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All Eyes on Accra

Text and photos by Seth Avusuglo

Read any Ghanaian classic set in Accra, and it can feel as though the city has been speaking about the same things for generations. Yet Accra doesn't keep its history hidden in books or sealed inside archives. It wears it openly. As Ghana approaches its seventieth anniversary next year, the city's roads, walls, vehicles, and billboards form a public manuscript, written and rewritten every day by the people moving through it.

At the Legon underpass, a mural of Ghana's founding father, Kwame Nkrumah, shows him weeping. Beside him, a painted question hangs over the traffic: "THE NATION IS FREE / ARE WE????". A motorcyclist speeds by, turning his head for a second glance. The mural poses a question that confronts everyone who passes it.

In Nima, schoolchildren gather around a stack of concrete blocks beneath a wall-sized mural. Across the dark surface, a painted message offers a lesson: "Knowing Your Own Darkness Is The Best Method For Dealing With The Darknesses Of Other People". Behind them lies the evidence of a city in motion: rubble, exposed drainage, and utility poles layered with ads. The children seem not burdened by the words behind them, nor distracted by the cluttered landscape. They simply inhabit it. In Accra, heavy ideas and ordinary life share the same street.

This dialogue continues in the traffic. For decades, trotros, the private minibuses, have done more than move people around the city; they carry jokes, warnings, scripture, declarations, beliefs, and everyday poetry. On the back of one white minibus, the words "ALL EYES ON ME" stand out in the congestion. It could be swagger, humour, or simply candour announced from the rear window. Directly ahead of it rises a billboard proclaiming "I TOLD YOU SO!", advertising a stage production of the iconic 1970s Ghanaian film. For a brief moment, the bus slogan and the billboard seem to be talking to each other. That accidental exchange captures Accra: a city where popular culture, commerce, memory, and performance constantly collide in public view.

The streets also document the daily grind. A green trotro bears the message "STILL WORK HARD," while nearby, a market woman balances a load on her head, making her way through the traffic in Accra’s sweltering heat.

All this is unfolding against a rapidly changing skyline. Along Independence Avenue, roadworks are underway as the city prepares for the independence celebrations. A sign warning of "UNEVEN ROAD SURFACES" sits below billboards selling luxury apartments and aspirational lifestyles. The contrast raises familiar questions about development, belonging, and who actually gets to participate in this advertised future.

Litar
Letzistrasse 23
CH-8006 Zürich
+41 44 291 99 00
info@litar.ch
www.litar.ch

At Kokrobite, where the Atlantic meets the shore, children jump into the surf as the sun sets. The noise of the road fades away, replaced by waves and laughter. Here, the city stops trying to explain itself. Nearly seventy years after independence, the conversation continues not just in books, radio, parliament or classrooms, but on concrete walls, in traffic, and beside the sea. Like the question beneath Nkrumah's mural, the answers remain unfinished. The city keeps speaking anyway.