(Dis)continuities in Scale, Scope and Complexities of the Space Economy: the Shopping Mall Experience in Ghana

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Abstract Contrary to common assumptions, the (re)emergence of organized shopping malls in Ghana is not a new development. Accounts of their existence date back to the pre-colonial era, when their character, status and operations were as popular as the malls of today. What is missing in current narratives is an analysis of how these malls—consisting of elegant apartment designs integrated with appreciable green spaces and centrally located food courts to entice visitors to lengthen their stay—impact the urban economy and the traditional retail structure. Using participant observation, semi-structured interviews and a survey, we examine the role of malls in the local economy and their possible ramifications on the retail structure. The paper interrogates whether the emerging malls can crowd out their seemingly 'fortified' informal predecessors. The results demonstrate two key findings. First, that positive outcome is intrinsically tied to the manner in which malls are conceptualized, especially with increasing trade liberalization and its reinvigorating impact on the informal retail structure. Our findings frame the continuity of the informal sector as important to the success of the malls. Second, that malls must respond positively to the rising demands and tastes of postmodern consumers and the middle class by investing in attractive, iconic architecture—or they risk being pushed out of business by the ever-growing activities of the informal retail sector. Our results are congruent with current literature that questions some of the conceptual and policy framings of informality, and we opine that such framing makes evident the sector's significant contribution to urban poverty alleviation.

Keywords Informal economy · Consumer behaviour · Space economy · Shopping mall experiences · Accra · Ghana

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Introduction

There is widespread agreement that the twentieth-first century city differs spatially from that of the mid-twentieth century and from the colonial city that preceded it (Beauregard and Haila 2000; Myers 2011; Pieterse 2011). The literature on globalization, particularly in reference to African cities, has documented the growth of multiple business nodes, peri-urban expansion and a phenomenal growth in urban informal settlements (Grant and Nijman 2004; Oteng-Ababio and Wrigley-Asante 2013). Some of this literature identifies recurring patterns and spatial fragmentation across diverse cities (Murray 2008). In some cases, the combined forces of globalization are often portrayed as resulting in a new city in the making (Simone 2004). These theorists typically emphasize the new, innovative and rapid transformation of urban environments in Africa.

The postmodernist perspectives on globalization and African cities highlight a disorderly city (Murray 2008), a fragmented, partitioned and much less legible urban environment than its modern precursor. Contemporary urban development takes place in contexts where global economic forces are more at play than ever before (surges in foreign investment, increased cross-border transactions and partially delocalized property markets with greater participation by members of the diaspora), and international forces are weakly buffered by the national state and/or municipal authorities (Grant 2015).

For some scholars of urban life, the hierarchical and “planned spaces of the modernist city are being replaced by a pastiche of unregulated spaces of the postmodern city” (Beauregard and Haila 2000, p. 23). The globalizing urban lens focuses on the growth of the city outwards, highlighting the new skyscrapers and attractive architectural new spaces and shopping centers that combine local and international confluences from the overpopulated urban traditional markets (Rogerson 1996; Oteng-Ababio 2014). In Ghana, the ongoing development within the ‘Airport City’ in the Accra Metropolis exemplifies this new paradigm (Oteng-Ababio 2014).

While a globalization lens on the emerging shopping malls has much to contribute in theorizing their new spatial features, it is on much shakier ground in understanding how these emerging complexities impact on the local economy, particularly on the informal retail structures. This is significant in situations where these traditional structures do not necessarily fit into the globalization narratives (Mitchell and Kirkup 2003). Consequently, the role of these informal activities vis-à-vis the (re)emerging shopping malls is overlooked and remains understudied, and the narratives of these diverse shopping malls have not been updated since the ushering in of globalizing forces. Indeed, understanding the emerging mall concept and general consumer behaviour in the current retail structure—and how the concept fits or does not fit into the city space economy—is over 50 years out of date.

In most African countries, economic geographers, urban planners and policymakers each tend to approach the city and its retail structure very differently. They focus on the modern architectural designs, the new foreign participants and their financial investments, the diversification of goods and the ensuing aggressive marketing strategies, but they are more cautious about their depictions of urban change. Scholars emphasize continuity in parts of the city as opposed to an across-the-board schism and complete ruptures with the past. Here, the layers of urban economic geographies and urban residential patterns laid out in earlier periods are altered, but change proceeds on top of, in addition to, and beyond these existing layers.

This perspective emphasizes the relatively fixed form of the older city, and abrupt transformation is buffered by continuities in the built environment and by the weight of urban historical development (Patel 2013). Some urban and economic geographers give special mention to the retail sector as an important and distinct area within the urban mosaic, although it is not studied in its own right (Owusu 2013). The contemporary city retail structure is not totally unrecognizable beside its earlier precursor, although this structure is always dynamic and never static (Rogerson 1995). Thus, urban continuity is highlighted as shaping how urban space economies function and how they fit and do not fit into the city beyond.

