

Domestic dramas: class, taste and home decoration in Buea, Cameroon.

Prologue

If you wanted to touch *upward* social mobility and the ‘new’ African middle class what would you reach for? Setting aside (for now) anxieties about the empiricism that such a desire for tangibility implies, the range of answers is increasing all the time: shopping malls, work places, private schools, voting booths, restaurants, beach resorts, coffee shops, cupcake vendors, smoothie bars and cars are all productive sites for research not just about consumption patterns but also about how the middle classes relate to the state, to businesses, to ‘Africa Rising’, to politics and to history. Or how about reaching for a will – the site where an individual’s assets are totted up ready to be passed to the next generation (Bolt, 2016)? Does upward social mobility in Africa have to be as urban as this list suggests or is the separation of urban and rural another Eurocentric misreading of African everyday life (Ndjio, 2009)? Would African upward social mobility even be ‘in Africa’ or is it in the transnational spaces of the airport lounge and diaspora meeting room? Wherever social researchers choose to look for the middle class in 21st century Africa it is now time to supplement the statistical story that has come from African economists (Ncube and Lufumpa, 2015), political scientists (Cheeseman, 2015) and investors (Deloitte, 2014) with stories of everyday life in order to improve understanding of these social changes.

The domestic sphere is the acme of social positioning in Africa at this current moment. The middle class have no monopoly over using houses as markers of position, but it is one of their particular pre-occupations. Plots of land, the fences around them, the buildings on them and the cars outside are the best-lit stage on which the dramas of *social boundary-making* are being played out (Lentz, 2015; Mercer 2014, 2016). Structurally the drama is fundamentally relational: stage, actors and audience work together to produce this new social scene. Class positioning is only one of the many jobs that such boundary-making plays, but it is the focus of this particular analysis. These boundaries might distinguish between those who are prospering and those who are not but they could also be normative boundaries between the worthy meritocrats of the new business world and the more suspect political ‘elite’ some of whom ascend through the adept accumulation of the rents. They could be boundaries between generations or genders or ethnicities or occupations or those with different levels of education. Or they could be understood as boundaries between different fractions within the emergent middle class. The central claim is that the desire for *recognition* among both the dominant and the dominated in these hierarchies is made visible in the material space of a ‘well-decorated’ living room or, to use the idiomatic term from Cameroon, parlour.

The claim that the home is a key site of social boundary-making is hardly novel. The domestic sphere is central to the analysis of the British middle class in the 18th/19th centuries (Davidoff and Hall, 1987; St George, 2006; Tosh, 1999). Similarly it is the subject of current analysis around the world too (Cox, 2016; Jacobs and Malpas 2013; Walsh, 2006). Much of this work is framed by the ideas of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He addressed economists on their home turf when he looked at the more-than-economic aspects of housing ‘markets’ in the *Social Structures of the Economy* (2005 [2000]). The book is a study of the transition from rented high-density housing to owner-occupied single family homes in the 1980s in the Val d’Oise, north of Paris. It explores the way that the market is constructed by the state and shaped by the (sociological) contradiction between the *tastes* of a middle class (who aspire to the cultural capital of the dominant class) and their economic *assets* (their capacity to afford the house they desire). The households he analyses “strive to content themselves... with the judgement reality has passed on their expectations” (Bourdieu, 2005 p. 187).

As often happens, the African story of boundary-making in the domestic sphere is not a simple revival of an old European production taken from the existing repertoire with the same characters, costumes and set-design. Rather this is a novel reinterpretation of the play's script, some of the speeches may be the same, but their significance is changed by the spatial and temporal context.

In the remainder of the chapter I will reflect on the analytical framing of the book as a whole by addressing Bourdieu's concept of 'the social space' in the context of a case study from Cameroon; describe and analyse three parlours in homes in Cameroon as examples of taste; and use the conclusion to explore the internal diversity of the new middle class in relation to questions of taste, and the political consequences of recognizing certain forms of capital as a legitimization of personhood. The chapter continues to plough its (laboured) theatrical metaphor, not merely as a rhetorical indulgence, but to make an argument about the relational nature of class without dissolving into the short-cuts of over-familiar academic jargon (terms like 'relational' for example). The idea that social boundary-making is a bit like a piece of theatre is part of a wider argument about social space as a dialogue between authors, actors and audience. As actors will tell you there are good audiences and bad audiences. They will also explain how some scripts and some directors are much easier to work with than others. As audiences make clear two people can watch the same performance and come away with very different thoughts and observations. Social boundary-making is theatrical in its concern with visibility, interpretation, thrill, repertoire, experiment, artifice and the suspension of disbelief. The arid vocabulary of social science often loses the vim of this dramatic creativity.

