate one, and the quotidian struggles for residence rights and permits form a larger politics of belonging. She tells the 'history of battles for access to the city for and on behalf of African migrants, of their combining of work and domestic life, and of a broad array of everyday practices that ultimately transformed the geography and demography

of Cape Town and, eventually, forced changes to apartheid law itself' (Makhulu 2015: 5).

Bayat and Makhulu stress the need to think about property rights and tenure security as lived experience. Berk and Galvan call this creative syncretism, in which 'the experience of living under rules is really an experience of living through rules, of not just playing by the rules, but playing the rules as if they were instruments' (2009: 544). This highlights the skill and human agency that residents have and the process of learning 'how to align situations, actions and expectations' (*ibid*.: 552). Habit and institutions are in 'constant, creative flux' (*ibid*.: 553). Rather than a lack of rights or precarious labour, informality and insecurity offer the opportunity for 'recombinatory bricolage', the possibility of a new future that Dewey calls 'an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses' (2002 [1922]: 190).

Institutional ambiguity, in the form of informal tenure rights, can be a political asset. In this way, 'economic agents [and all social beings and political actors] interpret and reinterpret their institutional settings in ways that reflect and reinforce differences in interpretation' (Lowe and Feldman 2017: 3). The ability to 'live through' and reinterpret institutional ambiguity is on constant display in the control of neighbourhoods. Of course, institutional ambiguity can also be a political liability, pitting groups of residents against one another and enabling the government to threaten residents with eviction and demolition. Uncovering the moments of crisis in which this ambiguity provides experiments in governance is a central contribution of this article.

Moment of crisis

'Where there is fire, there is politics,' a respondent told Kerry Ryan Chance in her study of urban South Africa (2015: 394). Chance rethinks fires in informal settlements as political possibilities, providing new opportunities for political claim making and economic redistribution. 'Using fire as a platform to redirect power,' Chance writes, 'they become legible to state agents, not as the governed but as the ungovernable' (*ibid*.: 399). Because fires are a 'concrete lived experience' in the lives of poor squatters (Gill 2014), they become part of what the South African social movement Abahlali baseMjondolo call 'living politics' – a politics that comes from the lived experience and struggle of people in the settlements.

Fire outbreaks are a moment of crisis in the everyday life of a squatter settlement, and also in the institutions that govern behaviour, property and urban space. Crises are 'structural processes generally understood to be beyond the control of people but simultaneously expressing people's breach of confidence in the elements that provided relative systemic stability and reasonable expectations for the future' (Narotzky and Besnier 2014: S4). Although unpredictable, such crises can create opportunities from the underlying uncertainty, contributing to new future political claim making as well as a fresh aesthetic (Rubin 2014: 699). In urban settlements, this crisis provides a 'moment of rupture' for residents and leaders to make new legitimized claims to property and authority – what Christian Lund describes as the chance to 'establish the conditions under which they hold property – together with the ability to define who belongs and who does not, and to establish and uphold rank, privilege and social servitude' (2016: 1199).

The period after fire outbreaks can become a time for residents and leaders to rebuild and reconstruct property relations and political authority. Fire outbreaks provide a sort of 'revolutionary break from the past', as Barrington Moore famously called it (Moore 1966: 431): a chance for residents to stake new claims to land, signalling recognition of permanence in the city. This moment of crisis is part of a larger struggle for space (Schatzberg 2014: 25), or 'room to experiment with making the future' (Moore 1978: 482), specifically the structures governing everyday life. In the context of insecurity and informality, this process involves signalling permanence to municipal and national authorities, or de facto recognition within the city's borders.

I now investigate these theoretical claims in Old Fadama, Ghana's largest squatter settlement, which has been under the threat of forced eviction since 2002. The eviction stems from the Ghanaian government's proposals to 'develop' the area; these range from the Korle Lagoon Restoration Project, designed to clean up the area and turn it into a tourist hub, to private development that would most likely benefit the elite (Grant 2009).

A temporary place of refuge

Like other squatter settlements across the continent, Old Fadama is valuable for its affordable housing and proximity to employment – the largest food and recycling markets border the settlement. The formal history of Old Fadama has been well documented (Grant 2009; Afenah 2012), but the story from the perspectives of the settlers themselves is often left out of academic analyses of the neighbourhood.

