

HOW TO READ AN AFRICAN CITY

A Diagnostic Handbook for Practitioners

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This handbook is an evolving field text developed from
observation, practice, and urban diagnosis in Addis Ababa.

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Introduction

This handbook focuses on a method for reading African cities before any interventions.

It does not accept everything that exists as positive but rejects the method of judging African cities based on what they lack. This perspective is limiting because it ignores what existing systems have sustained for a long time. It sees disorder before function, informality before systems, congestion before demand, and old fabric before memory, economy, and social infrastructure.

The following chapters present a different way of reading based on years of empirical experience.

They do not argue that African cities should remain as they are. Instead, it argues that improvement becomes destructive when it begins with an image of order rather than a diagnosis of how a city works.

The first chapter, *Read the Street Before the Masterplan*, begins with the street as the city's most honest document. It argues that plans show intention, but streets reveal what the system can actually sustain and support.

The second chapter, *Informality Is Not Disorder*, reads informal settlements and street economies as systems created under constraints. It asks what function informality performs before treating it as a problem to be solved.

In the third chapter, the pedestrian ledger, pedestrian movements are treated as economic evidence. When people walk, pause, wait, cross, and gather, the city unveils its demands in real time.

The fourth chapter, "Read Corridors as Power," examines corridor projects as more than just mobility or beautification. Corridors reveal state speed, value shift, clearance, visibility, and official images.

The fifth chapter, "Read Land Use as Politics," argues that land use is also about permission, which activities are allowed to remain, and which become vulnerable when land values change.

In the sixth chapter, Who Maintains Public Space, the focus shifts from design to the custody and management of public spaces. This chapter argues that public spaces are incomplete when they are built.

The seventh chapter, The Cost of Copying, questions imported urban models. It does not necessarily reject learning from elsewhere but supports the idea that importing must be translated into a local context.

The eighth chapter, Procurement Is the Hidden Architect, looks behind the drawing. It shows how tender packages, budgets, contractor capacity, and supervision shape the built city.

The ninth chapter, Who Coordinates the City, asks who makes urban life work. Coordination is not only found in government charts but also through daily users.

The final chapter, The Legible Self-Renewing African City, gathers the method into a closing doctrine.

Together, these chapters form a diagnostic sequence on how to read the street, informality, pedestrians, corridors, land use, maintenance, copying, procurement, and coordination. Only then should we intervene in the process.



Formal frontage, widened road space, and the planned image of order.

01

Read the Street Before the Masterplan

Plan is a declaration of intent, and the street reveals what the system can achieve. Urban interventions often fail when streets are redesigned before they are properly read.

The master plan sees order through geometry, hierarchy, and usage. Streets show order in terms of behavior, negotiations, and daily adaptation. This distinction is important because, in this context, street character is not limited to paths. It becomes a laundry space, cooking area, and meeting point for residents. Larger public streets become places of work, waiting, exchange, transit, visibility, and exclusion. A street reveals the city more clearly than fixed planning assumptions do.

The Masterplan's Blind Spot

Bole Street clearly demonstrates the gap between intention and reality. The street is one of Addis Ababa's primary commercial corridors and serves as a gateway to the city. On the plan, it appears legible with hotels, multi-lane vehicular paths, structured pedestrian zones, formal building edges, corporate façades, measured setbacks, and separated uses. The plan assumes that vehicles will move at a predictable speed, pedestrians will move along linear paths, building edges and public realms will remain clean and separate, and street life can be controlled through geometry.

The master plan's blind spot is that it treats the street, an active system, as a passive container of traffic. However, the

street is shaped by comfort, access, shade, waiting, informal trade, parking pressure, security, law enforcement, and maintenance. Any plan that does not align with the needs of pedestrians will be discarded automatically unless forced by regulations.

Plans assume order through forms, but streets reveal it through use.

Movement and Refusal

The activities that a street can accommodate determine its quality, not the pavement, asphalt, lanes, or sectional drawings.

Before the redesign, Bole Road had informal activities that made it more dynamic and lively than it is now. Vendors used to sell on street corners, and shoe shiners sat at every business gate with their boxes and small seats. Pedestrians stopped, negotiated, crossed, bought, waited, and moved through the messy but active street economy of the area.

The redesign made the street cleaner, wider, and more formal but risked removing most activities. Streets have become increasingly transient. Informal sellers have either disappeared, moved to other locations, or shifted their operations to buildings. Vehicles cannot find ample parking spaces in older buildings and new no-parking streets. Palm trees aligned along the streets provided minimal shade. Monotonous facades may not always encourage people to remain in the area. Consequently, the streets felt less socially enriching, with fewer people walking.

