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**Publication date**

2021

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Rassegna di Architettura e Urbanistica

**Citation (APA)**

Mota, N., & Haileselassie, B. T. (2021). Housing Innovation and the Global Foreign Aid Agenda in Addis Ababa (1964-1993). *Rassegna di Architettura e Urbanistica*, LVI(165), 128-134.

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# Housing Innovation and the Global Foreign Aid Agenda in Addis Ababa (1964-1993)

*Nelson Mota, Brook Teklehaimanot Haileselassie*

## Introduction

The Zambian economist and author Dambisa Moyo has bluntly asserted that the aid-based development model that sustained many African political economies since the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 has failed spectacularly.<sup>1</sup> In her 2009 *Dead Aid*, Moyo highlights the hidden factors that make foreign aid such a costly resource for low-income countries. Since the aftermath of World War II, housing has often been part of the foreign aid “package.” In the post-war reconstruction of Europe, the Marshall Plan played a key role and funded some of the most famous (and infamous) housing settlements built in Europe in the 20th century. In Africa, however, the influence of foreign aid in shaping the built environment and people’s livelihoods is less visible, perhaps, but definitely not irrelevant. Ethiopia is a case in point.

The role played by different agendas for international development cooperation in the urban and rural transformations of Ethiopia have been thoroughly reviewed by recent scholarship.<sup>2</sup> For more than half-century, international agencies and NGOs have been invited – or invited themselves – to participate in the development of new housing strategies in Ethiopia. However, the influence of foreign aid agencies on the development of housing policies in Ethiopia, often framed under the notion of “development aid,” has not yet been critically reviewed. To address this knowledge gap, in this article we will review three cases that have explored different strategies to promote affordable housing in Addis Ababa as part of the global foreign aid agenda.

The first case, the Kolfe Low-Cost Housing Project – Aided Self Help, was developed in the mid-1960s, under the rule of emperor Hailé Selassié and partially funded by the United Nations and other partnering countries. The second case, the Ethiopia Urban Development Project, was developed from 1982 until 1991 by the Addis Ababa local authorities with the support of the World Bank. The third case, the Menen upgrading project, was developed by a Norwegian NGO – Redd Barna Ethiopia from 1988 until 1993.

## Kolfe Low-Cost Housing Project

The Kolfe Low-cost Housing Project (KL-CHP) was an international collaborative project funded by the Ethiopian government, the United Nations (UN), Germany, and Sweden. Construction commenced in January 1964 after a tripartite signing of agreement between the UN, the Municipality of Addis Ababa, and the Government of Sweden. The project was a pioneer social housing initiative in Ethiopia and it was inaugurated three years later, in 1967, by the emperor Hailé Selassié I.

The project primarily targeted low-income communities with the following set of objectives: a) To build a habitable environment for low-income communities; b) To promote home ownership for low-income slum dwellers; c) To Introduce low-cost housing construction alongside with the active participation of inhabitants; d) to develop urban housing programs by promoting available resources such as labour, material, and savings. The project envisaged to trans-

fer the ownership status from the Municipality to tenants after recovering the cost of the initial investment through monthly rental payments.<sup>3</sup>