In this study, we argue that a middle ground more accurately describes the retail structure in most contemporary African cities. We are not convinced that the (re)emerging shopping malls can entirely replace the informal retail structure, nor are they an entirely new entity. We are acutely aware of the knowledge gap on the respective roles of both the new mall and its informal predecessor in the contemporary urban economy. We think that the current retail structure is somewhere in between, and it combines elements of continuity and discontinuity. We opine that there is a more complex patterning of old and new trends (forces) and of various combinations of these. We use the Accra Mall (hereafter, the Mall) as a vehicle to explore and highlight these dynamics and the ability of formal and informal sectors to reconfigure their activities, respond to a changed urban context and engage the city beyond. Our intent is to redress the imbalance in the literature by focusing attention away from architecture, internationalization and diversification, and towards how such transformations impact the local economy.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, after discussing the materials and methods for the study, we interrogate the historical perspective on the concept of malls in Accra and their re-emergence. Second, we provide an assessment of the Mall's scale, scope and complexities within the urban space economy and provide spatial contours of its influence. Third, we discuss the Mall's relationship with the informal retail structure and question whether the re-emergence of malls can stall the demise of the latter. Fourth, we discuss the issues raised by understanding the intricate transformation of the retail structure in general and consider how its elucidation should inform a more holistic approach to a sustainable urban management.

Materials and Methods

To achieve our objectives, we adopted a mixed-method approach to conduct a survey in and around the Accra Mall. This included semi-structured interviews with retail experts, managers and operators in the Mall and with the city authorities and public officials selected on availability. To examine the impact of the Mall on the urban structure and, perhaps, on the future, we relied on administered questionnaires with 2,000 primary shoppers between February and April 2014, of which 1,908 were retrieved for analysis (a response rate of 95.4 %). All the respondents were selected based on their willingness to partake in the study and thus constituted a convenience sample.

The information sought was detailed on the respondents' age, their origin and their purpose for being at the Mall. In addition, we also interviewed informal retailers around the Mall to understand how they use 'gray areas' and generic trade classifications to participate (compete) in the retail industry. We observed about 30 stall traders around the Mall, although at night over 100 traders set up on individually supplied tables, crates or boxes on the pavements along the road, providing convenient and affordable options for many residents who choose to shop at night. Mainly because of the similarity of responses, we conducted interviews with only 24 of these traders, most of whom were over the age of 20.

In general, the questions were aimed at encouraging 'storytelling' and inviting the interviewees to relate their personal experiences. In some cases, the interviews were conducted with the help of an interpreter. The textual data generated from the interviews and focus groups discussions were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings and, to a lesser degree, participant observation notes. The transcripts were manually analysed thematically, which helped in capturing the complexities of meanings within the textual data set and identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas.

Theoretical Background

Historical Perspective of Shopping Centers in Accra

A shopping center is simply a single building or collection of buildings containing multiple retail units (ICSC 2004). Strictly speaking, this can be either a wholly planned center developed all at once and owned and operated under a single management or a semi-cohesive shopping area that has evolved over time. Technically, shopping malls are usually enclosed, whereas shopping centere are open. Because most of the interest in urban studies regards the planned type, the former will receive most of the attention in our discussions. Earlier studies (Mitchell and Kirkup 2003; Valodia 2006) have indicated that mall development results in several benefits, particularly to consumers, including convenient location, large variety of goods offered, lower prices than small retailers and better quality of goods. Mitchell and Kirkup (2003) argue that retail development is a stimulator in the regeneration of physically, socially and economically neglected areas and can stimulate new social networks.

The literature on modern indoor retail spaces in Ghana indicates that the practice has existed in its major cities since the mid-twentieth century (Murillo 2012). An early indoor mall prototype was the Kingsway Departmental Store, which was built in 1929 by the United Africa Company, located on Accra High Street, and named after the company's headquarters in Africa House on the Kingsway in London. This subsidiary of the Anglo-Dutch firm Unilever was a shopping place to enable the colonial masters meet their consumption needs and maintain their home lifestyles in their 'adopted home'. The two-storey building with a full basement originally had shops located on all three levels, apparently in response to those seeking weather-protected, all-under-one-roof shopping. Significantly, it offered a link with overseas economies in the distribution and consumption of foreign products (Murillo 2012).

By 1950, with a growing indigenous literate population, Accra was to become the home of several major department stores, and this trend continued especially after the country's independence in 1957. Of great significance and national pride was the inauguration by the country's first President of a new Kingsway building at Kwame Nkrumah Avenue on 31 January 1957. Suffice it to add that, even at the time, Kingsway was more than just a place to shop but became part of everyday discourse in socially meaningful ways. For example, among the Ga women, well-behaved children were called "Kingsway babies" (Murillo 2012, p. 371).

An equally important retail company, of Swiss origin and dating back to 1921, was the Union Trading Company, founded as a subsidiary of the Basel Mission to promote missionary work in British West Africa (Dickson 1971). Another foreign-inspired department store, established in the middle 1920s, was Glamour, which eventually metamorphosed into the Melcom Group of Companies in the late 1980s. The department stores of the past were not without Ghanaian presence. The Ghana National Trading Corporation (GNTC) was fully government funded, established by an Executive Instrument (Statutory Corporations Act 1961) and inspired mainly by the then government pro-socialist policies.

However, the vibrancy of these department stores was seriously challenged in the 1980s, following years of economic decline and political instability. By the 1990s, earlier malls had discontinued operating owing to decreased traffic and tenancy, making the need for major reorganization evident. Indeed, during the Structural Adjustment Programme from the early 1980s and on through to 2000, some of the old malls, including Kingsway and GNTC, had to be remodelled into open-air shopping centres. Some studies indicate that some 'dead mall' estates had re-emerged by 2001, and there is now enough evidence to suggest a continued trend of re-emergence in the early twenty-first century (Grant 2009; Murillo 2012).