Informality appears and disappears periodically throughout the day in areas such as Wollo Sefer, Millennium Hall, and the Sky Light Hotel side of the corridor. People still wait, cross, and gather according to their transit needs rather than the design. People who wait for a taxi overflow onto the vehicular

way and sometimes wait for minibuses and taxis on pedestrian walkways rather than where the plan tells them to wait. These activities represent a refusal to use plans that do not meet the needs of users. Pedestrians often move, thereby correcting design flaws.



Bole corridor by night: formal lighting and pedestrian movement testing the redesigned edge.

Power and Economy

Streets reveal the socioeconomy of a place better than any zoning map. To a strict municipal professional, informal vendors may appear as an obstruction. To someone who reads the street carefully, these are market signals. They appear when movement slows and demand is present.

Bole's official image, for example, is a formal mixed-use. In reality, the street's economic life does not come only from formal buildings but also from the friction between movement and needs. On these streets, value appears to follow the commuters. Shoe shiners, lottery sellers, food vendors, and small traders respond to the demand that formal businesses could not offer.

The street redesign risked removing the street system that lay behind the activities. It threatened power dynamics: who was allowed to remain visible, who was pushed indoors, who was moved to the side of the street, who was counted as part of the city's economy, and who was treated as visual pollution.

The street edge is a negotiation between planning, capital, enforcement, survival, and daily demand.

Maintenance as Custody

Planners often forget to ask who owns a street after it is built.

In Addis Ababa, major street redesigns often follow similar patterns. They begin with a strong construction process followed by completion and celebration. Maintenance usually remains invisible. Soon after, the completed paving begins to crack, utility mismatches create an infrastructure backlog, lights fail, tree pits dry out, drainage blocks water flow, construction debris accumulates on the streets, and vendors return in the form of new encroachments.

This indicates maintenance failure or poor coordination. A

broken curb may indicate a weak maintenance budget. A blocked drain may indicate poor coordination between roadwork and utility agency. An empty sidewalk may reveal failed shade, frontages, or street programming. A controlled façade may reveal private capital replacing public comfort.

The quality of a street cannot be better than that of the institutional system that maintains it. Deteriorated concrete blocks on the older Bole Street are possibly a result of poor governance. The new clean corridor may hide this fragmentation for some time, but if the institutions remain fragmented, the street will eventually reveal it.

The plan can be completed; however, if the street is not maintained daily, it will eventually deteriorate.

Final Diagnostic

Before designing any African street, one should ask “What does the street reveal that the master plan conceals?” This may include movement, demand, informal systems, maintenance gaps, and power generation.

Read the street before redesigning it because the street reveals what the plan cannot see: everyday people.



Aware before renewal. Archival field photo, taken before demolition. The street worked as domestic space, work space, and shared space.



Shared compound life in Aware before demolition: washing, drying, storage, informal work, and social layered into one space.

02

Informality Is Not Disorder

Informality is an order created under constraints. It fills the mobility, risk, timing, and need gaps that formal systems cannot provide. Informality should not inherently imply obstruction, congestion, illegality, or visual disorder, as official documents would suggest. A good planner reads informal logic without romanticizing it.

The Formal Misreading

Formal planning standards may find informal settlements to be illegal, unattractive, and chaotic. The Aware Neighborhood renewal direction clearly shows this formal misreading. Located near governmental offices and embassies, the neighborhood has historically evolved as an organic settlement with low-rise mud-brick wall residences and microeconomies within. Despite the intricate system, formal reading classified the area as unfit for living conditions and removed them. The requirements are usually common: use of natural construction materials, user per room capacity, and sanitation services per household, among others. Everything that does not fit the standards is removed.

The Informal Logic

Aware functioned as a low-capital system for housing, food, repairs, trade, and mutual dependence. Before the renewal, Aware accommodated more than 40,000 residents, including the homeless people, tenants, sub-tenants, and homeowners. Residents grew vegetables, sewed clothes for sale, and sold injera and vegetables in communal compounds. These spaces created mutual dependence and helped them survive

unaffordable living conditions.

Before the renewal, if you walked through a narrow alleyway leading to the oldest mosque in Addis Ababa, the Wele Mohammed Mosque, you would find a compound containing 12 interconnected household rooms that shared a single, mud courtyard. In the morning, four women would sit on the ground and sell injera covered in large plastic-lined baskets and vegetables, organized by type. At noon, seven women sun-dried their crop. In the evening, the children returned from school and played in the courtyard. Young people gathered at the edge of the alley and talked. Two blocks down, there were eight interconnected household rooms within a single fenced space. This space was used for storage. In one of the rooms, four self-taught artisan sewists manually made clothes. They stored the products on their porches and dried clothes on wires in the open courtyards.

This activity is the same for many informal African settlements. African cities are often organized through provisional, ambiguous, and partially invisible practices. Informality is a different layer that routes resources, access, livelihoods, services, and social coordination when formal systems are incomplete or misaligned.