Before we continue, I want to make a two quick comments on the position of judgment from which the chapter is written. First, the theatrical metaphor pre-supposes a familiarity among readers of the kind of theatre I am imagining. Ironically the obscure professional language of abstract analysis may have more universal salience than a culturally specific referent like theatre, though Africa's dramatic traditions are vigorous, diverse and relevant. Second, the descriptions of the three parlours that make up the core of the chapter overtly express my own emotional reactions to these rooms. However, I am clearly not the intended audience that their decorators imagined as a visitor, but a nosy interloper into this particular social universe. I cannot make an insider's judgement about the decoration. Rather, I have made my own reactions explicit in the hope that the reader can see them in order to see past them. In every parlour described here there were mass-produced decorative gee-gaws that I would not choose to display in my own home. By telling you this my hope is you will be able to see beyond my patronising metropolitan bourgeois snobbery.

The proscenium arch: the 'social space' as analytical frame for a small town in Cameroon.

The distribution of social positions in the small town of Buea in Anglophone South-west Cameroon has been shaken up since the millennium by a distinct increase in prosperity for some households (Courade 1970; Page and Sunjo, 2017)¹. What was once a sleepy administrative centre comprising a mix of civil servants and famers has become a dynamic and entrepreneurial town – a process led by the expansion of the university and the investments of transnational migrants. On this basis it is conceivable to identify an emergent 'group' - the 'new middle class' (though this is a term that has no local salience). These households have, over the last few years, 'accelerated away' from the bulk of the population in terms of wealth. But this simple assertion that there is a relationship between capital accumulation (a purely economic variable) and the formation of a new class doesn't capture the social dynamics at work in Buea. For example, the routes to prosperity are many and varied. Some households in Buea have capitalized on the new private sector business opportunities

associated with economic growth across Africaⁱⁱ, others use their position vis-à-vis the state, and others accumulate assets through international migration (Alpes, 2013). The strategies of distinction at work in these changes cannot be reduced to purely economic measures of average incomes, household wealth or property values.

Instead, in line with a major source of inspiration for this book, the goal is to think about social mobility in the context of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'social space'.

"The social world can be represented as a space (with several dimensions) constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question, i.e., capable of conferring strength, power within that universe, on their holder. Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space." (Bourdieu, 1985: 723-4).

The social space is in some ways a background idea in his larger conceptual scheme. It provides a way of thinking about the co-ordinates through which more familiar concepts (field, habitus, capital) can be positioned *in order to* understand relations of domination. For my purposes three key points arise from this idea.

Firstly the social space obviously has multiple dimensions. Because this *is* Bourdieu these are primarily expressed as different types of capital: usually economic capital (money, and other monetised assets) cultural capital, (culturally-relevant knowledge and embodied know how), and social capital (who we know)ⁱⁱⁱ. But other forms of capital are available too: political, educational, informational, religious, technological. Crucially, when any form of capital becomes recognized as legitimate (and as a result confers benefits associated with that legitimacy) it also takes on the character of *symbolic capital*. So in Buea being educated is highly respected and titles like 'Professor' express legitimacy and can bring some social profits. In contrast the relationship between wealth and symbolic capital is much more ambiguous. Whilst the pursuit of wealth and public displays of wealth are common and are seen as legitimate, they are often haunted by a miasma of rumour that casts doubts on whether that wealth is literally legitimate or has been accumulated by deviant spiritual or criminal means. So the extent to which economic capital in Buea is also symbolic capital is highly contextual. The accumulation of symbolic capital is expressed in an elevated social position, in the capacity to ensure others will pay attention to you. It also sometimes suggests an obligation to the community. It is not just about the capacity to have one's way, but also about being recognized as 'a somebody' (Menkiti 1984, 2004). This aspiration to personhood is central to house-building in Buea (Page and Sunjo, 2017).

In relation to the wider discussion about the middle class in Africa (Ncube and Lufumpa, 2015) Bourdieu's approach provides a means of breaking away from imagining a class hierarchy that falls along a single line measured in terms of wealth. Instead by using the device of the social space this chapter seeks to supplement those accounts that present a more complicated picture of the disposition of actors across the stage of 'class relations' (Enaudeau 2013; Lentz, 2015, Mercer 2014; Spronk 2012. Social mobility cannot be reduced to the 'economic' since other elements (say recognition) are relatively autonomous. As some households increase their economic capital, others whose income has not increased over the same time period (such as secondary school teachers) are relatively at a lower position within the social space when viewed economically. Yet those teachers can still be recognised as *persons* because of their higher level of education and symbolic capital. These schoolteachers can still contest the recognition of the newly prosperous as legitimately superior - not least by passing judgment on the aesthetic choices they make in their homes.

