P4 Reflection Report

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Studio information
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Theme: Global Housing
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Title: Less space, more place
Transforming public space in a peripheral condominium neighborhood of Addis Ababa

Introduction
It is estimated that at this moment there are around five million people living in the metropolitan region of the Ethiopian capital town, Addis Ababa. Currently the housing stock is poor and a large part of the city is considered to be slum area according to the UN Habitat definition of slum conditions. People migrating to the city in the last decade have caused a mayor growth of the city and in the future this trend will continue. It is estimated that by the year 2030 the amount of people living in Addis Ababa has doubled up to ten million people. This growth means that big investments must be made in public services, public transport and housing to keep up with the needs of these new city dwellers. One of the pressing issues of today and the future is the availability of affordable houses.

To deal with this affordable housing problem the government started the IHDP (Integrated Housing Development Program). With an economical and technical feasible scheme they started building five story apartment blocks all over the city. In the periphery of the city large scale condominium neighborhoods are being built that bring a large quantity of housing units on the affordable housing market but are lacking quality on a lot of aspects. City planners had to be very precise when building condominiums in the inner city because there are only a few small places that are unbuild and the land is costly compared to the land in the periphery of Addis Ababa. The condominium neighborhoods in the periphery are planned with a lot of open space that is undefined and not used. Vast open spaces, in some cases bigger than others, create an unpleasant atmosphere when walking through these neighborhoods and that while walking is the number one means of transportation
in Addis Ababa. This large scale planning is in contrast with the existing city fabric of the inner city Kebele’s (neighborhoods) that have narrow streets with one story houses and shops that are in close contact with the street.

The relationship between research and design

To get a good understanding of how the condominium sites function throughout the whole city I have visited ten different condominium sites. All these site visits were done together with a guide/translator to be able to find the sites and talk to tenants. Being able to speak to the people gave me more insight in the social aspects of living in a condominium apartment such as the organization of a site or compound and the use of the house and the spaces around the house.

What interested me during the field research is how the large scale condominium neighborhoods in the periphery of the city are planned. Small clusters of apartment blocks are placed far from the road and from each other. The roads going through the site are as wide as a highway but there are almost no cars driving there. These spatial facts bring a very unpleasant environment for the pedestrians. During the planning of these large scale condominium neighborhoods the human scale seems to be forgotten.

My design project brings the human scale into one of these large condominium neighborhoods in the periphery of the city. A new type of building block is introduced and placed in vacant spaces through the whole site. These building blocks have an arcade that forms the connection between the street and the building. The new building blocks are placed in a way that a new network of public spaces in different scales is introduced. These public spaces are connected with pedestrian streets that have qualities that are needed to have a comfortable walk through the site. The design of these pedestrian paths is based on the twelve quality criteria described by Jan Gehl in his book ‘Cities for People’.¹

Next to the strategies for the neighborhood I formed a strategy for the architecture of the buildings that would connect the dwelling to the public space. To get a better understanding of the architecture in Addis Ababa I looked back at the research that was done in the first phase of the graduation lab. For my design I used two historical architectural figures as a reference to design the new buildings. The first one is the ‘Ras Palace’. These are large houses build by rich nobility people that settled around the emperor’s compound that formed the heart of the city. These ‘Ras Palaces’ have a heavy stone core, which houses the main rooms, and a light wooden veranda around it, which can be open or closed according to the function at a certain position in the house. The second figure is the modernist architecture from the 60’s that was mostly designed by foreign architects. In the city center there are several examples of these buildings with lively plinths and arcades where it is comfortable to walk and stay.

Methods used

During the Msc3 period of the Global Housing studio we researched different housing figures in Addis Ababa and Ethiopia. This gave us a thorough understanding of the architecture of past and present in Ethiopia. For this research our sources where books, magazines and websites. After this architectural research we did research on four themes that are currently at stake in Addis Ababa. These four themes where: dwelling and the infrastructure of mobility, towards an inclusive city, arriving in Addis Ababa and housing the urban poor. Besides this research focused on Ethiopia we did a case study research on affordable housing designs located in Asia,

¹ Jan Gehl, Cities for People. (Washington: Island Press, 2010), 238-239.
North-Africa and South-America. These case studies varied from designs for whole new cities to small housing units with detailed construction schemes.
To get more insight in the present situation in Addis Ababa we traveled to Ethiopia for our study trip. While being in Addis Ababa we had to decide which site we wanted to visit in a small group and do a site survey. This site survey gave me a good insight in the location for my design.
For my graduation project I studied the existing affordable housing scheme that is implemented by the Ethiopian government. To get a better understanding of this housing scheme I decided to do field research in several places where these affordable housing blocks where build. During this field research I mapped the visited site by taking photos and making sketches. To get a better understanding of the social practices a guide/translator joined me to explain the social context and help me with interviewing residents and other people that where on site. The site survey together with the field research gave me a good understanding of what are strong and weak aspects of the affordable housing schemes build in Addis Ababa.
During the design phase of the graduation studio a shift in focus was made from analyzing to designing. But for me analyzing remained a helpful tool to develop my design proposal. During the Msc4 period I looked back at the research done in the Msc3 period and searched for new references to analyze. Working in different scales at the same time was for me a good tool to keep developing my design proposal. When you get stuck on a certain scale you move to another scale. Shifting between the scale of the city, neighborhood, cluster, block, house and detail helped me to understand how these scales are related to each other and together form a solid design proposal.
At P4 and P5 a reflection must be included as a distinct part of the thesis (a separate chapter) or as a separate document.

In this reflection the student uses a short substantiated explanation to account for the results of the research and design in the graduation phase (product, process, planning). The aim of the reflection is to look back and see if your approach worked, to understand the “how and why”, and subsequently to learn from this. The choice of method (how) and argumentation (why) which preceded the research was a part of your study plan – the reflection must contain an answer to the question of how and why the approach did or did not work, and to what extent.

Depending on the research and design, reflection on a number of the following aspects should be included (you may choose in which order). The reflection should be in the form of a text, with diagrams and sketches for purposes of illustration and clarification.

Aspect 1  The relationship between research and design
Aspect 2  The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject/case study chosen by the student within this framework (location/object)
Aspect 3  The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework
Aspect 4  The relationship between the project and the wider social context

Case studies/references looked at:

- Ras palaces
- Previ design by Christopher Alexander
- A pattern language by Christopher Alexander
- Bologna, arcades and narrow streets
- The existing city fabric, Kirkos
- Modernist architecture from the 60’s in Addis Ababa (arcades)
- Doxiadis Mec-Hu streets
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