A vendor is usually a diagnosis, revealing a demand that the formal city has forgotten to fulfill. Urban actors connect people to work, goods, transportation, protection, information, and other services. Food vendors at taxi stations and street junctions and small vendors in front of hotels and hospitals sell telecards and cigarettes to solve immediate needs at a low cost.

When formal systems are slow, expensive, or exclusionary, informal systems intervene through trust, negotiation, and the use of local knowledge. Aware had a chain of vehicle-garage workshops where second-hand materials were abundant. In that system, young men joined to learn skills

cheaply, old car owners received cheap services, and young men received employment in return.

Small transactions and flexible spaces accommodate more actors than rigid transactions. Informal uses can add temporal diversity and low-overhead enterprises to an economy. Removing them eliminates food, attention, information and public presence.

The streets near Aware today are bare, with beautiful trees and fancy light poles but without any use.

The Constraint System

Informality is an adaptation to constraints such as low capital, unaffordable rent, a lack of employment opportunities, and incomplete public infrastructure. When formal capital is lacking, the informal system relies on daily inventory



Garage space in Aware before demolition: scrap parts, small businesses, and informal jobs.

turnover and zero fixed infrastructure cost. Rent becomes a multi-level tenancy in a small plot of land with changing temporal functions, where housing and workspaces are scarce. Without permanent physical structures, houses use light blankets, mud, and baskets as acute security measures. When formal shops function through formal signage, storage, contracts, and stable locations, informal vendors follow movement, timing, visibility, and social knowledge to survive the competition.

Constraints build informal alternatives to formal rules.

The Risk of Romanticizing Informality

Despite its alternative value, romanticizing informality before diagnosing it can be dangerous. Many Ethiopian planners have argued against renewal and have been educated to blindly preserve informality. This direction is dangerous because it will keep African urban spaces in a state of no change, thereby affecting millions of people. Some young people in Aware appeared trapped in a prolonged wait for a way out that they did not get from school or the city. Informal markets threaten formal shops, informal narrow alleys pose security risks, and crowded houses pose health and fire hazards for residents.

The risk of romanticizing informality is making the same error of formal misreading, that is, labeling before diagnosing.

Final Diagnostic

Informality is not disorder. It is a web of systems created under constraints, helping low-income residents survive, meet, work, and aspire. However, not all informalities need to be retained in the formal version. A diagnosis should ask, does this settlement need protection, reorganization, formalization, or removal?



03

Follow the Pedestrian Ledger

Pedestrians are units of economic activity. This value remains invisible until the patterns of how people move, pause, wait, and return are documented. Once documented, the pedestrian ledger indicates the direction of economic activity. At the edge of Megenagna, a pedestrian ledger is visible during rush hours. Hundreds of people funnel from transit stops, shops, and side streets into the roundabouts and then disperse in different directions. They are trying to catch a minibus, walk to food quarters, buy water, kolo, airtime, or food.

In this regard, pedestrians are not abstract circulation units; they are buyers, commuters, socialites, and workers. They reveal real-time market patterns.

Sidewalks Are Not Decorative

Sidewalks are layers of public activities where pedestrians wait, unload, buy, sell, and meet. When they are designed to look beautiful but without the human element, they die or are informally reinvented by users. For example, in Megenagna, despite sidewalks being designed to look clean and transitional, people have continuously repurposed them to accommodate multilayered pedestrian activities. Over the last 20 years, Megenagna has evolved from a secondary center to a transport node and then to a transitional zone. Sidewalks have evolved and refused to just remain decorative paths.

Movement Reveals Demand

Where people move or pause reveals demand, and where they return is where the city has created economic trust. Successful



Megenagna: pedestrian pressure becomes visible where crossing, transit, and market demand meet.

urban spaces depend on people's movement. The route taken repeatedly maps transport transfers, work, and the networks of trusted vendors. Megenagna adds another layer: where people pause, small economies emerge, and movement balances time and cost advantages.

In Megenagna, the anchors are complex. Elevated pedestrian bridges drop commuters onto ground-level minibuss staging bays and onto the light rail transit (LRT) beneath them. Observation of the pedestrian pattern, main walking lines, shortcuts, and overpass bypasses reveals the anchors and missing physical links. Where people pause, near stations and Zefmesh Mall, reveals where information and attention notes are located. Where people avoid, near accelerated zones and empty edges reveal spatial fear, unshaded expanses, and vehicular risks. Where people return, near stations, reveals loyalty, informal credit access, and pedestrians' spatial habits.

Where there is movement, there is demand.

Friction Creates Exchange

Some friction is productive; another is dangerous. Productive friction slows down pedestrian movement at certain spots so that users can meet, rest, or buy. Unproductive friction slows down pedestrian movement but also puts them in a state of danger, exclusion, or delay.