Second, Bourdieu's social space refers to 'the social universe in question' – that is to say it is contextually specific. It has geographical edges (however messy such frontiers might be). The principles used to distribute individuals within the social space could vary between locations. For example in *Distinction* (1984, pp 122-3 & 455), Bourdieu presents a graph showing different cultural choices, professions and political preferences in relation to the distribution of economic and cultural capital in 1970s France. His analysis is specific not only to that moment in time, but also to that place. In other places such a 'graph' might deploy different forms of capital in different ways. For example, in the Cameroonian context it might be more useful to incorporate social capital into the visualization since 'who you know' and ideas of 'personhood' are so closely associated with the practice of power in this particular social universe^{iv}. So, whilst the *framework* might assert universal utility, there is also something assertively idiographic about it. It has the merit of providing a framework for comparison between (and within) different African middle classes, which recognizes diverse histories and geographies at a time when notions like 'Africa rising' risk erasing spatial differences. Whilst the current wave of research on the new African middle class (Spronk 2012, Melber, 2016; Mercer 2014, 2016) might have successfully addressed the historicity of its object, it has paid less attention to its spatiality.

The third point to take from Bourdieu's definition of the social space relates to the risks associated with visualization, particularly in relation to the term 'lifestyle'.

"The means one has to use to construct social space and to exhibit its structure risk concealing the results they enable one to reach. The groups that must be constructed in order to objectivize the positions they occupy hide those positions. Thus the chapter of Distinction devoted to the different fractions of the dominant class will be read as a description of the various lifestyles of these fractions, instead of an analysis of locations in the space of positions of power-what I call the field of power." (Bourdieu 1989, 16).

Bourdieu argues against the assumption that individuals who occupy a similar location in social space ('classes on paper') will necessarily come to exist as a united group (real classes)^v So whilst a *class on paper* might look like a particular group of lifestyles it is not necessarily a *real class*. Dieter Neubert (2016) argues that the notion of 'the middle class' has little analytical salience in Kenya at the moment, and instead it is more useful to think about the multiple *lifestyles* of those on middle incomes (pragmatists, social climbers, young professionals, different religious milieu, neo-traditionalists and cosmopolitan liberals). It intuitively makes sense that in the absence of deliberate unity based on an awareness of shared self-interest there is no tangible 'class', but however interesting these lifestyle typologies are they should not be the endpoint of the analysis. Rather, for Bourdieu they are a precursor to a more explicitly political questions about domination: who amongst these groups can assert their will? What capacity do they have to challenge the existing structural relations of domination? Claire Mercer (2014, 2016) gets closer to these issues when she argues that the various different embodied and practised lifestyles of middle income households in Dar es Salaam agglomerate to have class *effects* relevant to other people even in the absence of self-conscious middle-class (for example in relation to the marketization of land in the city's suburbs). If analysis goes no further than listing 'lifestyles' on the grounds that there is no empirical *real class*, then Bourdieu's project of using lifestyles to unveil relations of power is lost.

The social space then is more-than-economic; it is a multidimensional, geographically-specific means of locating social differences. However it risks visualizing a social universe of lifestyles that can end the analysis prematurely by hiding the very thing it seeks to show: relations of power.

Somes scenes from a play: decorating parlours in 21st century Buea^{vi}

Scene 1.

Walking into the parlour of an ambitious, upwardly-mobile, politically-active, male civil servant (whose salary is supplemented by multiple entrepreneurial activities such as market gardening, retail, transport, car sales) I am struck by the dramatic chiaroscuro of the scene. The rectangular room (5 * 8m) has windows on two walls, but the one at the front allows little light in because of a low, wide balcony outside. Though the walls are white there is a general gloom because of the dark red rug, the bulky red velour furniture (embroidered with gold trim), and the heavy red drapes half-covering the windows (gathered loosely by tasselled yellow ropes). But glaring, mote-filled light slants through the louvres at the side and illuminates a colourful, carefully collated array of decorative objects. Most obviously there are bunches of pink, orange and yellow artificial gladioli and daisies, a collection of plastic toy animals arranged on a silky-embroidered table cloth, a shiny red tin, and a two metre high artificial apple tree in a decorative pot. A tiered trio of bowls, containing more plastic flowers, hangs down from the ceiling in a macramé net. The colours of these objects are duplicated in the shiny surfaces of the imported aluminium-legged, glass-topped tables on which they sit. The tables have shelves underneath where more artificial flowers and photo albums are stacked.

Routes from the door to the seats are constrained by the volume of stuff in the centre of the room, so that choices about where to go are limited and only one person can move along them at a time. The bulky seats themselves are of a kind fabricated by local carpenters. There is no space to put down a glass (or fieldwork notebook) on this line of tables in the middle of the room, but small locally-made coffee-tables (with embroidered white cloths on them) are placed beside us as we sit down to talk. A large, (100 * 50 cms) colour photograph of the man's wife (who decorated the room) shows her with her head on her arms. It is mounted on card and looks down across the scene from the outside of a glass-fronted wooden dresser, which covers the whole of the back wall facing the door. It is filled with more photos, crockery, glassware and electronics. The photographs are of family members, the couple's wedding, important dinners.

