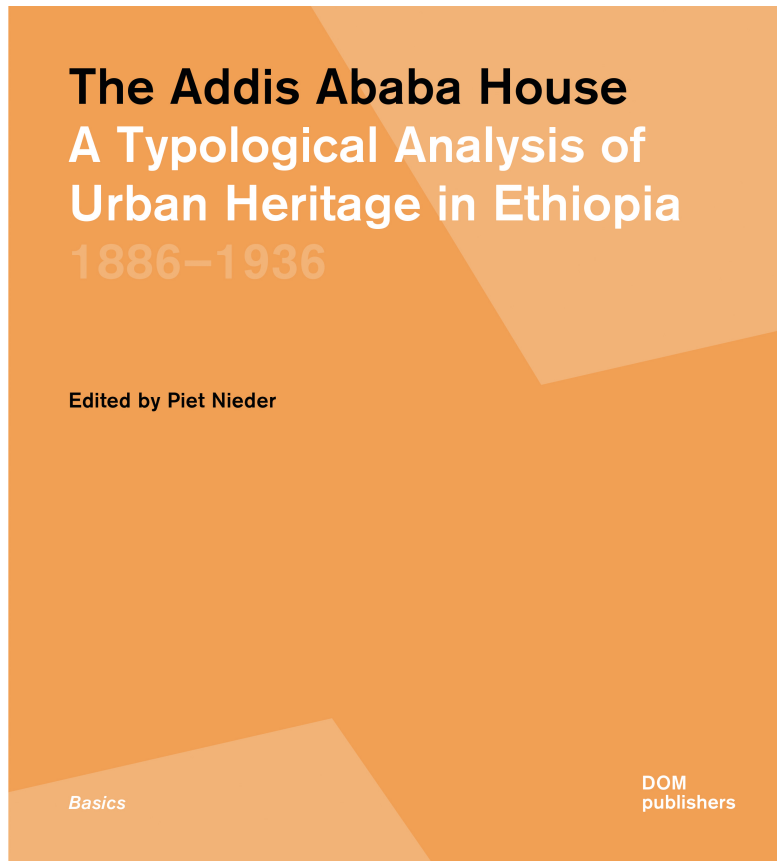


The Addis Ababa House

Der folgende Text ist die Einleitung zum Buchprojekt "The Addis Ababa House", das von Piet Nieder herausgegeben und im Verlag DOM Publishers veröffentlicht wird.



In its early decades, after its foundation in 1886, the young city of Addis Ababa witnessed a very specific form of local architecture. At the beginning of Ethiopia's first urbanization process, a mixture of vernacular knowledge and a new cosmopolitan mindset led to an architectural type that local professionals call the „Addis Ababa Style“. With the Italian invasion in 1936, this culturally outstanding period abruptly ended, exactly 50 years after Addis Ababa was founded.

This book aims to shed light on the architectural qualities of the Addis Ababa Style. Yet, the term „style“ has a connotation of just being added to a building, as something quite superfluous and exchangeable. The aim of this book is the contrary: it wants to show the underlying architectural logic of the Addis Ababa Style buildings, in its embeddedness in local resources, local climate, and craftsmanship - a result of a refined, cosmopolitan approach to architecture that was open to foreign influences while also valuing the indigenous, vernacular construction know-how of Ethiopia. As most of the buildings shown in this book are residences, we will speak of the „Addis Ababa House“.

Next to residences, there were also administrative, commercial, and educational buildings constructed during that time.¹ Most of these edifices were owned by the Ethiopian feudal cast from different regions of the country, others by rich merchants, engineers, or political figures of the time amongst those many foreigners.

The Addis Ababa Style is characterized by the diverse international influences that were not completely new to Ethiopia, but which had found a context in which they could flourish in the new capital. Indians, Armenians, and Europeans worked in the construction sector and contributed significantly with their expertise be it as architects, designers, or craftsmen. Their expertise was highly appreciated by the Emperor and the feudal cast. This unique integration of different building cultures as well as the variety of functions, and professional or ethnic background of the owners led to highly diversified architectural forms, some of which are documented in this volume.

A hinge between indigenous past and urban future

The historical setting in which the Addis Ababa House came into being marked an interesting turning point in Ethiopia's political and cultural history when Ethiopia started to open up to the world. Addis Ababa was initially planned as a temporal camp for Emperor Menelik II and his entourage - as it was common practice at the time seen that the Emperor was forced to resettle his siege regularly when the local wood, that was needed for construction, cooking, and heating was depleted. These were Ankober, Entoto and then Addis Ababa. Even its name, Addis Ababa which means „New Flower“ in Amharic, indicates not only beauty but also a certain temporality.

