

RECOMPOSING THE CITY FRAGMENTS OF ADDIS ABABA

Physical re-weaving of Addis from a social perspective

1. Research and Design

In order to understand the complexity of the social context of an emergent country such as Ethiopia, first was to interpret the cultural, historical and economic background of the country. For that reason, research was carried out in two phases: a theoretical research which involved different literature about the country but also about the existing living conditions of the people from the Global south; and a practical one which involved a field trip to the capital, Addis Ababa for two weeks. Both research were necessary to create a critical perspective identifying the main problems of the locals' living conditions, and then generate a statement and a research question based on our own interest, so then they could be developed and materialized in a design proposal.

The theoretical research was conducted during the first phase in order to get familiar with theories, concepts and the socio-economic challenges commonly present in developing countries. This first phase helped us understand the causes of why people live in poverty and how their living conditions directly affect the economy, environment and the culture of those countries. In fact, questioning myself and having my home country (Colombia) as a reference made me to understand that although both countries experience similar conditions of poverty, the causes differ as well as the behavior of the population around this situation. In turn, the practical research that was carried out after presenting the theoretical research was highly useful in terms that I was able to re interpret my intended perspective that had based on the previous research. That shift from expectation to reality enriched tremendously my conception of the country and led me to a constant questioning about its culture and its relationship with traditional rural practices.

Therefore, I draw especial attention to topics related to ruralization, the mix of different social backgrounds and the informal economic activities that somehow have reshaped the image of the city combining the country life with the modern life of the cities. Taking into consideration these three points I started to include them in my project proposal not only in the design but also in the social aspect I want to emphasize. For instance, is precise to understand that Ethiopia is an emergent country in terms that only 20% of the population lives in urban areas though is the second most populous country of Africa, which means that the way of living of the people is intrinsically attached to the rural. Through the practical research I found out that traditional practices rooted in the countryside are part of the daily activities of Addis Ababa fostering a juxtaposition and fragmentation of land uses emphasizing the chaotic urban growth. This may be seen in the design proposal on how I translated their social life into the courtyards and how community spaces become the heart of the daily activities. Second, the mix of income groups in the same living environment helped me to propose a similar model where different social backgrounds may coexist with each other. And thirdly, how these informal economies that are the result of slow changes in productive economies can be transformed into the formalization of jobs where community participation within the construction sector and other emerging service sectors are essential for the development of the country.

2. Graduation Project- Master and Building Science

The right to adequate housing is a challenge in developing countries due to the lack of urban policies able to control the rapid expansion of the urban areas, creating rings of poverty while accentuating overcrowding and the conditions of unhealthiness. Addis Ababa is not the exception. Around 80% of its population lives in slum conditions and 70% of them lack of basic services or share them with two or more families. Despite the efforts of the national government to invest in upgrading the slums all over the city, and the creation of the program "The grand Housing Program" in 2004 that searched for affordable housing for the poor while reducing the shortage of housing through a lottery system have not be enough to counteract poverty. On the contrary, the creation of new massive blocks and with it, the emergence of a new model of city have exacerbated the gap between those who can afford the new units and those who have to quit their dream of having an own roof for not being able to meet the down payment. Moreover, this approach is what 'Housing at the center', an initiative of the UN-Habitat tries to avoid. For "Housing at the center" the idea is to make housing a priority for governments instead of just solving the shortage of housing without taking into consideration other principles of wellness.

In that sense, The Global Housing Studio as the name suggests focuses on the basic element of architecture that is housing, but oriented to the poor. However, the study aims to go beyond what is "housing", and encourages students to explore different possibilities and feasible solutions in a broader concept that not only suits people's basic needs (sleeping, showering and feeding), but also understanding it as the element that provides flexibility of well-being and flexibility according to the needs of residents; While providing urban services and facilities within immediate environments in order to improve the quality of life of these vulnerable communities. In this sense, I believe in the social role of architecture as I have experienced it in my home country, of how creating sense of community may alleviate internal conflicts while the quality of life of residents through the implementation of public infrastructure and collective spaces which are used according to the needs of these communities.

In turn, the perception of housing can be understood from different perspectives and points of view, especially from such a heterogeneous study group, where different nationalities converge around the same theme, but each has its own version and approach of what a home means. This constant discussion and shared knowledge among students, guests, other professionals and tutors enrich our perceptions and help us acquire tools that allow us to more consciously develop our projects. In this sense, architecture becomes a humanist discipline that must be complemented by other collaborative disciplines in order to provide safer environments in which the forms of life, daily interactions and cultures of communities can prevail, while being made visible to the rest of society.

3. Method and approach- Scientific relevance

In the Global Housing Studio, the study of the relations between citizens and cities is fundamental to grasp how the rapid growth of the urban areas in the global south have redefined not only the skylines of cities but also the effects it has on the social dynamics and on the cultural contexts. As this constant interrelationship among people occurs at different scales is important to analyze the social and physical patterns in a multiscale way. Starting at the living space's scale considered the most basic element of living, until the territorial scale which remains how countries host diverse cultures and social backgrounds in one whole scenario.

Whatever the scale is, what is meaningful is the study of the human action and its behavior (praxeology) that serves as a guideline to propose resilient and mindful living environments. Therefore, praxeology becomes the

framework of the research, whereas literature and architectural ethnography are the research methods used to collect and analyze data and to understand a non-familiar context respectively.