The second decorative layer of the room has more to do with the man of the house, though it too has been arranged by his wife. It weaves together political and religious iconography with assertions of his commitment to 'tradition'. There are photographs of him in a new, richly embroidered agbada (gown) meeting big-wigs in the ruling political party; in the grandstand on national day for the march past; with his wife in matching outfits made from fabric decorated with the party's logo. The commitment to the governing party is explicit, shameless. There are also almanacs and calendars from the mainstream Protestant church where he is an elder; small statuettes of crucifixes, twee ceramics of cherubs and saints; decorative banners with embroidered biblical aphorisms. Adjacent to one such banner on the front interior wall, over the cramped (largely unused) dining table, hangs a bundle of 'traditional' objects: a raffia bag, a series of caps, an animal fur, a fly-whisk, a staff, a woven blue and white jerkin. These are ready to be taken down and worn or carried when he attends born-house or cry-die ceremonies or when he goes to meetings of his 'kontri-people' – his ethnic group. They are 'strangers' (immigrants) in Buea, but assemble every month to socialise and take care of each other (Mercer et al, 2008; Page 2011)). But these traditional objects are also hung in this room to be seen, not merely because it is a convenient spot to store them. They are used to assert belonging - both to a specific ethnic group and to his 'African' heritage. He is a title holder among his people and I know that some of the objects signify that role as well as his membership of a secret society. These things have explicit spiritual significance and so it's easy for me to exoticise this dusty bundle and make them more earnest than they are. "These are things we don't joke

about” says their owner – before immediately laughing and asking me why I think they are more interesting than his Christian paraphernalia.

To my eyes the room is abundant, exuberant, snug, comic, gaudy, cluttered, claustrophobic, kitsch. Its decoration does a lot of work. It makes me nervous, guarded, nosy: will I knock something over and spoil the display? Will I let my judgment about some of these ‘naff’ things show? Will I be able to find out about the politics, the traditional objects? The furnishing speaks to a dialogue between the showy, homely, aesthetic of the wife and the more self-consciously weighty, self-aggrandizing display of the husband. In terms of proportion of the space, the wife dominates, but her husband’s contributions are more diverse (less coherent?) and demand more of my attention because of the more obvious social work that they do. Both sets of objects are externally-facing statements in this semi-public part of the house’s interior.

The dialogue between husband and wife continues in terms of how the room is used. At some times this room is more public than at others. On days when the household hosts events much will happen outside: on the balcony and in the courtyard where there is space for dancing, marquees, large crowds. But this room will be where ‘notables’ – persons of significance will sit and be entertained. When there aren’t big occasions this is where people come in the afternoon and evening to ask for the husband’s help and advice. He conducts business here. His wife greets these visitors (a mix of men and women), and provides drinks and food before generally either withdrawing to the kitchen or sitting in the corner of the parlour perched on the arm of a chair. She is no mere stagehand though and interjects when she can. Before her husband had become socially established he had drawn from the credibility of *her* family – her father is a senior government official. Much of the time (when he is out) this is her space, where she meets with her friends, church groups and other networks. She is among her things and her stylistic choices. She too uses this space for ‘business’ – trading in cosmetics. Some of my interviews are with the husband and wife in here together, but the husband also prefers to talk to us elsewhere – in his car for example.

Scene 2.

Parlour 2 belongs to a Cameroonian woman who works in logistics for an international humanitarian organization, and who travels the world both for work and leisure. Her work is tough and has taken her to sites of extreme violence, but has also secured her an enhanced and secure financial position that reflects the demands of her job and her extensive experience and professional skills. This house in Buea is brand new and is her ‘sanctuary’ – the place she comes to seek relief from her intense, upsetting work.

The L-shaped parlour is larger than Parlour 1, with distinct areas for sitting and eating. The two spaces are separated by the use of different large, stone floor tiles. The whole room feels spacious with generous windows on two walls, which (though covered in anti-burglar bars) allow light as well as air to spill in. The curtains are made of two fabrics (one red, one tartan) and hung on simple rails and were well clear of the windows when pulled back. The house is built close to the edge of the building plot and surrounded by a high wall, so there is no view as such but, even so, there is a fresh breeze and a feeling of openness.

The bright white suspended ceilings over the two living spaces are clean and have been decorated with restrained prefabricated ‘staff’ plasterwork.^{vii} There is a ceiling rose where the main light fittings are supported, another oval decorative ring around that, then two more rectangular lines of decoration before the final ornamental flourish at the edge. There is then quite a wide gap between the ceiling and the edge of the actual room, which is left plain, drawing attention to the way the

ceiling hangs above us. The complex ceiling arrangements create an effect that speaks to an ambition for grandeur and sophistication, yet they are not too ostentatious. Tucked into the ceiling decorations are dozens of recessed halogen lights, whilst the new matching central chandeliers are in a stylised floral form mixing black metal work with a dozen small, opaque glass shades. There are a number of uplighters on the wall, which match the glass fittings of the central light.

