

VERNACULAR URBANISM

Global Housing Tutorial
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PROBLEMS OF URBANIZATION

A greater part of the urban areas on our planet are spontaneous and precarious settlements, generated independently, often in the complete lack of essential basic services. From this perspective it becomes clear that are the squatters, burdened by the expanding cities, and not the architects, the ones who actually build most of the world's cities.¹

In the last decades Ethiopia's urban population has grown at an incredibly fast pace. The rate of urbanization is expected to increase by 5% annually causing the urban population to triple by 2037, shifting from 17.5 million to around 50 million people.² The city which is suffering the most under this unregulated growth is Addis Ababa, whose capacity of affordable housing, especially for the low-income population, is put under an enormous pressure. This element increases the proliferation of unplanned informal settlements.³ Moreover as Elias Yitbarek states, beside the speed of urbanization, Addis Ababa is also facing a geo-political problem related to the limited capacity of its borders. This fact increases the need for vertical growth and greater density, to the detriment of the relation between the shelters and the ground, which is however essential for most of the daily activities of the population.⁴

The initiatives introduced by the Ethiopian Government to tackle these issues, like the IHDP (Integrated Housing Development Program) and the GTP I (Growth and Transformation Plan), have shown to be able to improve the quality of life of thousands of people in terms of security, hygiene and sanitation.⁵ However like Yitbarek stresses, these "one size fits all" solutions proposed by the government are not affordable yet for the "poorest of the poor", who need a wider range of options according to the possibilities of their income.⁶

Despite their success, these urban renewal programs and the consequent construction of condominium projects all over the city, at the expenses of informal settlements and slums, have generated other problems, related to the expropriation of land and the eviction of people. Firstly, the payment of compensation and the subsequent relocation neglected the segment of society, which is illegally living in the informal settlement. Secondly, renewal programs, which have established and developed within the settlements during the years, disrupt socio-economic networks and mutual associations.⁷ This process of disruption is even more evident in the old sefers, in the inner city, where the socio-economic network, the sense of community and the collective practices are so rooted into the history of the settlements, that have become part of their identity. Yitbarek calls them "intangible heritage".⁸

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1. Livio Sacchi, *L'espansione delle città*, Treccani, 2010
http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-espansione-delle-citta_%28XXI-Secolo%29/
 2. UN-Habitat, *The state of Addis Ababa 2017* (Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2017), p.11
 3. UN-Habitat, *The state of Addis Ababa 2017*, p.46
 4. Elias Yitbarek, *Interview with Elias Yitbarek*, Antonio Paoletti & Cristian Rancati, November 11th, 2019
 5. UN-Habitat, *The state of Addis Ababa 2017*, p.48
 6. Elias Yitbarek, *Interview with Elias Yitbarek*, 2019
 7. UN-Habitat, *The state of Addis Ababa 2017*, p.94
 8. Elias Yitbarek, *Interview with Elias Yitbarek*, 2019

THE VALUE OF THE HISTORICAL NEIGHBORHOODS

*"They seem to think that their neighborhood is unique and irreplaceable in all the world, and remarkably valuable in spite of its shortcomings. In this they are correct, for the multitude of relationships and public characters that make up an animated city street neighborhood are always unique, intricate and have the value of the unreproducible original."*⁹

Jacob's words describe the exactly condition that we can find in the historical neighborhoods of Addis Ababa, such as Talyian sefer. Christian Norberg-Shulz would define it as a "character of the place": the Genius Loci.¹⁰

In Addis Ababa, nearly 80% of the inner city areas are defined as slums. Nearly 70% of the houses are dilapidated and lacking basic facilities and urban infrastructure services. As a consequence in the last decades, the city has expropriated 392 hectares of inner-city land and demolished a total of 23,151 dilapidated houses in 23 Urban Renewal Project sites.¹¹ This urban plan, driven by a gentrification process, provides a clear vision about the future of these historical neighborhoods: a complete redevelopment, which includes demolition and reconstruction of tower buildings of around fifteen storeys-high.

On the other hand historical sefers are essentials for an expanding city like Addis Ababa because they preserve the tangible and intangible heritage of the city while everything is evolving quickly. Jane Jacobs underlines the need for old buildings within a city because they increase the functional and economical diversity of the neighborhood while simultaneously preserving its character.¹² Speaking about historical buildings, Aldo Rossi states that the traces of the history are to be found through monuments, the physical signs of the past, but also through the urban layout of the plan. In fact cities grow according to the urban layout and its directions.¹³ The plan can be modified, it can vary and differentiate in its functions until it becomes almost completely hidden by the spontaneous growth of the unplanned city. Still however the residents can feel its vibrant vitality. As Kevin Lynch best describes it, the historical city is alive because is capable of creating a "vivid and sharp image", which becomes part of the collective memory of the inhabitants¹⁴. Erasing the traces of the past, would mean that the new generations will grow up without that history that humanly belongs to them. Without being able to enjoy the experiences that have contributed to forge the character of the society of which they are part of.¹⁵

Is the "total reconstruction" approach the right one to use in an expanding city like Addis Ababa, where the urgent need for density is increasing constantly? Or should we preserve somehow these old sefers even if they are lacking of all the essential services for the population? These questions are both legitimate and right, but instead of seeing these two different approaches like independent and opposite solutions, we should try to understand how to integrate them, how to make them complementary.