Kobe, one of the earliest residents to build a structure, shared the story of building Old Fadama from scratch in the early 1980s.

> This place now it is a full community, but the first time we came, the whole place was bushy and there were crabs in our structures. It all started from the yam market which was a very small portion; from one side of the lagoon to the other side the only boundaries you could see was the yam market. Behind the market was the Korle Lagoon, full of water and very muddy.[2]

The marshy space was a frontier, with shifting borders.

Kobe arrived in Accra in the early 1980s and settled across the main road in Agbogbloshie, another neighbourhood inhabited by indigenous Ga families. As an indigenous community, Agbogbloshie had a history that extended to precolonial and colonial times, and the residents could make legitimate claims to the land (Paller 2015). Kobe remembers the important landmarks, including a place close to the market called Mensah Guinea, and the David Power memorial hall where public gatherings occurred. These landmarks became signs and symbols available to the residents, allowing them to navigate their daily realities and construct borders and local neighbourhood names within the settlement (Geertz 1973). People crossed the road – to what is modern-day Old Fadama – to 'go to the

[2]Focus group, 4 June 2012.

toilet'. A clear hierarchy emerged between those with legitimate claims to property and those 'on the other side of the road' who navigated within these power structures in the 'hidden transcript' (Scott 1990).

Kobe explained: 'There were some boys there, they were not northerners, some of them were from Koforidua, Kumasi and Takoradi [cities in other regions]. They came to Accra to do work so they camped there. But some soldiers also went there occasionally to harass them, and finally drove them away.' Some of those boys were thieves, and the soldiers made sure that they would not cause trouble in other parts of the city. From its origins, the settlement gained a reputation as a haven for criminals.

Institutional development in the settlement has deep roots. In 1962, Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, relocated a group of residents who were living there because of floods. The space was named Fadama, which means 'marshy, uninhabitable area' in Hausa. The area was vacated and was used as a rubbish dump for the city. Residents from nearby Ga Mashie recount memories of fishing in the surrounding Korle Lagoon and playing soccer on the fields that have since been squatted on. These memories have become powerful narratives used to mobilize people, especially the indigenous Ga, against the 'squatters of Sodom and Gomorrah' (Grant 2009; Paller 2019).

Contrary to public opinion, the community was not originally settled by northern migrants, even though the majority of residents today are from the northern regions; rather, it was a commercial space that was used for selling goods. Over time, many settlers in Agbogbloshie and other nearby neighbourhoods relocated across the road to what is now Old Fadama. While much of the space was swampy and wet, settlers found creative ways to build homes. 'Some of them just made sheds and fill the floor with sawdust, and sleep in it in the night and the women use it to sell during the day,' Kobe explained.

The community grew without proper planning or procedures. A powerful Mallam elder described the building of the community: 'When you are in difficulty, you don't fear dirt. We collected stones to cover the dam. We collected them to cover the dirty things.'[3] For religious figures such as the Mallam, establishing order and lawfulness in the neighbourhood was paramount. Part of governance involved distinguishing sections in the settlement that were 'orderly and safe' from those 'in the bush' that served as a 'haven for criminals'. Building the settlement required hard, physical labour, as well as establishing control and authority over urban space.

Once the community started growing, individuals realized that they could take advantage of the situation for personal gain. A few Ga family heads saw the squatting as an opportunity to sell land and make money. Two men from the Ga community came to the settlement but were not from the family that owned the land; however, they used their affiliation with the indigenous ethnic group to take advantage of the situation. A man named Pii Laryea settled in Old Fadama and started selling land to new migrants. 'Before you could build, you needed to give him some money,' explained Kobe. 'When he started doing that, Alhaji Egbe also came, and he was also a Ga; he went and put up his structure at a location behind Ash Town Videos, and was selling the lands there.'

[3]Interview, 9 February 2012.

At first, people built their structures from thin wooden boards and cartons and they would use rubber sleeves as windows. Then people started using bigger wooden boards, and later plywood. The floors were initially made with woodchip, before people eventually switched to cement. The population growth of other ethnic groups slowly shifted power away from these Ga leaders; while they were still treated as custodians of the land (due to customary property rights enmeshed in Ghana's constitution), migrant leaders seized control of the informal land market as the Ga sold off most of their shares of the land and moved out of the community.

