

Verah Okeyo ~ Low-Cost Housing Seen As Answer To Urban Housing Problems



K É A house in Mlolongo built using the Expanded Polystyrene (EPS) panels. Photo| Verah Okeyo

In 2011, the UN-Habitat estimated that African cities will become home to over 40,000 people and the shortage of housing an unattainable dream for most households.

With an urban population growth at 4.2 per cent annually, Nairobi alone requires at least 120,000 new housing units annually to meet demand, yet only 35,000 homes are built, leaving the housing deficit growing by 85,000 units every year. Coupled with the acute shortages, is the rising number of issues that any aspiring homeowner or institution seeking to set up facilities has to confront: HassConsult Real Estate's 2015 report indicated a steep climb in land prices and ownership processes in Nairobi.

Read more: <http://www.nation.co.ke/Low-cost-housing>

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Stories From Ghanaian Emigrants. Contents & Introduction



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Introduction

Why this book? It all started with Kwame Baffoe, the guy who only wept once. Kwame was the hospital driver at the time that I worked as a tropical doctor at

Nkoranza Hospital. One day Baffoe disappeared. After two weeks his relatives came to ask for his end of service benefit. I was then the medical director as well as the administrator and I had to say No, he vacated his post so sorry, no. But where for God's sake is Baffoe? They silently left. This was in the mid-eighties.

Between 1994 and 1996 I studied in Chicago. When I returned to Ghana afterwards, to look after the children living at our community and be the mental health coordinator for the region, I needed, among others, a car and a driver as my job meant a lot of traveling up and down. So I bought a car and then, then I met up with Kwame Baffoe again! He was driving his own minibus for public transport and looked the same as always, included the half smile and the twinkle in his eyes. I asked: 'Can you help? Drive me to Sunyani when I need to? Which is often'? 'Yes', he said.

Baffoe has never been a man of many words. That's how we met again after more than ten years and, many words or not, one day he told me his story. How he traveled and when he returned to his country Ghana. I was impressed especially since he told me his story the way you and I would talk about a trip to the supermarket. Facts, not emotions.

One day last year, when I had some leisure time, I decided to interview Baffoe more thoroughly so as to document his experiences. He agreed readily. So did thirteen other persons here in Nkoranza. It became a passion, almost an addiction, to hear these stories and write them down meticulously. All these interviewees became my friends and we keep meeting in town.

I did these interviews between August and September 2006 and found all of them, not one excluded, exciting enough to write them down. I could have done hundreds more but I was saturated. My admiration for the tenacious and often also hilarious Ghanaian spirit, which is already high, had risen tremendously by listening to these stories. Then one by one they came to me and asked: where is the book? Didn't you say you would put our interviews in a book? Yes, I said, that's what I said! Whooooops!

I started searching on the internet and mailed the Tropical Institute Publishers in Amsterdam. Nice, they said, but no, we publish themes, not individual stories. Try Rozenberg. I looked up Rozenberg, of which there are many, but I found Rozenberg Publishers in Amsterdam and I wrote, Are you interested?□

'Send me a story or two'. I did that, immediately. Thank God, by the way, for computers! I could hardly breathe waiting for his reply. 'Breathe', the guy from Rozenberg said, 'in the long run that is better for your health'. Then this: 'Hmm, these stories need to be read! Let's go for them.'

And so it happened! Here is the book! Even if you only browse through some stories you might still catch some of that tough great spirit of Ghana! But I'm almost sure you'll read the book from cover to cover. Do, but keep breathing, remember?

I dedicate this book to Samuel Kwame Baffo, my loyal friend whose voice you hear in the chapter alluded to 'A scar reminds me of the day I wept' and to Bob, my dear husband, my muse and my editor! And thanks to you too, Auke!

This is non-fiction.

Many of these friends walk around in Nkoranza. Some live overseas but come regularly to Ghana to visit and if possible financially help their family.

All the life-stories that I listened to with my tape-recorder and all my heart are written down almost verbatim. Some repetitive parts have been omitted and sometimes I had to translate the local language into English. From all the names only those in one story have been changed, otherwise the people interviewed preferred to be called by their own names. Good for them!

