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**Desecration of Public Monuments and Places:
The Causes and Solutions**

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Desecration of Public Monuments and Places: The Causes and Solutions

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Abstract

The monuments and public spaces of Accra have become the platforms, or rather, notice boards of advertisement companies, churches, politicians to mention but few. This is gradually turning them into monumental junkyards which leave visitors to the country with the first impression of a country where the citizenry are indisciplined and lawless. This is because unlike in the developed countries where perpetrators of such acts use graffiti and artworks which are very difficult to trace to the culprits for fear of prosecution, the direct opposite is what happens in Ghana. The offenders here boldly display their faces and contact addresses. In their desperation, some districts have resorted to painting some of the monuments with the national colours to prohibit the manace. This research was undertaken to understand the problem and find solutions to it. A mixed-methods research approach was used to collect and analyse information for the study. The findings indicate that ignorance, non-enforcement of by-laws and improper planning of the city are the major causes of the problem. It is recommended that plans of the city must be redesigned to provide adequate spaces for advertisement. This must go with strict enforcement of the by-laws to stop the nuisance.

Keywords: Desecration, Monuments, Public spaces.

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The Problem

National monuments, infrastructure and public places of Accra have lately been turned into billboards or rather monumental junkyards by advertising companies, religious organizations and disgruntled individuals who want to put certain messages across. The present research aimed at understanding why the culprits behave the way they do. This is because unlike in the developed world where such deviancies are frowned upon and the perpetrators punished, these offenses seem to go unpunished in Ghana and thus serve as sources of stimulus that reinforces the antisocial behavior. As a result, the irritating activities are gradually creating the impression that Ghana is a lawless country where the citizenry do whatever they like. Frantic efforts by some city officials to prevent the situation from escalating further in the past have not yielded many positive results. There is therefore a need to undertake a research that would come out with findings which would help find pragmatic and innovative solutions to the problem. The question to answer is: to what extent is the desecration and vandalism of public monuments and places due to ignorance, disrespect of laws governing such places and the non-enforcement of the laws? In order to answer the question the following objectives have been set for the study.

Objectives

- To find out the types of individuals, social groups and organisations involved in the defacing and vandalism of public monuments and places.
- To find out the extent of destruction caused to the monuments and places in Accra.
- To ascertain the motives behind the actions of the perpetrators.
- To examine the extent of ignorance of the culprits about the laws governing such monuments and places.
- To investigate the level of enforcement of the laws protecting such assets.
- To make recommendations to address the problem.

Location and Size of the Study Area

The study area designated as the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA), shares its eastern boundary with the Dangme West District while the western boundary is the Central Region. The northern border is the Eastern Region while the south is occupied by the Atlantic Ocean. The area ranges from longitude 0°5" east to longitude 0°30" west and the south to north extent ranges from latitude 5°29" north and latitude 5°52" north. The area covers approximately 1520 square kilometers (Ministry of Local Government et al., 1992) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Map of the Study Area*



Source: Survey Data, 2016.

Research Methodology and Design

The nature of this research problem is such that if not stopped quickly, it may destroy not only most of our national monuments but also mar the image of the country in the eyes of the international community. As a result of this, an approach rooted in pragmatism and mixed methods research was used in the collection of data, analysis, presentation and discussion of the research findings so as to get the issues resolved speedily.

A mixed methods design was adopted for this research because it was considered to be the ideal means of acquiring comprehensive data within a short period of time to find a lasting solution to the research problem. One may ask, why a mixed methods design? This is because in reality, most social research inadvertently involves every now-and-then, drawing on inductive and deductive research methods, tools and techniques-a process known as abductive reasoning to achieve the study objectives. Therefore the mixed methods research design used in this study was thought to be the ideal method for finding wide-ranging answers to the research questions (Creswell, 2003; Morgan, 2007). Furthermore, the mixed methods research design is advantageous because it enables qualitative and quantitative research techniques to be flexibly used to achieve the aims and objectives of the research (Morgan, 2007).

The research tools used for the study include semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, observations and photography. The semi-structured

interviews largely generated quantitative data whereas the in-depth interviews and observations that formed the basis of the qualitative data. The method's complementary attributes enabled quantitative techniques to be used for generalizations when qualitative techniques become unsuitable for such purposes. On the other hand, qualitative data become desirable when there is a need to present pronouncements verbatim and unedited in order to enable readers to get better understanding of the research participants' sentiments and concerns (Rossman and Wilson, 1985).

