# *MENGED* MERKATO

by Emanuel Admassu

A story of adaptable agency.

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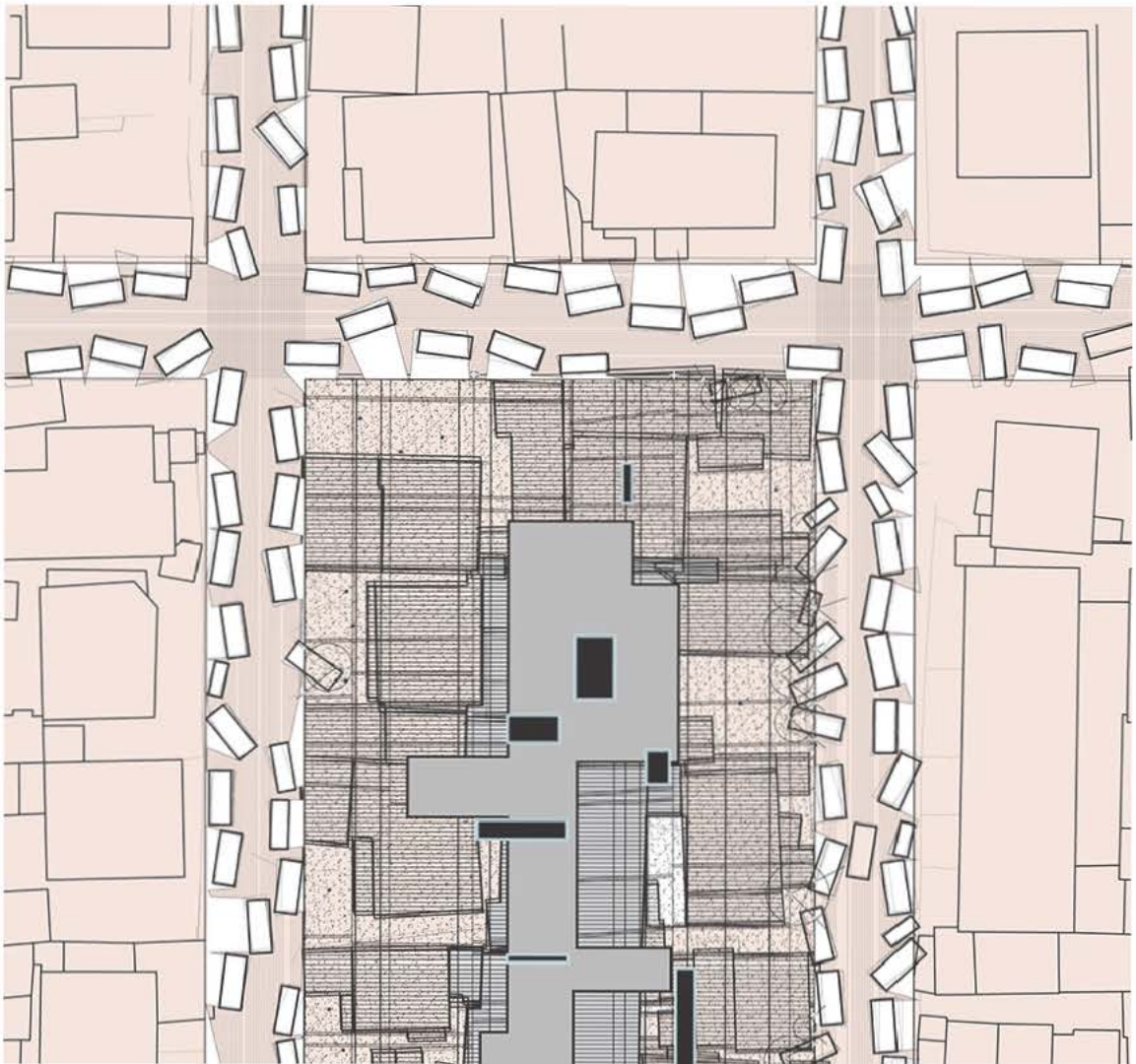
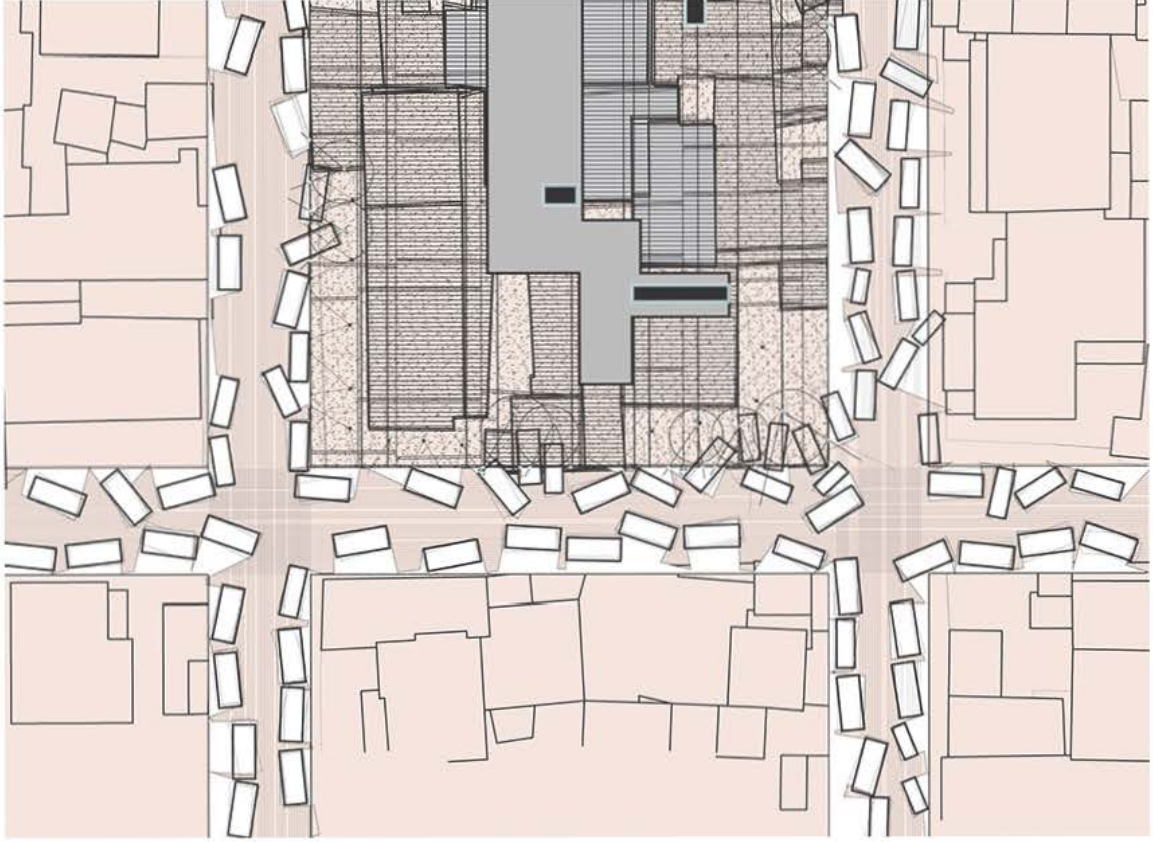
Shortly after the city of Addis Ababa was settled in the late nineteenth century, a large open-air marketplace was established as part of an attempt to centralize the political and economic activities of the country. The open fields of the Arada market provided remarkable spaces for exchange, stabilizing an empire that has always been on the move. The marketplace moved freely, drawing from the long history of day markets that have been dispersed throughout the country. It translated political impositions into opportunities to test its adaptive agency. But there is an undeniably endogenous logic that intensifies when a space that was meant to consume everything gets consumed by modernity. The recent ambition to turn Merkato into a collection of malls encourages us to experiment with alternative methods of reading and representing its historical resistance to both change and stability. Listed here[1] are a series of transformations that have contributed to the constructed identity of one of the largest marketplaces in Africa.[2]





Each block offers different variations of these three zones: The stalls facing the street, the interior spaces used for housing and production, and the micro-courtyards that offer intimate outdoor spaces between these concentric zones. All images courtesy of Emanuel Admassu.

