

Reading Addis Ababa
(Ongoing research on the Urban form of Addis Ababa)

Introductory note

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Imagine if Addis Ababa was one huge book - a book written by as many as millions of its citizens, both present and past. A book where the words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters are all jumbled. A book without apparent structure, story line or a plot. A book without table of contents or index. How would you read and understand this book? It would indeed be an unnerving job. Considering the time and patience that would be required you may ask why you should read it in the first place. But let's face it; you are possibly one of the authors of this book. You may have constructed your own house, or have contributed to this book by the simple act of painting the walls of your humble shack; or you are a consultant or simply an inquisitive guest. You would, therefore, want to read what you or others have written. The challenge is that your page or chapter, once written, has assumed its own life and has even started to communicate with those written by your neighbours. Hence you would also want to read what your neighbours has written. In effect we would want to read the book in order to understand what our hands and the hands of your neighbours wrought. We would want to understand how this mingling of pages and chapters affected the whole book. We would want to read so that we would understand the book and possibly make informed and constructive criticisms.

We could also imagine Addis Ababa is the book and its table of contents is the bill-boards, its words are the buildings; its phrases - open spaces and parks; its sentences - streets; its paragraphs - blocks; its chapters - neighbourhoods, its sections - districts and its index - street names and house numbers. However, our book as mentioned earlier, is not organized in this kind of neat hierarchy. Therefore, in order to read and understand it we need an "alternative" method² of reading - a contextual method appropriate for this kind of "book". Before proceeding in describing the method, however, I would like to add more on the research itself.

"Reading Addis Ababa" is an ongoing research that aims to document, analyze and understand the urban form of Addis Ababa. Further, the research intends to produce a basic document that could be of use to policy makers, academicians, and practitioners. Particularly, practitioners such as architects and planners could use the document in making informed interventions that respond both to the historical and current situation of an urban tissue. The term "tissue" is here used to denote an interwoven spatial segment of a city.

The method of analysis for Reading Addis Ababa was developed to respond to the realities of the cities of less industrialized countries. In cities of industrialized countries the divide between rural and urban is more or less a clear dichotomy - you have either a "pure" city or a "pure" rural. In cities of less industrialized countries, on the other hand, the dichotomy is rather non-

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²The method of analysis was adopted from that developed by Loecx, Andre; Vermeulen, Paul (1986), *Note on the methodology of urban analysis*. Part of the compendium on The Architecture of the City; KUL, PGCHS.

existent. Instead of a dichotomy we have an *interface* – a shade between rural and urban; between tradition and modernity. It is not a matter of either – or; it is rather both – and. It is from this interface the method seeks to develop an initial outline through which we can understand and read our cities – an outline upon which we can base our future interventions. The study of the interface in the *here and now* is investigated through *synchronic analysis* – a snap shot of a space and its activities as it happens now. But to understand the spatial logic of an area, a snap shot is not enough, we have to also go back in history and make a *diachronic analysis* – a chronological sequence of activities. Here we are not interested in historicity *per se*, as an urban historian would be. We are rather interested in selective investigation of history – a filtered investigation, picking happenings as far as they are relevant to the understanding of the spatial logic.

Where do we start to read the city? An *urban tissue* is the scale level the method considers as an appropriate entry point. The strategy is to develop the reading of the city starting from its parts. The reading of the tissue requires some systematic classification and the identification of its main elements that contributed to its formation and transformation. First the *primary element* of the tissue is identified. The primary element could be a building, a square, a street, a monument etc. There are certain criteria for the selection of a primary element:

1. It should relatively be built earlier than all or most of the tissue's elements
2. If destroyed should irrevocably change the identity and character of the tissue
3. It should have made significant contributions towards the formation of the tissue.

The more the urban element manifests the above criteria it would easily be identified as a primary element. But, to begin with, how do we know whether a primary element exists, in the first place? Here lays the importance of an *urban fact*. An urban fact is here understood as a historical happening that precedes the creation of a primary element. For example, an urban fact could be the gathering of soldiers in Addis Ababa, some time back in history, to wage a war against the fascist Italians in Maichew. This gathering happened in a certain space that was later named Maichew Square, after the place of the actual war. In this case the urban fact is the historic gathering and the primary element is Maichew square (later named Mexico square). However, before concluding that it is a primary element we have to check it against the three criteria mentioned earlier.

The diachronic analysis, so far, has led us towards answers to the questions of “when” (chronology) and “why” (urban fact). There are more concepts that should be dealt with through this analysis. These are the concepts of *typology* (what?), *morphology* (how?) and *topology* (where?). Though these are well known concepts, in order to clarify their operational use, in this research, I will discuss them briefly.

The concept of typology goes beyond the grouping of urban elements of similar characteristics. More importantly it deals with the meaning, connotation and memory that a specific element invokes or imparts. Morphology investigates as to how the tissue is formed. Through the study of morphology the elements that led to the formation of a tissue are identified. When this is done, chronologically, it may lead to the identification of layers of elements. Morphology is primarily interested in the constructed solid elements of the tissue - the form of the elements, graphically represented as *figures* on a *ground*. Topology is concerned with the landscape, sense of orientation, climate and context of the tissue. It also deals with the overall structure of the

tissue – whether it is grid or organic; whether nodes, squares and landmarks that give sense of orientation exist; and whether the structure is related to the climate, context and culture.

The concept of *type* is investigated at an individual urban element level; while morphology and topology are dealt with at the tissue level. To make the investigation as simple as possible the different *types* that exist within the tissue are first identified. Following the identification of the *types* analysis should be made on the relationship of the *types* with each other and the primary element. The search is to find out if there is any relationship of *meaning* between that of the primary element and the rest. Further, the chronological transformation of the primary element and the rest of the *types* are investigated in order to observe whether the primary element's influence exists. Similarly, the chronological transformation of the tissue's morphology and topology are investigated in relation to the primary element's transformation. The whole idea is to analyze how the very existence of the primary element and its subsequent transformations had affected the typology, morphology and topology of the tissue.

The above has described the significance of the diachronic analysis in Reading Addis Ababa. However, the history of the spatial logic is not enough. We need to know the current condition of the spatial logic in relation to human activity. This is done through synchronic analysis – a snap shot of the tissue and the human activities it supports or resists. The aim is not to look at the tissue as a tourist observer. Rather the method relies on themes that would serve as filters of observation and analysis. These filters are good enough to pick the interfaces upon which Addis Ababa is based. These interfaces are tensions between: tradition and modernity, rurality and urbanity, place and mobility. These interfaces are documented through photographs, sketches, video recording, text and direct observation.

Further, the investigation relates the snapshot (synchronic analysis) to the formation and transformation of the tissue (diachronic analysis). The hope is that through the combination of these two methods and the instrumentality of the concepts of urban fact, primary element, typology, morphology and topology to understand the spatial logic of a tissue. In other words the questions of “when”, “why”, “what”, “how” and “where” were addressed in order to document and understand an urban form.

The above described method was used to “read” fourteen tissues of Addis Ababa. Fourteen masters students were involved, as part of a course on the “History of Urban Form and Mobility”. As mentioned earlier, Reading Addis Ababa is an ongoing research. The intension is to continue investigating as many tissues as possible and develop a comprehensive picture of Addis Ababa. Such researches and other similar ones would save us all from having the often lamented misplaced projects. Reading Addis Ababa is thus an attempt in revealing the “sense” and/or “non-sense” of Addis Ababa – making it understandable and readable. Legibility may lead to the making of informed additions, subtractions and changes to this rather extremely valuable book - Addis Ababa.