Sampling Procedure and Data Collection

The data was collected to understand the underlying causes of vandalism and desecration of public monuments and places. In order to identify the culprits of the vandalism, the most important monuments and public spaces in Accra were visited and pictures of the materials that impinge upon the beauty of the assets were taken. The materials were supposed to give clues to who the perpetrators were for onward interrogation of them to know the reasons behind their acts.

First, the affected edifices were categorized into two main types: Monuments (infrastructures like flyovers, overpasses, footbridges, high voltage transformers, light poles, bus stop canopies etc) and open spaces (especially at road intersections, social event avenues, lorry parks etc.). Second, a list was compiled of the affected national assets throughout the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA). Third, a simple random sampling technique was used to select ten (10) of the affected structures and places for the research. Thereafter, five (5) impinging posters/adverts with contact telephone numbers were randomly selected from each of the ten (10) desecrated sites for interviewing. Thus a total of twenty (50) offending respondents were interviewed for the study (see Table 1). In addition, ten (10) stakeholders, comprising public services officials, opinion leaders and foreigners who were willing to participate in the study were interviewed to throw more light on the issue and to make suggestions for solving the problem.

Table 1. *Sample Sizes of the Selected Sites*

| No | Name of Monument/ Public Space | Sample Size |
|----|--|-------------|
| 1 | Tetteh Quarshie/Shangrila, Thomas Sankara Interchanges | 5 |
| 2 | Atomic Junction Overhead/pass | 5 |
| 3 | Madina Zongo Junction/Footbridges | 5 |
| 4 | Ofankor Junction | 5 |
| 5 | Kwame Nkrumah Circle Interchange | 5 |
| 6 | Ashiaman/East Legon Motorway Underpasses | 5 |
| 7 | Achimota, Tesano, Ofankor Overhead | 5 |
| 8 | Achimota, Dzorwulo, 37 Overhead | 5 |
| 9 | Mallam Junction/Overpass | 5 |
| 10 | Teshie-Nungua-Tema Junction | 5 |
| | Population (Total) | 50 |

Source: Survey Data, 2016.

Data Analysis

The data collected during the field survey were analysed using the Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS). Simple cross tabulations, descriptive and inferential statistics were also used in the analysis of the results. In addition, some of the comments and remarks made by the stakeholders and opinion leaders were transcribed and quoted to support some of the quantitative results of the survey.

Literature Review

The literature review of this research has been structured in a way to make understanding the findings easier for the reader.

Definitions

According to the New South Wales Acts (2010), a public place or space refers to an area which is either covered or not by water and is open to the public. It does not matter whether or not payment of money is required before one can access the place. The constitution of Ghana has similar connotations about such places and spaces. Thus this research uses the terms in a similar fashion.

The Pennsylvania General Assembly (2008) refers to the desecrating and vandalising of public places and monuments as the physical abuse of such assets in a way that the perpetrator is aware will infuriate the deep feelings of persons likely to watch or find out the results of their acts. Rasmusen (1998) has similar sentiments when he analysed the economics of desecration and states that when an object of reverence is desecrated, the offender gets benefits while other people, especially those who cherish that object incur costs. The question to ask is, do the actions of those who desecrate, deface and vandalise national assets in Ghana offend the sensibilities of those who observe or later on discover their exploits?

The Oxford English Dictionary (2015) defines vandalism as “action involving deliberate destruction of or damage to public or private property”. According to Ceccato and Haining (2005), vandalism could be said to have occurred when another person or the public’s property is damaged, destroyed or mutilated. That is when the property is disfigured in any form without the approval of the caretaker or owner (Donnermeyer and Howard, 1981). One of the reasons of carrying out the present research is to ascertain whether the culprits have been seeking permission from the owners/caretakers of the assets they deface, desecrate or put graffiti on.

Motives

Various reasons have been given for why people resort to desecration, disfigurement and damage of public spaces, monuments and assets. Autry (2012) asserts that some of the destruction of monuments is a way of expressing contempt for some of the monuments. Part of the reasons for undertaking this research is to find out why some of the acts committed against the monuments are done in Ghana. Could they be different from why such acts are committed in other countries? It is only when we know the reasons that we would be able to find a lasting solution to the problem.

