

TRADITION IN TRANSITION
REFLECTIONS ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF ETHIOPIA

with a special focus on the Afar region

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Introduction

Andrea Rieger-Jandl

Ethiopia is a country with a unique architectural heritage. It evolved out of the history of a powerful and religious ancient civilization with a rich cultural background based on tradition and legend, mystery and fact. According to the legend, Emperor Menelik, son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, brought the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Aksum, and from there he established one of the world's longest known, uninterrupted monarchical dynasties. Until today Ethiopia's palaces and religious buildings bear witness to the achievements of one of the world's oldest Christian civilizations. Some historical and archaeological places, such as Aksum, Lalibela, Gondar, or Debre Damo, have already been well researched and documented, whereas others, like the religious architecture of the Gheralta valley and many rock-hewn churches throughout Tigray have hardly gained any scientific attention.

As in many discussions about architectural history, the analysis of vernacular architecture in Ethiopia is conspicuously absent. However, in a country with 79,2 Mio inhabitants and more than 80 different ethnic groups the variety and vividness of indigenous architectural expression is fascinating ([www.aethiopien-botschaft.de/...](http://www.aethiopien-botschaft.de/) 2012). Although the spreading of modern technology has caused considerable changes regarding village- and urban settlement structures, the majority of Ethiopians still are largely unaffected by this and lead a rural life determined by traditional economic patterns and ideologies.

They have a strong, independent, living culture with vernacular buildings that immediately reflect the environmental and climatic circumstances, which are well integrated into religious or spiritual convictions, and strongly tied to the ancestors and the social community, ritual and symbolism. Because of the marked presence of the traditional built environment in everyday life many features of identification, habitual practices and guidelines of orientation have been preserved in a physical form.

But since Ethiopia has one of the fastest-growing populations in the world, the provision of adequate housing will be a major challenge for future generations. Already today the collective creativity that makes Ethiopian architecture so distinct, is on the verge of change, and traditional built structures disappear with every new road that is built. While formerly the question was: "What does the architecture of Ethiopia look like?" it now has to be: "How is the architecture of Ethiopia changing due to rapid globalization processes?"

The speed of change seems to leave no time for 'adaptation', but can only be referred to as 'transformation'. Thus the Ethiopian built heritage is a "Tradition in Transition", as the title of this book indicates. According to Websters dictionary (www.merriam-webster.com, 2012), 'transition' is defined as: *a movement, development, or evolution from one form, stage, or style to another*. Within this process of transformation the preservation of the outstanding examples of built heritage is important. However, in order to fulfill the human right of adequate housing for all, it will be a matter of accepting change and new lifestyles on the one hand, but on the other hand of not losing track regarding the past, ones roots and a lived identity. The question is how to find the best solutions regarding the ever-present clash of tradition and innovation. Who are the people sitting in the transit room between their traditions and roots and their expectations in a progressive future life? How can new needs and requirements regarding a progressive living standard be met? And how can architecture as a physical expression of culture, social formations and identity come to terms with the ideology of these people?

There will never be a customs control on the transfer of ideas and ideals. But indeed it can be a great chance if external procurement is seen as an inspiration and not as an invitation for an unreflected adoption of ideas.

It is in the hands of the many Ethiopian ethnic groups to organize themselves as dynamic cultures, permitting creative transformation processes without neglecting their own heritage and roots. Although the vast variety of traditional building techniques and the unique craftsmanship are in a process of decline, a profound indigenous knowledge of these foundations still exists especially in the rural areas. When using this potential, the creation of a distinctive architecture can be like cooking a delicious meal: a traditional meal, refined by the hands of innovative cooks, but still based on the original ingredients.

In this book, many people express their opinions and their views on Ethiopian architecture within a variety of topics according to the Ethiopian saying: *A single stick may smoke, but it will not burn.* It started with the excursion by a team of researchers and students from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Technology in Vienna in February 2011. This was followed by a student design-project dealing with a school building in the Afar-region, using earth building technologies. By getting more involved in the subject, the fascination for the uniqueness of Ethiopian architecture grew, we contacted other scholars and researchers dealing with the topic and decided, to gather our experiences and present them in a book.

This book is not a solely scientific one. Since most of the authors do not have a long research background in the region, the book does not focus on in-depth research on specific topics. It wants to give insight into a building culture which is still generally unknown in the Western world, since only a very limited number of publications is dedicated to this subject. Especially the Afar-region, a focus of this book, and its rapidly changing architectural environment on the verge of developing from nomadism to sedentarism, has not yet gained any scientific attention. This book is intended to give an idea of the vast variety of traditional architectural means of expression, cult architecture as well as indigenous forms of living; and it wants to highlight the processes of change, which show both destructive elements as well as new potentials for a positive architectural development.