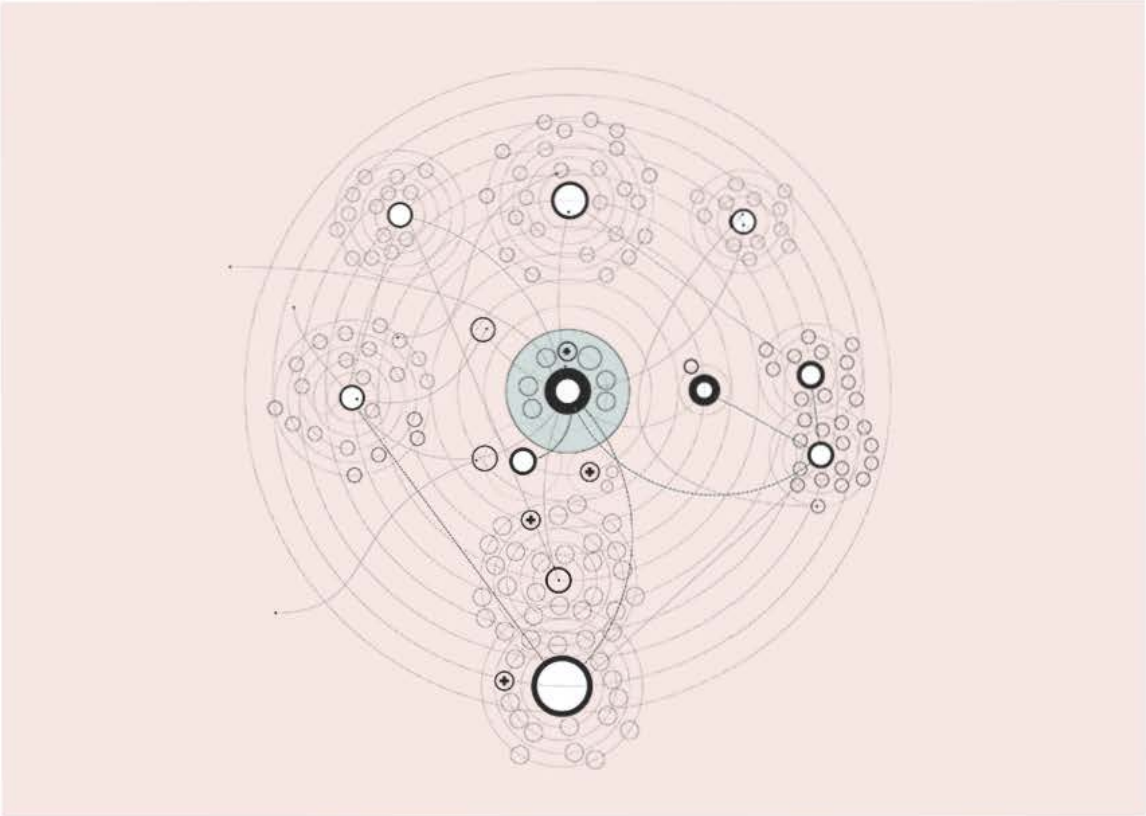
## ETHIOPIAN/ITALIAN

As in other spaces of colonial occupation on African soil, erasure and displacement of the Arada market began with the act of renaming. Merkato indigeno—as named by the Italians—established its current location and official organization in the midst of a five-year occupation by a foreign power. [3] It was designed to contain the trading and living quarters of the indigenous population and to separate them from the newcomers who took over the central part of the city. This was achieved by moving Arada—the existing market—from its original location to the Northwestern part of town. This act of displacement generated a space that functions both within and against[4] the city of Addis Ababa. The street grid of Merkato[5] offered an alternative to the less rigid parcelization of the rest of the city by generating a series of negotiable boundaries where global forces get subverted by local sensibilities.

The merchants have found inventive ways to hide unregistered businesses within registered shops to avoid heavy taxation.