At Megenagna, friction creates exchange. People sit under overpasses until traffic eases, wait in long queues at the bus station, or gather where movement slows. Vendors follow these pauses. They turn waiting time into small transactions, directions, conversations, and everyday services.

In contrast, some crossing points create dangerous friction. They become sudden breaking points between pedestrians and impatient drivers, spaces of fear for elderly people and women carrying market bags, and zones where theft and

confusion become easier.

Designing only for frictionless movement can remove the small exchanges that make a street socially and economically active.

Misreading the Pedestrian Damages the Market

The Megenagna roundabout and pedestrian corners were widened and cleaned at each corner, and the edges were decorated with gray tiles. However, the way pedestrians used it seemed to indicate that they did not belong. Some cross the street between vehicles that do not want to slow down, slowly pushing their way through traffic.

The road disrupted interactions, and people only wanted to escape and not remain. The new intervention moved the market into a single spot under the overpass and onto smaller streets. On most streets, people rushed past each other without interacting.

Final Diagnostic

A pedestrian ledger is simple: a functional city cannot be built by treating people as traffic participants. A street does not become modern simply because it is wide and free of obstacles. A good street encourages people to participate and find their place in the flow of the street. Redesigning should first map pedestrian activity.



Megenagna: waiting, food, shade, and movement overlap under the overpass.

Corridor as official image: the street becomes a surface where mobility, visibility, capital, and state order meet.



04

Read Corridors as Power

A corridor is not just a road. It is power.

For a technical planner, a corridor may appear in terms of mobility, infrastructure, and beautification. However, the corridor project reveals the state's priorities, the speed of state action, the areas where capital is being invited, the valuable frontages, and the urban realities that are removed from view.

The Neutral Corridor Myth

Stand in front of Arada and look down towards the Taytu Hotel; you will no longer see the previous street life, small businesses, and pedestrian activities. These have been removed or reorganized. The street is now wider, the edges are clearer, and the facades of the remaining buildings now have a new and different public image.

This is how corridor power should be read. A corridor project presented as a technical improvement is not necessarily neutral in its effects. It is a power that decides which type of city becomes visible and what is pushed out of the frame of the image. This framing obscures the division between the corridor and corridor projects.

The corridor is an urban system with irregular property edges, vernacular buildings, informal economies, pedestrian routines, and daily negotiations. The corridor project is a state intervention implemented on top of that system. It is packaged as clearance, widening, mandatory façade remodelling, and behavioral control. The corridor is not neutral; it reorganizes visibility, value, access, and power.

Corridor as Speed

The traditional planning process is slow and deliberate. The time between the decision and implementation allows residents to negotiate with the state on common matters such as asset valuations and grievance hearings. The corridor project significantly shortened this process. In Piassa, for example, the administrative timeline and eviction notices were compressed to a few days. Soon after, municipal water and electricity lines were reportedly disconnected.

This speed is part of what the corridor reveals to the observer. When a planning process that is normally slow suddenly becomes fast, the planner should read more than the physical. Speed shows alignment between political urgency, municipal coordination, enforcement capacity, and public image.

Visibility as Value

The corridor project created value by rearranging visibility. In older Piassa, much of the economic life was internal, operating within blocks, informal courtyard networks, rental rooms, repair spaces, small shops, informal trade, low-cost buildings, and hidden behind irregular property lines, away from the corridors. The system functions through access, proximity, referral, and familiarity rather than through formal channels.

The widening and clearing of roads and rivers have significantly changed this relationship. When the road edge opened, uncleared areas were visible. Buildings that were previously hidden are now exposed to the front and became more important. Properties facing improved corridors gained value from visibility, ease of access, and investment potential. When riverside informal settlements were cleaned, the buildings at the back gained new views and better infrastructure.

This sudden shift indicates that the corridor does not create equal value for all parties. It increased the value for some and consequently removed the low-rent conditions that allowed the rest of the population to survive. Informal trade and small repair economies may lose ground as the value of frontages and formal redevelopment becomes more important.

One should ask the following questions: whose value increased, whose value was removed, and who can still afford to remain after the intervention?

Image as Selection

Corridor projects a new official image selected to survive. The new image of clean edges, lighting, wide roads, formal facades, planted medians, and controlled movement improved safety, comfort, legibility, and public dignity. However, to produce a clean edge, other urban realities are pushed away from the primary frames. The informal vernacular economic life and spaces that had meaning for the locals were erased. These were replaced with a selected, visually controlled version of the city.

When an image becomes a tool for selection, it decides what kind of city the corridor has chosen to display and what it has chosen to conceal.

