

Exposing the Archive, Unlocking the Grid

Cady Gonzalez

“It takes more than implementation to be a hygienic community,” the director of Addis Ababa’s municipal water and sanitation authority (AAWSA) explained to me over a cup of strong Ethiopian coffee. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the problem of open defecation has typically been attributed to poor urban planning and lack of infrastructure. As of 2014 only sixty-four public toilet facilities were available within the city municipality, and they were rarely used. This is because these facilities “had no life,” the sanitation director continued. When a committee of urban planners and development practitioners convened to design public toilets and devise strategies to change people’s defecation habits, they thought “Coffee is life...” Noting that the Ethiopian coffee ceremony is a daily ritual as well as a space for relaxation and social exchange, they integrated this into their designs in the hope that the ceremony would improve citizens’ sanitary activities by laying out temporal and spatial markers for the day.

Between my fieldwork periods in the summers of 2016 and 2017, AAWSA constructed more than two hundred public toilet parks on small pockets of land repurposed from failed public utility programs, often in areas of high population density and



Historical public toilet in Addis Ababa.
Photo: Cady Gonzalez, 2019.



Addis Ababa's prefabricated public sanitation program, known commonly as AAWSA's "mobile public toilet" parks.
Photo: Cady Gonzalez, 2017.



near transit hubs. While all the public toilet parks follow the same grid-like design, each iteration also bears the unique material history of the site on which it is built. Here I ask, what does considering urban grid-as-archive reveal about infrastructure in African cities?

Café and garden areas centered around a toilet.
Photo: Cady Gonzalez, 2018.

By targeting dirty areas of the city, AAWSA seeks to ‘clean’ Addis Ababa as much as it aims to ‘green’ it. With the facilities also functioning as small urban parks, tiled walkways encourage customers to meander throughout the space among flowering shrubs, potted plants and trees – but not to engage with it intimately, as each planter is demarcated by metal-link chains.

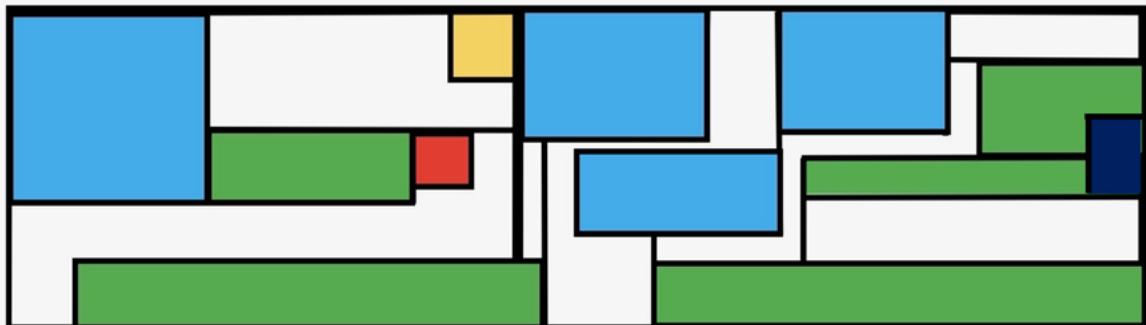
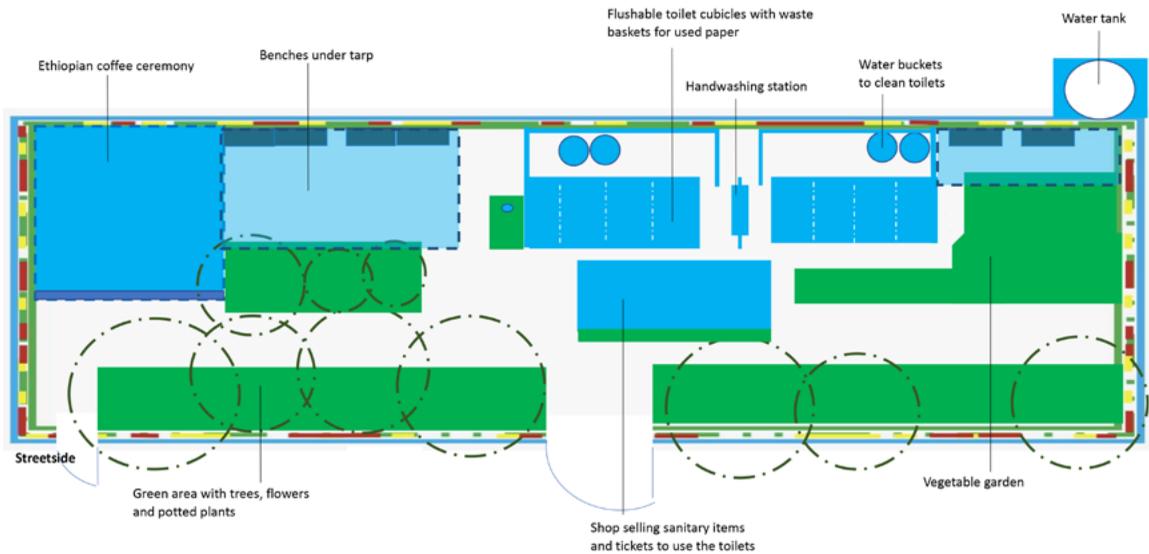
Akin to James Scott’s (1999) miniaturized forms of perfection, each park is a small island of order and modernity that juxtaposes coffee with pay-per-use latrines housed within modular metal cubicles painted in AAWSA’s signature blue. Hemmed in by a fence that reads in Amharic script, “The new town: it is cleaned; it is beautiful,” the plan offers a visually complete example of how one possible urban future might look. The rationale of control, planning and spatial order is legible within the confines of each park to anyone who engages with its materialities and rhythms. But the process of miniaturization requires a flattening of topography as if it were a canvas.