The population increased in the 1990s when a severe drought affected the northern regions and the Konkomba–Nanumba War contributed to a large flow of migrants to Accra. 'They were coming in groups, normally in the evenings,' Kobe recalled:

> Whenever they came we will come out and watch them move in numbers. As they came they had individuals they were coming to and they gave them the go-ahead to put up their own structures. They were mainly women and children, you will see them, coming in a group of young women, that even brought about this '*kayayei*' [head porter] business. [Before the war] there was nothing like '*kayayei*' [in the community].[4]

Former mayor Nat Nunoo Amarteifio explained how the municipal authorities turned a blind eye to the settlers: 'At the time they came to settle, we didn't pay much attention to it. Some northern politicians asked us to be charitable, so we said they could stay there for a short time. We had our own problems so we decided to ignore it.'[5] Amarteifio continually referred to the migrants as refugees, denoting their temporary status. But the newcomers stayed and the settlement grew.

Fire 1: Resettling residents in an informal settlement

A key event in the growth of the settlement occurred in 1993. Makola Market, the city's largest market, burned down. Many traders moved to Agbogbloshie, where Makola Market 2 was built to alleviate pressure on the central market. Amarteifio continued: 'It was frankly easier for us to ignore them than to get involved in potential confrontations with refugees and their political masters.' For city bureaucrats and politicians such as Amarteifio, fires led to temporary solutions: moving people to unoccupied spaces and rebuilding markets in alternative locations. Once rebuilt, people could return to where they came from, hence the label 'refugee'.

But for market sellers, the response was viewed less through a lens of transience or permanence than as a response to a moment of crisis. People made the decisions necessary to improve their lives. Although not outwardly political, the strategy of moving to Old Fadama and selling goods at the new market contributed to the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat 2013), in which the settlers expanded

[4]For more information about *kayayei*, see Opare (2003).
[5]Interview, 22 March 2012.

their space and control, inhabited new social positions, and staked new claims to the city. In other words, the fire contributed to a new experiment in governance. Whereas the authorities treated the settlement as temporary, it opened up a space for migrants from the north to make citizenship claims on Ghana's democracy, as well as to assert control and authority in the city. Northerners were winning the numbers game – they became the majority.

Migrant leaders established control by selling land, forming alliances with politicians, and controlling as many followers as possible (Paller 2014). For example, in the neighbourhood called Zuguline, early settlers were all from the same community in Tamale and would go to 'a certain madam to purchase land'.[6] By 2013, the land was controlled by seven local strongmen who were responsible for maintaining order on the ground. They allocated names to various neighbourhoods and areas of public space: for example, Yaw's Park and Jima's Park. Others were named after places back home, demonstrating the close links that settlers maintain with the northern regions. For example, Takorolyili is named after a chieftaincy in the north and means 'Chief Warrior'. Northern populations were now tasked with making Accra home, contributing to what Makhulu calls 'a basic struggle for survival' but also a 'struggle for a full life' (Makhulu 2015: 10).

Fire 2: From the bush to Sodom and Gomorrah

To make way for the construction of Makola Market 2, the government evicted squatters living close to the major road – but they simply moved deep inside the settlement, where the land had not yet been settled, and filled more of the swamp with sawdust. 'That was the first time I heard the name Sodom and Gomorrah,' Kobe recalled:

> Those people they evicted were moving towards the back there carrying their things and people started saying that they are going like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. They were moving to a place we used to call 'no man's land' – there was a lot of water there. There was one man in the bush called Commando; he was alone there, on the bank of the lagoon growing okra there. So when they evicted those here, they joined him there and occupied the whole area there. For some time everybody called [the back of the neighbourhood] Sodom and Gomorrah.

The renaming of portions of the neighbourhood to distinguish between groups of people is similar to the way in which Del Negro and Berger (2004: 4) conceptualize the everyday, suggesting that 'everyday life is best understood as an interpretive framework defined in dialectical opposition to the notion of special events', and emphasizing separate realms for ordinary people and those in power. Interestingly, these oppositions are made between those with formal state power as well as between groups in the hidden transcript as a way to separate and distinguish those with power from the powerless. The eviction and displacement served as a crucial 'special event'.

[6]Interview, 7 December 2011.

