

DECLINING COMPOUND HOUSING DELIVERY IN GHANA: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

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INTRODUCTION

Compound houses represent a traditional architectural style, with comparable designs observed in other African contexts, such as the Igbo family houses in Nigeria; sunken courtyard homes of Matmata, Tunisia (Ibukun, 2021); and Swahili houses in Tanzania (Lane & Michaut, 2023).

In Ghana, compound houses are known to be among the earliest housing typologies that emerged during the height of the Ashanti Empire in the 18th century, and they were usually built by extended family members (Ibukun, 2021). They accommodate multiple households and include shared facilities like kitchens and toilets (ISSER, 2022). Moreover, they are typically one-storey but occasionally multi-storey, featuring an open courtyard encircled by single-room or chamber-and-hall units (Afram 2007; Sinai, 2001; Korboe, 1992; Asante et al., 2015). Historically, compound houses served as rent-free accommodations for family members, while non-family tenants paid rent (Danso-Wiredu & Poku, 2020).

Compound houses remain popular among urban low-income earners due to their affordability, cost-sharing advantages for utilities, and convenient locations. They are especially appealing to youth, young couples, and smaller households. Despite its importance in Ghana's housing sector, compound housing has received limited attention in policy discussions. This is particularly concerning as the evolving housing supply increasingly favours other types of housing over compound houses. A critical question arises: what are the implications for the urban poor, who

predominantly rely on compound housing?

DECLINE IN COMPOUND HOUSES AS DWELLINGS IN GHANA

Ghana's National Housing Policy reports that while compound houses remain dominant in urban areas, their prevalence in Accra's housing stock has declined significantly, from 62% in 1990 to 42.5% in 2000 (GoG, 2015). In recent years, the decline observed in Accra has extended to other urban centres across the nation, diminishing the significance of compound houses, which have historically shaped the dwelling typology and architectural landscape of major urban areas in Ghana (see GSS, 2012; Grant, 2009; Danso-Wiredu & Poku, 2020; ISSER, 2022).

Table 1 presents housing Census data from 2000 to 2021 on dwelling types by location in Ghana. The data shows that although compound houses are dominant in urban areas, the overall proportion of compound houses across both rural and urban areas has declined markedly, dropping from 44 per cent in 2000 to 20.9 per cent in 2021. This implies that traditional housing units, distinguished by their ability to accommodate multiple low-income households through shared facilities such as toilets, bathrooms, and kitchens, are increasingly losing prominence.

Detached houses have gained prominence among housing types, increasing significantly from 25.3% in 2000 to 63.3% in 2021. Moreover, there has been a modest yet notable growth in the prevalence of semi-detached houses and flats/apartments. These housing types, commonly referred to in Ghana as self-contained houses and

bungalows, are primarily designed for single households rather than multiple households, reflecting their layout and architectural orientation. These building typologies are increasingly perceived as symbols of modernity, offering enhanced standards of comfort and security, while also presenting the potential for generating higher rental income (ISSER, 2022). Our research (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/geography-and-environment/research/home-grown-growth-in-african-cities>) reveals minimal evidence of compound house construction in these areas, as most homes are self-contained dwellings. The rise of detached houses aligns with Ibukun's (2021) observation that international-style apartments and villas designed for nuclear families have emerged as the preferred housing type. In contrast, compound houses are increasingly being subdivided into smaller, more congested units, accommodating unrelated tenants and serving as housing for lower-income individuals with limited alternatives.

(ISSER, 2022). While housing demand among the urban poor in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA) continues to escalate, supply remains both insufficient and prohibitively expensive. The ramifications of this dynamic are significant, jeopardizing access to affordable housing for vulnerable populations, undermining their right to the city, and posing a direct challenge to the realization of Goal 11 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which advocates for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urban development.

