

Echoes of a Market

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the constructed identity of Addis Merkato – the central marketplace of Ethiopia – as a testament to the possibilities embedded in avoiding overdetermination. This has liberated the market to constantly reconfigure itself over its eighty-year history. The shifting political, cultural and economic contexts have introduced multiple interventions that have attempted but failed to limit new forms of occupation. Merkato has absorbed conflicting agendas via the invention of nimble design strategies. It is a space that reveals the difficulties of operating within the confines of neoliberalism. The beauty of the market is simply framed by its ability to translate constraints into opportunities. Today, the market remains an architecture of robust networks that continue to resist both local and global forces of limitation.

The abundance of design tends to limit possibilities. Addis Merkato – the central marketplace of Ethiopia – has resisted overdetermination. Social hierarchies and cultural differences

are suspended through a relentless repetition of rooms that house people, goods and livestock, interchangeably. It has elegantly responded to its occupants' overwhelming sense of uncertainty. Merkato is a specific place with a specific history, yet it harbours phenomena of wonderment that is consistent with markets elsewhere around the world.

THE GROUND IS GOOD ENOUGH

Power has always relied on topography. Markets in Ethiopia have historically been horizontal sites of celebration, consolidating rituals that have been taking place throughout the country. From the first half of the 12th Century, markets have been traveling with the Ethiopian Empire to establish anchor points for defence, in the efforts to forge a coherent national identity. They were typically dispersed at the foot of the hill, below the royal family compounds. These flat areas were used to centralize the political and economic activities of a feudal society. Shortly after the city of Addis Ababa was settled in the late 19th Century, Emperor Menelik II positioned the Arada market at the centre of his empire to absorb and inspect resources from the periphery. The openness of the market was a counterpoint to the compounds of elites that structured the capital city. As opposed to the churches, mosques and castles, that are positioned on hill-tops, Arada simply required flatness, subsequently avoiding unintended hierarchies caused by the accident of geography.

Comparably, in the countryside of Ethiopia, the emptiness of fields used for weekly markets, create slight ripples within vast redundancies of farmland. Farmers and merchants deftly switch roles, relying on a fluid oscillation between growing and trading spaces. They deliberately separate one trading platform from another through subtle manipulations of the ground. As seen in Çatalhöyük⁽¹⁾, minor sectional shifts applied to vast horizontal landscapes were the earliest spatial materializations of capitalism (Hodder, 2013). This delicate understanding of a boundary stands in stark contrast to the stick fences and thick mud walls that house and protect the farmer's family. The ground in the open-air market is lightly covered, gaining colour based on the transparency and pigment of its canopy.

THE POTENCY OF CONTAINMENT

The brief colonial containment⁽²⁾ of the local population was outlined by a Cartesian masterplan. The Arada market was moved to the north-western quadrant of the city, renamed Merkato Indigeno, and sub-divided into manageable parcels that housed the living and trading quarters of local society. The lines drawn on the ground marked the occupying regime's initial attempts to correct existing patterns of settlement. The orthogonal blocks and streets⁽³⁾ were designed to measure and contain local ambitions, diseases and perversions. It was meant to create a specific conception of control (Fligstein, 2001), where dominance is articulated through order and sanitization. Areas

occupied by the newcomers were treated as dynamic counterparts to existing notions of stability. This underlying sense of superiority was extended to the choice of materials used to construct the newer parts of the city. Mud was replaced by concrete and wood was replaced by masonry.

This containment helped in unifying a diverse nation against a common enemy. Repositioned inhabitants moved across a porous horizontal landscape of churches, mosques and shops, before they descended into their homes. It presented an efficient urban model, bounded by a stark set of movements between the most guarded and most vulnerable conditions of humanity. Micro-courtyards filtered these careful transitions between the protection of a dwelling and the exposure of the marketplace. The market was no longer a destination, it was a container of one's identity. This shifted the gravitational centre, by temporarily suppressing existing systems of oppression and hierarchy. Spaces were organized around communal activities in response to the newly racialized city. The five year Italian occupation came to prove that isolation facilitates a new form of agency sparked by the fear of losing cultural autonomy. Containment was the antidote to divisions that were being constructed within the Ethiopian society (although, these very divisions seem to have come back to haunt us more recently). Explicit acts of fascism were compromised and eroded by the market's horizontality, building a nested maze of resistance from the looming danger of being a prisoner in one's own home.