The seating arrangement combines two brand new small sofas and two more new single armchairs – all four seats are from a matching set: brown leather, supplemented by lighter cushion backs and a mix of decorative beige cushions made up from the same fabrics. They had been purchased in the UK and imported along with much of the other furniture in the house via sea in a container. They are arranged around three sides of a simple dark wooden coffee table, which could have come from the same furniture range – it certainly harmonizes with the chairs. It is unblemished and entirely clear of stuff except for the remote controls that pointed neatly towards the big flat screen TV (where CNN was running silently). The seating area is defined by a simple red rug. There is abundant space to move easily between and behind the chairs, which are a comfortable distance from the TV. The dining table and its six matching chairs are also an imported set: a strong almost art deco, geometric design with a thick black wooden table top, shiny metal legs and chairs with a wide flat circular shiny metal ring for backs. There are quite a number of decorative objects in the room, but it isn't at all cluttered: a large glossy sculpture of a treble-clef, three matching African-made candlesticks on the dining room sideboard, one small framed photo beside the TV, a globe tucked into the corner of the room, an East or Southern African style bead table runner decorated with zebras.

There are four pictures on the wall – all of which were assertively 'African' in their aesthetic – all are figurative, showing semi-abstract, elongated, stylized women dancing or carrying water or children. The frames of three of them are decorated with leather and cowries. The fourth (which was also the largest) is surrounded by a bold mirrored frame and contains three shallow relief female figures formed from metal. They are all the kind of images sold to tourists in African craft markets or airports: sympathetic, sentimental, generic, depersonalised, undemanding representations of poverty and female labour and stoicism. The home's owner told us she had collected the pictures and other *objets d'art* on her travels around Africa for work. They are entirely decorative images in the sense that they do not threaten the easiness of the room with magical powers unlike the traditional objects in Parlour 1. These are commodities that could have been bought by any traveller. Even if they announce a kind of pan-African pride they also seemed to speak to a social distancing from the Africans in the images. This was someone who could be a patron of the African arts and perhaps also patronise the Africans who still carried water on their heads and babies on their backs. There seemed to be a gulf between these images and the way of life of their owner – but there are plenty of families living nearby within Buea who could have been real models for these pictures, for whom poverty was not aestheticized in this way. I was enjoying sitting there drinking her South African fruit juice, chatting about decor and catching up on world news from the TV so I felt a bit shabby about judging the pictures on the wall so harshly.

For me, the whole effect of the room is comfortable, confident, easy, smart, insipid, and safe. The comfort is bodily (good chairs to sink into) as well as emotional (familiarity). It feels as though we are in sure hands here. The room could easily have been in a British show home in a new-build development (though a bit more generous in space than most of those). The pseudo-ascetic neutrality of the overall scheme; careful colour palette; coherent design; high quality materials and imported furniture; gave the room a studied restraint (albeit with flashes of glamour) that spoke to a language of bourgeois propriety. This was someone who had a secure comprehension of the rules of cosmopolitan 'good taste'. We could have been almost anywhere. Nothing too vulgar, nothing

ironic, more suburban than hip. Perhaps the whole room was too new to be really comfortable yet. It seemed almost impersonal in some ways – there was an overall meaning to the whole space (security, relaxation, calm, withdrawal), but no significant accretion of memories: it is yet-to-be-fully-personalised.

Compared to many of the houses I visited this one was smaller in scale overall, but had a higher standard of finishing. The owner spoke clearly of her aim of building something for her specific needs, rather than because she wanted to make a big visible statement (that said I had just missed the house-warming party). Not making a statement is surely a classic way of making a statement for some within the middle class. The relationship between scale and quality was one that generally tipped the other way in Buea (just to be clear this was not a small house by local standards, just a smaller one than many others I visited) and, given it was built for a woman, I was hoping the owner might explain this difference in gender terms – but this was a suggestion she refused flatly. It was more she said about ‘understanding’ – a far-sightedness that came from her travels. She had seen the world and knew that it was easier to manage and maintain a smaller house; that high quality finishing was ultimately of more value than flashy excess that would look shabby in a year or two and need repairs. It was a big enough house to host the guests she wanted, but did not invite the extended family to take up residence. It was what she wanted.

Scene 3.

Parlour 3 was created by a man who had accumulated wealth as a senior officer in the merchant marine – navigating the ports of West Africa as a senior employee of an expanding commercial shipping company. In a region of increased average economic growth rates, the commercial trade of goods along the coast was doing well and that had lifted this family well above their immediate neighbours in economic terms. Externally their home reflected this difference in a very literal, visible sense. It is very tall and quite thin, because the fairly small (inherited) plot of land on which it is built is hemmed in on all sides by neighbours – many of whom are also relatives. It stands proud on its sloping site: three and half stories high. It has a complicated façade combining a series of bays, pillars and pediments. There are balconies on each level, demarcated by decorative metalwork and glass panels. All of the ten windows are topped with a semi-circular glass-filled arches. The whole exterior front is covered in two tones of decorative tile –white and yellow. The house stands out from the neighbours in scale, materials and orientation: it is large, complex, glossy and vertical, whereas it is surrounded on all sides by generally shabby, matt, wooden-walled bungalows made from planks and topped with rusting corrugated sheets. The house was built to its owner’s own design (helped by a draftsman and a builder) and is a testament to his own creative vision on this highly constricted site. As he explained to me, he not only wanted the home because it was comfortable to live in but because he wanted to inspire other members of his family and his own ethnic group about what they could achieve through hard work. This is why, he said, he had built on this inherited plot in one of the more impoverished areas of town. Unlike the owner of Parlour 1, he is a member of Buea’s indigenous ethnic group, and as such is particularly concerned about their lack of social mobility relative to that of incomers.

