

Reflections on the urban changes of Addis Ababa

“Slums”, Change and Modernity¹

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This essay is about the ongoing urban change in Addis Ababa. It is about the importance of learning from the positive features of slums³ and transferring them into urban redevelopment schemes. The essay does not seek to preserve the physical fabric of slums. It rather highlights the responsiveness of slums to the dwellers' way of life and their livelihood. It cautions against the skewed influence of architectural modernism that focuses on material aspects at the cost of cultural needs. It calls for exploring the notion of 'another modernism' in redeveloping slums. 'Another modernism' that do not take culture as its excuse to preserve slums, rather that accepts the need for redeveloping slums while responding to the socio-economic requirements of the majority low-income people.

Change

Change, in this essay, is understood through three filters: scale, speed and depth. Scale refers to the visibility and magnitude of change; speed refers to the tempo of change; while depth refers whether the change is structural or cosmetic/superficial. The scale, speed and depth of the ongoing urban change in Addis Ababa, could be said, is of the highest degree. When change, as characterized by the three filters, is of the highest degree it only becomes appropriate to use the term 'transformation'. This is to say that while the term change could easily be associated with gradual movement from one state to another; transformation, on the other hand captures extreme change characterized by large scale, high speed and structural depth. Following long years of deep slumber, unprecedented urban transformation is happening in Addis Ababa. The construction of roads, high rise buildings and condominium housing blocks are transforming the city for good – lending it a new sky-line. Since 2004 about 80,000 condominium housing units are built, with more to come. Even more visible are the new roads

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³ Owing to its associated derogatory connotations the use of the term "slum" was largely considered inappropriate. As a result more neutral terms that capture the diversity of settlements and the potential of slum dwellers have been in use. Following the mid 1990s, however, the term slum was re-introduced in the development discourse as organizations formed by dwellers in some countries started to refer themselves as "slum dweller" organizations.

crisscrossing the city thriving to create a well connected network that has not been there for years.

One of the major factors that necessitated the ongoing transformation of the city is rapid urbanization and the ensuing challenges that come with it. Most least-industrializing countries, and particularly Ethiopia, is urbanizing at a high speed. The main reasons for this are: rural – urban migrations, the increase of populations within the city itself and the redefinition of its boundary as it continues to spread out and set new territories as time goes by. Rapid urbanization burdens the existing limited infrastructure, social facilities and basic necessities such as housing. It results in overcrowding the already crowded settlements. As a result more than seventy percent of the neighborhoods and housing units in the city are considered slum. These houses, which are commonly known as *kebele* houses are generally single storey mud and wood construction. They are occupied by the majority of low-income people. The rapid urbanization is also one of the major factors that have hindered bridging the gap between housing demand and supply. It is estimated that more than 300,000 housing units are required to address backlog, new demand and the housing needed to replace dilapidated slums.

Relatively speaking, as compared to the other parts of the city, in the inner-city the pressure for change is extremely high. The inner-city is a place where the possibility of staying of low-income households is constantly pressurized by the interests of the market and the government. Due to the relatively available trunk infrastructure and utilities, there is a tremendous pressure from both the government and developers to redevelop the *kebele* housing-dominated slums. The inner-city covers less than 12 % of the 54,000 ha total area of Addis Ababa. It is home to about 40% of the population, estimated at 3 million. No wonder the master plan earmarked the entire core city and the intermediate zone for renewal and upgrading, respectively. Thus it can be said that with the exception of the expansion area the entire city is set for transformation.

Then the question is what has been done to address the need for transformation. Most of the ongoing transformations of a major scale are government driven. The condominium housing, the regularization/legalization of informal settlements, the ‘eco city’ upgrading in the inner-city settlements, the impressive road construction, and major core-city renewal activities can be cited. The main issue here is whether the emerging change is responsive or not to the cultural and material needs of the inhabitants, particularly of the majority low income people. The thesis of this essay is that there are positive elements of slums that could be transferred to the emerging new neighborhoods of condominium housing.

