



# BUILDING ETHIOPIA

SUSTAINABILITY AND INNOVATION IN ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

ZEGEYE CHERENET  
HELAWI SEWNET



**EiABC**

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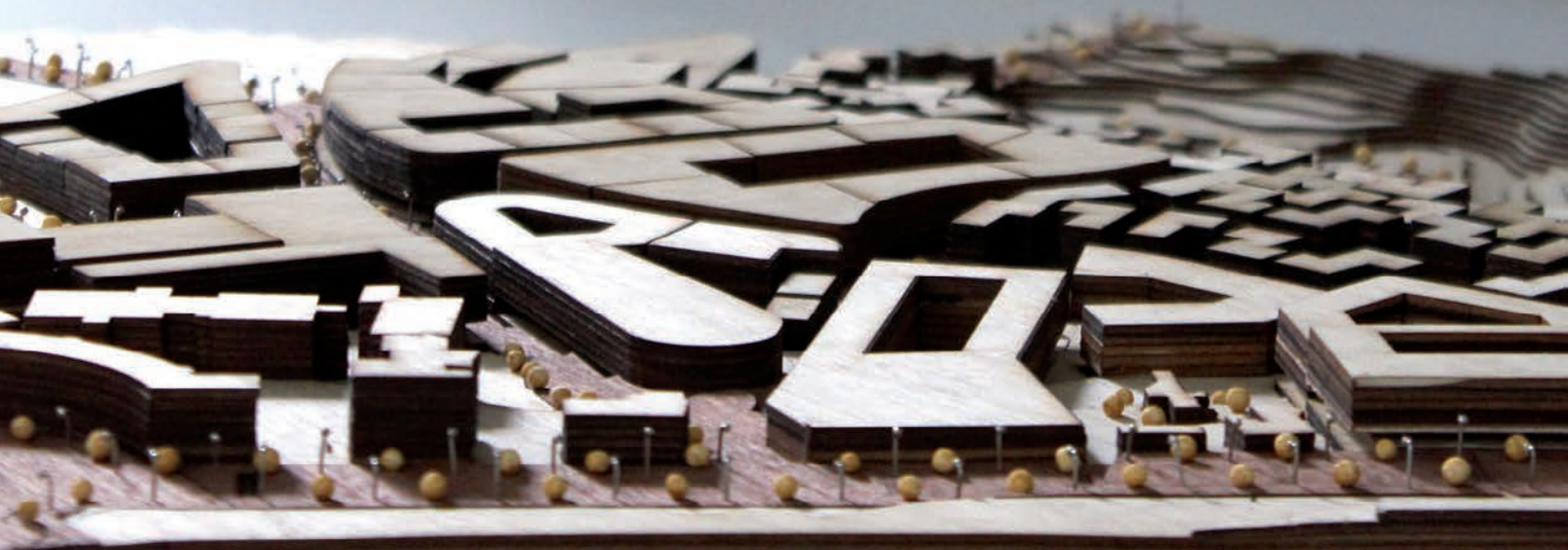
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# ADDIS ABABA

## EXTRACTING CHARACTER FROM VOIDS

>> DIRK HEBEL | ELIAS YITBAREK

When you move through the streets of Addis Ababa in 2011 you are flanked by iron metal sheets painted in green and yellow stripes. These sheets became lately an omnipresent companion in the city and fence the areas of major urban renewal projects. This reminds one of a tabula rasa ideology, proposed by the modern movement in the beginning of the 20th century in Europe. But Addis Ababa is not a playfield of ideologies; it is simply facing the question of how to handle large areas in the central part of the city, which are mostly single story developments and defined as “no-or low-income” residential areas, or simply: slums.

When Menelik II founded Addis Ababa in 1886, he asked the chiefs and their entourage who helped him to win victory over the Italian occupation to settle around the emperors palace (the “Ghebi”), so he could continue to be in control of them. These small neighborhoods, called “sefer” became the motor for the development of the city. First, the “sefers” were separated by natural buffer zones as rivers, slopes or streams, but during the years, those boundaries blurred more and more due to the incredible speed of urban growth. Nevertheless, those first settlement areas stayed for the last 125 years almost as naturally preserved social communities, with people and families living up till today in a very close economic and social relationship to each other. They can be seen as micro-cities in a larger urban network. The areas are marking and occupying most of the inner city, but do not correspond to the City Administration plans of density, sanitation, safety or public accessibility.