Perry (2002) also notes that some of the desecrations of both private and public assets occur during civil unrests and rioting. These could be as a result of the expression of anger or civil discontentment against the way political issues are handled. Idowu (2010) also contends that during elections, opposing party supporters may vandalise their opponents' posters in order to have advantage over them. In some cases such vandalism serves as a tool for intimidating others which in case are not punished could encourage the behavior and motivate others to imitate them. Only few acts of vandalism result in prosecution (Aguirre, 1994).

This is exactly the situation in Ghana thus the need for a research like the present one in order to provide empirical baseline data on the issue for future research.

Branch (2016) comes out with a similar categorisation of the motives of those who desecrate public places and monuments. She asserts that such vandalism could be as a result of celebration where people because of over exuberance, feel like climbing, decorating or doing all manner of things to monuments to beef up their festive moods and those of others. According to Branch (2016), some people also vandalise public assets in order to seek attention, revenge against the objects, random attacks or because such objects just happen to be at locations where many people with social problems gather.

Examples of Desecration

There are numerous examples of vandalism of public monuments and places. These include destruction of lawns, avenue trees, hurling of all manner of objects at monuments, littering, painting, polluting of the area and so on. Even though most of the materials used in defacing the monuments and places could not remain over a long period of time, they could cause permanent damage to the monuments (Branch, 2016). It is worthy to note that the focus of this research is limited to only adverts and inscriptions that mar the beauty of public monuments and places in Ghana.

Reactions and Solutions

Vandalism of public monuments and spaces impinge upon the sensibilities of those who observe or discover them. As a result, some countries impose

severe sanctions on offenders. Penalties could range from caning, fines and/or a prison term up to 3 years in Singapore (Branch, 2016). One of the questions this research endeavoured to answer is what are the penalties for these offenses in Ghana...are they deterrent enough?

According to Hopkins (1991), the burning of the US flag under certain circumstances is regarded and protected as a political protest whereas under certain conditions, the act would be sanctioned by prosecution as seditious libel. Is this the reason why the desecrators avoid defacing the monuments painted with the national colours in Ghana? Armstrong legal (2016), also states that in New South Wales, destruction or desecration of public places and monuments could attract a suspended sentence, community service order, bond of good behaviour, fine, or acquittal. Penalty units are used to determine the amount that is to be paid per fine. Presently one penalty unit is equal to \$110. This puts the maximum penalty for an offence of 4 penalty units at 4 x \$110 equals \$440 (Armstrong legal, 2016).

Another solution prescribed by Branch (2016) is that owners of such monuments should be encouraged to have regular checks on them to ensure that they are well protected. Owners are advised not to neglect such sites and assets because the culprits often take advantage of neglects like leaving the place weedy, damages not repaired on time etc. to vandalise the assets. The question to ask in the case of Ghana is: who are those responsible for ensuring that such monuments and places are protected and well kept? Why are they not able to prevent the assets from being vandalized? This research has been designed to answer these questions and more in order to find lasting solutions to the problem.

Major Findings

The following section a presentation on the major findings of the study. The major responses to the research questions form part of the presentation. In trying to identify those who are responsible for the acts of vandalism perpetrated against national monuments in Accra, photographs were taken of the posters displayed at the 10 sample areas for analysis. The result showed that 80% of those involved in the act between December, 2015 and April, 2016 were charismatic churches, 10% were private educational institutions, 5% traditional spiritualists and 5% individuals, some of whom are suspected to be fraudsters. It is heartening to know that the majority of the offenders are charismatic churches and private educational institutions who can be easily contacted and educated to understand why they should desist from such acts.