It was in 1997, after a major fire outbreak, that the entire community was labelled Sodom and Gomorrah. An influential Ga leader named Billy was the first person to use the term to designate the area at the back that was considered to be 'the bush' by community residents, differentiating it from the 'front' of the neighbourhood.[7] He wanted to distinguish the place where businesses and individuals operated and bought land through the Ga landlords from the back of the neighbourhood that was perceived to be 'no man's land' and a 'den of criminals'. As one leader explained, this was because '[a]nybody who would walk over there, they thought, were going to smoke or shit'.[8] According to one account, a reporter from Sunshine Radio overheard the nickname and used it in his report, and it stuck. An alternative narrative is that Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) spokesperson Numo Blafo said that the people of the neighbourhood would be destroyed like the biblical inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. The conscious (or unconscious) decision to use the nickname was made in the schema of daily life (Berlant 2011) and proved to have serious consequences for the future of the settlement.

Similar to the story Chance (2015) tells about the living politics of South Africa's urban settlements, the fire contributed to the area's criminalization, as well as to the stigmatization of the neighbourhood as a place that needed to be destroyed. The name Sodom and Gomorrah became regularized and is even used in official plans of the city, including the AMA *Mid-term Development Plan* I reviewed in 2012. Over time, the name shaped the broader public opinion of the neighbourhood, and the perception of the residents as squatters did not change. The settlement was transformed from a temporary place of refuge into an evil problem that needed to be exterminated, illustrating a second experiment in governance.

Fire 3: The political value of institutional ambiguity

Although informal and unrecognized by the city authorities, a vibrant social organization developed. Ties to migrants' home towns bound rows and clusters of homes together, establishing dense ethnic networks. Settlers consolidated their positions as local leaders by controlling territory and accumulating wealth. These early settlers established themselves as opinion leaders – a term that Ghanaians use to describe local legitimate authorities – by providing a sort of security of tenure, and by linking their followers to jobs (Paller 2019). As electoral competition intensified, many of these leaders made inroads into the two major political parties and incorporated residents into the parties' organizational machinery (Bob-Milliar 2012). By the 2016 election, there were twenty-seven NDC branch organizations in Old Fadama.

Leaders gained political value from this institutional ambiguity, as Bright Dzila's introductory anecdote suggests. Without tenure security, residents relied on these de facto landlords for property safekeeping. But, more importantly, leaders bolstered their status by acting as spokespeople for marginalized groups,

[7]Focus group, 7 December 2011.
[8]Interview, 9 February 2011.

establishing working ties to international actors including NGOs (see Elyachar 2003) – in this case, the Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) affiliate called People's Dialogue on Human Settlements (PD) and Amnesty International. Many leaders allied themselves to these organizations because they provided job opportunities, logistical expertise, and connections to new financial and political networks. As 'slum rights' have become an international human rights concern, community leaders have sought political advancement through opportunities funded by international organizations.

The proliferation of temporary structures or wood kiosks that are susceptible to fire intensified the lack of tenure security. The growth of these wooden structures was the outcome of an informal rule instituted by community leaders, and promoted before 2009 by PD, as a signal to the authorities that residents sought relocation rather than permanent residence. In accordance with this intention, the rule prevented new migrants from building with concrete blocks. PD, along with community leaders who organized as OFADA, strategically operated within the broader context of property insecurity and non-recognition by municipal authorities to devise its own local rules. The rationale was that building with wooden boards showed cooperation with the city authorities. As one leader explained, highlighting this temporariness, 'We wanted to be relocated, and we did not want to appear as wanting to settle here.'[9] Perhaps more importantly, leaders wanted to control and organize the relocation process. The organizations creatively used the institutional ambiguity to their own advantage, hoping to profit economically while politically controlling territory and the potential development process. The decision was contradictory: PD and OFADA made use of the larger institutional ambiguity while deepening tenure insecurity, including susceptibility to new fire outbreaks.

