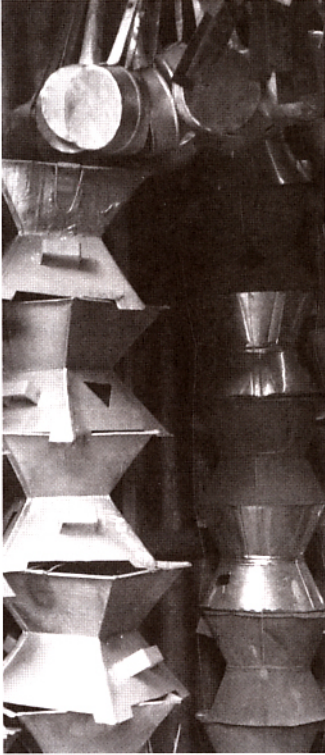


Addis Through The Looking Glass

There is the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way.¹

– Lewis Carroll



KITCHEN UTENSILS MADE FROM RECYCLED SCRAP METAL. PHOTO: THEANO MAZARAKI.

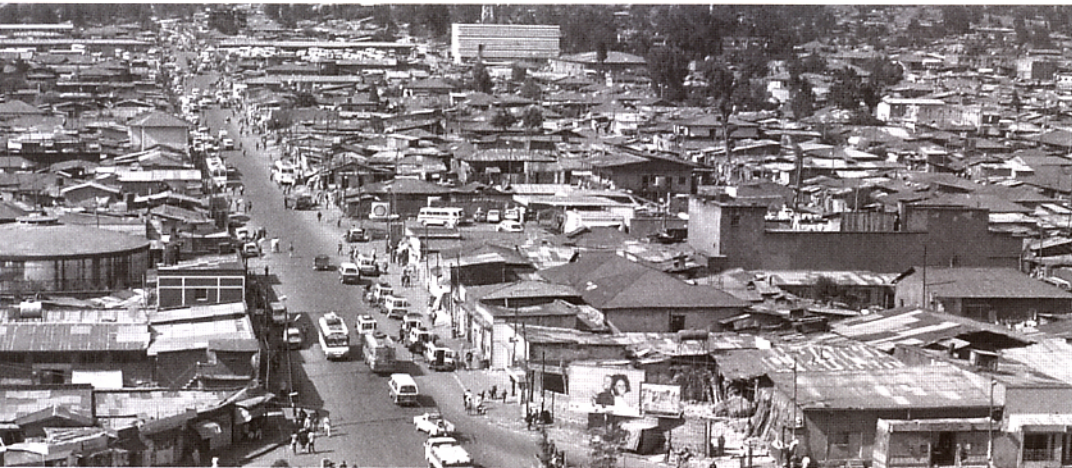
The dynamic of transactions, hustle and bustle of activities, hodgepodge assortment of goods, colors, and smells are all simply breathtaking. Corrugated metal roofs cover stalls piled with diverse products offered for sale: woven baskets, coffee, charcoal, manure, used tires, building materials of every sort, and coffins made of wood. Thousands of people crowd the streets and alleys, bartering along the way in hope of making a good deal. As the popular saying goes, “Around here one can even bargain for a new soul.”²

While the atmosphere exudes an air of exoticism for any outside observer, a closer look at the everyday lives of the local population struggling to survive reveals the initial perception as deceptive, calling into question the allure of the place as seen by foreign eyes – and a most curious place it is. Actually, we are in one of the poorest countries of the world, or more precisely, in Ethiopia, and in the middle of the largest African market, the so-called *Mercato Ketema* district of Addis Ababa. Accustomed to the proverbial good life, and in the face of this alien form of market economy, we wonder whether its principles are indeed not more sustainable than those promoted in the West. An unexpected mirror-effect comes into play. Whereas the developed world is held up as a universal measure toward which all developing countries must strive, another standard drives the daily workings of this culture. Were we to look back at the world from the vantage of the Mercato, it would not be from a disposition of envy but rather one of suspicion, for history has already provided a bitter lesson on the consequences of colonization.

The very fact that the name of the market is of Italian origin points to Africa's troubled past, when European powers carved the continent into pieces. Although Ethiopia defiantly asserts never to have been a colony, the country nonetheless was under the rule of Mussolini from 1936 to 1941. During this short phase of Italian occupation, the fascist regime undertook an ambitious restructuring of the city to give it a new face – a declarative sign of territorial appropriation. Part of this

1. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, first published 1872 (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1998), 125–26.

2. Katrin Hildemann and Martin Fitzenreiter, *Äthiopien* (Bielefeld: Peter Rump Publishers, 1999), 199.



VIEW OF THE MERCATO DISTRICT.
PHOTO: NOBORU KAWAGISHI.

3. During the Italian occupation, the original location of the Mercato in the city center was reserved strictly for Italians, a measure that drove the indigenous Amhara and Tigray to the city outskirts. While Mussolini's regime had authorized the construction of large public works projects in the attempt to pacify local resistance, racial separation – including residential and commercial segregation – continued to be enforced as thoroughly as possible. Thomas P. Ofcansky and Laverle Berry, *Ethiopia: A Country Study* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 58–60. See also “Mussolini's Invasion of Ethiopia and the Italian Occupation,” *Ethiopia. Country Studies Program* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, 2001).