From the Preface

It all started with Kwame Baffoe, the guy who 'only wept once'.

Kwame was the hospital driver at the time that I worked in Nkoranza Hospital as tropical doctor. One day Baffoe disappeared. After two weeks his relatives came to ask for his end of service benefit. I was then the medical director as well as the administrator and I had to say 'no, he vacated his post. Sorry no entitlements when someone walks out and does not return within ten days. Trade Union agreement. But where is Baffoe?' They smiled silently and left. This was in the mid-eighties.

I returned to Nkoranza after studies in Chicago and, apart from caring for my mentally handicapped children, I had received the appointment from the Ministry of Health to be regional mental health director in our regional capital, Sunyani. This meant a lot of travel up and down. I bought a car and then ...I saw Baffoe! It might have been 1997. He was operating his minibus as a taxi and looked well,

the same half-smile plus now a tiny little belly. I asked him 'Can you help me? Drive me to Sunyani any time I need to? Which is often?' 'Yes', he said. Baffoe is not a man of many words.

That's how we met again and, many words or not, one day he told me his story. How and where he traveled and how and when he returned to his country Ghana. I was impressed, flabbergasted is the more appropriate term maybe, especially since he told me the story the way you talk about a shopping trip at the supermarket. Facts, not emotions.

I felt the topic of his 'end of service benefit' still hanging in the air. And yes a few days later he asked me why I withheld 'his money' when he left for Libya. I told him that I did what I thought was right and that it was not 'his money' but 'the hospital's money'. 'Okay', he said. 'Now, older, and after understanding all that you went through, I might have been milder', I said, which is true. 'No, you are right. Okay'. Speaking about it after so many years settled the issue so the case was closed.

In my dreams his hazardous travel stories kept following me and one day last year, when I had some more leisure time, I decided to interview him once again and to document his experiences. He agreed readily. So did thirteen other persons here in Nkoranza. It became a passion, almost an addiction, to hear these stories and write them down metaculously. All these interviewees became my friends and we keep meeting in town. I could have done hundreds more of these interviews but to everything there is a natural end.

About the author:

The former Dutch tropical doctor *Ineke Bosman* once had a very special dream: the creation of a safe and loving place to live for intellectually (and often multiple) disabled children in Ghana. These children are still undervalued and abandoned, among others as a result of the widely spread fear for "evil spirits".

By founding the *Hand in Hand Community* in Nkoranza in 1992, Ineke Bosman was able to make her dream a visible and unique reality. Ineke retired in 2009 and left for Holland. Since then Albert van Galen, together with his wife Jeannette, has taken over the leadership of this wonderful community.

See also: <http://www.operationhandinhand.nl/>

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ The Good Samaritan Who Follows Where The Money Is. Interview With Owusu Agyeman



I am Owusu Agyeman and I come from from Akropong in the Nkoranza district. I live here in Nkoranza town where I have my well known Ash-foam business. I sell pillows and mattresses. As you may know, my father is a chief.

I decided to go to Libya because there is no work in Ghana. Let me correct myself and say it this way: there is work in Ghana but it doesn't fetch any money. Take farming for example. I may use two million Cedis to prepare and sow the land and when I harvest my corn I may get 1,5 million in return. What does it mean? It means I lost. I have lost money because the market prices are bad. That is why I went abroad, to get enough money to start a business in Ghana.

At the time when I left Ghana I was no longer a young boy, I was thirty eight years old and had a wife and three children. My wife agreed that I should go in order to provide for the family. So then we had to prepare for such a journey which is both costly and dangerous. Danger is everywhere along the way but the walking, which we call footing, through the desert, that is the greatest risk! I will tell you the story of my journey. I started here in Nkoranza in Ghana and traveled in an ordinary lorry to the border at Bawku.

I then took a car across the border to Burkino Faso and then on to Mali. Finally I went deep into Niger where you reach the desert and then another chapter starts! Those days when I traveled there, there was no such thing as group transport with Ghanaians all the way to Libya. Not at that time. Now that has changed.

