

Logbook, Ethiopia in a Timeline: The School, The Book, The Town

Angéliil, M., Siress, C and Barthes, CM (Editors)
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The initial attraction of this publication might be its typographic design. In this, it is reminiscent of the counterculture, but highly prophetic and influential books *Shelter* (1973) and *Whole Earth Catalogue* (1975). The likelihood that these earlier publications have indeed inspired *The School, The Book, The Town* is, however, remote. Yet, for this reviewer there are similarities in approach and spirit. The typographic layout is also in the same vein as so many recent books on architecture, whose creators seem to have a desire to project a certain level of 'coolness'. This publication has been printed on matt paper (probably produced within sustainability parameters), there is an abundance of white 'emptiness' on the pages, the photographs and other illustrations are relatively small, there is a play with the font size and the book has a so-called "alternative" structure – meaning that it has been consciously **designed** from cover to cover. In some examples of this *genre* this 'coolness' of approach is just an elaborate cover-up for a lack of content and depth. But in this case, it is in fact the opposite. One gets the impression that the design of the book is an authentic attempt by its creators to invoke real interest in readers as to the seriousness of their message. This publication rests lightly on the hand and it is a delight to the eye, while its contents finds its purpose and joy in chronicling a complicated history and process while also honouring the contributions of many.

The largest part of the book is a lively, but careful, account by Angéliil and Siress of the interaction between the Addis Ababa University and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich. This involvement with Addis Ababa started in 2005 when the ETH decided that it should extend its curriculum beyond its Eurocentric focus by including work from continents like Africa. The involvement between the two institutions resulted in a series of research publications and professional interaction with various governmental bodies, but most importantly it led to the creation of an autonomous institute of architecture and urban planning at Addis Ababa University called the "Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development" (EiABC) founded in 2010. The EiABC resulted from the reorganisation of an entity that was established in 1954 with support from the Swedish Government. The EiABC-ETH also led to the development of a new (sustainable) town, Buranest, 400 km north of Addis Ababa.

Early in the text, two crucial concepts or themes underpinning the work are emphasised. These are the idea that the city can be understood as a *collection of intertwined networks* (p5) or, in other words the actor-network theory (agency), and the fact that the work was conducted by a group of people looking at the Ethiopian context from the 'outside'. In relation to this, the metaphor of 'Alice in Wonderland' was used. The work that was done by the group in Ethiopia was used to reflect on the nature of the study and also to reflect on their own cultural suppositions as well as their understanding of conditions in Switzerland. With this in mind the research work was viewed as a creative act where facts were constructed and, surely reconstructed, while they did not wait for these 'facts' to reveal themselves over time. Their work addressed the potential correlation between theory and practice. There was a conscious attempt to bring equity to the relationship between *the clean realm of discourse* and *the dirty domain of manual labour* (p12). In this they questioned the premise where theory is placed above practice, and thus, for them *practical work contaminates the purity of intellectual thought just as ideas inflict the conventions of practice* (p12). This point is crucial in understanding their approach to the range of interactions as chronicled in this publication.

In all of their undertakings it would seem that they have placed the triad of theory, practice and teaching on an **equal** footing. This is an important lesson for (lesser?) schools of architecture where there is such an emphasis on 'research' to the detriment or near exclusion of teaching and practice. It also places emphasis on the importance that the 'messiness' of practice has for the acts of teaching and research. If the equity of this triad is not fully embraced by the *academe* and the profession alike it would inevitably lead to the slow demise of both. It could even be this messiness or contingency that could have assisted the ETH in their desire to extend their curriculum in this way and thus invigorate themselves while also giving birth to the EiABC and Buranest, amongst many spin-offs.

What is also noticeable in the text is the authors' awareness of the tension in Ethiopia between the agents of change and modernisation from within and from outside of the country. Ethiopia has a population of approximately ninety million and the capital, Addis Ababa, originally a new town started in 1886, has a population of four million. In Ethiopia, in keeping with world trends, there are high rates of urbanisation placing a huge strain on relatively fragile economic and political systems. Despite the fact that Ethiopia only experienced a brief spell of (Italian) colonisation, the question of the expression of cultural identity by means of aspects like architecture, are very much on the forefront. Global architectural images are creating aspirations for local application despite the fact that the country can ill afford the importation of the required materials for its realisation, while those types of buildings are also ill suited to the local climate and cultural conditions. Coupled to this is the influence

of the (sometimes disrespectful) attitudes of international development agencies, infrastructural 'gifts' by China that is heavily structured in their own favour, a series of 'land grabs' by foreign companies (enabled by the Ethiopian government) to produce food exclusively for export, etc. These realities, in broad terms, created the backdrop for the programme described in the text. In a way, local resistance to the effects of these forces was enhanced by the processes and products of the Ethiopian/Swiss interaction. These realities are, sadly, not unique to Ethiopia, but yet another example of the messiness of the 'real' world. It also raises an ethical aspect of how researchers, the *academe* and the profession need to deal with and confront such realities. The authors do not refer to the ethics of the matter directly. However, the text is full of examples of how the negativity of these ultimately destructive forces, the 'contingency' that is often referred to, have been transformed into opportunities for a more positive and equitable implementation on the ground. In fact, in this the general negativity of contingency has been actively used as a reality check on the more lofty and high idealism of the 'purity' of theory.