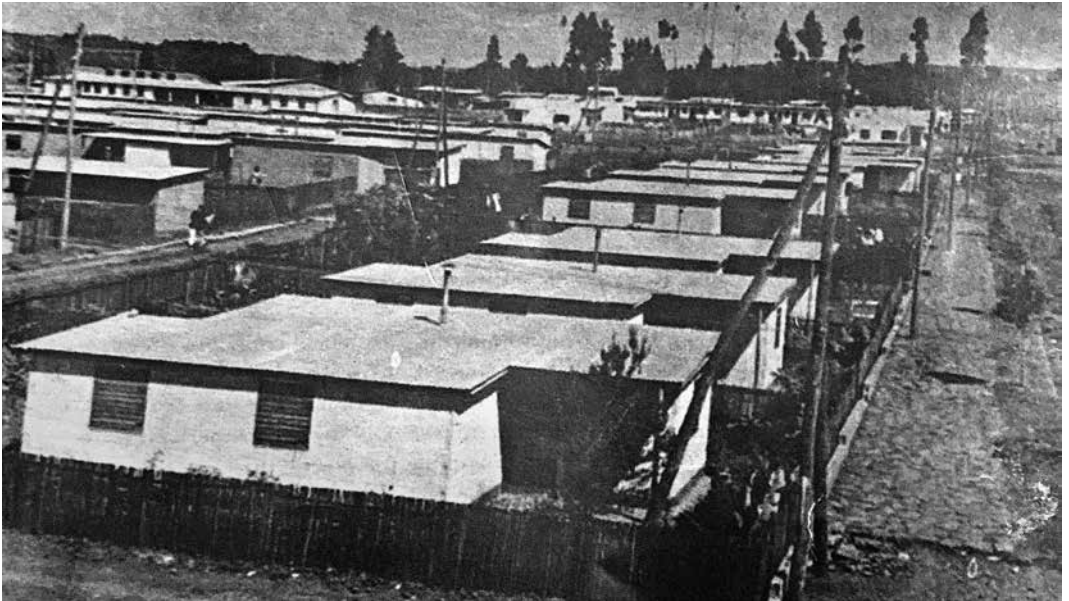
Ninety-one houses were built, along with the associated infrastructure. The project also included collective amenities, such as a school, a community centre, and a recreation field. The project was based on three different housing types. One of the most important innovations introduced in this project was the concept of aided self-help. Participants from East and North African English-speaking countries were recruited to take part in the development of a module aimed at directing the aided construction process. They first built one prototype as a group before guiding the 11 families that were preselected by the municipality to build their own houses.

According to post occupancy studies conducted in the 1970's, a few years after construction, there were some mismatches between the design of the housing scheme and the patterns of habitation of the residents. In particular there were issues concerning room adequacy for accommodating extended families, storage for cooking and bedroom privacy. The spatial configuration of the dwelling units failed to match the way inhabitants

chose to use their spaces<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, some aspects of KLCHP have added relevant social qualities to the neighbourhood. The decision to include public amenities and the intentional forging of associations such as the *Iddir* and *Equb*.<sup>5</sup> These two facets have succeeded in creating a closely knit neighbourhood.

The initial density of 130 persons/acre (approximately 53 persons/ha) was relatively low, considering Addis Ababa's housing shortage at that time. However, the strategy of providing security of tenure for the residents created conditions for self-initiated plot-based expansion and densification over time, accommodating unforeseen demographic and urbanistic changes. In effect, some plots that faced a major city beltway have been converted into multi-story structures.

KLCHP illustrates an attempt by international organisations, especially the UN-ECA, to introduce in Ethiopia models of self-help housing that were aligned with a Cold-War political strategy to develop housing policies in the so-called Third World, based on the promotion of home ownership and self-reliance. With the 1974 regime change in Ethiopia, this ideological framework was challenged, but some of its spatial premises remained.



1. View of Kolfe Low-cost Housing settlement. Unknown photographer. Source: Municipality of Addis Ababa, *The Kolfe Low-Cost Housing Project* (1968).

## Sites and Services in Nefas Silk

At the end of the summer of 1974, soon after toppling down the emperor Hailé Selassié, the leader of the revolutionary committee, Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, announced that Ethiopia should pursue three vital goals: land reform, national unity, and revolution. The first of these goals, land reform, would prove to be crucial for the politics of housing production in Ethiopia until today. In 1975, the *Derg* government published Proclamation n° 47, a decree that determined the nationalization of urban lands and extra urban rental houses. This political initiative was meant to abolish the concentration of land-ownership that prevailed through Hailé Selassié's rule, where 2% of the families owned 60% of the land.<sup>6</sup>

With Proclamation n° 47 nearly two-thirds of the houses in Addis Ababa became property of the state almost overnight, and produced two key results. On the one hand, the proclamation affected heavily the landlord class, removing them as stakeholders in housing provision in Addis Ababa. On the other hand, the proclamation created the conditions to decrease the rents for low-income families and to access vacant land to develop housing.<sup>7</sup>

