

A spatial dialogue **in the emerging city of Addis Ababa** *bridging the gaps between informality and formality*



*washing and drying clothes
happens mostly outside, it
is a communal activity*

*foil used to wrap Injera
(Ethiopian bread) due to
shortage washed to reuse*

Reflection

Ethiopia is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and is currently facing a fast migration from the countryside to the cities. To meet the high demand for housing, the government has initiated mass-produced apartment buildings, the so-called Condominiums. Especially Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa is subject to this pressure where overpopulation has created the demand for serviced affordable housing. However, this type of housing is not based on the traditional housing types, but rather on abstract concepts derived from western modernism.

As a German-Ethiopian, my background and experiences have profoundly influenced my understanding of this issue. Growing up with both cultures, I was confronted with this issue at an early age, and my interactions with scholars and family members have shown me the ambiguity of this issue. It is clear that Ethiopia is in desperate need of housing, and the condominium mass housing project is a successful project that provided a vast amount of housing and continues to do so. The condominium addresses the tangible need for housing; however, it is lacking in addressing the culture of the Ethiopian people. Recognising myself at the intersection of these cultural contexts, I became aware of the potential limitations architecture can impose on people's ability to express their culture. The current architectural concepts often imply that the Western way of life is the ideal to strive for, leading to the loss of valuable cultural heritage. This realisation encouraged me to address this issue as part of my Master's thesis focusing on the possibilities of integrating the nuanced aspects of culture, lifestyles and environment into a housing project.

In the research part of the Master's thesis, I deliberately focused on the residents' perspectives and worked out the following research questions:

What *spatial needs* do Ethiopian dwellers have that housing in Ethiopia must fulfill in order to ensure the expression of their *culture of everyday life*?

How do Ethiopian dwellers relate to space?

How does space influence their practices?

To delve deeper into Ethiopian dwellers' spatial needs and cultural expressions, I employed ethnographic research methods by travelling to Addis Ababa and visiting Condominium Sites (Figure 1).

By actively immersing myself in their daily lives and establishing rapport with the community, I aimed to minimise my outsider status and gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences and perspectives. I recognised that home-making encompasses both spatial and social dimensions, so I aimed to move beyond biased and polarised concepts of formal and informal categories. Instead, I focused on listening to the multifaceted realities observed on the ground, understanding that architecture may set spatial boundaries but cannot dictate how spaces are actually used. Analysing these lived spaces through observations, photography, and sketches accompanied by informal conversations with residents provided me with valuable insights into the local living culture and multiple ways in which residents navigate their daily life in their domestic spaces.

These insights challenged and expanded my initial assumptions, revealing nuanced and complex relationships between dwellers and their living spaces. Following my research trip, I elaborated and abstracted my findings and tried to develop answers to my research questions by compiling my findings in the form of collages and abstracted models (Figure 2).

A significant finding from my research was the unexpected similarity in the relationships between residents and their interiors, despite the architectural differences between condominiums and inner-city settlements. Even within the more rigid structures of condominiums, residents found creative ways to appropriate their living spaces, making them their own. Balconies were transformed into extensions of kitchens, new partitions were added to create additional living space, and communal corridors were personalised with household items. These observations highlighted the residents' determination to shape their living spaces according to their needs, overcoming the limitations imposed by the architecture.

Additionally, I observed that certain cultural practices were affected by the restrictions on cultural expansion within condominiums, leading residents to abandon or modify certain activities of every day, like producing

homemade products. The intertwining of cultural activities with specific spatial conditions became evident, emphasising the significance of thresholds that offer multiple gradients from private to public spaces.

The research process made it clear to me that housing in an Ethiopian context needs to focus on the various needs of the everyday, like the generation of income, communal activities and the possibility of appropriation. These aspects became a main part of my design proposal, where I focused on the peripheral condominium site in Yeka Abado. The unfinished appearance of the site revealed several untapped potentials, which I recognised as opportunities to create a proposal that actively engages its inhabitants and aimed to create a proposal that would not oppose the condominium but would include it.