## FORMAL/PROVISIONAL

But throughout this endless act of negotiation, the marketplace has increasingly become a microcosm of a nation that absorbs the frictions caused by its lack of uniformity. Merchants and customers who speak more than eighty different languages meet and negotiate over sales with varying degrees of spatial and legal formality. This allows for a growing number of registered and unregistered businesses to operate in the slippages between structured and loosely defined means of trade. Because most of the original architecture in Merkato was built cheaply from eucalyptus framing systems clad with corrugated sheet metal, modifications have been relatively affordable, allowing it to adopt various material and spatial identities over its seventy-five-year history. The recent construction of vertical mall types is a deliberate attempt to solidify a market that was never built to last.

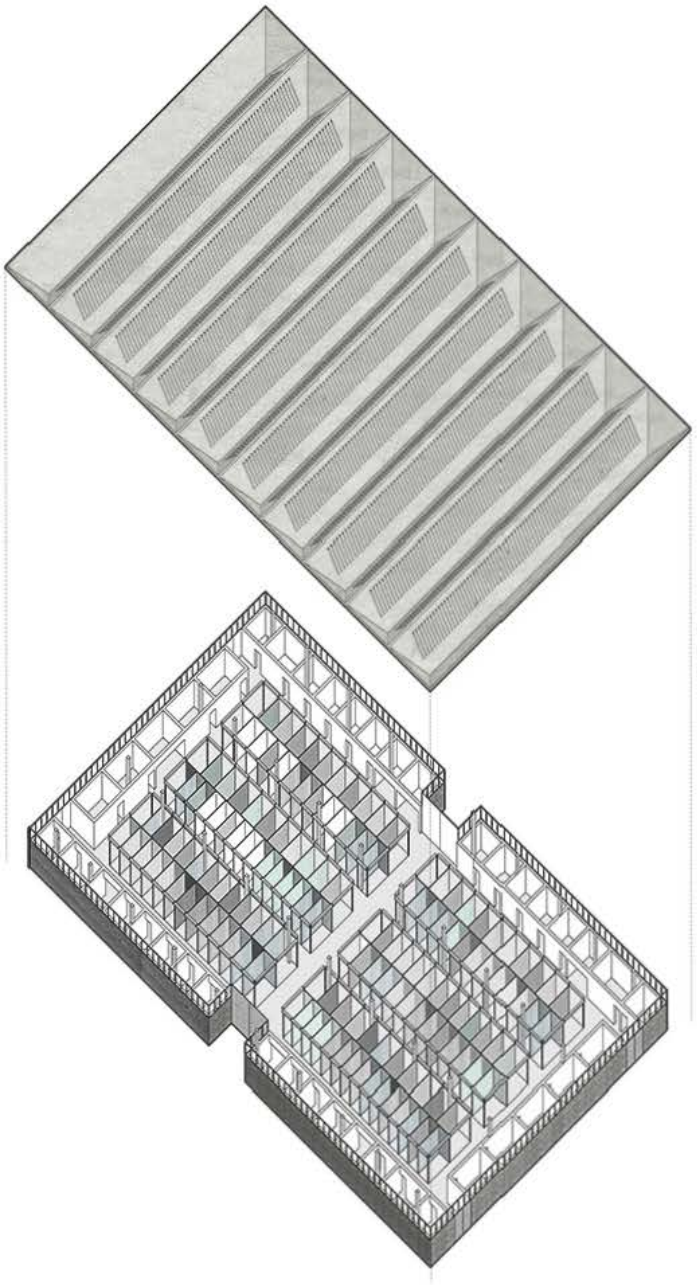


The initial settlement of Addis Ababa by Empress Taytu Betul and Emperor Menelik II, in the late 1800s.