Final Diagnostic

A corridor is a diagnostic surface that shows how the state speed, spatial visibility, value, and public image are on a single axis. One should ask what the project accelerates, clears, exposes, and creates as new value, and what image of the city it aims to present. What remains outside the frame includes old economies, displaced residents, informal workers, vernacular buildings, and social systems that made the corridor work before the intervention.



Lideta: older mixed-use fabric and formal redevelopment facing each other across the same street.

05

Read Land Use as Politics

Land use is not about function but about permission and decision on what should and should not exist. At first glance, a land-use map may describe an area as residential, commercial, mixed-use, or transportation. Beneath the coloring, land use determines whether activities are formal, tolerated, or temporary. This is visible between the old and new Lideta, which are located across the street. The new land use of the new fabric decided what should stay and what should not, and the new value changed the entire image and the economy.

The Neutral Zoning Myth

Zoning has difficulty categorizing informal uses without judging them through formal uses. Zoning organizes land into distinct categories, separates incompatible uses, gives value to uses based on location, and creates ease of access. However, it may not acknowledge the informal and everything else that does not fit in its formal theory.

This is visible in the Lideta district. In the older part of Lideta, land use is multi-layered: a house is also a shop, a courtyard is also a storage area, and street edges are also a small business area. The zoning term 'mixed use' barely captures the reality of informal urban life. When uses overlap and do not fit the formal land-use definition, they risk being removed from the zoning categories.

Zoning cannot remain neutral; it must decide which should remain visible and which should disappear.

Use Before Label

Before reading the land use category, read the actual use.

The older urban fabric of Lideta was incremental. Galvanized sheet houses, narrow openings, informal shops, flour mills, and home-based services create a local economy. This way of life was a means of survival for the community. Across the road, part of the older urban fabric was redeveloped into a mixed use condominium. Consequently, the new fabric was labeled as formal and easier to classify as mixed-use. Housing became vertical, and commercial activities were organized into defined spaces. The street edges were clearly defined and controlled.

In practice, both sides provide mixed urban functions; however, they no longer provide the same permissions to the same people. While the older side allows small and low capital uses to function as part of daily life, the redeveloped side favors uses that can survive formal rent, fixed layouts, property rules, and higher costs.

Instead of asking what the land is zoned for, we should ask what kind of life this land use permits.

The Politics of Compatibility

Modern zoning identifies certain formal land uses as compatible and ignores others. A bank, café, pharmacy, office, or supermarket may appear compatible because they look clean, formal, and pay taxes to the government. However, a vendor, repair worker, home-based workshop, and informal kiosk may be treated as incompatible, even when they serve the same neighborhood. This is the concept of the politics of compatibility, a question of not just whether two uses can coexist but whose use is recognized as a proper urban activity.

In Lideta, the contrast is visible between the two

developments: one side has a dense, horizontal mix of urban functions, whereas the other side has a more formal, vertical, and regulated urban model. Neither of these two sides is necessarily bad, but the informal side appears to be incompatible with the city's land-use vision.

When Value Rewrites Use

Perceived land value determines land use patterns. Land at the edge of the main street is more expensive and valuable; therefore, it is usually assigned for commercial or other high-income public purposes. Land inside blocks is less expensive and, therefore, less valuable, despite its countless activities and economic value.

Redevelopment also creates value that rewrites the use of space. In the Lideta condominiums, the floor area increased after redevelopment, and ownership was formalized. This makes it difficult to sustain low-rent activity. Redevelopment also filtered the economy of the area. Some were labeled illegal, and others disappeared because they could not afford the economic system that the plans imposed.

Land use changes when the value changes. When the value changes, people who depend on low-cost spaces become more vulnerable.

Final Diagnostic

When considering urban land use, do not simply ask whether it is cleaner or denser. Ask what the land already does, who lives there, who works there, and what activities are hidden in the houses and courtyards. Then, ask what the new category permits. Who can remain after the development? Which uses will become formal and which will disappear? Which activities will become unaffordable, visible, or illegal?

To read land use as politics is to recognize that every category gives permission to some urban lives and withdraws others.



Mexico-Sarbet Road: tiled pedestrian lanes, unique light poles, and defined open spaces

06

Who Maintains Public Space

Public spaces are considered complete when the design is built. Streets are paved, lights are installed, trees are planted, and bike lanes are painted. However, the real test comes later when dust, dry seasons, bad usage, returning vendors, illegal parking, and conflicts of use appear on the site.

Public spaces fail when they are not maintained.

The Design-as-Completion Myth

In many urban projects, construction is considered the final stage. In practice, once the street is completed and the project is delivered, it remains without intervention or maintenance. The spaces will constantly be used, occupied, become dirty, and damaged. This challenges the design as a completion myth that leaves infrastructure and space for abuse.