Parlour 3 runs the whole depth of the house (4 * 16m) and is on a raised ground floor level. There is something paradoxical about the geometry of this room; it is a challenge to describe its shapes. Two different staircases enter the room – one spirals up the outside of the house and comes in at the front of the room, the other comes in from inside and emerges half way along. The room is divided into three sections: a seating area at the front, a bar area in the middle and a dining area to the rear. The seating area is separated from the bar area by the top part of another (not quite perfectly round) white plaster arch, which rests on two ornate white pilasters with Corinthian-style capitals

(some of the decoration has been picked out in gold). The arch is not flush to the pilasters, so that their tops jut into the room creating two small shelves where decorative objects have been placed. The pilasters don't seem to be structural because there are also separate pillars right beside them. The ends of the arch come quite low (about chest height), so that the route to the rear of the house through the arch looks somewhat restricted (though this is actually an illusion). This physical and visual impediment is significantly compounded by a sofa that sits under the arch and by another staircase (going up to the floors above) that rises from the bar area and cuts through the arch at about 30 degrees, so that one side of the space is almost entirely blocked by the underside of the stairs. After the bar area (wooden with stools, mirror and shelves for the bottles of spirits) is another differently shaped wooden arch, which leads to the dining area at the back.

The seating area at the front is one and a half storeys high. Looking up you can see an open wooden balustrade beside the landing, but not the top of the landing since the ornate ceiling of the parlour is a metre or so lower than the ceiling of the landing (a consequence of the sloping site perhaps) – so you see people's legs walking along the landing above you, but not their faces. This balustrade is the only source of natural light to the landing. The walls and floor of the seating area are entirely lined with a melange of tiles: there are grey tiles that are the shape and size of bricks on the side you enter from, heavily textured, larger white tiles from floor to ceiling (4-5m?) on the opposite side wall and very small horizontal mosaic-style tiles (dark brown, pale brown and beige) on the arch end and in the windowed front bay of this part of the room. The floor tiles are a sandy brown. The ceiling is white with a big white plaster rose in the centre (with more details picked out in gold) and a similar cornice. The big chandelier is gold and crystal and cylindrical.

There are imported black leather sofas and chairs on three sides and a vast TV against the high white wall opposite you when you enter, which is unbroken by any window. There is also an array of locally-made tables, cupboards and display units made from glossy reddish wood (bobinga?) with spindly decorative legs turned on a lathe. The dining table has flecks of gold embedded in the glass top. The six dining chairs are backed with a gold and black animal print (more giraffe than leopard). Every surface has a decorative object placed on it: a large double photo-portrait, ceramic animals including quite a large dolphin, a carved hippo, some wooden maps of Cameroon on the bar, crochet work on the backs of the seats. Nothing in the room announced its Africanness or embraced an African aesthetic. In interviews the husband insisted that he had taken control of the interior decoration because women tended to introduce too much clutter when decorating and he wanted a simpler, less fussy look. He spoke with great earnestness: decoration is a serious thing.

The whole effect was joyous and impressive, but also slightly alarming and giddy. One part of the room was higher than it was wide. Others almost made you feel you had to duck to enter. Sitting in the parlour it was beautifully bright, but somehow the light didn't find its way around the whole house. Every surface was shiny with ceramics, but there were so many different colours, textures and shapes that my eyes kept moving all the time – every time they settled something else caught their attention. To my eyes the room (and indeed the whole house) is quirky, individual, charming, disorienting, disjointed, awkward, spirited, amateurish, uninhibited, gleeful. It is all genial and eager to please – if, unwittingly, crazed. A bit of a mess; but impossible not to love as an expression of its author's creativity. It's more than I've ever managed to build and I admire its creator and am a bit jealous of what they have achieved even if I would decorate a room quite like this.

The curtain call

The immersion into the world of any play is harder to sustain as the end approaches and the audience await a summing up speech and prepares to leave the theatre. As our actors from these

three parlours all gather on one comparative stage for the start of the denouement, it is inevitable that we have to try and array them across Bourdieu's 'social space.'