Figure 1: Condominium Sites I visited in Addis Ababa during my research trip.

Initially, I approached the project from a small-scale perspective, seeking to address the immediate needs of the residents. However, as the design process progressed, my first tutor emphasised the importance of integrating managerial aspects into the project to ensure its long-term affordability. While a small-scale approach may address immediate needs, it could clash with the existing context. Therefore, I expanded my project towards a larger housing project to create a proposal that harmoniously incorporates and requalifies the condominium structure.

In response to this challenge, I developed a modular housing system in combination with a new walkway, that connects the former condominium with the new housing module. This design approach not only requalifies the existing condominium structure but also integrates seamlessly with it. The new corridor serves as a unifying element, connecting different units and facilitating communal interactions as well as enabling the Condominium residents to expand their living space. By incorporating these elements into the design, I aimed to activate the inhabitants' engagement and enhance the overall livability of the housing complex.

As I reflect upon the complexities of executing and detailing my architectural intervention, I find myself grappling with a profound dichotomy. On the one hand, there is an inherent responsibility to meet the requirements and needs of the residents, ensuring their well-being and satisfaction. On the other hand, there is a pressing need to prioritise affordability and the sustainable impact of these interventions. This struggle is particularly evident within the African context, where materials like earth, although sustainable, often carry a stigma of poverty. In contrast, materials such as steel and concrete are seen as modern and aesthetically pleasing.

Given that the demand for housing units within the condominium framework has led to increased availability of these formal construction materials and knowledge regarding

their usage, it presented a challenge for me actually to materialise this gap between the formal and the informal. However, I wanted to create a proposal that takes up this challenge and stimulates a discourse by combining both realities. With this aspiration in mind, I embarked on the design of a self-supporting framework that allows for a flexible floorplan configuration. With this concept, I reference Le Corbusier post World War 1 "Dom-Ino" solution, a standardised, two-storey house made up of concrete slabs supported on columns and a staircase.

I extend this concept with housing modules that can be flexibly configured. By designing these housing modules non-load-bearing, I have unlocked the freedom for the residents to explore a wide array of materials, offering flexible and even informal solutions like the usage of earth blocks.

However, during the further design process I realised that flexibility can be seen as a blessing as well as a potential curse and I asked myself - how can I ensure that spaces are not overly appropriated at the expense of others?

This quandary compelled me to research possible design configurations that address the delicate balance between flexibility and responsible use. For me, the key lies in creating adaptable and accommodating spaces, yet with a conscious awareness of the impact on the community as a whole. In my project, I address this question by giving residents space for private spatial expansion and appropriation alongside communal spaces.

Although this perspective is based on observations and assumptions, I believe that if people are given enough space for their own private appropriation, communal spaces can be better shared in harmony with the community.

However, in order to truly guarantee the success of these interventions, it would be essential to involve residents in the design process and consider their opinions. Throughout this Master's thesis, I have often questioned

to what extent I am imposing my views on a group of people to whom I do not fully belong. Unfortunately, it is not possible for me to test these approaches and genuinely expose myself to the residents' opinions.

Therefore, I consider this thesis as a conceptual exploration of this topic, that is based on the extensive insights that is gained through two research trip to Addis Ababa. By creating narratives based on the residents I have interviewed, I attempt to represent possible forms of inhabiting the building on their behalf. In the remaining time of the graduation, I intend to elaborate further the detailing of my project

in the form of models and visualisations. Through this project, I have learned that architecture should go beyond building for people; it should actively include them, their realities, and their stories in the design process.

This realization has broaden my perspective on being an architect, emphasising the importance of a holistic and inclusive approach.

The project's intimate connection to my own cultural background has allowed me to bring my personal experiences, perspectives, and heritage into the design process, forming a profound connection between myself, the community, and the architectural interventions I propose.