Design is not complete when it is built. The real work begins the day after the last day of construction. Sidewalks require constant cleaning, trees require watering, light poles require repair, and vendor edges require regulation.

Custody Before Beauty

A good planner should first ask who is responsible for a space before asking how beautiful it is.

Consider the new face of the sidewalk on the Mexico-Sarbet Road. This has become increasingly appealing to users. However, all the new additions, including painted bike lanes,

tiled pedestrian lanes, unique light poles, and defined open spaces, come with certain underlying responsibilities.

The more materials a design uses, the more likely it is to require maintenance. The more green it adds, the more watering and replacement it needs, and the more specialized the materials and lighting, the harder the maintenance becomes when budgets, spare parts, and responsible offices are unclear.

Only custody determines the survival and longevity of the design.

Use as Maintenance

When people like a certain space, they make it visible through its daily use. They notice damage, report the case, or intervene. Shopkeepers clean their shopfront space, building guards watch parking spaces and care for greenery, and vendors watch for potential criminal activity. When a space does not provide people with a place to stay, it becomes empty and decays over time.

Informal custody is a form of maintenance in urban areas.

The Problem of Ownerless Space

Many public spaces are technically public but practically ownerless. They belong to the city on paper, but no one has daily custody over them. Ownerless spaces are created when agencies are not coordinated. Various offices repair, clean, and maintain green spaces, enforce rules, and respond to local complaints.

However, these offices do not always read each other because of capacity, schedule, or leadership issues. In Africa, cracked pavements wait for the wrong office, a dead tree waits for a nonexistent budget, or a vendor conflict waits for the wrong authority to resolve it. When spaces encounter scattered

responsibilities, they gradually deteriorate. An ownerless space is used but not cared for by anyone.

Final Diagnostic

Before designing a public space, the question of who will maintain it must be addressed. Who will use, pay attention to, and have authority over them? Ask who will take care of it after the construction is completed. Spaces do not survive because of good construction or good design. They require coordinated maintenance, use, authority, budgets, and custody.



Urael corridor: upgraded public space requires daily custody after construction, from paving and lighting to shade, use, and repair.

The Cost of Copying

Copying can blind professionals from seeing what is important. When a city borrows planning models that do not align with the local context, these models begin to undermine the local system before they are fully understood. They read informal as a problem, dense as congestion, mixed as incompatible, and old as outdated.

Orthodoxy as Blindness

Planning doctrines can make urban African life appear problematic because they do not fit the imported models. These principles often aspire to formal land use, registered systems, and controlled public behaviors. Orthodoxy becomes blind to truth when it compares a local street to an ideal city before asking which system it accommodated that the formal forgot. It ignores the repair economy, street vendors, functional spaces, mixed residential commercial compounds, and the entire social network that makes daily life possible in the city itself.

A copied doctrine offers only a blind solution to a problem.

Formal Space Without Public Life

A copied public space may seem to work until it fails to support actual use. A modern sidewalk or plaza that does not understand local public life cannot be successful. For example, a sidewalk in Addis Ababa is used differently than one in Abuja or Dubai. Any design adoption must consider the local context before aesthetics. Formal spaces that ignore local

realities remain lifeless. Sidewalks without shade become hostile in sunny weather. A plaza without an everyday reason to make people stay remains without public life.

Policy That Cannot See the City

Imported policy language often defaults to formal elements, such as registered plots, formal roads, planned land uses, and formal buildings. Many African urban systems are difficult to evaluate using these criteria. Informal trade, mobile vending, temporary shelters, negotiated taxi stops, and home-based work that do not appear in plans become invisible under these policies and are treated as problems. Informal activities along corridors may not fit the formal image that policies favor; therefore, they by default avoid them.

If a policy cannot see the city as it is, it defaults to replacing it with a new one.

Translation Before Importation

Importing solutions without translation to the local context is a futile effort. The reason is simple. All imported models have hidden requirements. For example, smart lighting, despite its beauty, requires power reliability, spare parts, and local maintenance capabilities for effective operations. What worked in China, Europe, or the Gulf may not work in the same way in Addis Ababa or other African cities.

Specific light poles may require a reliable maintenance system, expensive replacement parts, or protection against dust and theft. A good translation first understands the underlying system behind the model and decides how it fits the local capacity.

Final Diagnostic

First, copying should diagnose the hidden systems that made the model work and what is required to adapt it locally to a

new context, and the process should then identify expected anomalies, such as the local climate and budget.

Before importing a model, ask: What local system is already working here? What use will disappear if the space is cleaned? Who maintains the imported feature after construction? Does the model fit local climate, movement, cost, and repair capacity? What looks disorderly but actually carries economic or social function?

Copying without diagnosis makes a city less intelligent.