Africans need no visa on the West-African continent so I had all I needed which was my passport, my vaccination card and enough money. The last one is the hardest! At border crossings I of course never tell my real plans of going to Libya for they would send me right back. So at the Ghana border I say I go to Burkina Faso to work and from Burkina Faso I say I go to work at Mali. I have a profession. I am a mechanic. So that's what I say: I am going to work there as a mechanic. Once in Mali they ask me where I am going and I say to Niamey in Niger. I went to Niamey and then to the second biggest city which is called Agadez. I did all this with ordinary local passenger cars. It is at Agadez that the story changes!

Here you have reached the desert. Here we sit and rest along the roadside and we wait. We wait for other people who are on their way to Libya. Once there are enough people to fill a car then you go across the desert. The cars are land-cruisers, pick-ups.

Niger is a poorer country than Ghana, no jobs. There are men there in Agadez who make a living out of assembling people and organizing a car for them. There are other men who make it their job to cross the desert with us and bring us to Libya. Two of these men sit in the cabin in front and all of us travelers are packed in the back of the pickup. In my case they took us, 90 to 100 persons, into two cars. At that time, 1997, they let us pay 20,000 CFA, which is about 50 dollar per person. We were packed like maize bags, sometimes they even got more than 50 people in one land-cruiser.

Once your pick-up is filled you drive straight into the sand, there is no road. The driver finds his way by spotting old tires which are placed here and there along the trek. A tire indicates 'straight on' when it is parallel to the direction of the car, it means bend left or right when it is put on an angle.

On and on you drive and finally you reach the 'Hogar-mountain'. Cars cannot cross the 'Hogar' because of the rocks and ravines. That is the end of your ride. Then you have to walk and climb all the way over those mountains and again walk for one or two weeks before you reach Libya. The land-cruisers have left you already, they return for a new load of passengers.

The most dangerous point in the journey is the crossing of Mount Hogar itself. First of all therefore you have to gather strength and so you sleep at the foot of

the mountain. Very early before dawn the next day you take your portion of gari with shito which is your daily food. You drink some water. Then you start climbing towards the top of the Hogar. Climbing the rocks is dangerous. In my time four guys died instantly, they were Nigerians. Nigerians don't know how to persist. Passing over the rocky trail you walk alone and follow the one before you. You step exactly the way the one before you puts his feet and if you are lucky you reach the top. Many also fall in rifts and die. At the top of the mountain there is a man who reaches out and takes your hand and pulls you up.

Then when the last man has arrived you all sit on the mountaintop. No one speaks because of tiredness. You eat. You are silent. Everybody strictly looks after his own food. You can't have much because you can't carry it. It would not even fit in the car with all these fifty people sitting on top of each other. I may say it is like slave-trade, such cars. With water you have the same problem. Each man has one gourd of water, which means you drink only one cup a day. If you drink more you die, for the journey is three weeks and you have one gallon of water. It is simple mathematics. After having made it over the mountain you just sit there. Now you have eaten and you rest. You look and you see all that sand of the desert before you, nothing else but sand. This is like an endless beach without the sea and you have to cross that sand by foot.

Some want to go back but the car has already turned back to Agadez. They load us off the way they do with bags of maize or rice. So you go with your gari, your shito and your little water. I tell you it is a fasting journey. If you are not lucky you perish on the mountain for there are big ridges and if you slip into one of them than that is the end of you. Now follows the second trial, which is to cross that sand. If you run out of water you die.

Of our group about twenty percent were Nigerians. They are not as strong as we for they don't farm and have not known adversity. Often you find them complaining and they are the ones that perish. There were also five women with us, all wanting to work in Libya. Furthermore some people from Mali, Chad and Niger. However most of the people crossing the desert are Ghanaians. All the women were Ghanaians, they go for prostitution jobs.

Yes the desert journey is hard. During our journey, beside those who died on the Hogar, four other Nigerians died in the desert from thirst. They had mismanaged their water. We, the Nkoranza boys, are strong and so we all keep silent and we walk. You walk till maybe nine in the evening and then you sleep for two or three

hours and then you just have to get up and walk again.

We have guides, they are from Niger. They are supposed to know the desert. You know why many of us also die? Because some of the guides are not really guides and they mislead us so that we keep on roaming aimlessly in the desert. On the way going I saw a nice boy here, a nice lady there, a nice man here. All dead, fresh dead. They missed the way and perished from thirst.