Slums and modernity

The use of the word slum dates back to the 16th century. At that time signifying 'squalid, overcrowded and wretched housing'. Later, during the 19th century the word was used in quotation marks associated to: crime, drug abuse, epidemic etc. In the 20th century following to the need of using more precise terms, words such as 'tenement houses' and deteriorated neighborhoods were used. In developing countries slums refer to lower quality or informal housing and are used interchangeably with shanty houses, squatter settlements, informal housing, spontaneous settlements and low-income community. In the case of Addis Ababa the term slum refers to the deteriorated physical condition of settlements rather than the social aspect. In most cases they are not seen as segregated places of hopelessness and crime; in fact the close social network prevalent in the Addis Ababa's slums provides a cushion for vulnerability and risk.

As mentioned earlier, despite their physical condition, there are a number of positive features of slums that could be considered in developing new neighborhoods. The first is the street life in slums. Roads in the slums of Addis Ababa are not just for reaching from point "A" to point "B". They are rather vibrant places of multi-tasking. Domestic activities and home based businesses extend and flow out to the street. The usual scenery is drying laundry hanging across streets, women preparing food in make-shift kitchens, street vendors selling goods, pedestrians and vehicles moving – all at the same time. Further, the street is a social place of interaction. One can say that the livelihood of most of the low-income people depends on the connection between the housing units and the streets. The ambivalent activities on the streets and the small kiosks punctured fences lend the streets vibrancy and safety.

Other elements that exist in slums are pockets of common spaces. These are voids between housing units used both for day to day household chores and larger communal activities. These spaces, owing to their varying sizes and locations, accommodate from the smallest outdoor activities such as manual coffee grinding to the largest activities such as erecting tent for wedding or funeral occasions. Thus, the spaces are amenable for private, semi-private/semi-public and public activities which are highly desirable and responsive to the culture.

However, generally, slums are seen as signs of backwardness and anti-modern. The term modern as elusive and difficult as it is for definition it has great influence in setting a goal for urban changes. In the world of architecture and urbanism modernity is associated with the architectural modernism that became popular after the Second World War in relation to industrialization – the "cultural expression of the machine age". It is characterized by abstract forms, industrially produced building materials, efficiency and order through the zoning of functions, the improvement of health through sunlight and ventilation, top-down social

engineering, and generally the creation of the rational man. The influence of modernism was so strong that it spread in many least-industrialized countries. However, since its prerequisite was 'industrialization' it was implemented with out much success. Its drawbacks were exasperated by its often criticized characteristics of neglect for cultural aspects that resulted in a dehumanized and faceless urban character. Notwithstanding these modernism has still persisted. Witness its influence on the ongoing Addis Ababa's condominium housing that is partly replacing demolished slums. Despite this influence, however, one must recognize the advantages and contributions of the condominium housing towards alleviating the daunting housing challenge. In fact it has many positive elements, in terms of affordability, easing the crucial housing shortage, catering relatively decent housing, creating job opportunities, invigorating the construction and transportation industries.

Nevertheless, there is always room for improvement. Hence, a reflection is in order to seek lessons from the positive elements of the slums and their possible implementation in new housing neighborhoods. This may further require questioning the influence of modernism and seek inspiration from, what some authors call, 'another modernism'. Another modernism that blends the health and technology aspect of classical modernism with the above discussed positive qualities of slums. The point of departure of another modernism, usually, is the cultural aspect of African or least-industrialized countries. It is argued that, temporally speaking, Africa is not lagging behind the so called developed countries, rather the diversified African way of life is by itself part of modernism or it is another modernism. This argument, however, inadvertently advocates the preservation of the physical condition of slum areas which is often in appalling condition. The reason being, the prevalent discourse of another modernism masks the need for material development by focusing on culture. Therefore, this essay propagates a type of another modernism that recognizes the need for the improvement of the physical condition of slum areas while at the same time responding to the socio-economic requirements of the low income people.

In conclusion new housing neighborhoods should be designed taking into account both the material and cultural needs of the majority low income people. Fulfilling the requirements of health and affordability important as they are of equal importance are also issues of creating 'places' – spaces that strongly enhance the socio-cultural and economic activities of people; places that are the combination of space, context and social interaction. We need to aspire for having more and more neighborhoods that enhance a sense of belongingness, that make their residents proud in identifying themselves with the area, that boosts their identity. This calls for looking at neighborhoods not as a mere collection of housing units, as if people were numbers, but also as places that satisfy the social, cultural and psychological needs.