08

Procurement Is the Hidden Architect

Many urban projects fail long before construction begins, inside the procurement stage, which decides who builds, what is affordable, and who supervises the project. Budget changes the material, facade, and structural placements. When finances are insufficient, plans change, adapt, and ultimately fail to align with the vision. The city does not look like the end renderings because the money, contracts, supervision, and coordination systems that support them determine their final image.

The Drawing-as-Authority Myth

Planners usually perceive drawings as the final authority, as it takes countless hours to choose materials, design directions, integrations, and numbers. In practice, most of the drawing life is away from the planner's desk. It passes through budgets, tender documents, contractor selection and negotiation, payment delays, material substitution, and political deadlines.

Procurement, not drawing, is the final authority.

Tender Packages Shape the City

A project package determines what is constructed in a project.

In Addis Ababa, development projects are rarely undertaken by single institutions. Various independent contractors work on different aspects of construction projects. Some may work

on drainage networks, whereas others work on street lighting, landscaping, street furniture, and utility ducts, among other things. This diversity creates fairness but also risks the acquisition of fragmented systems. In practice, one contractor may finish paving the asphalt when the other contractor arrives late to excavate the fresh pavement to erect light poles. Another contractor may cut a trench through the asphalt to install telecom fibers or water lines, for example.

The system is as strong as municipal coordination, but without it, the final streets resemble the procurement structure in place. As a result cities will acquire broken edges, mismatched levels, exposed utilities, dead trees, and multiple excavations.

Tender packages shape cities.

Lowest Cost as Design Logic

The procurement system rewards the lowest price more than quality to minimize immediate state expenditure. The city later absorbs the cost.

The design may have looked beautiful in the rendering, but procurement changed it to a low-cost design. This resulted in cheap materials, weak workmanship, poor drainage details, flooding problems, and low-quality fixtures that were observed in some areas of the corridor project. Consider flooding that occur on some corridors in Addis Ababa, cycle lanes that do not withstand weathering, pedestrian ways that break at building entrances, or pseudo-arts on walls. Would they be the result of low cost design logic?

The cost determines the final implementation.

Contractor Capacity Becomes Urban Form

A contractor builds what their equipment, skill level, discipline, and finances allow them to build. Without that, no

matter how good the design is, it would not be precisely translated into reality. An incapable contractor pours a crude, steep concrete wedge when the drawing requires integration between a ramp and a street gutter. Weak or under-pressure supervision compromises the final look, and the result becomes a permanent urban form.

These three cases reveal the contractor capacity that has become a permanent urban form. The first is grade transitions, where side slopes direct rainwater into shop thresholds instead of drainage inlets. This occurred in the early stages of the corridor project when the streets were flooded. Second, utility interfaces that appear as misaligned manhole covers that sit above or below the final pavement level. This is common in some parts of corridor projects. Third, edge finishes and poorly anchored stone curbs break under the weight of delivery vehicles.

A plan is only as strong as its execution is.

Final Diagnostic

Urban corridors are judged by project packages, contractors that built them, materials substituted during the process, resource limitations, and external pressures rather than their design. Before judging the final construction, ask what budget, procurement process, contractor capacity, and supervision system produced it.

A sidewalk detail can reveal procurement decisions: material quality, supervision, construction sequencing, and maintenance responsibility.

Megenagna terminal: managed by taxi assistants and vendors



09

Who Coordinates the City

African cities do not run because of official structures.

Every municipal department has an organizational chart for traffic, cleaning, land administration, code enforcement, and green space management. On paper, the city appears to be coordinated through this top-down structure that controls each part of the urban fabric. However, this structure is not practical. Take the Megenagna junction, the daily chaotic activities are maintained by a different set of actors. Weyala, Delala, Denb Askebrari, taxi assistants, vendors, shopkeepers, local brokers, and informal parking attendants manage the streets.

The city does not run because of an official organogram but rather because of the unspoken network of everyday actors that fill institutional voids.

The Organogram Myth

The organogram makes coordination appear formal.

This suggests that each urban problem has a responsible office, reporting line, and procedure. The traffic office responds to traffic blockages, the cleansing office responds to waste collection, code enforcement responds to vendor occupation, and the road authority responds to road damage.

The street is active, rapid, and organic; it does not wait for an organogram to resolve its challenges. A ministry, agency, sub-city, or woreda may have legal authority, but the actual problem is solved by guards, vendors, taxi coordinators,

residents, brokers, repair workers, religious institutions, and local elders. A blocked taxi entrance, delivery truck occupying a narrow lane, or vendor conflict is often handled first by whoever is present, respected, trusted, paid, or capable of handling it. This does not mean that formal institutions do not matter; however, they rarely operate at full speed at the street level.

The organogram explains formal responsibility but rarely explains actual coordination.

