Reflection

Global Housing Graduation Studio: Addis Ababa Living Lab

"Respite: A Breathing Space in a City of Acrimony"

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I've often described my graduation studio experience as serendipitous.

As someone who was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and spent my formative years there, I had many pleasant memories and attachments to the city. I enjoyed the liveliness of the neighbourhoods, the friendliness of the people as well as the chaos and friction that have been present throughout its history and which shaped its peoples' character. The city itself is characterized by a patchwork of neighbourhoods which have organically formed close-knit communities which the locals refer to as 'sefers.' After years of living in diaspora, I had lost these connections, and when I found this graduation program, I reveled in the thought of having the opportunity to regain them.
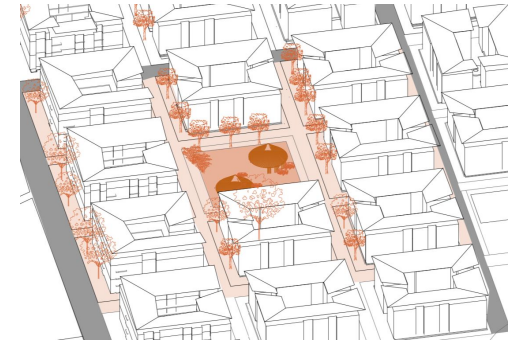
Yet, my trip to Addis Ababa was informed by multiple incidents I had not expected. The ethnic tension that culminated in mass protests in Addis Ababa and other cities in Ethiopia just prior to our trip added personal complications. As a descendent of the Oromo ethnic group, and therefore a person seen by some as an antagonist in this crisis, I had to make adjustments while staying in the city, attending workshops, and conducting interviews in the neighbourhoods. I found myself evading questions about my identity and my obvious Oromo name in order to avoid unwanted tension. I noticed stares as I spoke in my native language with family members. I tolerated occasional unpleasant remarks or jokes directed at the Oromo community. Although these experiences were devastating for me as someone who wanted to help and was attempting to reconnect to the city, they allowed me to reflect on wider issues and my place among them. I grappled with the notion of working on a project with and for people who may distrust me simply because of my ancestry. Ultimately, I found solace in the realization that I would be helping to solve a major source of this tension - the housing insecurity crisis present in the city and the rift amongst different income groups – often divided, or portrayed as being divided, along ethnic lines – which has been intensified by how the government has approached housing. I understood that I could be part of an endeavour to make the situation better for all the people.

- Relationship between project topic, the studio topic, master track (Architecture), and the master program (MSc AUBS).

The studio topic for this graduation project of Global Housing: Addis Ababa Living Lab focuses on "Creating Resilient Dwelling Clusters for Urban Resettlement". The topic aims to address the housing shortage in Addis Ababa and explore human-friendly solutions which take into account existing social ties.
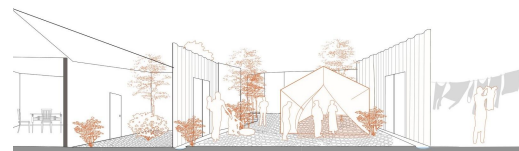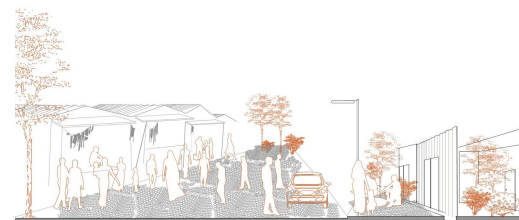
The current housing provision in Addis Ababa has mainly focused on fast and cheap solutions which, in some instances, precipitated tight and low-quality living conditions far away from major amenities. Through the quest for cheaper land to house the masses, the city resorted to employing eminent domain and acquiring farmland on the outskirts of the city. This intensified underlying ethnic and income inequality tensions and housing instability which combined to create the existing acrimony very present in the city. It is no surprise that this issue has mainly affected the poverty-stricken individuals of the city who continue to receive the short end of the stick when it comes to housing security. The Global Housing studio, and in particular the Affordable Housing projects, address these issues and explore sustainable ways of addressing the needs of the low-income community of our society.