But one night you walk and you suddenly see lights. They are from the most southern town in Libya, called Gut. How relieved you are then! In that City with the lights there is a car waiting for you. You just walk towards that town and you are sure to avoid any border post and suddenly you are inside Libya. Sometimes people weep because they have made it. They are there! In Gut you take a car to Saba. The roads are now tarred and you can rest. After Saba you either go to Tripoli or to Benghazi.

I went to Benghazi. This is the better city for all their police are out to arrest you in Tripoli but not in other towns. Libya is rich. Everywhere there are airports but of course we lack money so we travel by road. A car ride is cheap for petrol costs next to nothing. Not only petrol but everything is cheap in Libya. If you do well you can get free food from the Libyans because they like people from Ghana and they trust us. They don't give food or jobs to Nigerians.

This is what happens. They call you: 'Al' Hadji, come! Do you want food, yes?" They give you. They give you blankets, food, everything. They have much more money than Bulgarians in Europe, a country where I also went.

From my group eight people died and I met nine fresh dead bodies of people who lost their way in the desert from other groups.

So once in Saba I went straight to Benghazi and I had it all right. I did not suffer much. They speak some English in that town because it used to be the capital of Libya, before Tripoli became the capital.

Every morning I saw plenty of our Ghana-boys, all grouped together, with wheelbarrows, ready to be hired for work. You know so many different people run that country and work there. There are Lebanese, Syrians, Iranians and Kuwaitis, Pakistani and Bangladeshi and Israelis too. The Jews pretend to be Lebanese for Al-Qathafi does not tolerate people of Israel and kills them all. The Israelis are spies for America says Al-Qathafi, that's why he kills them. Al-Qathafi also does not tolerate Christians in Libya but he won't kill them. You can't worship in Libya, unless underground.

So when you arrive and, like me, you are lucky to have a profession, you can work with a company. Otherwise you wait to be hired to work by day or by hour. I told you about all my Ghanaian brothers being ready in the morning with their wheel barrels. They all assemble under some steel bridges and roofs and stand there, waiting to be called. My people are always called first because in Libya they know that we from Ghana are hard working. We can be called to wash a car, cut the lawn, do their underwear. Anything. You can be asked to clean a house for two hours and get 20 Dinars. You go back and wait again till you are called: 'Wash the curtains', another 30 Dinars. In a day you can earn 50 Dinar or more if you are lucky. They may give you a meal as well.

The next day you wait again after you had a nice bath and your breakfast. You stand so that the Libyans come for you. They ask: 'Are you from Ghana?' If you say yes they take you. If you say no, Nigeria, they ignore you. The Libyans don't work at all, that's why there is much work for us. That is the life for us, except for those like me who work in the big companies.

I was employed at an international company, which was run by foreigners such as Koreans, Lebanese and Egyptians. Actually, there is so much money in Libya that no Libyan works at all. They take us blacks as their laborers. I was lucky for they took me as a foreman and I got a car and a bungalow. Each month I earned 300 dollars. Mostly I was in my car, driving from one place to the next. I practically lived in the car! My company used to send me to Algeria, to Morocco and to Egypt, to Sudan and Somalia and to Bulgaria. As a works-foreman I had to go anywhere where there was a mechanic job to be done. I tried to cross to Europe. I traveled to Bulgaria by air but they repatriated me to Libya again. At that time there was a free trade zone between Libya and Bulgaria and that is how many Ghanaians then went into Europe.

From our group seventy percent were 'by day' workers and the others got employment at a company. More than half of all the strangers are Ghanaians. If Libyans are nice at all they are only nice to us. Nigerians are hated, they are known for their cocaine.

The ladies, do you know their job?

I can take two ladies to Libya and have them sleep in a room. I wash and dress up well and eat and then I go out and stand on the street. Some Egyptian or a Lebanese will ask 'How much?' I have her picture. They look. They say: 'That one.

How much?' The Syrians are the best clients.