Different historical circumstances eventually led to the transformation of Addis Ababa into the permanent capital of Ethiopia, A fact that led to a flourishing construction sector because otherwise, new architectural endeavors would not have been possible. First, the military victory of Ethiopians over the colonial power of Italy in 1896 led to international recognition of Ethiopia as a sovereign state. In the following years, many foreign powers such as France, Russia, Italy, and Great Britain built quite elaborated embassies in Addis Ababa. Foreign diplomats objected to moving the capital. Second, as a crucial asset of Addis Ababa, the Ethio-Francais Railway was opened and connected Addis Ababa with the port of Djibouti in 1917. And third, this might be the most important reason: The Eucalyptus tree was introduced to Ethiopia. It grew so fast, that the need for wood for building construction and fire-making could be met again.

On the one hand, these first decades of Addis Ababa from 1886 - 1936 marked the start of a „new“ époque for Ethiopian architecture. On the other hand it marques the end of an „old“ époque - an époque that was characterized by a certain „Africaness“ - cultural and political independence from the metropolitan Western powers. This in-between status makes the Addis Ababa House so compelling and unique on the African continent. The Addis Ababa House is a hinge between the indigenous past and urban future.

With the invasion of the Italian fascists under Benito Mussolini in 1936, who aimed to take revenge for the „catastrophe“ of 1896, this African

independence was lost. And even though the occupation of Ethiopia only lasted for five years, this marks a clear rupture in Ethiopian cultural history, which sooner or later also showed in architectural forms. When Haile Selassie returned from Great Britain in 1941, where he had stayed in exile during the occupation, his architectural preferences significantly changed in favor of European modernism. Thus, the Addis Ababa Style as a local building culture came to an end and their remaining examples were increasingly perceived as outdated.

In 1974 due to a socialist coup d'état, feudal Ethiopia came to an abrupt end. Parts of the imperial family were killed or had to flee the country.² Some of the houses owned by feudal families were turned into social housing, so-called „kebele houses“, that were state-owned and rented out for very low prices. This process was legally managed by a new law, by which families were not allowed to own more than one single house. However, there are some examples too, such as the Residence of Sheik Ojele, a rich merchant from the West of Ethiopia, where the original family remained living until today.

Heritage today

In a country that longs for development - from 2010-2019 Ethiopia had the highest economic growth rate in the world according to World Economic Outlook - heritage preservation is not very high on the agenda of local decision-makers. On the contrary, heritage buildings are often regarded as an obstacle to development, for those buildings are often situated close to the city centers and occupy valuable land. It can be observed that it is a common strategy to deliberately let heritage buildings unmaintained until they are dilapidated enough to have a good pretext for demolition. A drastic example is the demolition of the Asfaw Kebede Residence in January 2021, an exquisite construction of early architecture in Addis.

However, in recent years a slow increase in the appreciation of heritage can be observed. The government as well as private individuals have taken initiatives to preserve and restore historical buildings from the early times.

Most famously, the historical palace compound with the oldest and most interesting gems had been converted into a public park by the federal government, which in this case understood the historical, and the economical value of this heritage. The Ghebbi, which means „palace compound“ in Amharic, became a major tourist attraction in Addis shortly after opening in 2019. But there is also a political notion to the so-called »Unity Park«, as heritage is instrumentalized to tell a specific story about one's nation.

Furthermore, there have been private initiatives that made preservation possible in recent years. Famous is the restoration of the Ayalew Biru Residence by Ethiopian supermodel Liya Kebede. At the moment the „Old

Municipality“ (formerly called the H/ Giorgis Agid Residence) is being restored by the famous Ethiopian actress Alemtsehay Wodajo. But still, these are exceptions. The majority of heritage buildings are in a rather bad condition and sight of the staggering urban development Addis is currently witnessing, saving these gems has become ever more difficult.

From an outsider’s perspective, it seems contradictory that Ethiopians generally value their country’s history so much, but when it comes to architecture, they are blind to one eye. Not only are heritage buildings being destroyed, but entire historic neighborhoods are being cleared for new developments without context.