## CENTRAL/PERIPHERAL

Consequently, this recent tyranny of permanence makes it difficult to maintain proximity to the shifting sources of consumers and consumables. Ethiopia's historical prominence has relied on access to trading routes in the Middle- East and the Mediterranean via the Red Sea. But Eritrean independence in 1991 left Ethiopia landlocked and reliant on a more insulated dialogue between the center and the periphery. Though the Addis–Djibouti train line—the main artery connecting the city to the Red Sea—was halted, Merkato continues to support both local and global trade thanks to a robust network of white Isuzu transport trucks. Fragments of Merkato can be found throughout the country, feeding and learning from its evolving intelligence. In recent years, this network has also been duplicated at the scale of the city. With the horizontal expansion of Addis Ababa, lack of accessibility to

Merkato has led to the proliferation of smaller, neighborhood-based markets that serve as abbreviated versions of the central market. This formation is reminiscent of the initial settlement logic of Addis Ababa: a city developed not from colonial, top-down planning principles but from a series of fortifications. The Ghebi—King's compound—served as the center for the concentric dispersal of Sefers—neighborhoods—around the houses of military leaders.

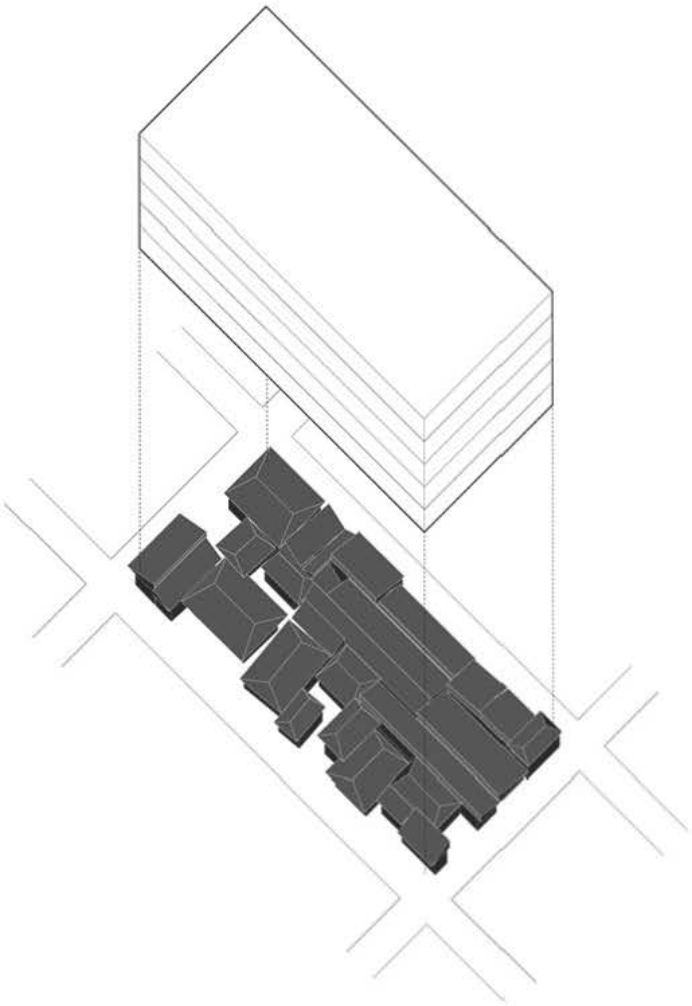


The Adarash building: Completed in the early 1960s as part of King Haile Selassie's

campaign to upgrade the physical conditions of the market.