While the earlier malls were concentrated mainly in the Central Business District (CBD) of Accra, the rise of the suburbs and improved transportation culture in the twenty-first century seems to have given birth to the new malls' architectural and locational style, being created outside the CBD. Locating these malls away from the CBD, particularly the Accra Mall seems to have something in common with the US model of highway development with shopping centres located at the interchanges of these highways (Miller et al. 2008). These malls seem to be encouraged and incentivized by the growth of new developments in the urban fringe (Grant 2009; Gough and Yankson 2011). A second stimulus relates to the activities of real estate developers who tend to group properties together. Such developments generally shape and spread the familiar exurban landscape of malls.

Re-emergence of the Shopping Mall Concept

The literature on planned malls is not concentrated in one area of study but spread over a wide variety of disciplines and professions, depending on the object and method of inquiry. Economics and marketing texts view malls as mere loci of the retail trade (see Martin and Turley 2004), whereas architecture and real estate texts concentrate on the structures themselves and their values (see Jameson 2003). Scholars in urban and regional planning focus on the development process or the impacts that new developments may have on the existing urban structure (Jensen 2007; Marling et al. 2009), while those in the social sciences (geography, sociology) are primarily interested in the relationship between malls on one hand and behaviour and identity formation on the other, often making liberal use of concepts borrowed from postmodernist philosophy (Featherstone 1990, 2007).

This underscores the complexities of study in this area and perhaps explains the common misconception that all shopping malls are essentially the same. Indeed, this view is generally linked to the *déjà vu* attitude that accompanies visiting a particular mall whose layout, materials and even tenants are unnervingly similar to other centres—even if they happen to be in geographically separate economies. According to ICSC (2004), the distinguishing features of shopping malls have very little to do with the location within a particular country or a particular city, but much to do with factors such as physical size and morphology, orientation in terms of purpose, market niche and location in the urban fabric (urban center, out-of-town).

Within the last decade, Africa has witnessed an unprecedented mushrooming of shopping malls (Mitchell and Kirkup 2003). From Accra in the west, to Nairobi in the east, Casablanca in the north, and Lusaka in the south, trendy shopping malls have sprung up as the continent's cities modernize and its emergent middle class swells. The Gateway Shopping Centre in Durban (South Africa), officially opened in 2001 with a retail floor space area of 220,000 m^2, is both the largest mall in Africa and the largest in the southern hemisphere (Lighthelm 2002), and it receives over two million visitors monthly (FutureGrowth 2009). Morocco Mall in Casablanca was named as the second largest centre in Africa, with 200,000 m^2 of floor space (FutureGrowth 2009).

Accounting for the upsurge in the mall culture in Africa, Alwitt (1995) points to the increasing economic fortunes of the middle class. England and Rice (2012, para. 3) also endorse the "prosperity theory" and argue that "with more cash in their pockets, increasing numbers of Africans are looking to shop in modern centers rather than the small, rundown, poorly stocked, often informal stores that have been the norm in the past". Grant (2015) highlights how in recent years a number of decidedly upbeat economic examinations of leading African countries' performance and increased economic momentum have appeared, garnering positive pro-business assessments. For example, although in 2000 *The Economist* magazine had regrettably labelled Africa as "the hopeless continent", the same magazine in 2011 reported:

> African economies registered among the top ten fastest-growing economies in the world for the last decade (2001–2011) (Angola, 11.1 per cent; Nigeria, 8.9 per cent; Chad, 7.9 per cent; Mozambique, 7.9 per cent and Rwanda, 7.6 per cent) and the average African economy is forecasted to outpace its Asian counterparts over the next five years. (*The Economist* 2011a)

Africa future hopefuls had a massive endorsement from the World Bank, which believes Africa could be on the brink of an economic take-off much like the one China witnessed 30 years ago (The Economist 2011b). The bank sees as phenomenal Africa's ability to lure Wall-Mart, one of the largest US retail giants, to the continent in 2011 with a 2.4 billion USD deal to secure a majority holding in South Africa's Massmart. Economically, this reflects the strong growth the continent has enjoyed in recent years, with sub-Saharan Africa's gross domestic product expanding at an average annual rate of above 5 % throughout the economic crisis since 2008 (Owusu and Oteng-Ababio 2014). Massmart's chief executive puts it aptly:

> We think of ourselves as Wall-Mart's African investment vehicle …. I think the global economy has got so bad that there's a realization that with South America, India and Asia tapped… there's only one large billion-sized population left in the world, and that is Africa.

Similarly, some business stories have hyped Africa as the consumer market frontier. The fetished consumption that has enticed high-income earners to shop at symbolic and aesthetically pleasing places echoes the view that "consumers are reflexive individuals who consume signs to recreate individual identities which are not fixed, but rather 'self-images' of the moment" (Firat 1992, quoted in Burton 2002, p. 792). Africa today is lauded as "the final frontier" for investment and marketing opportunities, with South African companies establishing strong footholds. For example, it is revealed that Shoprite, Africa's largest retailer, currently operates in 17 countries, with 115 supermarkets outside South Africa, including Kinshasa in Congo (a country better known for conflict and crisis than malls). Furthermore, Woolworths, a Cape Town-based retailer, has plans to double the number of its stores across the continent to 104 in the next 2 to 3 years (England and Rice 2012). John Fraser, head of Woolworths' international division, further remarks:

> The expansion has been encouraged by the conscious effort African governments are making to diversify their economies away from dependence on resources…. The other thing that's happening for us is increasing urbanization in Africa… and a growing middle class, which is really our target customer (quoted in England and Rice 2012).