The built environment influences social relations. With that in mind, we can say that the built environment can be used to introduce inclusion and stability in a society. My topic focuses on using open and communal spaces as social (and environmental) buffer zones which elicit spontaneous and peaceful interactions between neighbours while reintroducing traditional domestic practices in visual and verbal contact with neighbors. The project will use these spaces as both social and environmental buffer zones by introducing central courtyards in the blocks and a communal courtyard in each cluster.
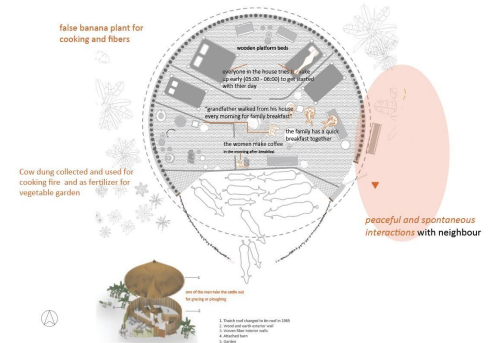

- Relationship between research and design.

During the research, hypothesis and design process, there were a few moments which influenced my design and managerial approach. First was the general research followed by readings I did in class regarding the state of housing and land ownership issues in Addis Ababa. This research helped me understand the shortfalls of the most recent mass housing schemes implemented by the city when it comes to the urban poor and how they have affected the social,
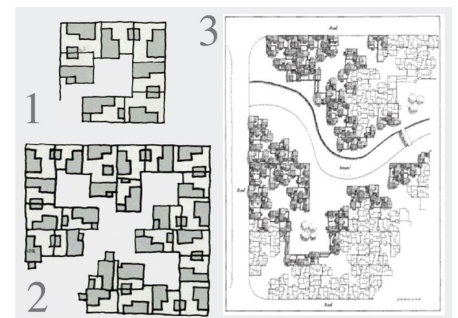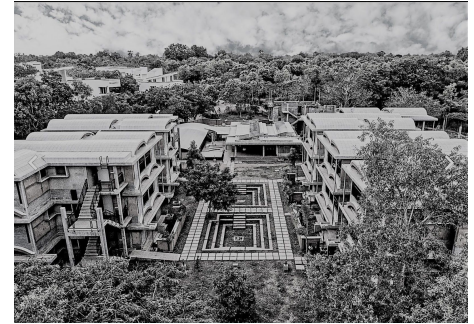
economical, and housing security of the people. In almost all cases, the top-down approach in the condominium setup does not account for the well-connected community life and spaces which exist in the inner city of Addis Ababa amongst the urban poor that are often created by bottom-up initiatives in the neighbourhoods. This underlines the importance of a balance between the top-down and bottom-up approaches in the community when designing communal and open spaces which can accommodate social activities.

The second stage of my research which greatly influenced my design hypothesis was the field trip, site surveys, and some ethnographic research I conducted in Addis Ababa. In addition to conducting interviews in two sites in Addis Ababa and participatory design – although very minimal due to time constraints – I opted to stay in one of the condominium buildings built during the early phases of the Integrated Housing and Development Plan (IHDP) mass housing scheme by the government. This experience added another level to my ethnographic research in Addis Ababa and the daily life of the inhabitants by gaining a firshand, 2-3 weeks experience in the dwelling units. From this immersion, I learned that the layouts of the dwellings – both in rental homes in Kolfe and condominium units – are restrictive (which necessitated alterations) and I was faced with some unpleasant realities that city dwellers face on a daily basis. For instance, due to the political and ethnic tension which has permeated into the housing security issues of the city, the priority of daily life activities has shifted from the communal life and close-knit social activities – a practice deeply rooted in Ethiopian culture – to privacy and housing security, This has caused the sense of community and social life to dissolve in the neighbourhoods and has forced communal spaces which can accommodate social activities to take a backseat. During this time I also did some research for a volunteer TU Delft research project – Home Life Diaries – on the traditional 'tukul' housing of Western Ethiopia where my father grew up. This work shed some light on traditional domestic practices. Additionally, through the graphic novel group work for the Research Seminar course I was able to contrast the living situation in the predominantly low-income communities such as Kolfe and the middle to high-income households such as Summit in Addis Ababa. My design proposal attempts to reintroduce social life and spontaneous interactions into daily activities and create open spaces which respond to different site conditions and accommodate different user groups at
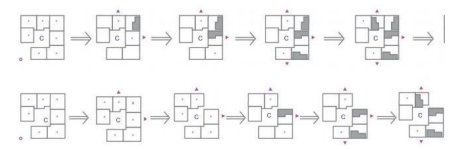
different scales – unit, building, and community – while keeping flexibility and private domestic life in mind.