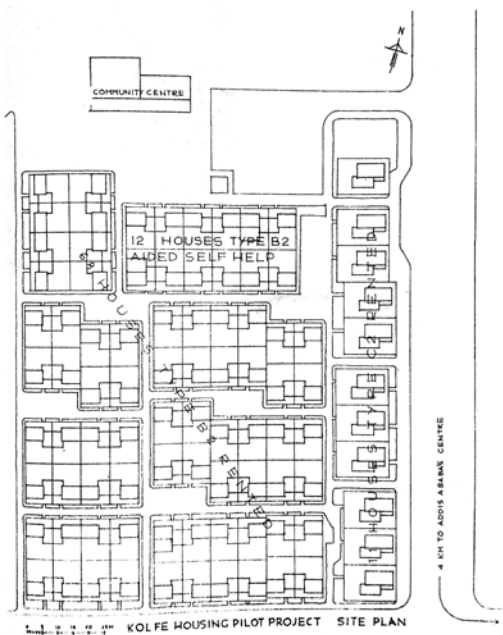
The second case we will discuss, illustrates an interesting collaboration between the emerging neoliberal agenda of the World Bank in the 1980s and the slow transition of politico-economical models of Ethiopia's Marxist post-revolutionary government, from centrally planned economy to mixed-economic system. It was against a scenario of extreme poverty and fragile urban infrastructure that in the turn of the 1980s the World Bank (WB) settled with the government of Ethiopia the implementation of an Urban Development Project for the capital city, Addis Ababa.

One of the key components of the project – site development and servicing – pursued three main goals: a) improving health and environmental conditions, b) upgrading urban infrastructure and housing, and c) building capacities in the governmental institutions responsible for housing policies. For the WB agenda these goals were instrumental to improve Ethiopia's productivity, rationalize public resources, and stimulate the construction industry.<sup>8</sup>

The project's site development and servicing component aimed at developing 2,950 serviced plots in the Nefas Silk district, a location to the South of the city centre, close to the new airport and surrounded by many industrial facilities. The preliminary plan for the Nefas Silk site, presented in 1982, followed the design practices and managerial organization advocated by affordable housing experts connected with the UN.<sup>9</sup> The majority of the 130ha site area (60%) was allocated for residential purposes, while 15% were for circulation, and 25% for community amenities, including a market, primary schools, and collective open spaces.

Most of the residential area was occupied with the so-called serviced plots. Each plot had 160m<sup>2</sup>, with the street or footpath side measuring nine meters and a total depth of eighteen meters. Creating a functional and social mix was an important aspect of the project. Hence, next to the serviced plots, the plan included also 650 dual-use plots with up to 250m<sup>2</sup> for commercial purposes or housing for the higher income group. These dual-use plots were integrated in the residential area to promote a "balanced community of mixed-income families."<sup>10</sup>

Pursuing a different approach to the social organization of the demand was also an important



2. Site Plan of Kolfe Low-cost Housing settlement. Source: Ettore Nobis, *Evaluation of the Kolfe Pilot Housing Project in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia* (1970).



3. Contemporary aerial view of Kolfe low-cost housing settlement. Photo Brook Teklehaimanot (January 2020).

political goal of the project. In the project's design guidelines, it was specified that no contractor-built core would be provided in the 160m<sup>2</sup> serviced plots. The construction of the dwellings on these plots should be funded by the Housing and Savings Bank (HSB) and developed through self-help or small informal contractors arranged by the participants. The loans would be provided according to several variants of serviced plots, whose estimated cost should range from ETB 2,200 (US\$ 1,000) to ETB 3,500 (US\$ 1,700). In the Nefas Silk project, while the sites were state property, the participants would be granted use rights for which they would pay an annual rent to the municipality. The dwelling would be held on a tenant-purchase basis.<sup>11</sup>

The construction loans provided by the HSB were given preferably to participants organized in cooperatives. In fact, active community organization became a vital component for the success of the project from the moment it was approved, in 1983, until its completion in 1991. According to the Project Completion Report, "sensitive community organization efforts mounted by the project unit resulted in the formation of cohesive and effective housing cooperatives whose self-help efforts were responsible for the efficient construction of low-income dwellings for owner occupation."<sup>12</sup>

### Clustering in Menen

The development of housing through cooperatives was a key strategic approach taken by the *Derg* administration, undoubtedly driven by ideological motivations, but also as a pragmatic approach to cope with the overwhelming housing problem that could hardly be tackled by individual initiatives or secured solely by governmental intervention.

In the context of this crisis, the lower income sections of the society, the poorest of the poor, suffered the most and lived in dire conditions in the *kebele* housing. In the late 1970s, this situation received especial attention among the international community and in 1981 the Norwegian NGO Redd Barna submitted a proposal to develop Kebele 41, one of the Addis Ababa's worse cases of urban misery and squalor. Redd Barna promoted the urban renewal of Kebele 41 through a community based integrated project focused on physical upgrading, creation of income-generating activities, preventive health programmes, and fostering community awareness and participation.