NGOs and community leaders thus enforced the rules governing the ways in which residents were able to construct their homes, directly affecting how they made sense of their worlds (Lock and Farquhar 2007). The susceptibility to fire promoted by the informal rule shaped residents' practices, as well as provoking emotions of fear and instability on a daily basis. On the one hand, it bolstered the reputation of the leaders, who could provide security to residents. For example, residents speak highly of the Catholic priest living in the neighbourhood who had a 'large instrument that can put out fires'.[10] On the other hand, fire outbreaks instigated 'new forms of collective coming-together' (Allison 2012: 349). A third, large, fire in 2009 illustrates this point and remains an important event in the community's folk memory. Residents remember the fire because it marked the date when they were allowed to start building permanent concrete structures and when OFADA reorganized to widen the roads and tax its residents. 'The fire was too much,' as one resident explained, implying that maintaining the status quo was now impossible.[11] From this moment on, many of the new structures that were built in Old Fadama were made with concrete blocks. In addition, landlords

[9]Interview, 26 September 2011.

[10]Interview, 29 September 2011. Another leader explicitly stated that one of his roles is to help residents with fires: 'Every second, every hour [people come to my door]. Gutters, fire outbreaks, the place has to be working or they will come to my door' (interview, 13 February 2012).

[11]Interview, 26 September 2011.

with extra money constructed two-storey buildings to accommodate more tenants. The landlords and community elders enforced these decisions informally. Perhaps more importantly, many residents with daily cash incomes from scrap dealing and private service operations took the lead and immediately started using cement blocks; neighbours then copied their actions. Many residents mentioned that there was no official authorization, but rather a new norm developed in the community. This third fire contributed to a new experiment in governance, in which landlords upgraded and expanded their properties while residents replaced wooden walls with concrete blocks, offering daily security and emotional stability.

Despite these often collectively inspired movements towards establishing permanency (see Makhulu 2015: 11), the episode also had an unintended consequence. Community leaders captured the rebuilding process, receiving valuable goods from the authorities, hoarding them and distributing them only to their own followers. This created new divisions in the community and deep distrust. One resident explained the personal nature of the distribution process, and how he felt left out: 'He [one of the leaders] brought all these things after the fire outbreak and he brought me nothing. He left me out. It hurt. I just couldn't understand or forget what happened.'[12] This was not the glorified 'economic collaboration among residents seemingly marginalized from and immiserated by urban life' – what AbdouMaliq Simone (2004a: 407) terms 'people as infrastructure'. Instead, the event provided new evidence for what many residents already believed: that the community had corrupt leaders who lived through institutional ambiguity in ways that benefited themselves.

Fire 4: The blaze and its aftermath

It was in this institutional context that residents experienced the May 2012 fire outbreak. The Ghana fire service was on hand to fight and eventually extinguish the fire, but the blaze left the empty space mentioned at the beginning of this article. The clean-up was swift and efficient. Young women filled containers with soot, while boys tried to salvage anything they could find, mostly copper wires and reusable tin. Hundreds of people waited around to see if they would be eligible to receive assistance, either from community leaders and politicians or from municipal authorities. Journalists began arriving en masse, and all the large radio stations sent reporters to cover the fire and its aftermath. Journalists wanted to dramatize a story in which only young women head porters lived in the community and were victims. They sought to craft a narrative of vulnerability and powerlessness among the residents. As one resident explained: 'They always do exceptional stories so that they can win awards. They only write if something terrible happens: a fire, violence, etc.'[13]

Community leaders publicly promoted this narrative as well. One leader estimated that 1,000 structures had been destroyed and more than 15,000 people

[12]Interview, 31 October 2011. Another leader took a considerable hit to his reputation after taking recovery items to his home town in the north and selling them to constituents there (interview, 14 April 2012).

[13]Interview, 26 September 2011.

'rendered homeless'. He chose this number based on his 'knowledge of the community', but it seemed unrealistically large. PD later estimated the number of victims to be 3,500 people (Owusu 2013). The leader prided himself as an expert on the community where he works, but even though he claimed to live there when he spoke on behalf of the community members in front of NGOs and to the media, he sleeps elsewhere. As a self-proclaimed human rights activist in the community, he knew that he needed to rush to the scene and document the fire. He used his mobile phone to call as many leaders in the community as he could: he wanted to make sure that he was noticed for his work and he wanted residents to see him 'showing concern'.

These strategies demonstrate the way in which leaders use these institutional resources for their own gain, amplifying an image of insecurity to the press while utilizing its value to advance their own careers. The residents' immediate reactions that day reflected diverse political opinions. One man panicked: 'How are we to vote? It burned our voter ID cards. They did this to us so that we don't vote.' Others feared that they would be displaced at a very important time: just before a competitive election. The outbreak occurred during campaign season both for the upcoming presidential election and for a closely contested parliamentary election. These fears dissipated over time, as residents responded to new forms of rebuilding in the neighbourhood.