State of the Art

To this moment, only a few books and articles have been published about the early architecture of Addis Ababa. In „Old Tracks in the New Flower - A Historical Guide to Addis Ababa“ released in 2004 by Milena Batistoni and Gian Paolo Chiari the authors created seven itineraries along the seven historical paths that connected the Ghebbi with the different parts of the city. More than 130 buildings, often hidden in contemporary Addis of the early 21st century, are described and photographically documented. Additionally, through interviews with residents, the authors have collected valuable background information about these buildings’ stories. As the authors say „the purpose of [their] work is not scientific in that it doesn’t have the pretension to attempt to analyze the architecture. On the contrary, it aims to document and, hopefully, communicate the fascination that stems from the syncretic complexity of early Addis Ababa architecture“. (p.18)

The work of Batistoni and Chiari was crucial for a systematic collection of „Addis Ababa Urban Heritage“ in a Database that was produced in the following years by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the Ethiopian NGO »Addis Woubet«, which was co-founded by Princess Maryam Senna Asfa Wossen after her return from exile. (The Database has never been made available to the public, but it was leaked and circulated amongst Ethiopian professionals.) The database systematically collected data for 173 historical buildings, including churches and monuments. For each building, the name, location, estimated year of construction, the name of the architect, and their current status in terms of physical condition and ownership were collected. One can say, that this collection largely corresponds with the collection of Batistoni and Chiari.

About simultaneously, in 2007, the Ethiopian architect Fasil Giorghis together with the French development professional Denis Gerard, published a book on „Addis Ababa 1886-1941 - The City & Its Architectural Heritage“. On almost 400 pages the book, which was extended in 2019, contains an extensive account of historical photographs of Addis Ababa’s early urban life, culture,

and architecture and describes the economical and cultural forces that allowed the city to take shape. For the first time, the buildings are presented with complementary drawings and floorplans. Fasil Giorghis shows, how the Ethiopian vernacular round hut has been incrementally transformed into a modern rectangular house. It sheds light on historical construction techniques, as well as architectural details.

These two books, „Old Tracks“ and „The City & Its Architectural Heritage“, today became classical accounts of the subject without any successor. Worth mentioning is the small book „Addis Ababa Old Piazza“ containing „three self-guided tours“ by Dominique Harre, published by the Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes in 2017. It points to some main features of the Addis Ababa Style architecture, beautifully illustrated by Wondimagegn Gashaw.

While all these books contribute significantly to a description and documentation of the early architecture of Addis Ababa and a description of its main architectural features, it remains unanswered what architectural principles have had an agency in creating this unique architectural type. With the present book, we are trying to look behind the surface of the architecture to reveal its somewhat mysterious DNA.

The structure and aim of this book

The book is structured into three main chapters, that go from the individual to the generic.

1. Phenotype: Case Studies
2. Genotype: Influence Analysis
3. Genes: Architectural Alphabet

In its terminology, it borrows a concept from biology and thus refers to architecture as organisms that are affected by an inner logic, the DNA, and the individual outer circumstances like environment, context, and people.

In that understanding, the „genes“ formulate an „Architectural Alphabet“, a collection of design principles, whether in regard to construction materials, construction techniques, strategies for adapting to local climate, or organizational principles in the floorplan. The „genes“ are clustered in order to create complex and functional organisms. The different influences - be it physical influences such as the local climate and the local resources or cultural influences such as local or foreign building cultures - create the „genotype“ of the Addis Ababa House. In the individual buildings, the case studies, these clusters of influences have materialized as concrete, tangible expressions and thus can be seen as the »phenotype« of the Addis Ababa House.

In our research, we had to reverse this logic. We started with the Case Studies, as material containers of construction knowledge, and then analyzed the different influences that were at play in the specific historical context of the young capital. Finally, we synthesized the Architectural Alphabet, a collection of architectural principles that are beyond time and context.

The three chapters are flanked by introductory articles and an appendix. These two parts reflect the fate of urban heritage in light of our contemporary situation in which Addis Ababa has become a boom town for, sometimes brutal, urban development.

The five introductory articles are written by independent researchers and do not necessarily reflect the personal opinion of the editor: Fasil Giorghis historically classifies the emergence of the Addis Ababa Style and gives examples from his architectural practice of how to learn from it. Livio Sacchi gives insights into his restoration work in the Ghebbi, for which he was the responsible architect. Rumi Okazaki explains the urban formation of Addis Ababa and shows how ownership policies have affected heritage buildings. Piet Nieder follows situationist research methods to encounter heritage buildings and their today's socio-cultural contexts. Tadesse Girmay sheds light on the conflict between preservation and urban development.

Learning from Heritage

This book hopes to raise awareness about architectural treasures of Ethiopia's urban past, and witnesses of the heroic time of the Battle of Adua. The architecture is the result of a thriving African nation that is characterized by its openness towards other cultural influences without giving up on local traditional building knowledge. Traditional African ways of doing things met in a productive way with a modernity that didn't mean the uniformization of what urban life and culture can signify. Rather the Addis Ababa House expresses a fresh desire for a new cosmopolitan urban African life.

Last but not least this book hopes that the knowledge about architectural principles - from materials usage, over smart and compatible design strategies, to excelled crafting skills - can again become a reference for contemporary architectural practices in Ethiopian cities.