In her article about the history and building culture of Ethiopia, **Alice Deix** gives a profound overview of the architectural evolution beginning with the

Aksumite Empire and reaching as far as the founding of Addis Ababa by Menelik II. **Irmengard Mayer** follows the traces of one of the oldest forms of Christian civilization. She explores the development of Christianity, the rites and symbolism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and describes selected distinctive examples of church architecture, above all the fascinating rock-hewn churches of Tigray. Out of there long experience with planning and building in the African context, **Peter Rich Architects** developed a masterplan for Aksum, Ethiopia's most ancient city and UNESCO World Heritage site. The master plan adapts Aksum not only to become a major international tourist destination, it also aims at providing improved socio-economic opportunities for local inhabitants and at giving them the capacity to construct their own story. The analysis of the town, the development of an infrastructural framework and the proposal of four routes to experience the town are presented by means of outstanding analytical drawings. **Asgedom Haile, Mohammad Aman** and **Tadele Fanta** describe the largely unexplored vernacular architecture of Tigray in northern Ethiopia from an inside perspective, and compare it with neighboring cultures. Special emphasis is given on social orders and hierarchies in connection with the use of building material and construction techniques. **Petra Gruber** views architecture on a larger scale and concentrates on the city development of Addis Ababa which is experiencing an impressive large-scale urban transformation. The term MixCity refers to the dense coexistence of different urban scales and functions. Informal settlements with no infrastructure and economic possibilities exist next to fenced in and guarded areas closed to the public – a concept which makes free floating public space impossible. **Renate Bornberg** dedicates her article to city development and urban identity in Awasa. She views cities as the three-dimensional result of a cultural agreement and points out the importance of distinctiveness and identity formation processes within an urban environment. **Marlene Schweigkofler** writes about the housing situation of the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel. The structure of Jewish villages in Ethiopia is described as well as the painful journey via Sudanese reception camps to Israel and the still precarious housing situation there. **Konstanze Elbel** presents an interesting study about the cost-efficient design of school buildings in Ethiopia. The current use of mainly imported materials like cement and steel

is compared with construction methods involving regional materials and manual skills based on vernacular building culture. **Rafaella Liendl** and **Jutta Leithner** put an anthropological perspective on Ethiopian politics, religion, economy, social structure, and education, focusing on the Afar region. They describe the different Ethnic groups, their ongoing struggle for agreements and peaceful coexistence, as well as the Afar's daily challenges when leading a pastoral life. **Valerie Browning** from the Afar Pastoral Development Association offers her vision for a future of the Afar people. She describes the pressure put on the Afar's pastoralist economy. Water management, health care, and above all a basic education in order to give them a voice to defend their nomadic way of life are of great importance. **Barbara Weber**, **Constanze Einhell** and **Dawit Kassaw** write about the traditional architecture of the Afar, about their social organization, which is reflected in the layout of compounds, and about the construction technique of their tents, which are perfectly adapted to their nomadic way of life and the harsh environmental circumstances. **Andrea Rieger-Jandl** describes the many challenges faced by the built environment when life for the people is on the verge of change from nomadism to sedentarism. Innovative earth building technologies are suggested as a sustainable alternative for new settlement structures in the Afar region in order to stop the current exploitation of limited resources such as wood. **Emilia Chocian**, **Dawit Kassaw** and **Julia Korina Soulos** took a number of clay samples in the Afar region in order to find out if the clay quality is good for construction. In their article they describe the procedure and the results of the clay sample testing in the laboratory.

The last part of the book is dedicated to the studio work by the students of architecture for the design of a school building made of earth in the Afar region.

In one way or another, all the articles center around one important insight: Ethiopian buildings are the result of a communal, spiritual, ritual, and a creative process, they are testimonies of a wisdom that has largely been lost in our industrialized world. As David Phillipson (2004) stated: "Ethiopia has a unique past, important not only for the country's own citizens but for all people's understanding of their place in the world." Although the architecture of Ethiopia cannot be directly applied to technological standards

of Western society, it can still make us reconsider our technology-centered view in order to put more emphasis on environmental pretensions and socio-cultural considerations.

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It all started with an excursion to Ethiopia held in February 2011. Although it was one of the toughest trips we've ever made at our department (History of Architecture and Building Archaeology, UT Vienna), it was also among the most rewarding ones and I am grateful to all the students who didn't lose their enthusiasm, their humor and their spirits on the bumpy roads of Ethiopia.

It was a pleasure to take Prof. Dirk Donath and Prof. Asgedom Haile from the Building Construction Department of Addis Ababa University with us to the Afar region and to learn about their research on indigenous buildings in Ethiopia and their engagement in documenting them for future generations.

I owe great thanks to Peter Rich, architect from South Africa and for one semester guest Professor at the Architecture Faculty of UT Vienna, who provided us with deep insights into his profound knowledge of and his sensitive approach towards African architecture, who entertained us with his German language skills and survived cruising the Afar desert with three Austrian women in a smelly old four-wheeler.

Without the help of Valerie Browning and her husband Ismael Ali Gardo from the Afar Pastoral Development Association (APDA) it would not have been possible to gain such deep insight into the fascinating life of the Afar nomads. Valerie provided us access to many traditional homes, patiently translating all our questions and sharing her deep understanding for the problems and aspirations of the Afar with us.

Thanks also to Dr. Petra Gruber and Prof. Karin Stieldorf who, together with Peter Rich, helped me to supervise the student design studio for the Afar school project at the Architecture Faculty of UT Vienna for their valuable input and dedication and to the students who participated in the studio for their enthusiasm, their creativity and the immense amount of time they invested into their precious work.

My gratitude goes to all the contributors to this book, who dedicated their knowledge, their time and effort

to make possible this great variety of approaches and the very different perspectives on the built environment of Ethiopia.

Since almost none of the contributors to this volume is an English native speaker, this book would not be readable without the endless patience of Monika Feuersänger, who assiduously and critically read all the articles and turned limited language skills into comprehensible English texts.

Credit for illustrative material is noted in the illustration credits, but it would be amiss not to mention our great appreciation for the permission to use precious drawings and illustrations from David Phillipson and Walter Raunig for this book.

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