STUBBORN CONTINUITY

After the occupation, the urban marketplace became a realm that continued to absorb frictions caused

by the nation's conflicting religious and ethnic sensibilities (Tuso, 1997). Spatial coherence was achieved through a concerted effort of rebuilding, because maintenance requires stability – a condition that has rarely been achieved in Ethiopian politics. The ubiquity of sheet metal cladding makes it difficult to clearly decipher the varying environments of decay and transparency. It provides a consistent background to the less predictable texture of shoppers and merchandise. These are landscapes where self-doubt is confronted with urgency. Religion also plays a role in achieving commonality: St. Raguel Church shares a wall with the Great Anwar Mosque. Shopping happens after and before worship. It is a cleansing process of consumption. Lack of infrastructure has forced the market to regulate itself. At times this could be liberating, but independence has its drawbacks. Recently, there has been a tendency to aestheticize the unwavering face of poverty through reductive notions of urban informality. Merkato is not informal. It is the place where a rootless urban population (Benjamin, 1999) demonstrates radical design strategies as a vivid resistance to the violence of disparity.

The shops on the ground were built to approximately match the footprints of the ones that came before. More recently, escalating land values have initiated an ambitious process of densification, multiplying the patterns on ground vertically. Nevertheless, the precision of continuity is compromised as the pace of rebuilding is quickened. The stone archways built during the Italian occupation, the market halls built during the monarchy, and the distribution centres built during the communist regime, each came with subversive tactics aimed at

a specific adversary. Memory acts as a negotiation device, reminding merchants and customers of how things used to be, by framing a nostalgic sequence of events that took place before the contemporary strains of inflation and urban migration. Today, the streets are filled with people adjusting to their new reality, some came from the Semien Mountains, others from the Omo Valley. The market has always been an initial filter, entry point to the city. This is making the city more like the countryside, and the countryside more like the city. The process of assimilation is emotionally taxing. The lonesome and contemplative experience of ploughing fields with oxen is replaced by the anxiety of survival, within the noisy streets of the capital. This fluidity is where our interest in the market lies: the fluidity of thought and maybe even the fluidity of identity.

MERCHANDISE AS VENEER

The fall of the Derg regime in 1991 marked an open engagement with the global economy. This period also marked Merkato's loss of access to a prominent seaport that had historically given it a clear sense of directionality – eastward. It was a line of connection with the outside world, where ideas, goods and people were shared with other markets located across the Red Sea. After the Eritrean independence, Merkato had to adjust to the newness of operating within a landlocked country. The expansive nature of wonderment was replaced by the bureaucratic demands of efficiency. Nonetheless, infrastructural projects funded by the Chinese⁽⁴⁾ government (Cabestan, 2012), like the light-rail system that was partially completed in 2015, provide tentacles linking it to production centres

throughout the country. The market has remained otherworldly by dispersing fragments and reassembling pieces, simultaneously. It provides space for small-scale merchants, while operating as a distribution centre – due to the horizontal expansion of Addis Ababa – for smaller, neighbourhood-based markets. Real estate investments by the diaspora are slowly translating the fortifications that gave birth to the city into all-inclusive gated-communities. The small section of the populace served by these new developments might find the gruelling visit to the central market somewhat unnecessary, sustaining itself with the abbreviated fragments of Merkato.

Unlike these large-scale materializations of neoliberalism, Merkato harbours the emergence of a sophisticated political network. It was always meant to be a communal project. There was a clear agenda to keep the market free of the displacements seen elsewhere in Addis. Merchants have formed cooperatives to resist the pressures imposed by corruption and globalization. This ambition has been somewhat successful in contrast to the failure of vision seen elsewhere. The merchandise operates as a veneer, cladding the market and hiding its well proven potential for dissent. It is far removed from the blue glass towers and luxury apartments that have come to define the city. It simulates the metropolis without its most dangerous element – exclusivity. This potential to evade detection is incredibly valuable while operating within a surveillance state. The porosity of the market makes it an ideal space to construct a fantasy, because it is difficult to control sites where a recycling centre doubles as a factory, a mosque doubles as a mall and a parking lot serves as a gallery. It is a constant reminder of the State's failure to

distinguish between systems that give it strength and decisions that compromise its legitimacy.

ACCEPTING INTERIORITY

Built in the early 1960s, the first department stores marked an important era in the scalar shift of trading spaces. Two identical halls were built on either side of a bus terminal. The monumentality of mass transportation was employed to assure the success of a new found fascination with interiority. These buildings were part of the initiative promoted by Emperor Haile Selassie I⁽⁵⁾ to sanitize the marketplace by hiding street traders behind stone walls and clerestory windows (Terefe, 2005). Roaming street hawkers were herded and lined-up into a series of neatly arranged kiosks (M. Gebremedhin, personal communication, December 18, 2012). The porous roofs and wall-less kiosks provided an endless landscape of consumption that has come to symbolize the limitless desires of modernity. Their rectangular plans were meant to expand equally in every direction, absorbing the city along with all its inhabitants. One building sells local textiles to foreigners while the other sells foreign textiles to locals. This marked the boldest transition from an outdoor market into a series of interiors. Merkato could no longer be considered the largest open-air market in Africa.