The last part of my research that is taken into account for my design proposal are the case studies of three housing projects: a 1992 cooperative housing in Addis Ababa, Humanscapes Habitat in Auroville, and Belapur Housing in Mumbai by Charles Correa. The model cooperative housing in Addis Ababa built in 1992 was one of the first and most successful cooperative schemes. Although the scheme was mainly suitable for the middle-income households and failed to serve the low-income households it was meant to support, it was successful in providing an alternative and affordable home ownership opportunity with a mixed-use housing building for middle income households. My design bridges the gap between the different income groups by allocating 40% of the units to low-income households with core housing.

The other two projects are socially-conscious housing projects in India which also take different private and communal activities into account. Humanscapes Habitat is an investigative project which explores environmentally friendly housing with in-situ construction methods and introduces a human ecology by using the "principles of cohousing concept of living, facilitating interaction among neighbors for inclusive social development, economic and environmental benefits."[1] Lastly, Belapur low-income housing development takes the traditional Indian settlement patterns and applies it the spatial hierarchical configurations at the private dwellings scale "through the 'doorstep'"[2], the communal courtyard, and the larger public space. Correa emphasises the focus on the dwelling unit and the open space and expands it to the larger public space using its geometric grammar, which allows for flexibility and future alterations. This idea of spatial hierarchy which starts from the dwelling and expands into the public promenade is an approach that can work well in the Ethiopian context and its common domestic patterns. The dwelling units which make up a block can be thoughtfully connected to other blocks based on the site condition thereby creating alternating open spaces.

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[1] "Humanscapes Habitat: Auroville Design." Archello. https://archello.com/project/humanscapes-habitat.

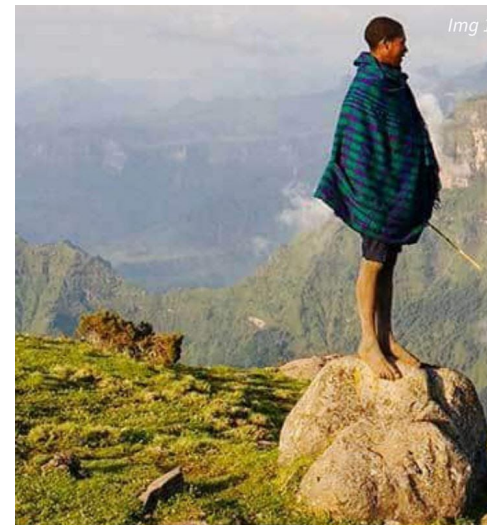[2] Davey, Peter. "Belapur Housing in Navi Mumbai, India by Charles Correa." Architectural Review.

- Research method and approach chosen in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry

The sudio's approach for the graduation project was divided into phases throughout the year. Naturally, my approach was somewhat guided by this approach. These phases were:

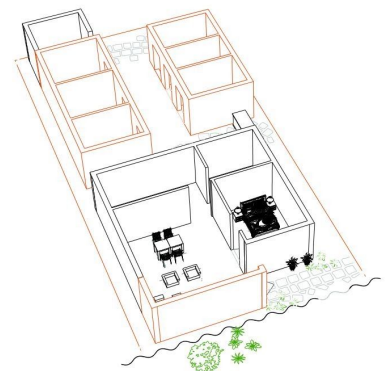Phase 1 _ Design Research / Projective Mapping

During this process, the studio class was divided into groups to study the Ethiopian – particularly the Addis Ababa – context and build an intellectual base before conducting site surveys. The research results from this process were synthesized into research booklets with four main topics: hard data, soft data, spatial mapping, and housing.