In 1986, a Master Plan was developed for Addis Ababa under an Ethio-Italian technical cooperation team, consisting out of 75 Italian and 45 Ethiopian professionals. The plan, which was introduced only in 1994, proposed for the first time utility systems and road networks as major planning instruments and attempted to introduce the idea of Addis Abba as a multi-centered urban conglomerate. But it focused mostly on new large residential development sites on the outskirts of Addis Ababa and the extension of road networks towards those sites as well as connections to neighboring cities. As a result, industrial areas are developing along these axis in a breathtaking and uncontrolled speed. The city is eating its hinterland and almost forgets its unique history and character.

In 1998, the City Administration initiated a revision of the Master Plan, which was introduced in 2003. The vision is a plan that is responsive to a market-economy. In this light it attempts to re-organize major functional areas of the city and introduced a double ring road system for better accessibility to all parts. Various “sefer” areas were destroyed by those road projects or were simply cut in half. With it, social bounds and income possibilities were affected for the first time since 1886 and the people of the corresponding areas had to leave the inner city to the outskirts in hope to find new possibilities.

But next to major road projects the 2003 Master Plan also proposes to re-develop the old “sefer” areas, now called districts or “Woredas”. Fourteen new major urban projects in six districts, covering more than 280 hectares of land in the core area of Addis Ababa are in planning to be redeveloped under the urban renewal strategy or are already under construction. Higher densities, better living conditions, connection to urban utilities, safety and economic prosperity are the guidelines for those developments. Of course, there is no question of the necessity of such a major urban redevelopment in the inner city, which is occupied almost 80% by single-story corrugated iron sheds. But the question, which needs to be addressed, is the one of the character of Addis Ababa. Is it enough to focus a master plan just on an economic oriented market ideology? Looking at three case studies, this question has to be discussed. Otherwise, Addis Ababa may become a city without character. All fourteen urban projects in question use the planning instrument of a so-called Local Development



a >>



b >>



c >>



d >>

a >> The green and yellow stripes fence the new development areas in Addis Ababa

b >> The „Ghebi“ area marks the start of the urban development of Addis Ababa

c >> Addis Ababa was found as a settlement of separated neighborhoods, which still today mark the character of the city

d >> Small huts, so-called “Tukuls” were the first constructions in Addis Ababa

opment Plan (LDP), also known as detail plan. Those plans can be seen as lower level strategies and are used for the implementation of a master plan, which is otherwise too general. In theory, LDPs, among other things, try to capture the physical, social and economic aspects of a city. One of the main objectives of LDPs is to create a place that defines the life of its users: a place that is shaped by building blocks, street networks, squares, facades, etc. in other words, a place that is crafted by urban design elements endowing it with a character.

When urban places of character nurture a civilizing effect upon their citizens and when they allow citizens to identify themselves, in the words of Norberg-Schulz, with the ‘Genius loci’ of the place, then we can truly say that there exists urbanity. ‘Genius loci’, here, is understood as the context of a place linked to societal connotations. Therefore, in the broader sense, our interest is in search of an urbanity of character, which includes: conviviality, security, social contact, aesthetics, productivity and generally the wellbeing of its dwellers.

The vision and concept underlining the preparation of LDPs should be the basis for shaping the urban fabric. How a given area or a space is transformed into a place, therefore, is greatly anchored on the concept and strategy of an LDP. In this article, emphasis is made on the creation of character through the primacy of open spaces (voids) that harbor social contact. Social interaction is not a luxury but a necessity. It is not an externality to the collective identity of human beings but an essential characteristic.

e >> In the Local Development Plan of ‘Kasanchis’, objects are given priority over open space

f >> In ‘Kasanchis’, objects control the appearance of the area, old networks and connections are destroyed



e >>

## THE “PARCEL (PLOT) – BLOCK – OPEN SPACE” LOGIC THE CASES OF ‘KASANCHIS’ AND ‘LIDETA’

Following the 2003 master plan, two areas were the first ones following an urban renewal strategy and were developed with an LDP. The first is, ‘Kasanchis’, an old area in the central city, not far away from Meskel square and the “Ghebi”, which was built under Italian occupation in the 1940s. It was bulldozed in 2006 and underwent a major transformation towards a new business quarter. Several office buildings, hotels and service units are developed, after the old building mass was completely removed. The usual practice in preparing local development plans led to parcel the given area into plots of land and assign the Building Up Ratio (BUR), land use and building height. What is expected from the architect is to respect these parameters, which are very much focused on the individual building. This phenomenon can also be witnessed at Lideta area, the second major re-development project in the city. With the help of an LDP, the ‘object’ was given priority over the ‘void’, even so traditional social spaces, roads and pathways and historical buildings formed an appropriate network already. But instead of building the LDP on those already existing qualities, the plan proposed an open field ideology, neglecting questions of identity, geography and with it character. The process that results in this kind of urban fabric could be summarized as first “Parcel”, then “Block” then “Open space” approach. Contrary to the reality of a city it starts from a strict two dimensional vision