The Ghanaian urban space, particularly Accra, has been populated with shopping malls in recent years. These are either a collection of buildings containing multiple retail units, as in the Makola Mall, or simply a single building, as in the Mall, the subject of our analysis. Characteristically, these malls are planned, developed, owned and managed as a unit. Prospective retailers have to pay ground rent to a manager, who is also responsible for the collective good in areas such as parking, security, sanitation, upkeep and marketing.

Clearly, these emerging malls are far from being new concepts, as they reflect the continuity of the retail bazaars dating back to the pre-colonial period, as already discussed. The discontinuity, however, relates to their spatial locations, architectural designs and the 'product mix'. The twentieth century saw the advent of the arcade within the CBD, which was a pedestrianized shopping street that harbored all the major shopping centers. The modern shopping malls defy this spatially concentrated pattern, although the principle generally remains the same.

Results

Doing Business in Accra Shopping Mall: the Scale, Scope and Complexities

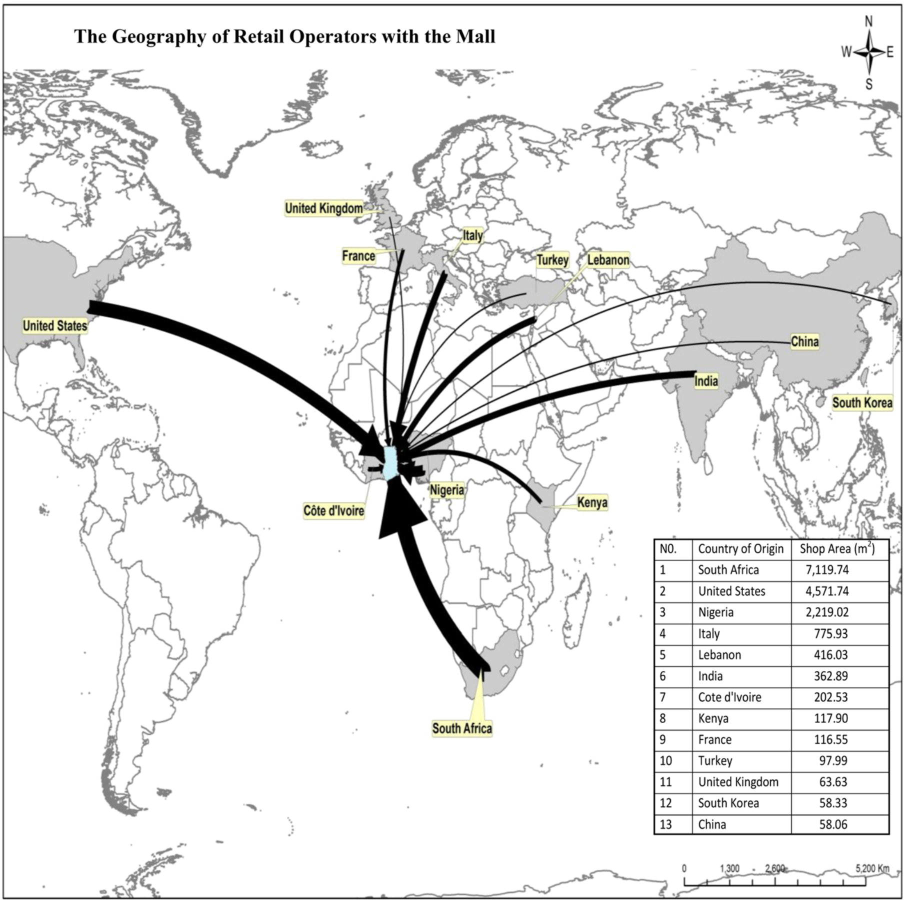
The Mall, located on the Tema Motorway, is one of the modern shopping malls in West Africa (Klutse 2008). Commissioned on 4 July 2008, the Mall has been a place of attraction because of its functional variety. This enclosed, fully air-conditioned mall has 20,000 m^2 of retail space.

The sheer number of international brands in the Mall (e.g. Panasonic, Puma, Bata, Payless, Swatch) as well as some African giants such as Game, Shoprite and Mr. Price, all engaged in the retail trade is striking. Despite being located outside the CBD, the Mall has become a noteworthy retail outlet, offering shoppers a choice of items ranging from imported consumer goods to banking services. It reflects a space that "inculcate[s] the tastes and identities of global consumer culture" (Voyce 2006, p. 273), with entertainment outlets such as Silverbird recently coming on stream. Thus making the Mall an example of a "shoppertainment complex" (Marks and Bezzoli 2001, p. 34). What is generally unknown is that approximately 37 foreign companies presently operate within the Mall (see Fig. 2), and it accounts for imports of goods valued at an estimated 8–12 million USD annually and for total daily sales of 150–220 thousand USD. On average, a total of 20,000 people visit the Mall on a daily basis (personal interview, March 2014) (Fig. 1).