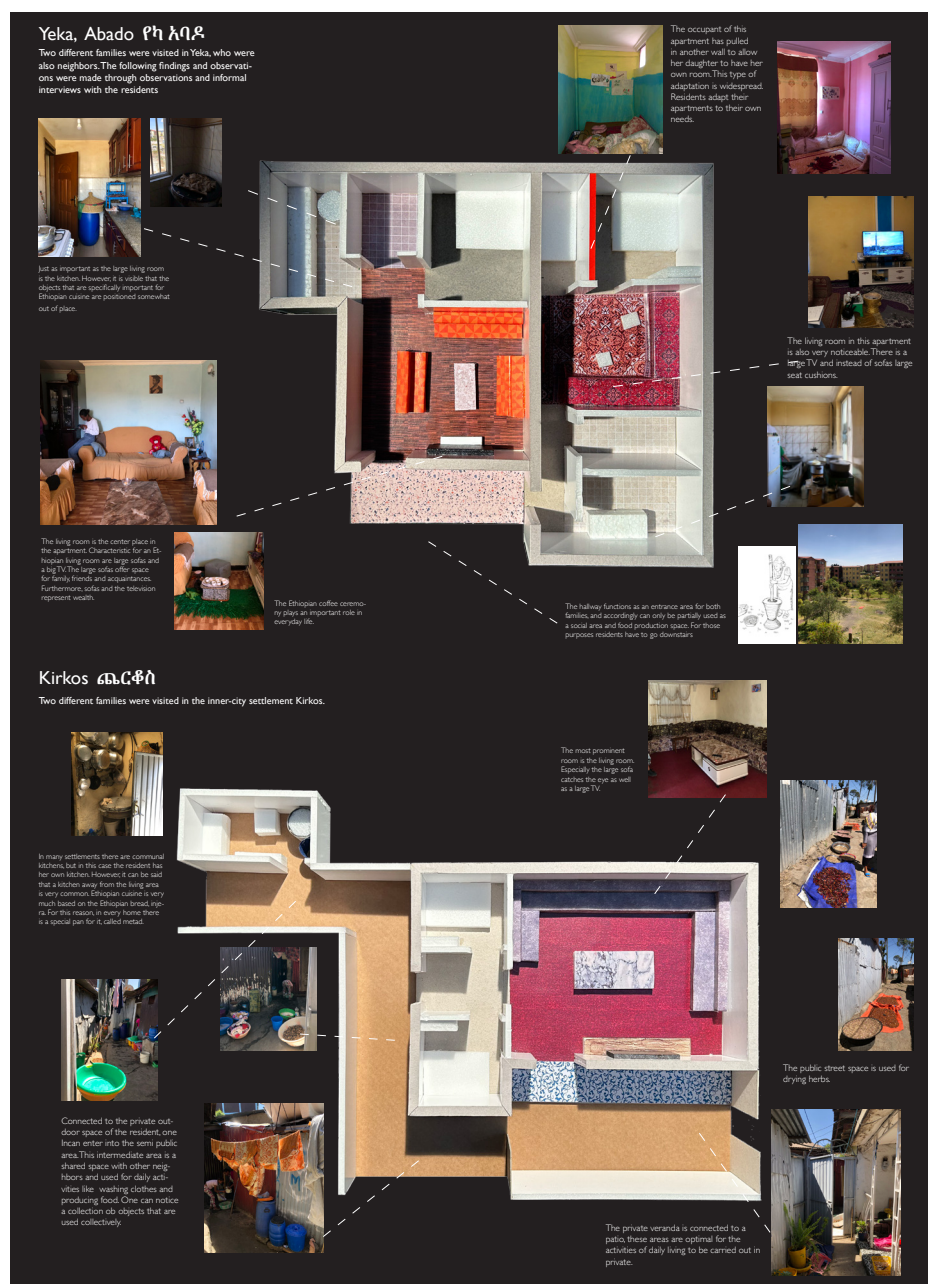


Figure 2: Compilation of Research Models and pictures depicting housing types in the Condominium and the Sefer