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Graduation Studio: Dwellings, Methods and Analysis

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“a bigger wall” – frames of Addis Ababa

P5 Reflections

On the context

The Graduation Studio has worked within the urban context of Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia, in order to enquire and project the possible development of the booming city. Trying to understand and to react to the emerging issues of the context, the attempt of the studio is to develop a critical reflection of the situation of so-called “Global South” countries in order to introduce architectures as tool for developing local “welfare” conditions.

Within the great frame of topics that came up during the studio, my attempt has been to enquire the role that architectural forms and urban strategies can play within the city at different scales; trying to theorize a necessity for continuity and coexistence of the different realms of everyday life, from the urban configuration to the smallest pace.

Focusing on the clash of forces that is happening in the central areas of the city, where informal dwellings and the populations of entire neighborhoods are being removed and relocated in order to develop the new central district of the capital, I developed a critical point of view over the policies actuated in Addis Ababa.

Importation of foreign typologies, forceful relocation of people, immense role of state and private developers and scarce attention to development of public spaces are only some dangerous issues of the development policies performed in Addis so far. Construction for its own sake is often disguised as an unavoidable need for making the city more “modern”, but cannot be a solution for the immense problems that Addis is facing nowadays. Solutions designed so far lack both of specific qualities for spaces and also of a wider idea of the urban environment as a whole.

Thanks to this limits, Addis Ababa forces architects to rethink their role. It is not simply a matter of design and detail, but of context understanding and strategies definition. What the city needs are strategies and architectures that rethink the development from within, considering problems that are truly at the base of Ethiopian “ethos”, like the continuous “change of scale”, definition of limits, the role of poorer people, the social implications of forms of dwellings and the importance of micro culture within the urban environment.

Trying to cope with these issues, the project doesn’t seek for a peaceful reconciliation of urban parts; instead it work with the disordered cacophony of the African city, adding new elements which try to make sense of the already existing

and help it developing. While the current Ethiopian economic and political way of development is something to be acknowledged, the role of architecture in this foreign environments should be to propose alternative strategies for the development of inclusive urbanity.

The proposal is an urban artifact. Neither truly a building nor a traditional master-plan, it propose to relocate people from the slum into a megastructure that will become a new urban entity to allow Addis future development. The intervention proposed wants to highlight the coexistence and contraposition of two model of urban environment, two speed of the city (namely the informal dwelling areas and the new city centre), which now seems to forget one of the other, and emphasize the productivity that the limit between them can have. An urban infrastructure which works as a form and as a practical tool for slum dwellers upgrading, at the same time manifesting their presence in the city, becoming themselves the visible possibility for a reasonable change in the urban form.

The final aim is to reach a productive and active exchange between urban actors and city form, which is anyway necessary to modify a current development status of which we can already foresee some of the failure.

On research

The development of the thesis has undergone a period of specific research on the urban environment as well as of the main social agencies currently happening in the African context. A first research on the dwelling typologies of Ethiopian culture has helped me to understand not simply the forms of everyday life but also the scale of such. Differences with Western culture is clearly visible from the spaces and the role that housing has in the “ethos” of a culture. The analysis of housing figures evolution has shown very clear the change of scale that dwellings has experienced through the last years and at the same time an attempt of “westernization” of such starting from the second half of the XX century.

A second moment in the analysis has focused on specific socio-spatial dynamic happening in the Ethiopian environment. These topics had to do with the main issues concerning Addis Ababa nowadays, like its role as arrival city for migrants and the pressing issue of infrastructure. I focused my research on how the category of “inclusive city” can become an operative concept to understand and criticize the urban development of Addis. Far from being a moral term, the “inclusive city” is the realm in which the development of “welfare” can happen and *viceversa*. While Addis has developed as a settlement of coexistence in the past, is now being questioned by new forms of inhabitation that are threatening its social and spatial cohesion. Within the term of inclusivity, great importance has the practice of “gated communities”, both as a completely design top down intervention, as well as spontaneous everyday practice to claim control and security over a land.

The research over Addis Ababa, culminated in the field trip on site, has been absolutely crucial in understanding a culture completely different from the Western world and to create the fundamentals for the development of a project. Themes like “inclusive city” or reflection about dimension and features of Ethiopian living spaces, as well as the necessary urban dimension have been seminal aspect that can be found as basics also the final project design.

Looking at the relationship between research and design, they evolved together enriching constantly one another. Already in the first research phase we were challenged not simply to dissect reality but to actively understand the topic we were researching. Every architectural element is not simply a spacial definer, but a device for social relationships and culture definition. I was soon interested in a twofold aspect of the Ethiopian living space: on one hand the striking contrast between informal settlements and new speculative construction; on the other the micro practices where people perform almost according to a fixed ritual for reclaiming a communal areas, land and security.

In studying these aspects I understood my interest in trying to bridge these two aspects, to link scales and activities that belongs to the same city. The project wants to reveal a relationship whose basis are already there in the urban environment but still not manifested.

On a possible value for the project

The proposal is a critical project, and as such it tries to propose an alternative scenario to an existing situation.

Being such I strongly believe it can claim some degree of importance in the discussion over new development strategies for the “Global south” cities. Although to talk about form of the city or relationship between architecture and urbanity in such context seems to be an unattainable possibility, I believe that we need to enrich the way “global south” cities are planned and living environment constructed. The attempt is not to make these cities western copies, but to enhance their features both in terms of space qualities and in terms of social cohesion. In such environments, architecture can become meaningful only if it accepts local challenges and turn itself into a tool.

Being not simply a matter of design, it is important to grasp some general strategy on which to base the design on. At the same time, I believe the project should have a certain degree of generosity and flexibility. Addis Ababa is an urban

magma, where use of spaces is variable and uncontrollable; if a building or whatever architectural intervention, seeks a meaningful role within such a context, it should work in my opinion as a framework, as a sensitive background to accommodate the incontrollable variety of everyday socio-spatial transformation.