When interrogating why those who deface and vandalise public assets behave the way they do, over 90% of the offenders said they engage in the deviant activities because they need to advertise their products and services for people to patronize them. This is in line with Rasmusens (1998) assertion that the desecrators derive benefits from their acts. It becomes clear that the churches, educational institutions and politicians get clients and patronage from

doing what they do. The research findings also revealed that those who suffer are the tax payers who are every now and then made to pay higher taxes in order to restore the assets or build new ones to replace those damaged by acts of vandalism. Thus it is the taxpayers, the general public and the silent majority of the citizenry whose sensibilities and resources get abused as a result of the antisocial acts. When asked why they put multiple posters at one spot, the most popular response was to get the maximum public attention. They admitted that by so doing they deprive other competitors space on the platform to detract people's attention away from their messages. Even though there was an indication of intense competition among the offenders, the majority of the respondents (80%) who are charismatic churches, denied the suggestion. This is how one pastor of an offending church puts it: *we are not in competition with any other church. In fact, we Christians are supposed to complement each others' activities because we serve the same God and use the same holy book...the bible* (interview with Pastor Evans, 2015). But when the question was asked, then why did you not let others get space on the platform? The response was: *we have to be visible*. Then that is competition? I asked. He answered: *well, let us take it like that*. Further probe into the matter indicates that, it is the errand boys and girls whose duty is to paste the posters who have adopted that style of putting posters on the monuments. Pastor Evans of Anonymous International Church further explained that:

We would have wished that the errand boys/girls spread the posters over a wide area across the city, but some of those we send to do the posting think it is better to put multiple posters at specific places to make a bigger impact. They also claim that by so doing they save a lot of money during the course of executing their duties. We are aware that the practice is annoying to a section of the general public but we need to win souls for God (interview with Pastor Evans, 2015).

The research findings clearly show that the sensibilities of those who observe or later on find out the activities of the miscreants are offended by the acts. Over 98% of the general public interview near the multiple posters about what they think about the way posters are put on the public monuments express their anger and disgust at the way the poster are destroying the beauty of the assets. One thing was clear in their responses...they are helpless in dealing with the situation and do not know who to contact to stop the menace (see Figures 2).

Figure 2. *Samples of Multiple Adverts that are Annoying to the Public*



Source: Survey Data, 2016.

There is no doubt that the motives behind the desecration of monuments and public places vary. Even though the majority (80%) of the perpetrators (mainly churches) said they only advertise for people to patronize their products and services, there are some of the respondents who claimed that they do so either to intimidate/coerce the public into their desired actions or to send strong messages to the government. This category of offenders is a minority (5%). In addition, a small number of the posters (5%) have with no doubt been posted by fraudsters whose intention is to lure unsuspecting people to defraud.

When such fraudulent people were contacted during this study they either terminated the conversation or demanded consultation fees payable by mobile money transfers before they could proceed with the conversation. This category of advertisement includes those advertising solutions to a gamut of problems; easy loans for workers, students and the general public etc. (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Example of Adverts from Spiritualists Claiming they are Capable of Doing Supernatural Things*



Source: Survey Data, 2016.

As part of the research objectives, an assessment was made about the extent of damage caused by the activities of those who deface the monuments. Apart from the visual intrusion, the majority of the assets, especially the metallic ones like foot bridges have undergone extensive rusting as a result of the moisture that the posters collect unto the structures' surfaces. In addition, some of the surfaces of the concrete structures also have extensive corrosion or pigmentation at the portions covered by the posters and inscriptions of the culprits (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Rusting and Deterioration Partly Due to the Placement of Posters on Footbridges*



Source: Survey Data, 2016.

Apart from the damages done to the monuments, a lot of the advertisements and billboards placed at public places/spaces have become a nuisance to motorists and the general public. They have been dangerously placed without any consultation with experts and the city authorities and thus have become the most conspicuous items that obstruct the views of drivers and pedestrians at road intersections and junctions. Examples of these include posters on high voltage transformers (at times covering the ventilation parts of the systems) and even on road signs (see Figure 5). This is what the Structural Engineer of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly said about the issue:

Most of the posters and billboards, especially those you see on footbridges are unauthorized. They do not have permits. There is a procedure to be followed and permit fees paid before such things are allowed in Accra. There is a taskforce which goes round to demolish those illegal signboards...the owners are prosecuted and fined but we have a serious problem with the small posters. They are so many across the city. We are

understaffed to tackle the issue...we are really overwhelmed by the problem (interview with AMA Structural Engineer, 2016).

Figure 5. *A High Voltage Transformer Covered by Campaign Posters of the President of the Republic and a Road Sign Which has been Turned into a Billboard*



Source: Survey Data, 2016.