f >>





g >>



h >>



i >>

ending up into a collection of three dimensional blocks placed in fragmented left over open spaces. Generally, in Addis Ababa, once the municipality permit is secured the architect is usually cut-off from the consecutive design and implementation processes and the final product and construction is largely left to the developer. Thus, at the moment, one can say that the design and construction of a building is not only 'object- oriented' but also 'wallet-driven'. The usual / observed result is a jungle of buildings with left over spaces in-between. The focus is so much on the object/ "figure" that the open space/ "ground" emerges as it comes. More often than not, these negative left over spaces end up being no-man's land or garbage collection spots; hence, the need for reversing the usual "Parcel – Block – Open space" design sequence into "Open space – Block – Parcel" logic.

## THE "OPEN-SPACE – BLOCK – PARCEL" LOGIC THE CASE OF BASHA WOLDE CHILOT

Basha Wolde Chilot is located in a prominent historical part of the inner-city of Addis Ababa and will be the third major redevelopment area of Addis Ababa. It covers about 39 hectares of land bordering a river to the West, the national Parliament premises to the East, Arat Kilo area to the North and an old settlement to the South. The area served under Menelik II as the servant quarter for the palace and was characterized by its sloped area towards one of the rivers of Addis Ababa, running from the North to the South. Again, in a tabula-rasa approach, the original settlement of Basha Wolde Chilot was demolished and an LDP was prepared that could guide the new development. Even so the LDP was already agreed on by the municipality, the Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development (EiABC) was asked to rethink the strategy, since the draw-backs of the two first re-development areas became more and more obvious during their construction.

In contrast to the LDP, which was developed before, the urban design strategy of EiABC for the Basha Wolde Chilot project starts from carving out a network of open spaces from a perimeter- block layout. The vision is to have well defined spaces that could mainly serve for social and small scale economic interactions. The open spaces are designed in such a way that their scale creates a sense of intimacy and functional hierarchy. This is opposed to the common practice of having large-sized fragmented blocks surrounded by bigger open spaces that do not relate with the dwellers. The concept of small scale network of open spaces is inspired by the spatial fabric of the low-income areas of Addis Ababa. These are voids between housing units used both for day to day household chores and larger communal activities as well as small scale trade 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 tents for weddings or funerals. Thus, the spaces are amenable for private, semi-private/semi-public and public activities, which are highly desirable and responsive to the culture. The aspiration is 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 – a place of character that enhances a

g-i >> Design and construction of buildings in Lidetta is not only 'object- oriented' but also 'wallet-driven'. As a result, the jungle of buildings with left over spaces in-between.

j >> The Basha Wolde Chilot area was bulldozed, as the two first inner city redevelopment areas were as well.



