

Jules Gallissian
Student number 4332911

P4 Reflection

The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject chosen by the student within this framework

My project takes place as part of the studio Global Housing : Cross-cultural methods and positions in Addis Ababa. The hypothesis of this studio is that the emerging urban territories of the so-called 'global South' can develop into urban 'welfare spaces'.

However, the impressive economical as well as demographical growth that Addis Ababa has undergone since the first years of the 21st century is posing the risk to short-circuit the intelligible 'ethos' that the urban condition has developed through time until the present condition. The arrival of the light railway and the speculation it implies challenges the existing low-income neighborhoods. The urban poor are the first to be displaced from the center to the outskirts, in order to make the land accessible for more profitable developments. A master plan anticipates the complete transformation of the city into an orthogonal urban grid, which would therefore engulf the existing historical tissue. No negotiations are made. Limits are not seen anymore as way to relate and make parts productive but as a tool to guarantee social discrimination, security and control. A metropolitan carpet of generalized urbanization lacking of productive networks and of structuring elements is fragmenting the city in sterile parts.

The project therefore aims to reconcile the different parts by reflecting on the integration of infrastructures of mobility within the city, and counter the existing dynamics of exclusion. It attempts to act as a regenerator of the condition in which it intervenes by reflecting on the coexistence of the two urban models and the possible generation of 'welfare spaces' in this dialectical relationship. As the Kirkos area can be seen as a spatio-temporal transition between the two urban tissues, it has been chosen for testing the possibilities of such an idea.

The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework

The methodical line of approach of the graduation lab proposed in a first part to define the notion of 'welfare spaces' in the context of Addis Ababa through an in-depth research of the socio-spatial practices in this urban condition. A typomorphological analysis of the dominant housing figures has been followed by a thematical approach of the city, finally leading to the site survey of a chosen area. This research formed the point of departure of the individual design assignment carried out in a second phase.

The graduation lab therefore proposed to look at the city from the bottom up, starting from the particular to move to the global, using the notion of 'welfare spaces' as a 'cut-through' different scales and conditions. In the development of my personal project, I opted for a top-down approach, first considering the territorial scale and a thematical approach, to eventually zoom in and finally arrive to the local scale and spatial intervention. This choice allowed a continuity through out the methodical approach of the studio and my personal research : the focus evolved from architectonic to urban considerations in the first phase, and when back from the territorial to the local scale in the second.

The relationship between research and design

During this project, research and design evolved simultaneously and constantly enriched each other. One could say that I somehow researched by designing. In fact, I developed the research in different phases, constantly trying to refine my first interests from thematical approach to spatial intervention.

In the P2, I was already interested in the confrontation of two urban models and how the modernization process threatens the informal settlement, which soon led to a first problematic and thematical framework : how to establish synergies between the market-driven densification and the inner-ci-y slum upgrading processes ?

I identified the need to introduce a new figure that should act as a catalyst and create new centralities within the slums. This part of the research resulted in a territorial system I called 'holarchy', which could also be read as a return to the original polynuclearity of the city. By confronting myself to the architectural definition of such a figure, I was first interested in the implementation process. Rather than the actual way of doing - expropriation, relocation in the outskirts, tabula rasa, new building - I started looking for alternative ways of building that don't disturb the socio-spatial dynamics of the informal settlement. Keeping the people where they used to live during the upgrading process led to the idea of using the urban voids as temporary dwelling, accomodating the slum dwellers during the construction time of a new figure.

This marked a crucial moment in the elaboration of my project. I understood that my profound interest laid in the logistics and process through time. I therefore decided to design a tool that could enable the implementation of new typologies while preserving the people on site. I chose to take the infrastrucural void of Kirkos street as a framework to experiment this idea of tool for urbanization that mediates between two urban models. Since a tram line was supposed to be implemented in this urban leftover, I went back to research on the theme of infrastructure of mobility, analyzing the light railway project in Addis to finally arrive to my final research question : how can we create a mobility infrastructure that connects both at the territorial and local scale and participate in the upgrading process of the areas it crosses?

Looking back at it, I can say that it has been difficult for me to understand soon enough what I wanted to design. If my interests always remained in the same line of thought, I kept on experimenting different possibilities and as I went back and forth through research and design, the process has been time-consuming. However, I looked at Addis Abeba through a wide range of lenses allowing me to have a valuable understanding of the existing living conditions, the relocation process, its different stakeholders but also to grasp the important social, cultural and economical challenges that should be adressed.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

I think that my project is of important value because like Addis Ababa, many African cities are subject to a massive economical and demographical growth that challenge the existing urban condition. The infrastructure of mobility is a key element to the modernization process and thus needs to be reconsidered. By proposing an alternative way of thinking, this project questions the integration and place of such a fundamental figure within these cities, but also in our western context.