Questions were also asked to determine the level of awareness of the culprits about the laws that they breach by their activities. When asked whether they know that what they were doing is against the laws protecting public assets, it became clear that over 90% of them were ignorant of the laws governing such monuments and spaces. When asked “do you know that your actions contravene Ghana laws? This is what one of the churches’ advertisers had to say:

What laws are you talking about? All that I know is that people have been advertising on the structures and that is why we have also decided to put our posters on them. I personally always warn our members not to put the posters on private properties and walls with inscriptions “Post No Bill”...why? Because I know we can be prosecuted (interview with Bishop Pontus, 2016).

This is the response that echoed throughout the majority of the answers to the above question. In fact, over 90% of the respondents did not even know that they were doing anything wrong. Only 10% of the offenders were aware that their actions could land them in court. This percentage of the offenders indicated that they avoid posting their adverts on structures painted in the national colours and others with inscriptions such as “Post No bill” for fear of being prosecuted in law courts (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Sankara Overpass Covered in National Colours to Prevent Desecration*



Source: Survey Data, 2016.

This could be one of the reasons why the Canadian High Commission in Ghana asked artists from one of the deprived communities in Accra (Nima) to put beautiful artworks on their fence wall to fend off the desecrators (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. *The Canadian High Commission Fence Wall: An Innovative Way of Fending off Property Desecrators*



Source: Survey Data, 2016.

There is a lot of work to be done to create awareness about the laws protecting monuments and public places in Ghana. This is what the Former Legal Director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said about the issue:

I wonder if we have any specific laws in the constitution about the issue. Ignorance of the law could be attributed to the fact that the constitution is not very specific/clear about what happens to people who deface national

assets. It is the District Assemblies who have been mandated to protect such assets with their by-laws. However, most of the assemblies do not even have the by-laws to control the nuisance. Thus education of the citizenry about these by-laws has been very low, if not none existent...we have not gotten our priorities right (Former Legal Director of the EPA, 2016).

The research findings indicate that apart from the demolition of illegal structures erected at unauthorized public spaces and the seldom prosecution of the offenders, most of the adverts and notices that destroy the beauty of monuments are simply removed, without any form of penalty. When the police was contacted about why they do not arrest and prosecute the offenders, they supported the view that it is the District Assemblies who have been mandated to take care and manage such public assets. According to them somebody has to report the perpetrators to them first before they can take action. This is what one officer said:

The processes in the law courts are such that we can only arrest the culprits if the custodians of the public assets and concerned citizen of the country lodge complaints to us about the issue. They must also be willing to testify in court. This is often not done by good spirited people because of the lengthy court procedures and the costs involved in seeing such cases to their final end...we assist the assemblies and individuals when they request for our assistance (interview with Chief Inspector Wugo, 2016).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the present research indicate that there is a lot of work to be done in order to prevent the national infrastructure, monuments and public places from being turned into disgusting billboards and junkyards. The distribution of the problem areas across the entire city is a source of worry because not only do they create the impression of a nation where the citizenry are lawless, but they are also sources of potential hazards and dangers to the populace. It became clear that ignorance, lack of by-laws and the non-enforcement of the laws by the District Assemblies is a major underlying cause of the problem. The question to ask is how can the problems of this grey area in urban planning and management be addressed in Ghana?

The fact that ignorance came out clearly as the main cause of the problem, there is a need for an extensive civic education about the laws and by-laws governing behaviours and practices in the country. This will help prevent most of the antisocial behaviours within the country. In addition, the way the city of Accra has been planned seemed to have not provided adequate spaces and platforms for advertisements. There is therefore a need to rethink the planning of the city. Furthermore, there is a need to enact new by-laws and update/amend old ones to address current trends of activities in the country.

These new laws must actively engage the services and assistance of the police in ensuring that antisocial behaviours are nipped in the bud. Penalties for offenders should be fashioned along the lines of Singapore (Branch, 2016) and penalty units prescribed as in the New South Wales laws (Armstrong Legal, 2016). Another solution could be, as suggested by Branch (2016), that owners of such monuments should be encouraged to have regular checks on them to ensure that they are well protected. The owners must not neglect the assets because if they are well kept like in the case of the Canadian High Commission, that will deter the culprits from taking advantage of neglects to desecrate them.

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