## CONSTRAINTS/TRANSGRESSIONS

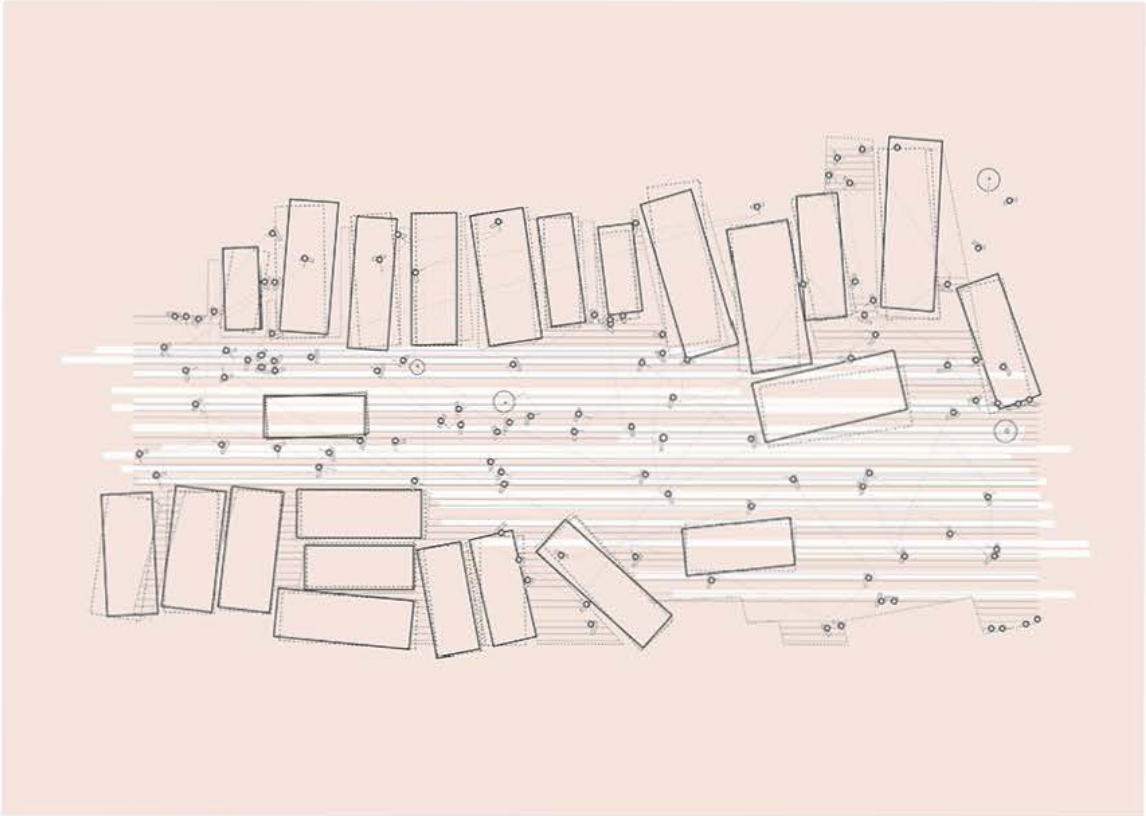
Attempts to control the market have reflected the varying agendas of each ruling power. In the early 1940s, King Haile Selassie—fresh off his five-year stint in England[6] —was preoccupied with "cleaning up" the market by moving street traders into large halls with apertures positioned significantly above human height.[7] The most prominent building of this era, the Adarash, had an interior that was originally planned as a series of neatly arranged kiosks. But its load-bearing enclosure freed partitions from structural responsibility and allowed for adjustable stalls that contract and expand based on the merchant's capacity to rent more or less space. This transgression serves as a precedent for future malls and provides critical evidence to our continued understanding of the market as a space of coexistence between merchants with fluctuating financial capabilities. After the socialist revolution ousted the king in 1974, the communist government nationalized the whole market and placed quotas on maximum earnings. For seventeen subsequent years, merchants devised inventive ways to hide their profits and maintain a low profile. Nevertheless, bureaucratic inefficiency forced the merchants to pay for the maintenance of the shops rented from the government. This led to a series of seemingly minor physical alterations—like 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.



The merchants who were renting shops on the ground floor have started forming cooperatives and multiplying the market vertically. Several malls have been constructed throughout the market over the past ten years.