In many ways, the intellectual punchline of this publication comes towards its end. The high point, for this reviewer at least, comes in the form of two interviews with Fasil Giorghis (Addis Ababa University) and Franz Oswald (ETH) by Sarah Graham (AGPS) respectively titled *Building Networks* and *Building Capacity*. This is followed with essays by Dirk Hebel (ETH & EiABC) *Envisioning Ethiopia – from the City to the Unit and Back*. Sacha Delz (ETH) *Contingent Cooperation* and Zegeye Cherenet (Addis Ababa University) *Project Ethiopia*. Graham's interviews with Oswald and Giorghis endeavours to introduce comparability and commonality by asking similar questions to both and/or by introducing similar themes into the discussions. In this way the reader is introduced to a more intimate and detailed history

of the circumstances that have lead to the creation of both the EiABC and the new town Buranest. The interesting link between the two is the role that technical and professional knowledge plays in the ever increasing complexity of the shift from rural to urban in a country facing inroads from global political and economic interests. This kind of knowledge is viewed here as a fundamentally important equalizer against the sometimes very powerful and destabilizing forces operating both inside and outside the country. In these discussions much emphasis is placed on the role of Buranest, as part of a network of settlements that will hopefully address the influx of people into Addis Ababa as well as the transformation and stabilization of the agrarian base by means of vocational training. In this way it is hoped that technical knowledge would play its role by being a contributing instrument in creating real choices and alternatives beyond the dominant city.

Hebel's concluding essay highlights an important similarity between Switzerland and Ethiopia. He draws attention to the fact that the same desire for educational reform gave rise to the Swiss Federal Polytechnical Institute (now the ETH) in 1855 and the EiABC (2009). In both instances the focus was on engineering as a means of modernization. From the start the focus was to be *Engineering Towards Development and Change* (p18). They unashamedly *foregrounded the common mind-set that elevates technology and engineering as the primary cultural drivers* (p18). They were equally open when they said that *neither architecture nor urban design were given the same significance, considered as they were as mere subcategories of engineering* (p19). It should immediately be noted that 'engineering' in this instance is viewed much broader than the generally narrower views of it in the English speaking world. Hebel further raises the issue of scale. Much of their earlier work focussed on the larger scale, namely the more abstract and organizational issues until they realised that they would

also need to focus on the small scale daily actions of builders, architects and engineers. These actions have a compounding effect that places a demand on the importation of high cost building material over what could be produced in the country itself. This placed an unnecessary burden on the country's balance of payments. To address this they produced built examples of locally developed sustainable buildings. These units could then be aggregated to form denser and a more sustainable urban form. Thereafter, they returned to the larger urban form when the EiABC teamed up with the 'Future Cities Laboratory' in Singapore to produce an alternative and more realistic vision for Addis Ababa.

In the essay *Contingent Cooperation*, Delz gives an insightful and highly valuable overview of the nature and pitfalls of such cooperative activities. It is in this mode of operation where failure or success, in however it is defined, is ensured. It is also within this process where opportunities, or lack thereof, and physical spaces are produced that affect the daily lives of ordinary people. It is here that there has to be close attention to who or what benefits from these actions. Cherey's (Addis Ababa University) essay *Project Ethiopia* describes the development of the training of built environment professionals, the history and circumstance that shaped the focus of their curriculum and the context within which these professionals need to operate in. In 2004, the number of registered architects in Ethiopia was less than four hundred (p145) for a total population of between eighty and ninety million people. Until 2005 there was only one school of architecture, that could only accommodate approximately *thirty students per year* (p145). Fast urbanization, infrastructural investment and a lack of skilled labour created a difficult and complex environment within which to operate. Inevitably the training of architects had to receive the highest order attention in this scenario. It had to be a different generation of architects who could become part of an urban culture *that is based on exploration, production*

and the reproduction of knowledge (p145). *Ethiopia, in other words, had to reinvent its understanding of architectural education, not only in the light of internal pressures but also in view of the need for international interconnectedness* (p146). In all of this they realised that, despite their knowledge of and the pressures/influences of global trends, they had to grow their knowledge from within in relation to their own cultural history. Architecture and the architectural profession, as it might be known and defined in other parts of the world, is not known in Ethiopian society. In this way, the profession has to earn its relevance and value in different ways. What existed as architectural education in Ethiopia consisted as remnants of western educational modes, devoid of local connectedness, and therefore devoid of local influence and relevance. This reality was changed by introducing research in the early stages of architectural education, by introducing group work/learning and by introducing a discourse on method as it relates to the design of processes. These changes endeavour to enable a *socially and environmentally responsive transformation of the country ... on its path to modernize* (p149). It is at this fundamental level that the work described in this book, *The School, The Book, The Town*, aims to influence life in Ethiopia.

In order to attain a broader understanding of the developmental and physical history of Ethiopia and Addis Ababa, this reviewer has read as much literature as possible beyond the pages of this publication. The general conditions as researched and described by the authors are in keeping with what a wider investigation into other available sources reveals. Every part of the texts by the respective authors bears the hallmarks of unquestionable honesty and intellectual integrity. This imbues the content of the publication with complete credibility. There are many lessons to be learnt here for architects, built environment professionals, and academics. It would be highly beneficial for South African architects, urban

designers and city planners to immerse themselves in this book, even if they only come to understand the many parallels between the developmental and physical context of Ethiopia and South Africa, and even also if they only come to the realization that the vexing complexities of these contexts can only be faced with humility and courage. This humility should stem from the fact that the opportunities that arise from the many problems inherent in these conditions can only be managed by co-operation across a wide spectrum of fields of knowledge and also courage that should be based on the secure knowledge that the architect, urban designer and city planner does have real abilities, talents, insights and inspirations to make a meaningful contribution to this very important field of human endeavour. For academics in the field of the built environment professionals the content of the book is an excellent account of how knowledge can be exchanged equitably between institutions. Furthermore, it also points to ways in which a meaningful relationship can be established between the *academe* and the community and how a balanced relationship between research, teaching and *praxis* can be highly beneficial for all stakeholders in the long run.

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