My role during this phase was within the soft data group researching on and analyzing the widely varied cultural backgrounds (including arts and craftsmanship) of Ethiopia. During this research we mapped out the commonly known history of Ethiopian kingdom, politics, religious background, and the different cultures. For my role, I studied the arts and local cultures based on the region and geographical location which not only greatly influence the common practices of the different groups but also shapes their way of life. The Ethiopian culture including clothing, food, rituals, ceremonies, and religious practices are mostly influenced by environmental influences and the neighbouring regions. Addis Ababa is a melting pot (or perhaps a salad bowl) of different cultures and ethnic groups. It is seen as a safe haven by people who travel to the city for myriad reasons. These individuals maintain their cultural expressions and customs which very much shapes their interactions in the city. For this reason, having a good understanding of the different cultural, historial, and political background is (and has been) very beneficial when conducting ethnographic research in a specific context.

Phase 2 _ Field Trip / Site Survey

The main goal of the field trip to Addis Ababa in November 2019, also broadly discussed in the previous section, was to conduct site surveys, research, and workshops for the graduation project and Research Seminar course. During the site survey and ethnographic research, we went to the site of Kolfe to conduct interviews and identify the core problems and positive attributes of the site. By

talking to the inhabitants, I was able to gather information on their daily lives in the household, their communal life, aspirations, and changes they desired to include into the redevelopment process of Kolfe. In most cases, their aspirations and the shortfalls of the original core housing provided by the government or Federal Housing Corporation (FHC) can be seen through the multiple self-aided transformations made by the homeowner over the years. (Fig. 10)

Phase 3 _ Design Hypothesis

As mentioned previously, the site surveys and research conducted in Addis Ababa during the field trip greatly influenced the problem statement and design hypothesis process. I was then able to synthesize the information I gathered and used it for the problem statement and research questions to formulate my design hypothesis. With this phase, I started to explore the urban strategy for the site and think about design strategies and phasing schemes. Although my approach has focused on maintaining the existing infrastructure and neighbourhood structure which would allow the existing social ties to transition into the new blocks, the triangular shape of the site and the existing river on the east side of the site has been a challenging factor. It has been clear that maintaining most of the existing infrastructure would be a positive approach since it is also a cost-effective and efficient way of redeveloping the site. As I delved deeper into the process, I experimented more with different ways of orienting or clustering the blocks, creating more porosity and creating a more organic connection to the river.

Phase 4 _ Preliminary Project

The current version of the design proposal is a compilation of the different research, analysis and case studies conducted throughout this process to create a human-scale community for the existing and new inhabitants of Kolfe. The design reintroduces traditional domestic practices into the central/ social spaces which were inspired by the case studies and ethnographic studies. The unit designs also take into account vernacular domestic rituals such as intimate spaces and open versus closed areas of the home. The phasing scheme used responds to existing community ties where the current households from the same 'sefer' can organize a cooperative for the housing. These cooperatives can transition into the same block which are characterized by the courtyard typologies. The proposed scheme introduces cooperative housing which was successful in Addis Ababa's housing history and makes the necessary adjustments to include low-income households.

The central courtyards in the blocks, each featuring a water collection tank and vegetation, create intimate spaces where people can enjoy their social interactions in the beautiful weather. The central courtyards also connect to a common social space for each cluster which can accomodate the social activities currently present in the neighbourhood of Kolfe.

- Relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework

The built environment greatly influences social relations, and how people experience their environment. This project explores how different spatial hierarchical configurations and social spaces can be used to include – and introduce – different income groups on the site of Kolfe while providing equitable quality of life to the different strata of the society. A sustainable, human-scale design approach which takes the community and social life into account while also respecting the private lives of the home has the ability to influence an individual's sense of security and peace of mind. Finding ways of achieving this goal in affordable housing can have great impact in the low-income community which can potentially also be realised in different contexts.

Resources:

Davey, Peter. "Belapur Housing in Navi Mumbai, India by Charles Correa." Architectural Review.
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     Social Housing System Described with Shape Grammars: The case of Belapur low-income
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     School of Civil Engineering Architecture and Urban Planning, State University of Campinas -
     Brazil. Faculty of Architecture, TU Lisbon.

"Humanscapes Habitat: Auroville Design." Archello.
     https://archello.com/project/humanscapes-habitat.