Our three parlours have been chosen to represent three versions of upward social mobility in Buea: state-led, migration-led and business-led. What dimensions (capitals) would we use in this particular social universe to lay out principles of differentiation? Bourdieu's visualization (1984, 122-3 & 455) used capital volume, economic capital and cultural capital. In this chapter the three households considered were deliberately chosen to have *broadly* similar economic capital. But where they differ is in relation to (1) their taste in home furnishings (the culturally-relevant knowledge and embodied know how of cultural capital), (2) their personal networks (social capital) and (3) in the acquisition of prestige, recognition and legitimation (symbolic capital). The incorporation of social capital is central to the geographical specificity of this case study. In Parlour 1 a civil servant who has built his mobility out of party loyalty is part of a national network of those who depend on him and to whom he himself looks to for further advancement. It is part of a joint endeavour with his wife, who takes a supporting role. In Parlour 2 the scale of the network is far more global, reaching into the diaspora and the professional networks of humanitarian practice and the leisure activities of global traveller. The cultural know-how relates to the people encountered across that experience and are expressed in a form of 'good taste' that is indexed against a global aesthetic. Parlour 3 is about a more assertively local, vernacular network, concerned with addressing the extended family and co-ethnics in the immediate vicinity of the new home. However it is the incorporation of symbolic capital that takes us beyond a typology of three different lifestyles and into a discussion of the dynamics of power, domination and class relations.

The legitimate exercise of power requires the possession of symbolic capital, which gives a person the authority to act. Becoming a somebody in Buea is not about having a well decorated parlour it is about being recognised as someone with the capacity to dispense patronage (political, commercial, familial, communitarian). Symbolic capital "is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition" (Bourdieu, 1989, 23). The owner of Parlour 3 had the capacity to demand that his family members acknowledge his views of what constituted success and how it is achieved because they saw his house adjacent to their own. They had to recognise his claim that they too could do better in life (or their children could) if they emulated his example and worked hard in business. The individuals whose parlours I visited depend on the recognition of those they dominate, there is a mutual inter-dependence here. They only have symbolic capital because people believe in them, because they are held in esteem. Showing good taste is part of earning that confidence. How then do you show good taste in Buea?

An enthusiasm for the novel and the unique (new furniture, new geometries, new technologies) is often a sign of culturally-relevant knowledge and embodied know how. Multiple builders claimed that they were the first to use some new material (mirror glass for example) others would draw attention to the uniqueness of the multi-faced roofline on their home. This would be the dominant means of earning the admiration of visitors or passers-by. Neophilia speaks not only to a sign of being able to afford new things but also to a rupture in time, which endorses the 'newness' of the 'new' African middle class. Yet an enthusiasm for the new in Cameroon is not really a new thing— (Ardener 1970, Fardon, 2006) nor is it limited to the middle class - as the ubiquity of new technical gadgets across society shows. This temporal break does social work. It asserts a boundary between the old and the new that marks out the socially mobile from the immobile. This admiration for the new is also a displacement of social newness (becoming a new person, being *nouveaux riches*) onto tangible things (decorative objects). The visible accumulation of new stuff can be seen as a means of

becoming a recognised, creative somebody within a particular set of social relationships in this context (as in many others).

There is a spatial iteration of this neophilia too: an admiration for imported manufactured furniture and decorations were seen by many interviewees as showing better taste than those produced by local craftsmen. There is little valorization of the vernacular or craft. Italian imports were valued over those from China; tiles from Dubai had a particular cachet when compared to those from Nigeria. But there are contradictions here, because such imported objects are often mass produced (the artificial apple tree in Parlour 1 for example was seen in lots of houses and was available in roadside stores too). The ability to assert individuality through uniqueness is also seen as an expression of good taste. It is easier to show such originality through commissioning local craftsman, yet this was a rarity. Yet in contradiction to the broad principle certain craft materials (bobinga wood in particular) which are 'local' are at the peak of the pyramid of taste when it comes to selecting doors. Negotiating your way through good imports and bad imports, good craft and bad craft is another opportunity to show a capacity to be discriminating.

Another means of showing good taste in home furnishings is successfully navigating your relationship to the timespace of the African past. Locally crafted objects can be tasteful if they suggest a capacity for discernment. This might actually be about specific exclusions when decorating – I was frequently told that it was inappropriate to put African masks on your wall as they might offend Christians because they contained spiritual power. However demystified, commodified African carvings (as found in Parlour 2) were fine. A capacity for managing Africa by not simply turning your back on it in your decorative schema (as had happened in Parlour 3) speaks to a higher level of cultural capital – a capacity for knowingness, for knowing how to incorporate Africa in an appropriate way. Given the close links between politics and neo-traditionalism in Cameroon the display of 'cultural' objects in Parlour 1 would be seen as a perfectly legitimate assertion of a particular form of power for an individual whose mobility and authority depends on the state and the ruling party. But by carefully balancing these objects with an array of Christian iconography questions of whether they are appropriate (or even offensive) do not arise.

It is also a measure of elevated know-how if you can design your parlour to meet the challenge of property maintenance in the physical environment of Buea (high humidity, torrential rain, dust, insects). The wise builder shows restraint and focuses on quality not quantity. This is a good example of something that is autonomous from wealth. Whereas the owner of Parlour 2 had given considerable thought to the question of maintainability, the equally wealthy owner of Parlour 3 had not really done so. A house is never finished, but will need to be renovated from time to time just as earning recognition from your peers is also a never-ending process.