In terms of the global presence in the Mall, Fig. 2 shows that companies from South Africa, the US and Nigeria are major players. South Africa and Nigeria dominate among the companies from the sub-region, while the US outnumbers those from outside Africa. From Europe, Italy, France and Turkey have a conspicuous representation, while South Korea and China also record an impressive presence. Regarding operating space, South Africa, the US and Nigeria are the three top countries in the league table. Shoprite operates as a central brokering node, importing retail goods through its international affiliates and redistributing them to its various mini-outlets in the city.

Locally, a number of companies, including those providing banking and communication services, have strong representation, targeting the higher income and business

Fig. 1 The Accra Mall. Source: Isaac K. Arthur, November 2014



NO.	Country of Origin	Shop Area (m^2)
1	South Africa	7,119.74
2	United States	4,571.74
3	Nigeria	2,219.02
4	Italy	775.93
5	Lebanon	416.03
6	India	362.89
7	Cote d'Ivoire	202.53
8	Kenya	117.90
9	France	116.55
10	Turkey	97.99
11	United Kingdom	63.63
12	South Korea	58.33
13	China	58.06

Fig. 2 The geography of retail operators with the Mall

community. Significantly, most of these companies are multinationals, having operated in Ghana since independence. Other local players concentrate on the entertainment and restaurant sectors. Our study revealed that the main challenge confronting local enterprises relates to the ground rent, quoted as 60 USD per square meter ($60/m^2). Consequently, the tenancy movements (flows) exhibit considerable variation over time and space, with some well-known companies like Frankies[1] being off the Mall's radar. We established that to reduce the cost of doing business, many retailers do not necessarily acquire a 'shop' but rent a stand(s) periodically for a particular purpose, including product promotion. There are also those who concentrate on fulfilling orders from clients, and they shop around for brokers willing to pay the highest price for a particular product being introduced into the market. Such companies serve as a link in the supply chains: local traders purchase low-cost goods and then re-sell them elsewhere.

[1] Frankie's Hotel and Restaurant is one of the most popular in the city of Accra, right on the popular "Oxford Street" of Osu, where life never sleeps. Its restaurant is open almost 24 h a day and widely known for its Ice Cream Parlour.

Fig. 3 Informal retailing activities around the Accra Mall. Source: Martin Oteng-Ababio, December 2014

Our study further established that it is not just the major international and local players that operate in the Mall; there is considerable evidence that a vibrant hive of informal activities has also emerged around the Mall as depicted in Fig. 3. Many of these informal traders generally operate as links in supply chains, procuring their goods from the wholesale outlets in the Mall and retailing them mainly at night at terms and conditions that suit their clients. This suggests that the informal traders and the Mall "do not exist in isolation, rather they interact and affect each other's development" (Rogerson 1995, p. 168). Significantly, our interviews uncovered the broad geographical origins and patterns of the retailer structure in the Mall. They revealed that the successful outcomes of the new mall concept (discontinuity) are dependent on burgeoning informal trading activities (continuity).

The taxi and *trotro*[2] (minibus) drivers, who operate according to 'turfs', readily come to mind, as do the typically side line activities such as the local restaurants (*chop bars*), vulcanizing shops, makeshifts stalls and hawkers, which target the low-income earners who work at or visit the Mall. Such informal activities have for a long time maintained the vast majority of the urban population, a subject on which extensive literature exists (Lindel 2010; Myers 2011; Obeng-Odoom 2011).

Accra Mall and the Space Economy

The Mall's impact on the city's geographical space may be very extensive, but our study can gauge only the number of visitors to the Mall on a daily basis. The Mall management estimates that approximately 18,900 people visit daily, but the number reaches 23,000 on weekends. The age distribution of the respondents is shown in Fig. 4.

The figure indicates that most of our respondents were youth within the 30-year and below cohort (constituting 59 % of respondents). Apart from the youth predominance, the result also shows they come from within and outside the Accra Metropolitan Assembly. In terms of regional distributions, Greater Accra recorded 92 % of the total respondents, while the rest are spread between Central (2 %) and Eastern regions,

[2] *Tro-tro* originated from a local (Ga) language "tro" which means three pence (pence being the penny) and a catch-all phrase for any public transport vehicle that is privately owned and can be hailed at points along its route. In the colonial days, the mass transit vehicle charged passengers three pence (coins used during the colonial days) per trip, and thus were referred to as "tro-tros", and the name have struck ever since.

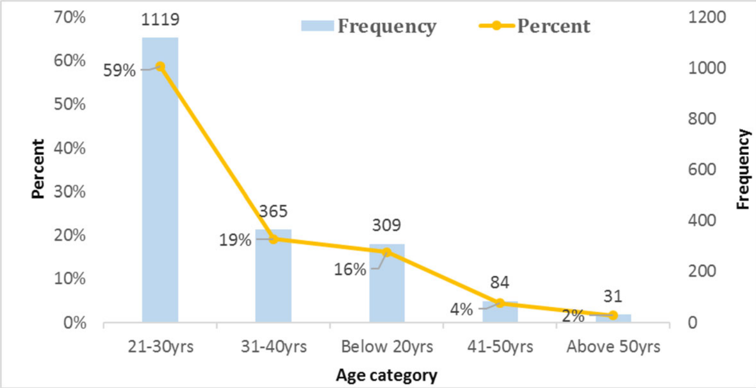


Fig. 4 The age distribution of respondents

Ashanti as well as Western registering 1 % each. The study recorded 3 % foreign presence, mainly from the West Africa sub-region. During interviews with the Mall management, it was revealed that between 10 and 15 organized shopping tourist groups from neighbouring communities and countries visit, and this echoes what Lofland (1998, p. 9) calls "a world of strangers", where individuals in co-presence are "personally unknown or only categorically known to one another". Whatever the real numbers are, the multitude of people converging on the Mall daily is phenomenal.