DRIVERS OF DECLINING COMPOUND HOUSING AND IMPLICATIONS

The decline of compound houses and similar housing types across Africa can be attributed to a confluence of broader socioeconomic and cultural transformation factors, including the growing influence of social change, shifting housing preferences, evolving architectural designs, and

TYPES OF RESIDENTIAL ACCOMMODATION BY LOCATION IN GHANA, 2000-2021

Type	2000 (%)			2010 (%)			2021 (%)		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Separate house (Detached)	25.3	33.2	16.3	28.7	40.1	19.3	63.3	76.6	53.8
Semi-detached house	15.3	15.7	14.9	7.1	6.3	7.8	8.0	7.2	8.5
Flat/Apartment	4.4	2.0	7.2	4.7	1.9	7.0	3.1	1.0	4.6
Compound house (rooms)	44.5	38.4	51.6	51.5	42.9	58.7	20.9	12.2	27.2
Huts/Buildings (same compound)	4.4	6.0	2.5	3.1	5.7	1.0	0.5	0.9	0.2
Tent	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	1.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Kiosk/Metal container/ Wooden structure	1.4	0.5	2.4	1.8	0.2	2.9	2.7	0.9	4.0
Living quarters attached to office/shop	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.4	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1
Uncompleted building	-	-	-	1.6	1.0	2.1	1.2	1.2	1.4
Other	3.8	3.3	4.3	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1
Total	96*	100.0	100.0				100.0		100.0

*Hotel/Hostel 0.4 percent; was included in the 2000 Census only, but this category was not included in the 2010 census. Source: (ISSER 2022)

The dominant transition from compound housing to detached housing delivery undoubtedly signifies a notable shift in housing preferences and urban development trajectories. This trend raises critical concerns regarding the sustainability of traditional housing forms, communal housing models and their functional relevance such as enhancing social cohesion among people of different ethnicities, religions and backgrounds

the pervasive impact of foreign influences. Existing studies on Ghana have highlighted a growing disinterest in the co-sharing of utility bills, coupled with the increasing inconveniences associated with shared facilities such as toilets, bathrooms, kitchens, and compounds. These challenges are further exacerbated by some individuals' lackadaisical approach toward cleaning and maintaining shared spaces, overcrowded living conditions, health-related concerns, and the lack of privacy (see Asante et

al., 2015; Danso-Wiredu & Poku, 2020). In some cases, family compound houses have been sold to real estate developers, who repurpose or modify these structures for alternative uses, further contributing to the decline and displacement of some family members.

Attempts to address the persistent challenges faced by tenants in compound houses and enhance their comfort have spurred two notable trends in the rental market. The first, and most prevalent, involves landlords upgrading existing units into self-contained spaces. The second trend entails the construction of entirely new multiple-occupation houses, where all units are designed as self-contained (Asante et al. 2015). Consequently, it is unsurprising that virtually all new housing developments in this category exclusively feature self-contained units, reflecting a decisive shift in response to tenant preferences and market demands.

However, the increasing prevalence of self-contained houses appears to primarily cater to upper- and middle-income earners, thereby intensifying concerns about the persistent housing challenges confronting low-income populations. Low-income earners, who have historically depended on compound housing, are disproportionately disadvantaged, as the majority cannot afford the high costs associated with purchasing or renting the emerging self-contained housing units in urban areas. This challenge is particularly pronounced in GAMA, Ghana's most urbanised area. As a result, some low-income individuals experience homelessness (Ayumu et al., 2025), while many others are compelled to seek shelter in alternative dwellings, such as

kiosks, metal containers, and wooden structures, which are predominantly located in slums and informal settlements.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite serving as the primary source of affordable and decent housing for the urban poor, and their historical significance in fostering communal living and social capital, the construction of compound houses in Ghana, particularly in urban areas, has experienced a steady decline over time. This trend may be worsened if the delivery of other housing types continues to increase, with a limited focus on affordable compound housing for the urban poor. To address the ongoing decline in the provision of compound houses, it is recommended that the government as a matter of policy must encourage or partner with individual self-builders and real estate developers to build more compound houses targeted at the urban poor.

While acknowledging tenants' preferences to avoid shared facilities and communal spaces, government policies should aim to preserve the architecture of compound houses as an integral aspect of cultural heritage in Ghana. Challenges such as inconveniences associated with shared facilities in compound houses could be mitigated by increasing the number of shared amenities and implementing strict codes of conduct to address tenants' poor management of common spaces.



Credit: Afram and Korboe 2009

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