## DEVELOPMENT/DISPLACEMENT

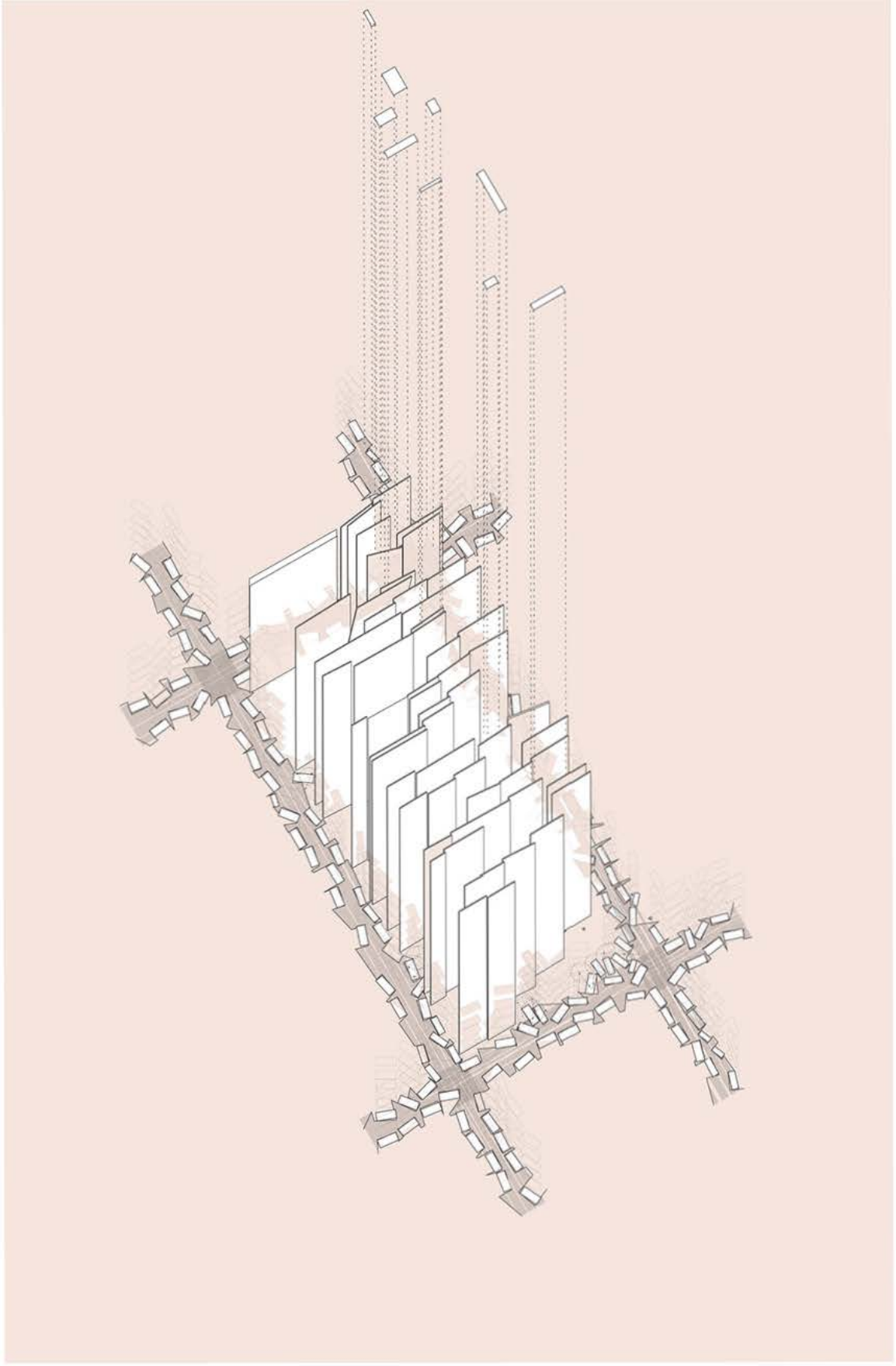
The most radical changes to the market did not occur until the reestablishment of the free market economy. Although a large majority of the shops were still owned and rented out by the government, the increase in demand led to illegal subdivisions and alterations, which made Merkato the most expensive real estate in the city.[8] Land lease policies introduced by the current government upon arrival enabled citizens to own the building but forced them to lease the land from the State. This policy made it compulsory to build new structures in order to maintain possession of land. This was further articulated in the current Local Development Plan for Merkato, which required every block to be demolished and built up to a minimum of five stories. But—unlike the marginalized communities in other parts of the city—most of the merchants in Merkato 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[8] —those renting shops on the ground floor started forming cooperatives and multiplying the market vertically.



