Reflection on my design process for an urban farmers community in Addis Ababa

Introduction
The project that I have chosen, with the studio global housing, is situated in Addis Ababa. I guess the main aim of the project was finding a new solution, or method, to deal with urban issues in Addis Ababa, but also on a global scale. All over the world cities are changing quickly as a result of phenomena such as rural urban migration, poverty, and modernization. Third world countries, such as Ethiopia, often adopt western methods to deal with these issues. The challenge is to find a solution that is better adapted to the culture, way of life, and possibilities (materials, skills, etc.) of the place of intervention, but at the same time can set an example for similar projects in other parts of the world.

We started the semester with group research into several topics. The first research was focused on existing housing figures in Addis Ababa (I participated in the vernacular housing group), the second on urban issues such as rural urban migration (in which I participated), and the third was a site survey on location. During our field trip we explored different areas of the city and chose our design location. I chose the urban farmers community Abajale, on the border of the city, in one of the poorest sub cities. Most inhabitants are migrants from the Gurage region in Ethiopia, and continued to practice farming after migrating to Addis Ababa. As Addis Ababa is expanding at a rapid pace, Abajale is slowly being swallowed by the city, but remains as a rural oasis within the city borders. The research in the first semester and during the field trip produced the main starting points for my design and support the location’s position as a place of transition between rural and urban: income generation, the environment, hierarchy of spaces, and vernacular architecture. In my P5 presentation I will elaborate on these themes, and explain how I have integrated them in my design.

Design process
The following report is mainly a personal reflection on my individual design process from the P2 onwards.
After we rounded up the research of the first semester, I needed to start to focus on my own design and make some decisions. At first I had a hard time starting up the design process. Before the P2 we had had limited time to work on our individual designs, and in order to get the project standing I needed to get started quickly. There were a lot of things I wanted to integrate in my design, and I wanted to make them apparent on every scale. Because I had some difficulties finding an architectural form of my ideas, I started to look for inspiration in literature. The research I had done during the research seminar into Aranya by Balkrishna Doshi and New Gourna by Hassan Fathy had been an inspiration from the start, but I needed more input. My teacher Nelson Mota mentioned ‘A pattern language’ by Cristopher Alexander, and I thought this book might give me some ideas. In ‘The Timeless way of building’ and ‘A Pattern Language’ by Cristopher Alexander, I found a lot of similarities with my own views, such as the hierarchy of public space and self-building with the use of local materials. The most important thing I learned was possibly that every element of a design is not just functioning as that element itself, but it is also part of a larger whole, and, as an element, consists of smaller elements. This became a fundamental point in my design process. Probably this is why the use of materials has been very important in my design from the beginning (apart from the self-building aspect). It is very hard to visualize a space without visualizing its components and its part in the larger whole.
The projects of Anna Heringer in Bangladesh and Pakistan have been a very important reference for me for materialization and the construction methods of my design, but also for showing the spatial and architectural qualities of these methods and materials. After I had decided that I was going to build with cob and bamboo, I started to materialize some ideas by making sections and models to explore ways of positioning the dwellings around a courtyard and accessibility of the roof landscape.
The results however were very rigid. The configuration of the houses and how I was going to integrate them into the mountainous landscape was still an issue. I looked through projects of Charles Correa, Balkrishna Doshi, and other architects in search for organizing principles, but in the end I found that they were instead confusing me even more. I tried to start again by defining what kind of spaces I wanted to create and how they would form a sequence from public to private. I searched up a lot of projects with 'in between' spaces, and also rediscovered photographs I made in Bundi in India, and I made a collage in which I positioned pictures of these spaces in a sequence from public to private.

In the end the design that Balkrishna Doshi made for Aranya was a base from which I reinvented my project. In earlier designs I organized the dwellings with the façades on the long sides, and now I turned them around into rows of long thin dwellings with the façades on the short sides. This made the project a bit more urban, and made it easier to create functional and flexible floorplans. The houses needed to be very small, otherwise they wouldn’t be affordable for the inhabitants of Abajale, but also of quality. The floorplans of Aranya managed to do this. I took them as a basis and made them a bit wider, and with a lay-out more fitting to traditional Ethiopian houses.

When I was a bit further in the design process I realised I needed to make a change, to make the project less rigid and more whole. Another concern was the roof landscape, that I hadn’t really developed much. During a tutoring session guest teacher Brook Teklehaimanot from Ethiopia mentioned he didn’t really like the idea of having staircases at the street side, because he found it would look messy, and he suggested putting shared staircases in the space between the houses. Then these spaces could also be used for ventilation and pipes. I realised this idea of the shared staircase had already played a part in my design proposal for the P2, but somewhere it had disappeared. At this stage in the design process it could however solve a lot of different issues. Apart from ventilation and aesthetics, these staircases could also be pulled up to the roof as the entrance for the roof gardens, and as a space for storage of equipment, quarters for cattle, and shared work places. Additionally, while the dwellings all have a similar (rectangular) shape, the staircases could be the place where the building blocks change angle to follow the meandering hills.

Concerning the social and environmental impacts of the design, I learned a lot from case studies that dealt with similar issues. I started by doing a short research into the technical aspects and methods to get a clear idea of how I could solve some issues mainly with water management.

The most difficult part for me often is to visualize my ideas in diagrams and sketches. In previous projects I hardly used diagrams. What did help me a lot was the experience with the group research in the first semester. We had to present the results of our research every week, which was challenging in the beginning, but in the end I realised I had started to become better and quicker at defining conclusions and visualizing them fast enough to be able to communicate them every tutoring session. But I still had a hard time figuring out how to communicate some of my ideas for the P4 presentation. The Bura Nest project in Ethiopia, was helpful, because it has a lot of similarities with my own project, such as communal farming and self-building. Looking at the principles and diagrams of this projects gave me a basis for the visualization of my ideas.

Conclusion
I have worked quite focused towards a solution for the issues I wanted to address, and stayed with the standpoints that I took at the P2 presentation. As every design project, there have been times when things went easily and times that I struggled, but overall I think I learned a lot during the research and design process, also during the periods in which my design didn’t evolve very fast. I would, however, have liked to have done a bit more exploring into the urban aspects of the design. With a little bit more time it would have been nice to have made some variations of the clusters, and more defined public spaces.