The sphere of influence of the Mall is highly unequal (more highly concentrated within the three nearby regions surrounding Greater Accra). Our results further show that, at the district level, Accra (the primary catchment area) experienced the greatest benefit. Thus, approximately 49 % of respondents typically travel within the metropolitan area, while Tema (14.3 %), Adenta (9.7 %), Ashiaman (4.4 %), and Ga-South (3.8 %) follow in that order (Fig. 5). Principally, these assemblies are within a 29-km radius of the Mall. That said, the study nonetheless captured 0.1 % respondents each from Obuasi (300 km), Ho (200 km) and Suhum Kraboa Kotaa (100 km) assemblies. We suspect this segment to be part of the 10–15 organized tourist groups who visit the Mall from the countryside and beyond on a daily basis.

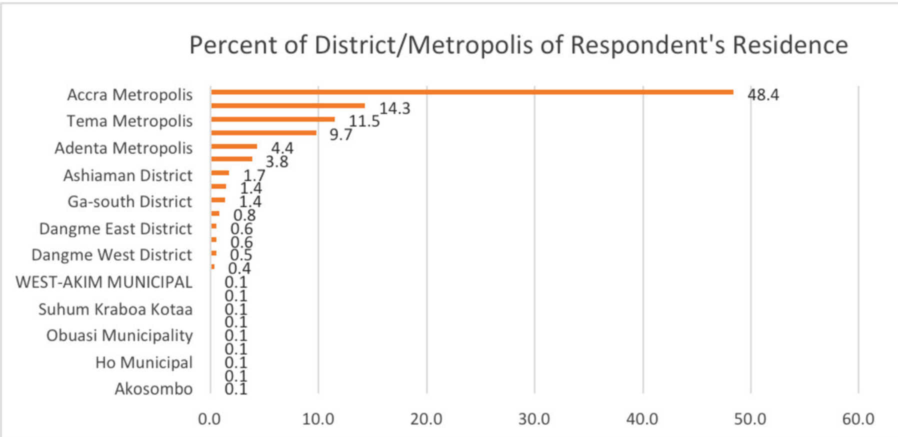


Fig. 5 Districts where respondents live

Turning to the purpose for visiting the Mall, we found that 51 % of the respondents visit the Mall for shopping, 21 % come to transact business (including informal meetings with friends and families) and 16 % come with an entertainment agenda. Table 1 outlines the various age cohorts of the respondents and their reasons for interfacing with the Mall.

The table shows that over 45 % of our respondents visit the Mall for reasons other than shopping per se. It was established, for example, that the youth make use of the entertainment facilities within the Mall because of the relatively reasonable prices of games compared with other places in Accra. By inference, the Mall encourages and facilitates social interaction among the citizenry for two main reasons:

- It contains several places where people can gather, sit, eat, talk, entertain or stand for socializing, where restaurants, entertainments sector, cinema and window shopping are the main activities people pay attention to.
- It has a pleasant atmosphere day and night during the whole year because of its air-conditioning, which creates a congenial environment for people to gather and socialize in.

Suffice it to add that the choice of a preferred shopping place is not a rational decision and based only on pricing but is based on a compromise satisfying economic, social and psychological needs, in which the perception of being respected and recognized plays a major role (Alwitt 1995). In addition, the concept of buying 'international brands' is usually revered by the youth, and brands from the US and UK are perceived to be of greater quality than local brands. The relatively high representation of adults (above age 50) engaged in shopping is not surprising, as most pensioners, for example, know that the money they spend on any product has to be well spent and they therefore prefer to buy trusted and well-known brands.

Surprisingly, approximately 30 % of the operators in the Mall expressed preference and support for the informal trading and questioned whether the formal sector alone can provide the needed employment for the teeming unemployed youth in Accra. A middle-aged interviewee summarized the situation:

> It's important to note that the informal sector is not only the domain of the urban poor. Many middle-class people greatly benefit from the economic activities

Table 1 Respondents' age category and reasons for visiting the Mall

Age cohort/purpose	Business	Entertainment	Restaurant	Shopping	Other
Below 20	51	65	10	147	36
21–30	230	196	35	561	97
31–40	89	41	7	203	25
41–50	21	10	2	46	5
Above 50	6	4	0	17	4
Grand total	397	316	54	974	167

carried on outside the formal sectors. It serves as a mode of urban transformation for many places.

Despite its seemingly large sphere of influence, we have no independent way of determining the Mall's contribution to the overall urban economy. However, checks with the Ghana Revenue Authority indicate that ten shops operating in the Mall generated thousands of Ghana cedis in state sale tax revenue since 2012 (see Table 2).