The fire became more politicized as the recovery process continued. For the next month, leaders appealed to outsiders to give them resources such as cement, clothes and cash. One local chief painted his community as passive victims. 'We have nothing,' he said.[14] More notably, the fire provided an opportunity for politicians to visit the community. Politicians used the fire as a campaign event – a way to distribute patronage to their followers. They campaigned by 'showing concern' and made lists of potential followers to whom they could distribute relief items later. But this did not change the opinion of people in the community. 'They do not take us seriously,' one resident said.[15]

Three days after the fire, the spot where the blaze had occurred was entirely transformed into a construction site. Residents were building rapidly, and they were using cement blocks. Leaders were telling residents that they should not build wooden structures. If residents could not afford cement, they were advised to sell their plot. It was residents and local leaders rather than formal authorities who led the rebuilding process, with residents reconstructing their structures within guidelines established by their local leaders. New rules were drawn up as the fire gave leaders the opportunity to establish regulations and building codes; it gave the better-off residents opportunities to purchase structures and invest in the community; and it gave ordinary residents the chance to upgrade their homes. Contrary to the claims by scholars such as De Soto (2000) and others who emphasize the lack of rights, residents invested in their homes without individual property title deeds.

In many ways, this was a break from the past that redrew property relations. Using a phenomenological approach to institutions, we can see how those affected 'lived through' this process, reinterpreting the rules for their own benefit. This is

[14]Interview, 25 May 2012.
[15]Conversation, 21 May 2012.

what Lowe and Feldman call an entrepreneurial region, or a 'geographic space for bringing together individuals with different institutional interpretations – a space that builds power by encouraging the intersection of multiple institutional lives and thus contributes material for creative activities and action' (2017: 7). PD was quick to take credit for the reconstruction, going so far as to say that it had supervised and urged residents to rebuild with durable and concrete materials (Owusu 2013: 246). PD partnered with students from University College London (UCL) to raise funds and promote its image of supporting the community (Allen 2012), and it linked with international funders to attract resources and promote its international standing in the human rights community.

Residents and leaders on the ground to whom I spoke throughout the rebuilding process at the site told a different story. They did not think PD or OFADA played any meaningful role in the upgrading of homes,[16] or, if they had done, it had had no impact on their own decisions and motivations to reconstruct the local rules and norms of rebuilding, and in particular to use cement. In addition, they heard about supplies and relief but said that these supplies benefited only a small number of residents in the community who did not represent the community as a whole. Regardless of its actual impact, the fire outbreak gave PD the chance to re-engage with Old Fadama and reassert its presence in the community.

For ordinary residents, the rebuilding process was hard work and required substantial effort and 'everything [the victims] have' (Stewart 2007: 9). For example, one man had two rows of blocks. He could not afford any more blocks but he had to put something down to mark his territory; if not, other people would build on his spot. He needed to signal that he inhabited the place (*ibid.*: 15), providing security of tenure to those around him who might displace him and claim his territory. By marking out the space, the property would be secured. Even without official property title, residents creatively secured their housing plots: they built walls, set down stones, and aligned with their co-ethnic leaders. Residents had accumulated these skills because they had participated in everyday life in the institutionally ambiguous setting for many years; they had already developed 'skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on' (Berlant 2011: 8).

Residents upgraded their properties themselves, without support from politicians, bank loans or international aid agencies, just as some discussions of urban upgrading advocate (see, for example, Gulyani and Bassett 2007). In economic terms, they fulfilled Hayek's condition of local knowledge production, 'performing eminently useful functions based on special knowledge of circumstances of the fleeting moment not known to others' (1945: 522). In this case, the residents knew of the 'relevant changes and of the resources immediately available to them' (*ibid.*: 524), thus organically creating a new housing market.