4. Heyaw Terefe, *Contested Space: Transformation of Inner-city Market Areas and User's Reaction in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia* (Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2005), 126.

5. “Mercato Local Development Plan,” *Addis Ababa Development Plan* (Addis Ababa: City Planning Commission, 2002), 73. Another source indicates that “some 200,000 people live and work” in the Mercato district. See Thomas Vesper, “Masterplan for the Mercato,” *Akzente. Urban Management* (Eschborn, Germany: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, GTZ, 2005), 14–17.

undertaking entailed relocating the indigenous market from the city's center to its outskirts. As a clear measure of urban segregation, the new European elite overtook the city's core, with the local population removed and kept at safe distance.³ Laid out on a grid, a new neighborhood arose straight from the drawing board, a matrix of sorts to be filled when needed by market stalls, booths, or shops. In keeping with the rules of good planning, public buildings and amenities, such as a mosque, a square with a bus station, a city hall, a cinema, a hotel, and a courthouse, were envisioned for the community, but only a few were ever realized.⁴

Notwithstanding the politically motivated origins of its formation, the Mercato emerged during the following decades as the central platform of urban commerce. According to official sources, the market today encompasses an area of approximately 500 acres and accommodates roughly 100,000 inhabitants, while its constituent activities spread far into adjacent districts.⁵ Not merely a hub of trade, the quarter serves as a settlement in its own right, integrating a multitude of mutually supporting functions; it is a place where goods are sold and produced; it is likewise a place of residence, social encounter, and religious worship. This programmatic blending is mirrored directly in the structure of the built fabric: market stalls are oriented outward, facing the streets, with workshops and living spaces commonly located to the rear – a socio-material diagram reflecting a spontaneous mode of bottom-up land appropriation.

This ostensibly simple spatial scheme is underwritten by a complex social network that ensures the performance of the overall urban system. The collective web is reinforced by craftsmen associations and trade unions housed in low-rise clusters, market halls, or, more recently, two- and three-



story buildings. In turn, the neighborhood is zoned according to specific categories of services and products. One encounters, for example, a sector for spices, another for agricultural produce, and still others for light metalwork, textiles, plastics, or imported electronic equipment. Although ordered, the boundaries between various subdivisions are blurred by the casual unfolding of events – or simply by the way things go, for the quasi-formal market organization is persistently thrown off balance by informal market practices.

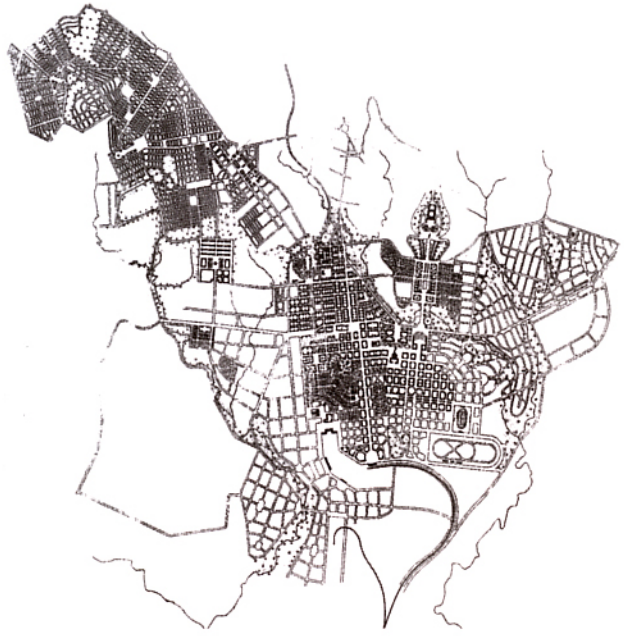
With respect to the coexistence of formal and informal frameworks, the Mercato takes on the role of a key relay between rural and urban communities. It provides an arena for the sale of agricultural goods and serves as a landing pad for the ever-increasing hordes of migrant farmers hoping to earn a better living in the city. As the majority of these migrants are not legally registered they stand little chance of getting a commercial license. Nevertheless, their presence is tolerated. They occupy temporarily unclaimed spots wherever possible, even peddling their products in the middle of the street if necessary. One encounters here yet another level of land appropriation, only this time in the form of a roaming proprietorship.