Redd Barna's Kebele 41 initiative was a novel strategy to promote slum upgrading, including the urban poor in urban upgrading processes, promoting home ownership while preserving a

sense of the collective. While there were some similar goals to the Nefas Silk World Bank sponsored project, the Menen upgrading intervention had a completely different spatial strategy. The project was based on clusters of two stories-high housing blocks comprising minimum dwelling units with areas ranging from 10m<sup>2</sup> to 25m<sup>2</sup>. In 1994 Redd Barna Ethiopia (RBE) handed over 23 housing blocks, built in different parts of the Menen area, activating the renewal process using an acupuncture approach. The new housing compounds could accommodate 198 households and were complemented with several shared facilities such as communal kitchens and water stands.

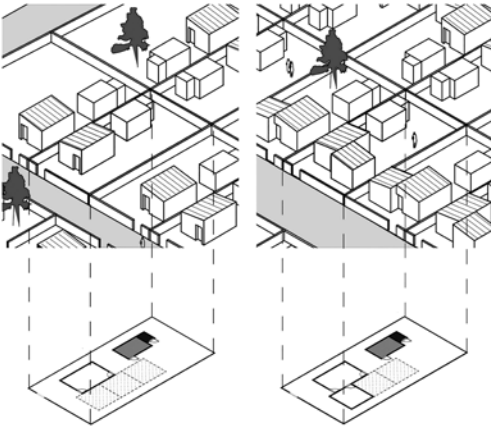
The legal status of the stakeholders was another important innovation introduced in the project. The stakeholders created a Saving and

Credit Cooperative (SACC) to manage the development of the operation and to take over the ownership of the housing units, securing their tenure status, safeguarding the development from gentrification and protecting the replacement of the intended target groups by a favoured group as had happened in previous experiences. In Menen, RBE adopted a process that avoided the transfer of benefits to higher income groups, asking the beneficiaries to contribute with a “matching input” and making the housing subsidy non-transferrable to a third party for 20 years, the age required for a child to support him/her self.<sup>13</sup>

Next to the innovative strategy to develop a community-based housing policy, providing security of tenure and preventing gentrification,



4. Site Plan of the Nefas Silk sites-and services district. Drawing by Juanjo Tenorio de Peroy, Lara Spagnol, Siqi Fan, Yıldız Haseki, 2015.



5. Axonometric perspective of the serviced plots. Drawing by Juanjo Tenorio de Peroy, Lara Spagnol, Siqi Fan, Yıldız Haseki, 2015.



7. Axonometric perspective of a cluster in the Menen RBE project. Drawing by Paolo Turconi, Arianna Fornasiero, 2016.



6. View of a street in the Nefas Silk housing district: row-houses. Photo Nelson Mota (2015).



8. View of the shared courtyard of a cluster in the Menen RBE project. Photo Nelson Mota (2016).

the Menen project created also an alternative type of housing compound, based on clusters of two-stories-high housing blocks with their associated communal facilities. Over time, this new housing type created conditions to accommodate the vernacular patterns of inhabitation of the residents and supported the development of processes of income generation, while improving people's living conditions and sanitary infrastructure.

## Conclusion

The three cases discussed in this paper demonstrate different paradigms of housing as part and parcel of the strategies of the post-Bretton-Woods global foreign aid agenda. In the Kolfe Low-cost Housing project, land ownership became a key factor to enable self-initi-

ated incremental growth and to consolidate the dwelling unit as a key asset for the household. Similarly, in Nefas Silk there is a strong interdependence between the control created by the infrastructural layer and the openness assigned to the individual housing plot. In Menen, the spatial agency of individual actors is directed to initiatives that promote a sense of community.