You negotiate like on the market. I say: 'My brother, come here, look at the women, the pictures, how much?' He may give an amount. You may spend some time bargaining. When you sleep twice with the same woman you have to pay more, you pay 20 Dinars. The customer comes to her house and then the woman herself also bargains. She says: 'No. 50 Dinar'. 'No no 20 Dinar', says the man. So maybe the amount will be 30 Dinar. He sleeps with her for two hours and has to go. The owner of the lady collects the money. At the end of the day they will make accounts. The lady lives in the house with the man. Often these ladies are also married with these men.

Most women go to Libya in search for a job although they are warned about it and know that they will end up in prostitution. They know and they don't know. They want to go to Libya in order to go on to Italy. But before you can do that you need money and you don't have that money. The girls have one way to make money which is prostitution. After that they sometimes escape and go to Europe. Sometimes women are tricked into prostitution by the men. The mature ones know that. A lady is alone and you take her as your wife so she is protected. You say to each other that after all the job is only during the day and in the night you sleep with your partner together like man and wife. There is no jealousy, it is all about money. If you take three ladies to Libya you will sell two to others and you stay with one. You don't stay with two. Prostitution is all over the world anyway. The same in Kenya, in America, in Amsterdam and in Accra. It is not so strange. Prostitution in Ghana by the way has no money in it. A rich man doesn't pick up a girl from the street. Why would he, he can get as many girlfriends as he wants. The poor guy can't afford anything so at most the girl gets a present for the sex.

All this goes on. The work is hard and the reason for it all is to bring money home. When I was there I would not think of loneliness or of my wife and children. No, you have work to do which is to make money. If a man gets lonely he can get a lady or if you are a lady you can get a man, if not a Ghanaian than maybe a Nigerian or someone from Chad.

More than our family we may miss our drinking together! These Islamic countries don't allow drink and you get kicked out or imprisoned if they catch you. However we have ways... we make our own gin! The Ghanaians do that. We know how to do that, distilling in large steel barrels. We distill from millet with sugar and then we all sit somewhere hidden and we drink and get happy. The Libyans don't, they

can't drink. Oh maybe secretly they do but they don't know how to make the drink. We keep it our secret.

I stayed three years in Libya and then returned to Ghana. My coming back to Ghana was caused by a friend who had suffered an accident. He broke both legs. I had to see that he came back to Ghana for I felt responsible for him. I took my friend in a car all the way to Egypt because at that time there were sanctions on Libya and you could not fly from Tripoli to Ghana. I had a hard time with the man because both legs were broken and he suffered but eventually we reached the airport in Egypt. Then straight on a flight to Accra. I would not have come home if my brother had not had that accident, so I guess the 'good Samaritans work' brought me back to Ghana.

I was lucky to meet a German at Ghana Airport who saw me struggling with my friend and his broken legs! He helped us into a taxi and found admission in 39, the best hospital in Accra. My brother recovered well. Eventually we returned to Nkoranza together. And guess what! That that same man went away again to Libya! This time he made it on the boat sailing across to Italy. Alas I think you heard of it he was one of the four Ghanaians who died at sea because of the boat accident. It happened some years ago. Four Nkoranza boys drowned when that boat capsized. The funeral was terrible and lasted for weeks. One was from Nana Gyema Stores, one from Fiema, one from Akropong and one from Nkoranza-town here. In the meantime the wife is married again. We are survivors! Crying does not work well for us.

I have been to Nigeria too before going to Libya. That was the time that Nigeria got petrol, in 1970. Suddenly they sent us all back, by boat and by car and by whatever way. Many died on the way because of the overcrowding and the violence.

I also worked in Sierra Leone and other places and yes I will go again, I cannot sit still and I want to explore the world. I'm always feeling around where the good places are. Japan is good for us now but Europe is not good anymore, The Netherlands especially bad. We like the UK and Japan and the USA. If you have some money you always get a visa, always. If you can show 10,000 or 20,000 euro you can go to Holland for a shopping trip and everywhere else too.

Only terrorism has become a problem for us now. I will not go to Libya again. Too many workers and not enough work. Fewer people now go to Libya, unless they

already have the money for the boat to Italy. Then... straight to Europe!

I like traveling, that is part of it too. I have a good business here, however. Still if I had enough money then I would take up farming also. Farming without having to depend on nature. I would start an irrigation project and grow tomatoes in the dry season. That is where the money is, have you seen it? I like adventure and I go where the money is.