Formal Authority vs Actual Coordination

Formal authority relies on regulations, written notices, and periodic enforcement. However, actual coordination comes from proximity, trust, payment, fear, repetition, and competence. When a dispute erupts over a delivery truck blocking a narrow lane in Merkato, drivers or shop owners do not wait for the sub-city authority to intervene. They negotiate, shout, move goods, redirect vehicles, and call someone influential. This is true for many parts of the city. City officials may regulate transport, but taxi assistants manage the immediate traffic flow. Issues are resolved through local proximity, even before they become administrative issues. This is the gap between authority and coordination in government. The authority may grant permission; however, only coordination makes movement possible.

Everyday Public-Space Managers

Most systems flow well because these managers exist. Despite their role, they are treated as informal, temporary, or marginal by the authorities. At Meganaga terminals, taxi assistants organize the movement of chaotic terminals and orchestrate physical queues of thousands of commuters. Vendors manage information and access, storefront guards manage safety and parking, and community associations, including Iddir, manage events and neighborhood trust. They

do not replace the formal government but rather fill in the missing elements of governance. Order becomes incomplete when every day public space managers are ignored or removed.

Coordination Through Contact

City coordination depends on contact.

Storefronts, mixed-use spaces, and public spaces create good contact. Blind walls, speeding vehicles, monotonous façades, fenced corridors, and single-use blocks disrupt social contact. Disrupting contact kills coordination by separating pedestrians from buildings, residents from streets, shops from passersby, and users from one another. When fewer people are watching or caring, streets will depend more on formal enforcement measures.

A good city is one in which people can see, hear, meet, negotiate, and recognize each other.

Final Diagnostic

A spatial intervention is needed to map street managers despite the existing official organogram. It should identify the street managers and ask whether the intervention might destroy the taxi assistants without replacing the queue system. Will it displace vendors who are informal observers? Will it replace active edges with blank walls? Will it move residents off the streets? Will formalization reduce the ability to coordinate activities?

Streets can be better coordinated by people who understand how they work.



A self-renewing city must hold formal structure, everyday movement, and local adaptation in the same frame.

10

The Legible Self-Renewing African City

A self-renewing city is one whose systems can be read, repaired, coordinated, adapted, and renewed without destroying the life already within it. It does not appear to be fully controlled. It is not limited to a final image; it is legible in everyday life and can be renewed when needed.

The Final-Image Myth

Assuming order as a final image for a good city assumes that urban progress is linear. African cities do not survive as a final plan. They survive through adjustments, negotiations, repairs, informal coordination, reuse, movement, and adaptation.

Planners should not only ask what the city should become but also whether the city can become self-renewing. Large-scale interventions can upgrade the physical space but still leave the streets without users, remove the informal activities that make the streets active, and erase the social systems that helped them function. The final-image myth assumes that planning improves the city by making it look complete. However, a better reading asks whether the city can adapt after intervention.

Legibility From Below

True legibility is the collective memory of users. A city is legible when the people who use it find each other, move,

trade, and decide what to do. People read the city through experience in the markets, taxi stops, churches, mosques, landmarks, and daily routes, which have their own unique characters.

A legible city is one that can be understood by practitioners, residents, officials, investors, and users. Travellers in Addis Ababa rarely use coordinates, street names, or zoning color codes. They read the city through everyday life, chaotic taxi terminals, and landmarks of religious buildings. A poor renewal process erases this navigation source.

A legible city is how people use spaces everyday. Informality reveals its constraints, pedestrians reveal a demand, corridors reveal power, land use reveals permission to build a house, maintenance reveals custody, procurement reveals implementation logic, and coordination reveals actual governance.

Renewal Without Erasure

A good renewal direction does not erase the existing informal value. It meticulously identifies what to upgrade, protect, formalize, care for, and evolve. Randomly evicting an informal cluster removes the existing webs of credit, income sources, and local trust. These cannot be easily replaced by new institutional programs. The small kiosks under the Megenagna overpass may create small activities, but cannot replace the previous diverse and organic relationships, customers, credit, memory, and social trust.

The planner's task is to renew without erasing existing systems.

Legibility With Flexibility

A self-renewing city that is not rigid uses its own rules for learning and adaptation. It may follow its formal plan but also

be flexible enough not to compromise small economies and informal activities from flourishing on the streets.

The final doctrine

The primary task of planners is not to impose order, but to read the order that already exists. This approach may appear messy but has its own organizational system.

Read where people move, pause, wait, cross, sell, avoid, and return, and what informal systems are doing before naming them as a problem. Read corridors as places where mobility, power, value and image meet. Read land use as permission and procurement as a force that rewrites the design. The imported models were read through their hidden requirements. Read coordination through actors who actually make the city work.

The future of African cities will be built on a thoughtful diagnosis of existing values without romanticizing or erasing them.

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