Residents' cynical understanding of the disaster was based on their experience of previous fire outbreaks, especially the 2009 fire discussed above. Their sense that little help would be available was borne out by events. For example, the

[16]In fact, many local leaders had a deep distrust of PD because of its advocacy for temporary structures. In hindsight, many residents viewed this regulation as motivated by the financial interests of the organization. Whether this is in fact the case is unknown, but residents on the ground articulated this opinion.

government agency in charge of disaster management, the National Disaster Management Organization (NADMO), arrived and said it would return, but failed to do so during the reconstruction process. And if the process were to be left to politicians, they would prove to be unduly partisan in offering help. As one resident explained: 'You know, the way that this place works is that the politicians come to support their people. They do not share with everyone.'[17] The chair of OFADA, who was also the branch leader for the NDC, would receive the goods and share them with only a very small group of people. 'We have to do it ourselves,' the man said.

The fire shed light on the various alliances within the settlement, and showed that it was extremely divided. Members from the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) arrived on the scene four days after the blaze, when executive party representatives walked through the 'construction site', speaking to victims of the fire. They greeted only other NPP supporters, 'showing concern' to members of their party. One young man joked that the former mayor would not visit Old Fadama when he was in office, but that the campaign season had brought him back to the settlement.[18] The aspirant MP used the visit as a way to consolidate his organizing machinery, asking the residents to coordinate within their groups and to write down what they needed. He said the party would help in small ways.

The event also sparked a change in the way in which the MP viewed the community. He was impressed by the pace of reconstruction. 'This will make it much more difficult to move the people,' he whispered to me. 'It was much easier when the place was a shanty.'[19] Before the fire outbreak, he had never visited the settlement, but now felt 'compelled' to do so. While he walked around, he talked to his colleague. She mentioned that she had travelled to Thailand and had seen how they were upgrading slums. They were doing it within the slums themselves – in situ upgrading. From that point forward, the candidate started incorporating the idea of in situ slum upgrading into his proposals; his policy with regard to squatter settlements changed spontaneously as he walked through the neighbourhood.

This example demonstrates how politicians' opinions and strategies sometimes change in real time, and with no preconceived ideas about the basis on which to think about new policies. Paying attention to everyday life exposes the moment in real time – in this case when the candidate saw the permanent structure and then had a discussion with his colleague. Paul Stacey and Christian Lund describe the shifting relations between community organizations, politicians and city authorities in Old Fadama, highlighting the 'everyday negotiations and interpretations of social and political interactions between more and less powerful institutions' (2016: 610). In this case, the fire outbreak provided the impetus for a change of opinion among the decision makers who held significant sway over policy, creating the potential for long-term change in rules and norms.

As the fire demonstrates, rebuilding occurred within the hidden transcript. A resident confirmed that the government had not done anything, but that

[17]Interview, 24 May 2012.
[18]Conversation, 25 May 2012.
[19]Conversation, 24 May 2012.

'somebody from the north' had donated a large gift to help rebuild with concrete. Most residents, however, did not receive anything from politicians, despite their promises, and one woman said that the chiefs 'only share among themselves'. For example, politician Nii Lante Vanderpuye gave a few bags of used clothes for the fire victims; the political representative then dropped them near the house of the NDC branch leader.[20] The process was entirely organized by word of mouth and on a first come, first served basis. Because the leader was part of the majority ethnic group, no members of the minority groups were notified of the distribution of the clothes.

After five weeks, the area had been almost entirely rebuilt. People had moved in, roofs had been completed, and the only thing left to do on most of the houses were the final painting jobs and the windows. One house, already painted, had the name of the popular football club Asante Kotoko painted across the front, lending more evidence to Makhulu's claim that homes can represent ideals of dignity, autonomy and freedom (2015). This fire outbreak shows how rules and norms relating to property and tenure security changed. Delivering an exogenous shock to the status quo, it prompted spontaneous decisions to change the guidelines about building permanent structures. Natural, organic upgrading was at work, without the support of outside donors or politicians – the latter, in fact, only got in the way, fuelling distrust and resentment.

Residents articulated a new hope for the future: no longer would they be worried that their homes would be destroyed by fire. While they might still face demolitions by the authorities, numerous residents mentioned that the concrete structures would significantly improve their daily lives. For example, one man said that he would no longer worry about leaving for work in the morning, while a young woman said that she would be able to sleep soundly throughout the night. They took pride in their new homes, even though they lacked individual title deeds. Perhaps more importantly, upgrading the homes signalled to the authorities that the residents were there to stay. Over the course of the next few years, administrators and politicians tacitly accepted this new understanding of the inhabitants as residents of the city (Stacey and Lund 2016: 609).