In the three housing initiatives discussed in this article, the agenda of the foreign aid agencies was greatly focused on promoting new systems of home ownership and progressive development based on the concepts of aided self-help housing, sites and services, and residential clusters. However, these cases have very distinct socio-spatial characteristics that have greatly influenced their performance through time. Ongoing empirical research that includes spatial analysis and ethnographic studies in these case studies suggests that



these housing experiments contributed to create resilient urban communities.<sup>14</sup>

This preliminary conclusion contrasts with critical reviews of the disruptive character of the current mass-housing program implemented by the Ethiopian government since 2002, the Integrated Housing Development Program (IHDP). The IHDP's emphasis on densification and affordability resulted in a massive process of urban renewal and development of new peripheral residential complexes based on a single typological figure, the free-standing housing block. In contrast to the three housing initiatives reviewed in this article, the IHDP lacked emphasis on communal needs. This housing type was foreign to the 97% of the citizens that lived hitherto in compounds of single-story houses. In fact, resettlement to peripheral condominium areas often resulted in the loss of income and disruption of livelihoods.<sup>15</sup> While the issue of density and affordability needs to be seriously considered to achieve a solution that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable, mass housing programs such as the IHDP need to take into account the different temporalities of dwelling social and spatial practices.

The aid-based development model that influenced the production of affordable housing for most of the last half of the 20th century needs to be critically redefined to strike the right trade-off between a focus on efficiency and an aspiration for resilience. Deeper research on the performance through time and the patterns of inhabitation in the cases discussed in this paper can contribute valuable insights to achieve this trade-off. A critical account of the productive integration of design, control, and self-reliance can contribute to bring about new approaches to cope with the mismatch between rapid demographic growth and limited financial resources in the implementation of housing policies in low-income countries.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> D. Moyo, *Dead Aid. Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (London-New York: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 144.
- <sup>2</sup> S. Delz, *Development Cooperation at All Costs – How Global Actors and Concepts Influence Urban and Rural Transformation: Case Studies from Ethiopia*, PhD Dissertation, ETH Zürich, Zürich, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> The financial scheme of making low-income dwellers home-owners initially faced challenges as most

dwellers struggled to pay the monthly rents and risked defaulting from their contract.

- <sup>4</sup> E. Nobis, *Evaluation of the Kolfe Pilot Housing Project in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia* (Lund: University of Lund – Dept. of Architecture IIB, 1970).
- <sup>5</sup> For more information about the *Iddir* and the *Equb*, see A. Pankhurst, “The Emergence, Evolution and Transformations of *Iddir* Funeral Associations in Urban Ethiopia,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 41-1/2 (2008), pp. 143-185.
- <sup>6</sup> The World Bank – Eastern Africa Projects Department, *Staff Appraisal Report. Ethiopia Urban Development Project*, Staff appraisal report (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1982), p. 2.
- <sup>7</sup> From 1976 until 1978 141 cooperatives were formed to develop housing on nationalized undeveloped plots. See *ibid.*, p. 3.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>9</sup> H. Caminos, R. Goethert, *Urbanization Primer* (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1978).
- <sup>10</sup> The dual-use plots were serviced by the same standards as the other plots but were positioned to have a privileged access to individual water and electrical connections. The aim to avoid ghettoization was explicitly mentioned by the WB team. See The World Bank, *Staff Appraisal Report*, p. 16.
- <sup>11</sup> The tenant-purchase scheme meant that the Housing and Savings Bank (HSB) would hold the land use rights and the title to the dwelling until payment of the final loan instalment.
- <sup>12</sup> The World Bank – Eastern Africa Department, *Project Completion Report on Ethiopia Urban Development Project (Credit 1366-ET)*, Project Completion report (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1992), p. III. According to the World Bank rapporteur the process of group formation based on the workplace of the participant was instrumental to facilitate the coordination of mutual self-help construction activity.
- <sup>13</sup> E. Yitbarek, *Between Renting and Owning: Saving and Credit Cooperative Based Tenure Transformation in the Inner-City “Slums” of Addis Ababa*, in S. Ege et al. (eds.), *16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Trondheim: NTNU, 2009), p. 949.
- <sup>14</sup> D. Van Gameren, N. Mota (eds.), *Global Housing: Dwelling in Addis Ababa* (Prinsenbeek: Jap Sam Books, 2020).
- <sup>15</sup> I. Mahmoud Hassen, Y. Alemayehu Soressa, *Experiences of the Poor in the Contemporary Urban Resettlement of Addis Ababa*, in E. Yitbarek Alemayehu, L. Stark (eds.), *The Transformation of Addis Ababa: A Multiform African City* (Cambridge Cambridge UK: Scholars Publishing, 2018), pp.127-159.

## Acknowledgement

Part of the research developed to write this article was supported by the research project Addis Ababa Living Lab: Creating Resilient Dwelling Clusters for Urban Resettlement in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2019-2023), jointly funded by NWO-WOTRO and TU Delft.