In addition, the Mall's related employment accounted for approximately 800 jobs in 2013, an increase of 190 % from 275 jobs in 2010 (personal interview with the Mall's manager, 2014). Apart from the monetary contribution to the economy, 167 of our respondents indicated that they use the Mall for other purposes. For example, during the fieldwork a respondent confessed: "I sometimes use the parking lots of shopping malls; it is free and safe, and close to my destination [private office near the Mall]". We also observed on many occasions during the fieldwork situations that elderly couples visit the Mall just for a walk, perhaps owing to the safe and serene atmosphere it provides.

From the foregoing, the Mall's economic space qualities within the city (and beyond) have become apparent. According to Gehl (2007), such a space in an urban setting serves three vital functions: as meeting place, market place and connection of space. Our results demonstrate that, as a meeting place, the Mall is the scene for exchange of social information of all kinds. As marketplace, it serves as a venue for exchange of goods and services. And finally, the Mall provides access to connections between all the functions of the city—the wholesale and retail chains. In this sense, the Mall has become an additional niche for the better-financed and the so-called business tycoons in society, who use it to perpetuate their business interests (Miriam 2008).

Discussions: Are Shopping Malls Sweeping Away Informal Retail Activities?

Our study sought to establish not only the role of the new malls in the local economy but also their possible ramifications on the traditional retail structures. In other words,

Table 2 Sales tax revenue generated from ten sampled shops operating in the Mall

TIN number	Taxpayer name	2012	2013	2014
C0002098636	Accra Mall Pharmacy Limited	8,704.34	107,193.69	38,702.39
C000285421X	Consolidated Franchises Gh. Ltd	165,970.19	422,897.58	161,179.50
C0003628280	Decorland (Gh) Ltd	29,370.18	96,306.75	169,606.83
C0002854406	Enda Foods	47,601.33	74,882.73	150,388.52
C0003395499	Fast Forward Investment Gh. Ltd	–	–	4,000.00
C0001489232	Galaxxxy Prefumery Ltd	–	–	51,432.49
C0002854805	Master Meats Gh. Ltd	72,489.31	293,818.11	146,987.50
C0002854937	Palace Home Décor Ltd	6,109.08	75,022.18	90,275.05
C0002855143	Silverbird Entertainment Gh. Ltd	191,732.95	93,159.73	138,130.62
C0003643638	Vasore Forex Bureau	95,866.48	46,579.87	69,065.31

we questioned whether the emerging malls can crowd out their already 'fortified' predecessors. We noted that high land prices in cities have discontinued the lateral spread of markets and popularized 'vertical malls', in which spaces for retailing are configured over a number of storeys accessible by elevators and/or escalators, making malls an integral part of the economic and social fabric of their communities. Similarly, we counted approximately 30 stalls and more than 100 traders using make-shifts stalls and individually supplied tables, crates and boxes during the night, providing a convenient and affordable option for many residents. Characteristically, the infrastructure provision in the informal sector is in most cases extremely poor—such areas are neither properly cleaned nor is there access to water, electricity or sanitation services. Demand for space has resulted in a large number of traders sitting on the pavements along the road, causing irritating traffic congestion particularly during rush hour.

We noted a thriving informal trade that has organically emerged around the Mall and heavily dependent on the traffic of shoppers, a phenomenon also observed by Rogerson (1995) in Johannesburg's inner city. We also established a direct link between the Mall and the informal retail activities, especially among the operators of mobile phones and food vendors. Significantly, most of these informal markets source their wares from the wholesale outlets within the Mall and offer more convenient trading hours or credit facilities to their clientele. Their operations, which extend way beyond midnight, attract customers not only among the working middle class who cannot brave the day traffic to visit the Mall from their working places but also those from the countryside who travel at night to buy at wholesale prices to re-sell in their respective communities during the day.

During our interactions, about two thirds of our interviewees who indicated had no other income apart from what they do revealed that although the Mall, by its architectural design and operations, has recreated the complexity and vitality of the urban experience without the noise, dirt and at times confusion, its continuous survival is very much anchored on the continuous operations of the informal sector. A cloth seller remarked:

> The Mall has helped in exposing us to customers from various parts of the city who cannot visit the Mall in the day... We now do not only retail goods; others also buy in bulk from us. Today, many of us get goods on credit from the Mall once you are seen as trustworthy. Indeed, we sell most of their imports for them in the night, and my family live off what I make here.

A nearby 'bubbling and bustling' 24-h lorry station (courtesy of the Mall) has designated stands for food vendors. These vendors constantly strive to offer meal combinations at affordable prices and the opportunity for their clients to make preferred choices (combinations of food). A food vendor remarked:

> Even though my initial target market was the trotro drivers, workers of the Mall now represent a sizable proportion. They patronize my food because it is customer-friendly and very affordable. We also provide a one-stop food joint for the many young guys who visit the Mall especially on public holidays and this is how I survive.

With regard to members' relationship with the city authorities, one elderly woman among the focus group discussants reported sadly:

> This is my fulltime job and I started selling here when the area was very undeveloped. There were no threats of eviction. It is an irony that those of us doing petty trading for survival are being accused of disrupting the customer base of the Mall, which is firmly established. I think that the debate should be not about regulation versus deregulation as such, but rather about the optimal design and implementation of labour regulations in country- and time-specific contexts.

