

The grey-color coercion: Homogenizing the city's color theme and its repercussion on the urban heritages of Addis Ababa

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ABSTRACT

Urban heritages in Addis Ababa play a crucial role in rendering the city's skyline and conveying its architectural identity. Most of these edifices go as far back as the period when the city was first found. Over the years some of these structures, with their own authentic make up, persevered through demolition and physical damage. However currently they are facing risks due to the growing infrastructural ambition, which at times is pointed directly towards them. These threats emanate from different directions where they have the potential to alter or exterminate them. For that purpose this article discusses the repercussion of alteration of the city's color theme, to monotonous grey and its impact on the identity and authenticity of urban heritages through the use of photographic data of seven complexes in Addis Ababa.

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INTRODUCTION

Addis Ababa is a city that came to emergence in the late 19th century and become the capital of Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Menilik II. Ever since its formation the city became an architectural hub for complexes that were discernable from the rest of the country's vernacular and traditional architecture. These complexes are an amalgam of foreign influences and the traditional Ethiopian construction style—as a result creating a unique architectural style that came to be referred as the “*Addis Ababa style’ architecture*”. However these structures have recently been under threat due to several factors that directly allude to its modern-urbanization. The *government-imposed* corridor development and other private infrastructural aspirations are among the threats that are directed to these urban heritages.

The preservation of historic buildings' identity and heritage faces significant challenges from inappropriate interventions and new developments.¹

Several valuable complexes have been erased to make way for new infrastructural projects that are set to modernize the city and among these case scenarios the *Hakim(Doctor) Workneh's* Residence stands out as an emblematic case-scenario for how emerging infrastructural projects, near heritage sites, pose existential threat to urban heritages.



Figure 1-Hakim (Doctor) Workneh's Residence. (Photo by Natnael Firew)

This residence was once a house representing the *Addis Ababa style Architecture* with its unique aesthetics and building elements. Now it is erased from existence and the place is given to corporate builders for commercial infrastructure developments. Thus more than seventy years of history and architectural identity perished with no trace or compensation to the cultural loss.

¹ Pramesti, Ciptety Trisya, and Agung Budi Sardjono. "Application of the Building Infill Concept in New Buildings within the Historic Semarang Old Town Area." *Jurnal Teknik Sipil dan Perencanaan* 27, no. 1 (2025): 100-110.



In a similar fashion, painting the city grey is an approach being implemented as a symbol of modernization and unification of the city with a singular color theme. This action although light seeming, stands out as an insurmountable damage to the identity and authenticity of these cultural heritages, which in the future could end up being irreversible.

Figure 2- Light rail way bridge around stadium. (Photo by Author)

Currently as part of the government's effort to modernize the city, several bold measures are being taken within the urban setting. And these actions include infrastructural expansion, corridor development, renovation of old buildings and many more. Contained in the frame of the corridor development, the government coerced the grey color compulsion, which urges the city to create a monochromatic modern urban aesthetics that is expected to bring the city together.



Figure 3-The influence of the paint on compounds of residential houses near Behere-Tsege, Adey Abeba. (Photo by author)

As a result grey color is being applied on every small to medium scale buildings and protective fences of edifices that are mainly oriented toward streets. More so it is being applied on structures such as railway support bridges, building facades, signage, and more. On top of that

individual residence and commercial complex owners, with an average building height are forced to paint their premises grey. Yet this is mainly applied to those buildings with exposure to streets. While the preservation of color and architectural features is crucial in maintaining the identity of historic cities and buildings,² in the case of Addis Ababa it seems as though the value embedded within the colors of historic buildings appears to be irrelevant.

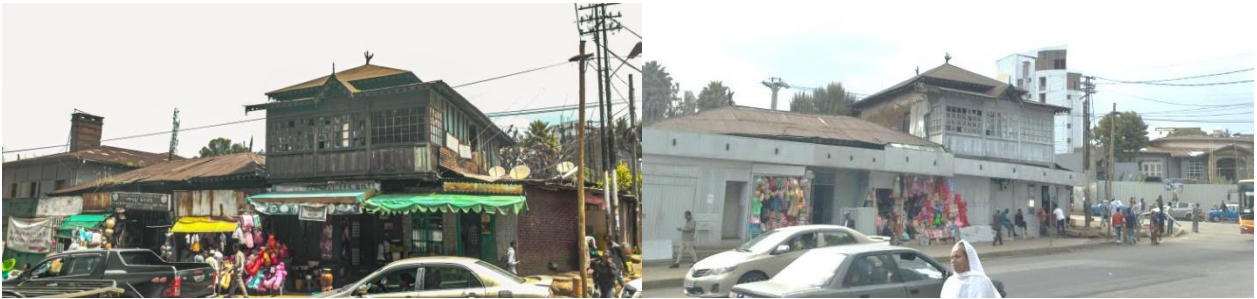


Figure 4-Before and after case-scenario of an old historic complex around Païsa. (Photo by author)

More so, this unofficial mandate has never been ratified on legal basis, neither was it announced to the public—rather it just came out of nowhere. Additionally it was not put out as part of the urban planning directive prepared by the city’s plan commission bureau.