In that sense, a theoretical and a practical research have been done. For instance, the theoretical research was conducted during the first phase of the Graduation Master project, and was conceived to understand the cultural and social context of Ethiopia, as well as get familiar with theories, concepts and foreign contexts. During this phase group research was carried out in groups of four choosing a main topic to be developed. The main topics were: data and facts (Hard data), cultural-political background (Soft data), the evolution of the capital throughout the time embossed on maps (Spatial mapping), and finally, the evolution of their living environment having the dwelling unit as the primary element (Dwelling). This phase was fundamental to take a critical perspective of the current situation, that later on was modified by the living experience. Moreover, other general literature such as the book: *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, by Sennet, was used as an intellectual framework to interpret how cities work around the world and the dilemmas they tackle everyday as a consequence of the rapid urbanization.

The second phase of the research was practical. The fieldtrip to Addis Ababa to visit the work site and in general to get an overview of what we previously learned through the recommended literature, gave us the opportunity to elucidate and reinforce our own perspective of the Ethiopian society. Without doubts, this phase was totally enriching because the fieldtrip works as the complement of the theoretical framework that literature and mapping are not able to transmit. The fieldwork itself is the main tool to gain knowledge and understanding of the culture we are studying, whereas the techniques used to collect data to subsequently analyze it were observation, photography and sketches, and informal interviews in the streets of the neighborhood and in some houses. Though the limitation of time and language, interviews with the locals was the activity that I enjoyed the most due to the openness and kindness of the cultures from the Global South. Finally, all these activities served to draw our own conclusions based on what we observed and experienced, while the different strategies used to collect data have served to take a rational position of the Ethiopian context.

However, this research method makes me reflect on whether it is a double-edged sword due to the limitation of timespan, language and knowledge about the complexity of the social context which is highly relevant for making design decisions. The lack of available information in english especially that related to policymaking and governance, and the lack of Google Street view as a tool to observe patterns of inhabitation at any time also hinders the reality-based design process and becomes ideal. This is perhaps what the ethnographic research may become: a romantization of what we had observed proposing living environments that may not be able to fit into those realities. This is why reflect on whether is better to choose a familiar context to carry out the investigation where each participant may be more objective by proposing something that knows profoundly in all aspects.

The other aspect I would improve next time is the way we conducted interviews. Having informal conversations are more enriching rather than having interviews with specific questions. This may be also applied to the participatory design which I found out was not very useful in the sense we were asking " how do you imagine your dream house?" in a context where the living conditions barely provide the basic needs of sleeping and food and where the majority of them have not had the opportunity to go beyond the limits of its city.

4. Ethical dilemmas

Without doubts this point may be analyzed from different perspectives. From the research methodologies chosen until the considerations for technical aspects such as the different mechanisms of housing tenure.

In that sense, I would like to start with the dilemmas we all could had doing the practical research. As other methodologies, ethnography, the preferred method for anthropologists, has its challenges in the way that firstly, takes a long time to know in deep a foreign culture, exacerbated also by the language limitations; and second, in the way on how the researcher is going to take a position in the process. Even though the academic exercise is highly valuable there are always aspects that we will overlook though they are important to understand the context.

The second factor relays on the understanding that Addis Ababa, and in general Ethiopia are part of a transitional period shifting their rural traditions to urban ones. In that sense, the dilemma is how to propose a new scheme in a non-static environment which in 20 years the living conditions may be totally different as today. For this reason, I believe that people also must learn on how to adapt and live in other circumstances, sometimes totally foreign to them. Addis Ababa will no remain rural forever, therefore its residents also must to be able to adapt to the new rhythm of the city, as communities are in constant evolution (or involution depends on how it is seen). However, it is important that urban policies support and encourage the migrants and those who live in vulnerable conditions to learn and to be literate creating new jobs opportunities for them. In that sense, education and training may become the new base of an inclusive society and a key element for the progress of the country. For that reason, my research project also involves community participation during the whole process of construction but also the creation of spaces where youngsters and women are able to learn new labors.

Finally, the last difference stands out on the perspectives from different cultures on basic concepts for example on "what housing means" for a person who grows up in a developed country and for someone who is born in a developing country. Probably the person who was born in a developing country housing means its entire life. Having a roof may be the only stable and safe in his life that no one else can take it away, because in these environments even dreams are taken away. This is why I support the ownership as the mechanism for housing solution and an instrument for reducing poverty.

5. Social, professional and scientific framework

Cities are in constant transformation, especially those that are experiencing a transition from the rural to the urban world. As those social and urban changes are usually framed by weak urban policies that do not take early actions to help curb uncontrolled urban growth, let alone help alleviate the bonds against extreme poverty that arise. Consequences are reflected in the inhumane conditions in which thousands of people live in overcrowded spaces, and lack public services and community facilities which could highly improve their quality of life.

For that reason, I find in my research project an opportunity to explore feasible and resilient solutions for those communities that live in vulnerable conditions. Even though, the work site I chose for my project is a low-income neighborhood, its roots constitute a formal neighborhood. However, as many other parts of the capital, Addis Ababa, urban and infrastructure conditions could be improved, and thereby generate better spaces for social inclusion. In that sense, my research project is about inclusiveness in a world whose trend is being more and more unequal, and where indifference from those who have more opportunities in life tend to reshape the meaning of cities.

Based on the idea that housing is a fundamental right and that homeownership is one of the pillars to reduce poverty worldwide, inclusive scenarios must be created in order to provide higher standards of life, while mitigating the proliferation of squatters, and reducing the gap between rich and poor. In that sense, and due to the cultural context of Addis, mixing social groups in the same living environment is a logical solution. Pretending to dignify the lives of residents by granting the same accessibility rights to decent homes and healthy environments, social inclusion is reinforced. Therefore, the use of different strategies of design such as reconnecting the fragmented layers with the surrounded neighborhoods, the use of transitory spaces such as the urban gardening in between buildings as division between areas, and the use of public spaces as elements to weave community highlighting the sense of appropriation among residents are principles that may be replicated worldwide.