Journal Article

Spaces Movie Series
From cinematic documentaries to implementation strategies

Author(s):
Heisel, Felix; Kifle, Bisrat

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The movie series _Spaces documents selected elements of Addis Ababa’s city fabric, which seem essential but could be lost for future generations soon due to the city’s current rapid transformation. This cinematic research aims to highlight objective values of the informal city through subjective story telling in combination with expert interviews, in order to influence tomorrow’s decision making through today’s education.

African cities have growth rates of up to 5%/year; this makes them the fastest growing cities in the world today. Extrapolations show that the urban population in Africa currently doubles every 10 to 15 years (United Nations 2012). Also Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, is in transformation. Currently the home of approximately four million inhabitants, the city might triple its size within the next 30 years due to the increasing rural to urban migration, as well as natural growth. And, according to UN-Habitat, 80% of the existing dwellings are in ‘sub-standard, slum like’ conditions (UN-Habitat 2011). Consequently, in 2011, the Addis Ababa City Administration announced to redevelop all ‘informal’ and ‘unplanned’ parts of the city until 2020. But, nearly all households in Ethiopia undertake some kind of informality either through consumption or production of employment, services, land or housing (Fransen and van Dijk 2008).

Therefore, also in 2011, the authors started the research initiative _Spaces based on cinematic documentaries to record a century old way of living in Addis Ababa, following the strong believe that the informal sector can teach important lessons about the use of architecture and its social role. Originally, these documentaries were intended to act as a teaching tool for students at the Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development (EiABC). Fascinated by mega-projects in the West and Middle East, and understandably excited about the building boom in their own capital, Addis Ababa’s informal city lost its value in the perception of most Ethiopian students due to its derelict physical presence.
Fig. 01  Expert interviews for Supporting Spaces, filmed in Addis Ababa’s lively Piazza area
However, the social and cultural networks as well as the spatial fabric underlying this physical appearance should be validated and regarded as the basis for the development of a sustainable future city. The documentary series _Spaces addresses such lessons from informality in currently six movies discussing housing and public space, rural to urban migration, conservation, recycling, and land ownership specific to the city of Addis Ababa. However, using the example of Ethiopia, the questions raised are applicable in many other developing territories around the world.

Similarly, the structure of the movies combines the story of a single person and his experiences with interview opinions of academics and professionals. Each 15-minute documentary follows the life of its protagonist for the duration of 24 hours on an average day. In combination with comments and explanations by the experts, this subjective story then aims for an objective lesson.

Outside of the university, public interest in these documentaries started growing fast. Through recent screenings for stakeholders and politicians in Addis Ababa and internationally, the movie series and its applicable findings have since influenced political decision-making in Ethiopia’s capital. A public discussion on the future of city planning at the World Urban Forum 2014 in Medellin, Colombia is only one example. At the moment, the series consists of 6 documentary movies, which can be seen at http://www.spacesmovie.com
Disappearing Spaces

A day in Addis Ababa’s informal city

Addis Ababa, unlike many other African cities, has a history and city fabric to learn from. Even if the physical conditions of the informal settlements are very poor, the social networks, as well as spatial and cultural values developed and embedded in these areas are worth the preservation and study. In fact, we believe that any new development should be based on the values routed and cultivated in exactly these parts of the city. The movie Disappearing Spaces is a cinematic documentary on the use of space in the informal parts of Ethiopia’s capital. Looking at one typical house for the duration of 24 hours, one can notice how a single room can serve for most daily functions.

Emerging Spaces

A day in Addis Ababa’s condominiums

At the time of filming (2012), the AAHDPO completed around 100,000 units on more than 120 different sites – 2/3rd of them in expansion areas – out of which nearly 70,000 are handed over to end users so far. This grand housing program has increased density in several parts of the city, at the loss of traditional ground-floor networks. Emerging Spaces is a cinematic documentary on the use of space in the redeveloped parts of Addis Ababa. Looking at one typical condominium for the duration of 24 hours, one can notice how its inhabitants changed the spaces according to their accustomed needs and traditions.

Originating Spaces

A day in rural Ethiopia

Addis Ababa is a city of migrants. Considering that Addis Ababa’s history reaches back only a century and most of the inhabitants of the informal areas of the city are rural migrants, the spatial arrangements of the traditional tukul actually forms part of Addis Ababa’s understanding of space. Based on the claim that traditional and cultural habits, religious and social patterns and income generating mechanisms should be the basis for new developments in Ethiopia’s capital, this movie tries to understand the origin of such conditions. The movie Originating Spaces is a cinematic documentary on the use of space in the rural areas of Ethiopia. Looking at one typical tukul for the duration of 24 hours, one can notice the similarities in rural and urban space understanding.
Spaces Movie Series
Felix Heisel and Bisrat Kifle

Disappearing Spaces
a day in Addis Ababa’s informal city

Emerging Spaces
a day in Addis Ababa’s condominiums

Originating Spaces
a day in rural Ethiopia
Supporting Spaces
a day on Addis Ababa’s streets

a documentary by Felix Heisel and Bisrat Kifle as part of the series _Spaces_

Recycling Spaces
a day in Addis Ababa’s merkato

a documentary by Felix Heisel and Bisrat Kifle as part of the series _Spaces_

Materializing Spaces
a night on Addis Ababa’s periphery

a documentary by Felix Heisel and Bisrat Kifle as part of the series _Spaces_
Supporting Spaces

A day on Addis Ababa’s streets

Small and micro businesses in Addis Ababa are start-ups for many inhabitants, especially migrants coming to the city. A ‘listro’ (shoe shiner) defines his business area by setting a shoe shining box down on the ground. He then brings a chair to claim the space. In time, a plastic shade covers the customer’s seat. As the space defines itself, side businesses emerge, like the selling of tobacco, candies, chewing gum and so on. At the streets of Addis, daily, public space turns into private and vice versa. The movie Supporting Spaces is a cinematic documentary on the use of street space in Ethiopia’s capital. Based on the life’s story and experience of one selected listro, this movie tries to tell a generic experience of thousands of migrants in Addis Ababa. Looking at one spot in the area of Piazza for the duration of 24 hours, one can notice the importance of micro economies as part of the public realm.

Recycling Spaces

A day in Addis Ababa’s merkato

Throughout the years, Addis Ababa, informally, developed a sophisticated recycling system in all parts of the city. “Kuré-Yalews” are roaming the streets in small neighbourhoods, collecting anything that might still be useable from households. In the course of a few days, these items are returned into the cycle after their transformation in “Minalesh Terra”, being sold to the owners of small neighbourhood shops as “new” products. This recycling process is not only the source of income for many families in the city, it also appropriated space in the city throughout the years. The movie Recycling Spaces is a cinematic documentary on the use of space allocated to this recycling cycle in Ethiopia’s capital. Based on the daily routine and experiences of one selected Kuré-Yalew, this movie tries to tell a generic experience of thousands of inhabitants in Addis Ababa.

Materializing Spaces

A day in Addis Ababa’s periphery

Informal housing construction in Addis Ababa features a very specific, “illegal” but common typology, the “chereka bet”. These houses are built on squatted land during one night, hence the name “moon-shine house”. Material collection and preparation might last for a few weeks before the specific night. Once everything is in place, neighbours and specialists help and erect the structure within a few hours. The movie Materializing Spaces is a cinematic documentary on the construction of such a chereka bet. The story is based on the erection of one specific structure, including the preparation in the days before the event. Interviews with the builders and the “owner” tell the story of such houses.
References


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