Within this machinery, not only people are on the move but also the material resources of the city. Goods no longer used are salvaged and revalued for sale in the market – a type of recycling before the letter, a literal and opportunistic mining of the city that involves reprocessing whatever is at hand. What is typically considered as waste in the West is reappropriated in Addis Ababa through modest means and on-the-spot ingenuity: old tires are converted into satchels for pack-mules; soft-drink bottles are turned into toys; scrap metal is transformed into household utensils.⁶ Other products, from

6. Lukas Küng and Dirk Hebel, "Lernen von Addis Abeba," *archithese* (March/April 2007): 26 and 31.



ITALIAN MASTER PLAN FOR THE RELOCATED MARKET QUARTER, OR MERCATO, CA. 1939. RIGHT: ITALIAN MASTER PLAN FOR ADDIS ABABA, CA. 1939. IMAGES COURTESY THE AUTHORS.



discarded plastic sheets to recovered copper pipes, reinforcing bars, or beverage crates, need only be cleaned before being recirculated as building material. When the interplay of supply and demand is constrained by an economy of scarcity, there is no limit to improvisation. Bottom-up resourcing is the rule. When set into motion, such a principle gives rise to a self-fueling system operating across multiple scales – a trickle-up urban ecology that reframes the discourse on sustainability.

Despite dire conditions, this makeshift processing of resources gives rise to a special form of market economy, namely, small-scale measures of subsistence empowered through the thousandfold repetition of minute elements, an undertaking carried out by the masses and organized from below. And yet, this frail economy recently faced an existential threat when the livelihood of local stakeholders was directly confronted by the interests of a global consortium seeking to take over the quarter. What sparked the crisis was the offer of a Malaysian investment firm to buy all rights for use of the area, with the intention of turning the Mercato into a business and shopping district, an infringement from the outside hinting at a new form of domination. Followed scrupulously by the local press, the affair set off a public debate on the future development of the city. While politicians were occupied with the question of whether partaking in the global game would be both desirable and feasible, it was finally the cost of mass relocation that brought the entire venture to a grinding halt.⁷

7. The authors were informed of the unfolding of events in a series of discussions with representatives from the Association of Ethiopian Architects in Addis Ababa in May 2007.

The debate was accompanied by two occurrences that facilitated the resolution of the conflict. First, the standoff reinforced social ties within the community as well as galvanized its political representation within the city at large; the worker associations were proactive in demanding an equal voice in shaping their environment, and new trade unions and building cooperatives were formed that further strengthened communal bonds. Second, at the time of the clash, the municipal administration was in the process of revising the existing zoning ordinance, the so-called *Addis Ababa Development Plan*. An entire chapter of building regulations was drafted for the Mercato area. To those responsible it became clear that neither planning from the outside nor exclusively top-down would serve the cause of appeasing stakeholders: their involvement in decision-making processes was paramount.⁸

What is referred to as participatory or discursive planning was legally ratified. Rather than succumbing to the demands of potential investors, which aimed to secure provisions for a high-rise business district, consultation was sought with citizens from the city government.⁹ Self-empowerment in place of dictated power became the maxim for all planning matters. From the perspective of urban discourse it is notable that the mandate in Addis Ababa to move from informal to formal structures is only possible under the condition of dialogue between public interests framed from above and those determined from below by the needs of the local population.

If we were to take another look in the mirror, another image of Africa would surface. Whereas to Michel Leiris the purported “dark continent” displayed ghostly traits in its sheer otherness and invisibility, as the title of his travel log, *Phantom Africa*, from the 1930s, suggests, it becomes apparent that what indeed harbors phantomlike features today is that strain of market economy which is engulfing the planet.¹⁰ Reflecting on the case of Addis Ababa shows us that what appears to be backward is actually a forward-looking tactic of how to effectively circumvent the dictates of global capital through the implementation of communicative action in planning.

But just as any mirror can be shattered, so too can this fragile grassroots vision. A new form of colonization is well underway. For now, China, having spied lucrative trading prospects, has stepped through the window of opportunity opened up by Africa. Putting the West ill at ease, an unexpected Sino-African dynamic is building, evoking memories of the European seizure of the continent. Notwithstanding

8. Op. cit., *Addis Ababa Development Plan*, 5, 43, 73, 74.

9. See Jürgen Habermas's thesis pertaining to communicative action in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Publishers, 1981).

10. Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934), in *Michel Leiris: Miroir de l'Afrique*, ed. Jean Jamin (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1996), 851 and 855.



complaints from Western companies that Chinese bids are impossible to match, the People's Republic has learned to play the game of coaxing African countries along the path of development. In marked contrast to Western investments that tie trade incentives to human rights, China's policy of "no-strings aid" is simply more seductive.

Ethiopia is not exempt from this lure. Here, new infrastructures, schools, and factories are being built, favorable trading agreements signed, and vocational programs sponsored. On top of this, a \$150 million gift was recently given by China for an annex to the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa. But all of this comes at a price: substandard wages; no retirement benefits; no custom revenue from imports; no income due to tax-free accords; and, above all, general disregard for the rights of citizens. Those browsing through the Mercato today would not be surprised to discover artifacts bearing the ubiquitous label "Made in China." In effect, exploitation is the name of the game.

"Let's pretend" that we in the West are out in front, looking back at the rest of the world.¹¹ A second glance in the rearview mirror, however, reveals another player set to overtake in the fast lane. One might well recall that objects in the mirror are closer than they appear.

11. Op. cit., Lewis Carroll, 124.

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