The Postman Only Had To Ring Once



What a [beautiful public love letter](#) to an art that appears to be lost, but not quite. This writer, sharing his thoughts with who knows who, also longs for the intimacy of the exchange of words between two. What strikes me most about this essay are the words: “The day I lost one of J.’s illustrated postcards in the subway on my way home, I was as distraught as I would be now if

my hard disk crashed.”

No, I would not say like “my hard disk” crashing. Not that at all. That least of all. That is an anxiety unique to this age of data-exchange, the reduction of all words, whether committed to hard-drive with care or hastily-strung-together, to an assemblage of giga-bytes. That feeling is equivalent to the boss berating you for losing an “important document”, no matter how important to you this hard-drive may be.

I have kept letters that are close to my heart, letters that mark milestones in my life and recollect those in the lives of those for whom I care, those who I remember, whether or not they remember me. I have lost some of these, in the jumble of our “modern” state of statelessness, placelessness. With each loss I

knew I had lost a marker. Not that the object itself was a loss it itself. It was a loss because it has meaning in and of itself. The words, which were written with care and thought, sometimes in friendship, at times in love, are irreplaceable in a way that a hard-drive could never be. Letters brought more than news, or, rather, they defined a notion of news that many no longer regard as relevant. The postman only had to ring once.

Dropping these fragments in the subway would mean losing a piece of the dialogue that once existed, a fragment that could not have been spoken in words, and which cannot ever be committed to memory in the way that we can store passwords to social media sites, the literary equivalent of fifty shades of grey. Not even the spoken word can “reveal” itself in the immediacy of dialogue. We need to filter the maelstrom of spoken intonations, throw away thoughts, carelessly aimed barbs, fluff. In other words, we need to “process”, in the pseudo lingo of the day, as if the spoken word is something to receive like a legal brief, rather than to share in a collective act of interpretation.

So perhaps it is not only the written word that is fading, the medium for committing our most intimate thoughts. With that loss we risk losing the art of listening, rather than merely hearing as one does in a noisy room. We have turned listening into hearing, the ear into a portal to matter, and that extraordinary matter into a measurement of our relative sanity. Who has not heard the claim that we use perhaps 12-15% of our brains, “on average”? What better measure of our language of median lines. In this age of brain science thought, itself is losing its tragic quality, as we learn that the biological organ with which we think is also the locus of our deepest emotions, and we again take refuge in “spirit” to quell a fear inspired by our eternal finitude. Hang onto those letters and postcards. The brain has a sell-by date. The words it shapes into a personal declaration between two people do not.

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sustainablecitiescollective ~ Four Lessons From Beijing And Shanghai Show How China's Cities Can Curb Car Congestion



Photo:

sustainablecitiescollective.com -

Photo by Alan Sheffield/Flickr

Although Beijing, China has struggled in previous years to adopt strong transport demand management (TDM) strategies, the city is now looking to expand its TDM policies to combat growing car ownership.

A century of car-centric urban development has left our cities polluted, congested and searching for sustainable solutions. Transport Demand Management (TDM) strategies can provide these solutions by combining public policy and private sector innovation to reverse over-reliance on private cars. The Moving Beyond Cars series—exclusive to TheCityFix and WRI Insights—offers a global tour of TDM solutions in Brazil, China, India and Mexico, providing lessons in how cities can curb car culture to make sustainable transport a reality.

As China's GDP has grown, so has the number of cars on its roads. From 2008 to 2010, the country's vehicle ownership almost doubled, from 38 vehicles to 58 per 1,000 people, and is set to hit 269 vehicles by 2030. This growth in car ownership not only means that the auto industry and infrastructure investments will

continue booming, it also means more air pollution, energy consumption and traffic crashes.

Read more: <http://sustainablecitiescollective.com/car-congestion>

dLOC ~ Digital Library Of The Caribbean



Silvia Ravelo de
Arrom Collection

The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) is a cooperative digital library for resources from and about the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean. dLOC provides access to digitized versions of Caribbean cultural, historical and research materials currently held in archives, libraries, and private collections.

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