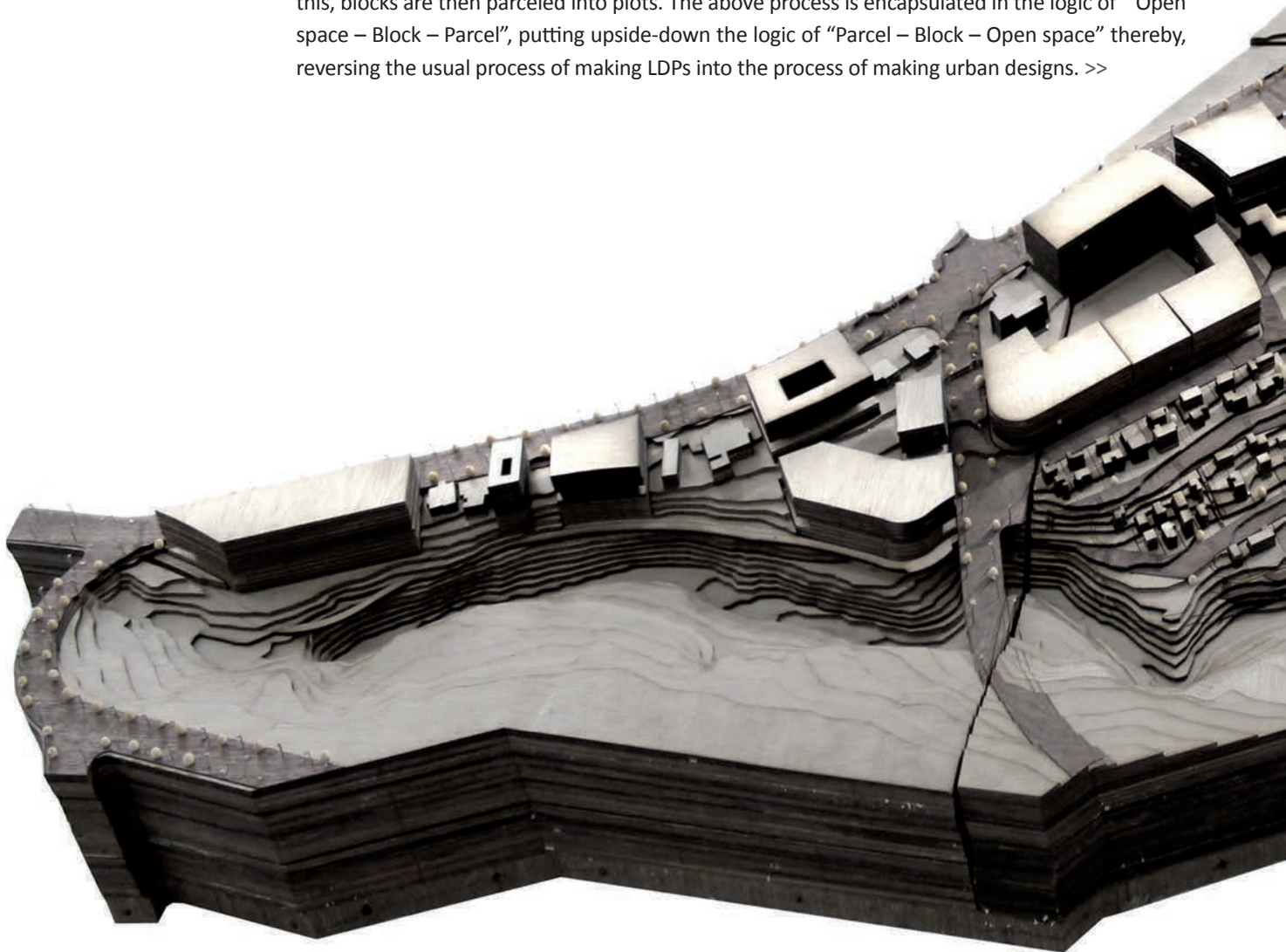
j >>



k >> The vision of the proposed project by EiABC is to have well defined spaces that could mainly serve for social and small scale economic interactions. The open spaces are designed in such a way that their scale creates a sense of intimacy and functional hierarchy

sense of belonging that make their residents proud in identifying themselves with the surrounding, thereby boosting their identity. In addition, the block structure is surrounded by colonnades, which cover the social spaces from sun as well as rain, and follow the tradition of the neighboring Piazza area, build by the Italians in the 1940ies. EiABC even proposed a new instrument to regulate the façade structure of the buildings, avoiding full glassed facades, which destroy the social character of the neighborhood and increase the energy consumption of the buildings.

This calls for looking at neighborhoods not as a mere collection of building blocks, as if people were numbers, but also as places that satisfy the social, cultural and psychological needs. This concept is anchored in the very belief that social interaction and the need for bonding with fellow dwellers are inherent characteristics of human beings. The molecules of minerals, plants, animals and human beings bond with each other to make the larger bodies exist for what they are. It is nature's law that bondage and interaction gives life while separation and disintegration leads to death. Similarly, at a larger scale, dwellers need to bond with their fellow neighbors to enjoy a fulfilling life. Consequently, the approach that propagates the supremacy of open spaces/voids over blocks/objects creates places that are conducive for human interaction. Therefore, in the Basha Wolde Chilot project the open spaces were designed while inseparably being defined by perimeter blocks. The concept of perimeter-block avoids the fragmentation of buildings both horizontally and vertically through the use of contiguous layout and uniform height. Dictated by this, blocks are then parceled into plots. The above process is encapsulated in the logic of "Open space – Block – Parcel", putting upside-down the logic of "Parcel – Block – Open space" thereby, reversing the usual process of making LDPs into the process of making urban designs. >>



k >>

