

Made by China: the Transformation of an African City

A visual exploration of the Light Rail Transit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Over the past two decades, China has become increasingly more involved in Africa. From rising trade and investment capital to a rapid climb in industrial and construction activity, a new foundation has been laid for Africa's development. While Africa's economy is growing and its cities urbanizing rapidly, many African leaders follow the Chinese Development Model in order to modernize and develop into globalized 21st century cities. This thesis studies the continent's diplomatic capital, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Aside from the construction of the African Union's Headquarters, numerous planned skyscrapers, the establishments of businesses and industries, among other sectors, China plays a significant role in Ethiopia's much-needed transportation infrastructure development. China is involved in numerous road and rail projects throughout Ethiopia and, as of September 2015, Addis Ababa is equipped with the first modern Light Rail Transit (LRT) network in Sub-Saharan Africa; constructed by the China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC) and financed by the Chinese Export-Import Bank. An urban superstructure such as this not only changes the city's primary mode of transportation, but also affects Addis Ababa's urban fabrication. Perhaps most importantly, however, the LRT serves as an icon of Africa's rapid modernization and development.

Addis Ababa, like many African cities, is transforming rapidly. The government of Addis Ababa introduces modern master plans for its large-scale urban renewal approach and tackles the challenges of much-needed transportation development through top-down planning and the implementation of new transportation systems, notably through the LRT. This construction leads to a fundamental transformation of Addis Ababa's public spaces, which impacts the accessibility of its users as well as physical changes within the built environment. On a secondary level, this thesis explores China's financial and technological assistance to Ethiopia and questions in what manner Addis Ababa may develop into a city "made by China."

Only little existing literature concerns China's impact on architecture, urban, and social spaces in Africa's transformation. Inspired by Glaser and Strauss' Grounded Theory Methodology, this research accumulates empirical data gathered through repetitive in-situ observations in Addis Ababa. These observations were predominantly executed using photographic studies throughout the LRT construction phase between 2013 and 2015. This visual exploration method occurs along the North-South and East-West corridors of the Addis Ababa LRT and is strengthened by a detailed study of five selected hubs (public spaces), which showcase a historic, cultural and/or political importance to the city as well as Ethiopian history.

These studies reveal the impacts of the LRT onto Addis Ababa's urban as well as social transformation and can be categorized into four main results (predicted outcomes). The first evidence – spatiality – shows that the two main LRT lines create a physical barrier and consequently lead to urban fragmentation, which is described as the emergence of "urban islands." This spatial transformation of urban spaces lead to the transformation of urban movement and thus mobility. By the introduction of a modern transportation technology, existing movement patterns change in both spatial as well as temporal means. In addition, the LRT furthers the hierarchization of transportation, leaving existing informal modes of transportation as secondary. Speaking of modern technologies, the implementation of the LRT favors the country's rapid development and modernization and yet this growth also leads to a disproportionate development. Ethiopia is still considered one of the poorest countries, despite being one of the fastest growing economies worldwide. Referred to as an emerging global city by AT Kearney, Addis Ababa's path to modernization is successively neglecting its long and omnipresent history, its locality.

The phenomenon of radical transformation, rapid urbanization, development, economic growth and industrialization, has more prominently been observed in China after the post-Mao market reform. Since China's presence in Africa is increasing substantially, this thesis proposes a theoretical concept described as the "Chinaization" of urban Africa, which indicates fundamental dynamics and tendencies of China's recent development and question this extents to which this impacts Africa's current urbanization.

Keywords

Addis Ababa, urban transformation, Light Rail Transit, China-Africa, modernization, neo-globalization, "Chinaization"