Unfortunately, this subtle directive inevitably did not leave out historic buildings, even worse the major edifices that are experiencing this coercion ended up being the small scale ones directly bordered with main streets, a significant proportion of which are old houses with attributes belonging to Addis Ababa style architecture.



Figure 5- The old Kuraz printing press located in Arat Kilo. (Photo by Natnael Firew)

In some cases, the government takes measures into its own hand and boldly renews historic buildings without involving conservation professionals and labels it as renovation work. Such

² Barchino, Ana Torres, Jorge Llopis Verdú, and Juan Serra Lluch. "Recovering chromatic space as a sign of identity in the historic city." In INTBAU international annual event, pp. 1321-1328. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017.

action that is claimed to be a conservation approach, should focus on retaining distinctive materials, features, and spatial relationships while allowing for minimal changes to accommodate new uses³

When necessary, interventions should be grounded in documented data and scientific methodologies to ensure that they are compatible with current systems.

And when these historic structures are painted with new color, the visual identity also changes, altering the very image it is associated with, which becomes a direct threat to the physical identity of the historic structure. In historic urban settings, color is an essential structural element that has important ramifications for the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.⁴ Moreover, these structures hold different history and were constructed at different times. Thus, coloring them with a single palette in hope to blend them with the grey color trend, goes to show how less they are being regarded that they don't get treated for the identity and history they have.



The Potential Side Effect

From a cultural stand point the consequences of putting paint on a historic building can be severe. Because when historic structures are usually intervened with conservation measures it requires experts that can approach them with caution in order not to affect their identity and visual appeal. These complexes stood for about a century holding their authenticity intact and also conveying the historical zeitgeist of Addis Ababa's formation. However when this new monotonous color is applied they lose their identity and the nostalgic charm as they are being rendered with new identities.

Figure 6- An old residential structure around Biherawi, Addis Ababa. (Photo by author)

³ Hume, Gary L. *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation: And Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings* (revised 1983). National Park Service, 1983.

⁴ Barchino, Ana Torres, Jorge Llopis Verdú, and Juan Serra Lluch. "Recovering chromatic space as a sign of identity in the historic city." In *INTBAU international annual event*, pp. 1321-1328. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017.

This impact can be severe as some buildings are permanently being altered due to the reason that the new coloring is not cognizant of the original paint that have been applied to them. Not to mention the potential incompatibility of the new paint to the existing material and possibility of it damaging the material fabric.

Additionally, even though it is the paint coercion that is stressed in this scholarly work, concepts like spatial and zoning consideration of historic complexes and neighborhoods are completely neglected in the current urban planning approaches of the city, which is a practical detriment for these structures as it leaves them prone to demolition under the guise of infrastructural development. None the less, Color serves as a fundamental sign of identity in historical cities, where chromatic characteristics define urban landscape coherence and must be carefully considered in restoration projects.⁵ And preservation interventions related to historic complexes

⁵ Barchino, Ana Torres, Jorge Llopis Verdú, and Juan Serra Lluch. "Recovering chromatic space as a sign of identity in the historic city." In *INTBAU international annual event*, pp. 1321-1328. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017.

Conclusion

As part of the effort to modernize Addis Ababa, the government is applying grey color to several edifices ranging from low to high story structures. This includes commercial and residential complexes where the owners are subtly required to paint their premises grey without official mandate. Amidst this coercion historic structures, that are predominantly low rise structures and are associated with the formation of the city, are found in a cross road, where they are being painted with a color that does not coincide with their historic or material identity. This indicates that the application does not have a working framework that can be used to ethically conserve these structures; as a result, it is becoming a devastation that directly threatens these urban heritages and impacting their historic value and authenticity. This can tangibly disrupt the cultural memory, disconnecting the city from its historic root and past heritage. Moreover, the visual homogenization reduces these structures from telling their own individual story and blends them with the rest of existing complexes.

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