Fully enclosed shops continued to spread across the market until 1974, when the monarchy was abolished and replaced by the promise of socialism. The military junta nationalized the whole market and placed quotas on maximum earnings. For the seventeen subsequent years, merchants devised inventive ways to hide their profits and maintain a low profile. Nevertheless,

bureaucrats forced merchants to pay for the maintenance of shops that were exclusively being rented from the State. This led to a series of seemingly minor physical alterations, such as covered exterior walkways and foldable façade systems, that have radically intensified the experience of walking through the market. In each case, merchants smoothly translated the constraints imposed by each regime into an opportunity to reconfigure the market.

TESTING VERTICALITY

Profound changes to the market did not occur until the demise of Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Derg⁽⁶⁾, in 1991. Although a large majority of the shops were still owned and rented out by the government, an increase in demand led to illegal subdivisions and alterations, escalating the real estate value to the most expensive in the city.⁽⁷⁾ New Land lease policies were implemented, making it compulsory to build new structures in order to maintain possession of land. This was further reinforced with the requirement for every block in the market to be demolished and built up to a minimum of five stories. But – unlike the marginalized communities in other parts of the city – the merchants were able to resist massive displacement by convincing the government to let them develop their own land. After five years of negotiation – using covert and overt means (Terefe, 2005) – those renting shops on the ground floor started forming cooperatives and multiplying the market vertically.


The new malls protect customers from the smoke-filled streets of the market, overburdened by trucks, cars, pedestrians and mules. They destabilize the prominence of the ground with multi-directional expansions of hallways,

shops, kiosks and atria. The glass roofs accommodate a gamut of experiences, ranging from the sacred to the profane. Organizational systems from previous version of Merkato are arrayed vertically, to render the experiences of each slab as an elevated simulation of the ground floor. The merchants have managed to atomize the concrete floors of the mall like the fields of the open-air market. The hallways and corridors – like the sidewalks and streets – are used as extensions of trading and display space; activities softly migrate from the shops to the hallways and from the sidewalks to the streets.

GENUINE TEMPORALITY

The Tera⁽⁸⁾ is an ever-shifting zoning system based on merchandise, allowing for a more flexible reading of the otherwise Cartesian boundary (B. Semu, personal communication, December 21, 2012). It helps customers navigate through the market though it has no street signs or addresses. In them, merchants set up temporary platforms called Gulits – a typology inherited from Arada and other rural markets – where a large piece of cloth is temporarily raised on rocks, soda crates or wooden sticks to display goods for trade. Not only does this platform protect merchandise from the seemingly unsanitary conditions on the ground, but it also defines a general zone of operation for a merchant positioned to obstruct foot traffic. By the time the market closes at sunset, the same cloth is used to tie up and carry the goods to storage. At the core of Merkato's architecture is a continuous patchwork of removable façades which erase the street grid during the day, but reveal it again at night when they are retracted to secure merchandise until the following day.

Similarly, the boundaries of the prolific number of construction sites are dissolved by barnacle-like programs that operate until the construction is completed. The fenced-in compounds anticipate future malls while providing leisurely activities that appear and disappear daily. Their dispersal throughout the market has made them appealing spaces for temporary escape. Demolition sites are just as active, providing roofless barber shops and wall-less cafes. This transitional phase allows merchants to observe change without making drastic modifications to their existing mode of operation. These scenes are often photographed in local Instagram accounts that document the rapid urbanization of the city. Architects struggle to upgrade the market without romanticizing or neglecting its current reality.

The cultural value of Merkato relies on its capability to ingest the unfamiliar. It is a micro-demonstration of the relentlessness that is inscribed behind contemporary African urbanism. A fluid state of improvisation has been chosen as a tactical reaction to rigid demarcations established by national and colonial identity. Its radical design strategies are based on an intuition, a knowledge of its own history. At a moment when our discipline is choosing flatness, Merkato makes a case for complexity. 

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NOTES

- (1) Çatalhöyük, located in southern Anatolia, is one of the oldest cities known to man. The flat roofs above dwelling units were used for trading activities.
- (2) Ethiopia is one of only two countries in Africa that has never been colonized, but there was a five-year Italian military occupation from 1936 to 1941.
- (3) Merkato is the only realized aspect of the Italian master plan for Addis Ababa.
- (4) Since 1995, the Chinese government has been involved in funding and constructing most of the major infrastructural projects in Ethiopia.
- (5) During the Italian occupation, Emperor Haile Selassie I spent five years of exile in England.
- (6) The Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia.
- (7) On December 5, 2014, a plot of land located in Merkato was sold for USD 15,500 per square meter, making it one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in the world.
- (8) There are several *Teras* throughout Merkato. The general boundaries of each one of these *Teras* are constantly shifting, but most of them are dedicated to a particular type of merchandise: mattress *Tera*, cellphone *Tera*, etc.

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