The parlours we have visited are clearly highly relational: they were constructed in front of and for the viewing 'pleasure' of other people. More research is needed to make strong claims about how this audience reads these scenes (Alpes, 2013; Pelican 2010). However wider discussions in Buea suggested that the people who build new houses are recognised as successful by those who are less successful, which is to say that everyone agrees what success looks like. However several people cast doubt on the legitimacy of the means by which success was achieved by implying that criminality or witchcraft were involved. Different actors agree about the rules of the drama - even if everyone also recognises that as it is a play it is a bit of an illusion. Even those (such as the teachers mentioned earlier) who accuse the new middle class of vulgar excess, also recognize that, as 'the old middle class', they do not currently possess the capacity to effectively assert any alternative.

But the picture being painted here is too certain – it risks suggesting a settled field that seems empirically inappropriate in Cameroon. Violent protests in Buea starting in October 2016 suggest that, at least in the political sphere, there is an ongoing struggle over legitimate forms of domination. The owner of Parlour 1 looks less secure in retaining recognition than the owner of Parlour 2 because his symbolic capital rests on the universal recognition of the social hierarchy arranged by the ruling party, whereas hers is drawn from her profession and transnational experience. Whilst he is currently seen as more useful for those wishing to navigate the Cameroonian system, she doesn't have the same immediate capacity to solve other people's (non-monetary) problems and is content to be less visible, except within her diaspora networks. But all this could change in the event of the ruling party losing its grip.

Through this analysis I have sought to show how qualitative accounts of middle class life can be translated into more ambitious analyses that go beyond wealth and income to address questions of recognition, power, domination, and personhood. Differences within the category 'African middle class' emerge. Dialogues are opened within families, amongst economic peers and between those who are thriving and those who are not. Certainly Bourdieu's framework provides tools that shift analyses away from unilinear accounts of class measured in terms of wealth towards a more diverse set of measures of social difference. However, Bourdieu also identified the risk of empiricism when connecting these ideas to empirical research materials:

"people who are very distant from each other in social space can encounter one another and interact, if only briefly and intermittently, in physical space. Interactions, which bring immediate gratification to those with empiricist dispositions -they can be observed, recorded, filmed, in sum, they are tangible, one can "reach out and touch them"- mask the structures that are realized in them. This is one of those cases where the visible, that which is immediately given, hides the invisible which determines it." (Bourdieu 1989, 16)

Bourdieu's strained relationship with the idea of the unconscious (Steinmetz, 2006) is expressed here in terms of the challenge of focusing not on the visible but on the 'invisible which determines it.' Habitus functions somewhere other than in consciousness or language. This is what really seems to concern him about the idea of a social space, and to this extent he was caught up in the challenge of balancing the temptation to represent social mobility and social positions with the view that such representations actively mask the *real* drama underneath the public *play* of class, taste and boundary making. In that context the more empirical parts of this chapter seem perhaps to wilfully ignore his warnings. But, my argument is that the play is all we have to go on if we are searching for something underneath that cannot be spoken. Like dreams or Freudian slips the fantastical homes of the new middle class hint at the invisible forces that determine the unfolding social dynamics in this small town in Africa.

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ⁱ This research is based on fieldwork in Buea between February and April 2013 and in April 2015 and July 2016. The qualitative data is based on 29 interviews and walk-round tours undertaken with homeowners, building contractors, officials, politicians, architects and the regional manager of the government's mortgage bank. All interviews were undertaken in English (or Pidgin) by the author and by Emil Sunjo, from the University of Buea. I am Grateful to Claire Mercer for comments on an early draft of this chapter.

ⁱⁱ The boom is of course not continent wide, despite frequent uses of aggregate data about GDP. Even setting aside the sluggish growth in South Africa and very slow growth in northern Africa there is considerable variation between regions, countries and cities across the sub-continent.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to Joel Noret for reminding me that 'social capital' plays a far less prominent role in the argument of *Distinction* than economic, cultural and symbolic capitals (along with many other helpful comments).

^{iv} 'Who you know' is crucial to the practice of power in many other places too.

^v In other conceptual lexicons this would be called *class consciousness* and is key to the analytical distinction between *class in itself* and *class for itself*. The difference, however, is that in Bourdieu's framework there is no 'telos'. Classes on paper are nothing more than similar conditions of existence, they will not necessarily be mobilized as a real class.

^{vi} These descriptions are based on a large set of photographs as well as research notes. However, I have deliberately made a choice not to use photographs in the chapter. Partly this is a simple practical consequence of not getting permissions, but it is also an ethical preference because I have tried to leave out some aspects of the description, which could identify specific individuals.

^{vii} This is the French term for decorative plasterwork or stucco, but it is used widely in the construction trade in anglophone Cameroon.