The streets of Merkato continue to be the primary zones for exchange and negotiation between cars, trucks, mules and pedestrians.

## MUTUALITY/CONFLICT

Since the market's physical alterations have maintained the existing programmatic and ownership structures, use patterns on the elevated slabs have become almost identical to those on the ground. The merchants have atomized the 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. Any activity can migrate from the shops to the hallways and from the sidewalk to the street. Few stores can afford to remain static when everything and everyone is constantly on the move, from the daily laborers advertising the human capacity for cargo, to Isuzu trucks overflowing with Chinese merchandize, and from street hawkers carrying jeans from Dubai, to the listros[9] polishing shoes from Los Angeles. Activities are fragmented but the
benefits are mutual.



A continuous patchwork of removable façades hiding and revealing different aspects of the market.

## BOUNDARY/EXPANSION

One could also see that the market has operated as continuous field. The Tera[10] —an ever-shifting zoning system in which merchants sit in rows arranged by the goods they sell—allows for a more flexible reading of the otherwise Cartesian boundaries of each block. The Tera system 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 piece of cloth is

temporarily raised on rocks, soda crates or wooden sticks to display goods for trade. Not only does this platform protect the merchandise from the seemingly unsanitary conditions on the ground, but it also defines a general zone of operation for the mobile merchant purposefully 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 in the daytime but reveal it at night when they are reinserted to lock up merchandise.

Merkato negotiates between two extremes—the ever-transforming landscape of Addis Ababa at large, and the rapidly changing requirements of the merchants within. The vertical expansion of Merkato will not be the last phase of its transformational narrative. Soon enough, today's malls will seem as "indigenous" as the temporary Gulits appeared to the Italians. 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. It is an urbanism that has chosen a fluid state of improvisation as a tactical reaction to rigid demarcations established by national and colonial identity. The merchants of Merkato have built an expansive network that was further solidified by the very hands that have fought for its erasure. It maps the historical evolution of a country that has gracefully managed to position itself between Christianity and Islam, the Middle East and Africa, progress and nostalgia. So, for the central market of Ethiopia, architecture can never be absolute: It has to continue performing new interpretations of an ever-changing alignment between the city and the Gulit.

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1. An earlier version of this essay was published in 'Informal Market Worlds – Atlas'. This research was completed as part of the Advanced Architectural Research initiative (later renamed Applied Research Practices in Architecture) at Columbia University GSAPP with critical input from Brook Teklehaimanot, Maheder Gebremedhin, Ginger Nolan, Kazys Varnelis and Mabel Wilson. ^
2. Menged is an Amharic word chosen for its dual meaning as "street" and "direction." ^
3. Although Ethiopia is considered to be one of only two countries in Africa that has never been colonized, there was a five-year Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941. ^
4. Pier Vittorio Aureli, The Project of Autonomy (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008). ^
5. Mekato is the only realized aspect of the Italian master plan for Addis Ababa. ^
6. During the Italian occupation, King Haile Selassie I spent five years of exile in England. ^
7. Heyaw Terefe, Contested Space: Transformation of Inner-City Market Areas and Users' Reaction in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. (Doctoral Dissertation, 2005) NTNU. ^
8. On December 5, 2014, a plot of land located in Merkato was sold for $15,500 per square meter, making it one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in the world. ^
9. Listro is an Italian word commonly used in Ethiopia for "shoeshiners." ^
10. 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. From a personal interview with Berhanu Semu, December 21, 2012. ^

Emanuel Admassu is an architect based in New York City. Born in Addis Ababa, he moved to the United States at the age of fourteen. Admassu graduated with a master of science in Advanced Architectural Design (Honors) from Columbia University (GSAPP '12), where he was awarded the Lucille Smyser Lowenfish Memorial Prize. He currently works as an adjunct assistant professor at Columbia University and a senior designer at MdeAS Architects. Emanuel is the co-founder and principal of MI, a design collaborative engaged in consuming, critiquing and producing spatial translations of contemporary culture. Admassu's current research focuses on the constructed identities of urban markets in Africa.