Highlighting the importance of the informal sector, the chairperson of a newly formed transport union at the station remarked:

> The growth of the informal sector is nourished by the influx of migrants from the region's surrounding agglomerations. With the formal sector unable to accommodate such large numbers, the informal sector becomes the primary source of employment. Without the economic opportunities generated by such activities, the poor would certainly become larger burdens for the urban authorities. Indeed, this is how about 60 % of residents of Accra survive.

Suffice it to say that although earlier studies (see Chung and Palop-Casado 2001) alleged that malls tend to force smaller shops out of business and thus create unemployment in the city, our study points to the contrary. Indeed, our result agrees with what Crawford (2002, p. 24) terms "urbanity and publicness," with shopping malls becoming a part of daily urban life as multifunctional urban public spaces, financed largely by international investors and very popular with shoppers from the emerging middle class. Yet, at the same time, our research shows hidden interconnections between the Mall and the surrounding informal markets and even some citywide multi-storey shops. We established that there is no one retail structure per se but multiple (diverse) retail activities that are interconnected in the urban space economy. There are several feed streams, and for some companies, operating from the Mall is a significant opportunity that allows uninterrupted circulation within the entire urban space.

Concluding Remarks

Our study demonstrates that the economic success of the emerging malls in Accra has primarily more to do with informal retail continuities. To put it another way, factors located geographically, economically and politically outside the corridors of the Mall can impact what happens inside it. Continuity in this context has another dimension: the relationship between the Mall and its formal 'retail outlets' within the city beyond is still mediated by informal distribution outlets. It is therefore essential to maintain multiple perspectives on the Mall and traditional retail activities simultaneously, although the vitality and viability of these sectors remain subjects for further research.

We concede the difficulty in ascertaining the Mall's overall influence on the periphery. However, we have presented enough evidence to show that apart from the

Mall's generating taxes and employment, the informal retailing activities around it are major sources of livelihood and a potentially significant contributor to the alleviation of urban poverty. We see some level of mutualism in the Mall's operations and the emerging retail activities, which contradicts the traditional frameworks for understanding urban retail structure (Wilson et al. 1981). The new scenario does not fit neatly into the core–periphery dyad, but rather it illustrates how informal retail activities are linked to global markets and finance in ways that have been invisible to urban policy makers in the past.

Faced with many hurdles, including the exploding popularity of informality in general—employing about 80 % of the working population in the country (Osei-Boateng and Ampratum 2011)—and the perceived urban blight, city authorities have the responsibility to ensure that the malls do not run the risk of emptying. Managers of the Mall should also seek new solutions to generate the needed traffic. The current issue facing malls in the Western hemisphere was highlighted by Foley and Jopson (2013), which reported that almost 200 out of 1,300 malls across the US are going out of business.

The continuity of the mall concept is not in disrepute, but recent dynamics have compelled developers to discontinue their traditional modus operandi and promote brand interaction and enhanced architectural appeal (Evans 2013). Critical to the success of the Mall is the need to attract a number of compatible retailers. There is therefore the need to design elegant apartments which include appreciable green spaces and create a centrally located food court consisting of various fast-food restaurants to entice visitors to lengthen their stay. This will provide a space for postmodern consumers to broaden their experience with a wide range of goods and services (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Carù and Cova 2003).

The Mall needs to embark on a new market orientation, targeting specific consumers and using multiple channels, including the informal sector. Operators may also take advantage of the growing usage of information technologies to provide remote shopping experiences, whereby their clients can enjoy services delivered to their doorsteps without having to leave their residences (Burton 2002). As stated earlier, the interface with informal retail activities will be a key element in the success of the Mall. It is already known that the Mall has expanded its influence and reaches both into and out of the city, mediated by the informal retail system. What remains unknown is what the cost of this dynamic will be in the future? Adopting a communicative approach in future planning processes can help resolve the dilemma, since Accra is not immune to what Comaroff and Comaroff (2006, p. 3) called the "triumphal spread of neoliberal capitalism". In other words, local knowledge should be taken into consideration in future planning. We can only assume that the current pattern will continue and Accra's public space quality will become more important. The existing malls will have to regenerate themselves to compete and to increase the overall quality of the urban experience.

Ultimately, our findings call for new urban theories that fully explain the phenomena of urban informality—a phenomenon almost absent from current theories such as the urban ecology of the Chicago school (Park et al. 1925) and the postmodernist urbanism of the Los Angeles School (Davis 1985; Soja 1989), both of which are rooted in cities in developed countries. We do not intend to 'preach' that malls are without drawbacks. Such inherent externalities are not the preserve of developing countries like Ghana alone. However, environmentally, there is evidence to the effect that the Mall creates intense noise, air pollution and traffic congestion, a point succinctly articulate by Addae-Bosompra (2009). The increasingly uncontrolled informal trading activities, coupled with ineffective management of sanitation by the metropolitan authorities have also left the streets, pavements and other open spaces around the mall posing serious environmental risks, not only for the occupants of the mall but visitors alike. Additionally, the supposed greenfield around the Mall has been consumed by a large asphalted car parking corridor and unauthorized commercial car park. This undermines the liveability of the area, especially its green open space, and minimizes the possibility of developing other urban experiential land use activities. We suggest in conclusion that although malls have their pros and cons, the industry has proved that when well planned, implemented and monitored, its advantages far outweigh its disadvantages, and therefore city authorities as well as planners must strive to consider these externalities in the planning process.

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