Therefore how would be possible to preserve the tangible and intangible heritage of the historical neighborhoods in a redevelopment project, which takes into account the challenges of an expanding city, like the need for greater density and the provision of basic facilities, including all the social classes and avoiding the eviction?

9. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Random House, 1961), p.279

10. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, (Rizzoli, 1979), p.14

11. UN-Habitat, *The state of Addis Ababa 2017* (Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2017), p.55

12. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p.187

13. Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura Della Città*, (Il Saggiatore, 2018), p.56

14. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, (Boston: MIT, 1968), p.4

15. *Centro storico, museo-ghetto o motore di sviluppo?*, (Fondazione Filippo Caracciolo, aprile 2005), p.16

URBAN UPGRADE

“This is vernacular urbanism”, as Richard Sennett states in *Building and Dwelling*. A process which takes the logic of conservation forward in time, looking for the ways in which new forms can emerge from the old, but can still relate to them.¹⁶ Jane Jacobs would say that we should start to “regard slum dwellers as people capable of understanding and acting upon their own self-interest”¹⁷. In this quote she is highlighting the consideration of the upgrading of historical informal settlements as a possible alternative to the complete reconstruction but also as a valid alternative to the relocation, which should be taken into account as a last option.¹⁸

In practical terms, the preservation of valuable historical buildings and of the consolidate urban layout, defined as tangible heritage, as well as the conservation of practices and activities deeply linked to the history of the place, defined as intangible heritage, should be the solid backbone for a redevelopment project that aims to not crystallize the past memories. On the contrary the strong identity of the place, its *genius loci*, should be used as a socio-economic engine for the development of the contemporary city. For instance Yitbarek suggests that these interventions could create a sort of vibrant *sefer*, becoming a cultural catalyst for people, like tourists but also students, interested in history and traditions.¹⁹

Another aspect to address is the need for densification. As recent studies have demonstrated, in responding to the increasing challenges of the expanding cities, the best solution is the highly dense “compact city”.²⁰ Although old *sefers* are densely built on the ground, their actual density of inhabitation is pretty low. When growing vertically however, we should be aware of the relation of multi-storey constructions and the historical buildings, in such a way to create a balanced morphological composition, able to enhance the quality and the characteristics of both. Moreover a higher density could also be helpful to avoid the eviction and relocation of people who are living in the *sefer* during the redevelopment. In fact if we plan the intervention on the sites per sectors, it would be possible to relocate evicted people in the new buildings during the construction work, due to their higher capacity.

ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS

The last aspect that I want to address is the possibility to create an “open city”. An urban configuration which is not determined and leaves the freedom to the inhabitants to shape and create multiple different scenarios. Sennett introduces the concept of “shell” as a form which creates porosity, whose possibilities are not exhausted in any particular configuration, since its structural freedom.²¹ Incremental housing reflects exactly this idea of “open form”. This approach is based upon the principle of increasing the responsibilities of individual households, by fostering decision making and responsibilities of individual inhabitants or the community.

Moreover, this informal approach has demonstrated to perform much better than public attempts to build dwellings in a number of respects: greater affordability, flexibility and a better response to the changing of needs. It meets the necessities of the rapidly growing urban population.²² Furthermore incremental housing can be comprised of self-build processes in which the households act as architects, improving their house, building extensions according to the plan supplied by the project developer. The architect’s task is to provide a “core-house”, a large unfinished dwelling which leaves room for future variations.²³

16. Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, (Penguin Books, 2019), chapter 4

17. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Random House, 1961), p.287

18. UN-Habitat, *The state of Addis Ababa 2017* (Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2017), p.94

19. Elias Yitbarek, *Interview with Elias Yitbarek*, Antonio Paoletti & Cristian Rancati, November 11th 2019

20. Livio Sacchi, *L’espansione delle città*, Treccani, 2010

21. Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, chapter 8

22. Esin Hasgul, *Incremental Housing: A Participation Process Solution for Informal Housing*, January 2016, p.20

23. Hasgul, *Incremental Housing: A Participation Process Solution for Informal Housing*, p.21

This strategy, as Yitbarek emphasized, could also be a solution for the so-called “affordability ladder”. Meaning that the governments and the developer should provide only facilitation of land, material construction, infrastructure and housing finance in affordable way. Additionally they should create a legal framework, in which the construction can be left to other actors, in this case the households, in order to create many other options where people can fit and grow according to their income, in a sort of “step by step” configuration of the house.²⁴

CONCLUSION

The genius loci, the spirit of the place, survives within the evolving structures of the city and gives an indelible character to the urban environment, making it a unique and recognizable experience. We can define it as “the immutable framework of the city”. On the contrary, the contemporary dimension of the historical city, the genius saeculi, requires a continuous updating of the themes assigned to its forms by the inhabitants: new typologies, new functions, new activities, new forms of social life.²⁵ This is the challenge for the future redevelopment of the old sefers of Addis Ababa: reconciling the spirit of the place, the genius loci, with the spirit of the time, the genius saeculi, preserving the values of history and integrating them in the current time, according to a sustainable approach that takes into account the challenges of a continuously expanding city, which leaves room for possible future changes: thus setting up an open city model.



Talyian's character, relation between historical fabric and informal housing

24. Elias Yitbarek, *Interview with Elias Yitbarek*, Antonio Paoletti & Cristian Rancati, November 11th 2019

25. Luisa Bravo, *Contemporary historic city: genius loci and genius saeculi*, DATP, December 2010

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