All in all, the episode represented the most recent in a series of experiments in governance, showing how individuals shape institutional change by combining the resources available to them in daily life. The fire reshaped people's daily existence, as they upgraded their homes so that they would no longer be afraid of fire outbreaks, while young men and women built permanent homes, providing them with a new sense of ownership. In the process of reconstruction, this upgrading signalled to the authorities that the residents were there to stay: the settlement might be extralegal, but it was no longer temporary.

Conclusion

This article provides an empirical account of how people attempt to build permanence in a Ghanaian squatter settlement. Building permanence entails both a physical claim to the urban space one inhabits and a new existential state of being and

[20]Interview, 30 June 2012.

living in an environment that will last and remain unharmed. This refers both to the physical act of constructing a neighbourhood and to the emotional state of residents feeling more secure that they will be able to live in the environs without being harmed. This is not a legal or formal political claim; instead, building permanence serves as a form of emergent tenure security in African squatter settlements.[21]

This approach provides a complement to the liberal view of urban development that emphasizes the need for stronger property rights, as well as socio-economic rights (De Soto 2000; Fischer 2008). Rather than receiving formal title deeds from metropolitan authorities, or collectively making claims on the government or indigenous landowners, the process involved residents and leaders skilfully renegotiating their institutional environment after a fire outbreak. By drawing attention to the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat 2013), I show how institutional change involves the emotions, practices and opinions of residents and leaders in the context of everyday life. Fires in Old Fadama contributed to four successive experiments in governance and to the building of permanence, including the establishment of a temporary refuge that would need to be demolished, new claims to the state and city by previously marginalized migrant populations, the rebuilding of bigger and sturdier structures, and the assertion of stability amidst informality. These moments of crisis shifted the control and authority of urban space, contributing to emergent forms of tenure security in the city.

The findings have lessons for other squatter settlements across the continent, as well as implications for policies relating to sustainable urban development. Squatter settlements lack tenure security, because residents face either eviction threats from metropolitan governments, or lack of recognition undermining their ability to receive public services. The policies proposed to deal with this challenge emphasize formalizing tenure rights or investing in infrastructure. This article suggests that an alternative to strengthening tenure security might be found in the crises of everyday life, including fire outbreaks, when residents and leaders, responding to an emergency, create emergent rules and norms (Simone 2004b) in the process of building permanence.

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[21] Lawyers, activists and political organizations could draw on this to fight for in situ upgrading or adverse possession occupancy rights (Kohn 2016).

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Abstract

Fire outbreaks are common sources of anxiety and insecurity in informal settlements, but they can also provide new opportunities for claim making and governance of urban space. This article examines how a series of four fires in Accra, Ghana – three of which took place in its largest squatter settlement – offered new opportunities to experiment with governance, or a new way for residents

and leaders to imagine and construct the future. Empirically, I document how, in the process of reconstruction, residents redrew property lines and reshaped social relations. They did this through the emergent political action I call building permanence, or a physical claim to the urban space one inhabits, as well as a new existential state of being and living in environs that will last and remain unharmed. The article offers a possible way towards achieving more secure tenure beyond formalization and infrastructure upgrades, and focuses attention on how institutions change in the context of daily life after a moment of crisis.

Résumé

Les incendies sont des sources courantes d'anxiété et d'insécurité dans les peuplements informels, mais ils peuvent aussi offrir de nouvelles opportunités de revendication et de gouvernance de l'espace urbain. Cet article examine comment une série de quatre incendies à Accra au Ghana (dont trois survenus dans son plus grand quartier d'habitat spontané) a donné l'occasion d'expérimenter la gouvernance, ou un nouveau moyen pour les résidents et les dirigeants d'imaginer et de construire l'avenir. De manière empirique, l'auteur relate comment, lors du processus de reconstruction, les résidents ont redéfini les limites de propriété et refaçonné les rapports sociaux. Ils l'ont fait par le biais de l'action politique émergente que l'auteur appelle « construction de permanence », ou une revendication physique à l'espace urbain habité, ainsi qu'un nouvel état existentiel d'être et de vivre dans un cadre qui va durer et rester intact. Cet article offre une voie possible vers une plus grande sécurité foncière, au-delà de la formalisation et des améliorations infrastructurelles, et se concentre sur la manière dont les institutions évoluent dans le contexte de la vie quotidienne après un moment de crise.