A bird’s eye view of the model park shows how the grid is discernable in the consistent compartmentalization and fragmentation of space into discrete components with clearly delineated contours. In addition to the grid enacting a practice of legibility and social engineering (Scott 1999), it also emerged as emblematic of twentieth-century conceptual modern art. Unlike the spontaneous defamiliarization inherent in classic anthropological fieldwork, I tried intentionally to defamiliarize myself from the everyday experience of the park by means of modernist abstraction.

The Dutch abstract painter Piet Mondrian chose to radically distill his representations of the world into their most basic vertical and horizontal elements, using fields of

primary colors to delineate different zones. Inspired by Mondrian's visual regimentation and informed by the field of speculative design where design practices are utilized to "trigger shifts in perspective" and "open spaces for unthought-of possibilities" (Dunne and Raby 2013: 43), I reduced and rescaled the plan for the model public toilet park to shed light on the formal, geometric order of urban space. This shift in perspective highlights both the grid's tendency to "extend in all directions to infinity" (Krauss 1978) as well as, in Vyjayanthi Rao's words, how "the city constitutes a messy

Spatial and architectural representation of the model public toilet park.
Illustration: Cady Gonzalez.



kind of archive" (2009: 371). As indicated by the red, yellow and dark blue shapes, these sites also archive plotlines of social and political possibility, both past and present. The model park, as Samuel Shearer (2016) describes, is a space where "ruins and afterlives of unrealized and abandoned designs inhabit the present alongside dreams of a better future."

Grid abstraction of the model public toilet park. Required infrastructure is rendered in AAWSA's signature bright blue and prescribed landscaping in green. Zones of red, yellow and dark blue designate unofficial structures.
Illustration: Cady Gonzalez.

A telephoneless telephone booth, once part of a failed intervention, is now inscribed within the program's model park, pointing to how layers of state failures become the foundation upon which models of development are then predicated. Similarly, individual managers of the toilet parks use the prescriptive design as a point of departure to construct half-built structures, such as kitchens to prepare food for patrons and water fountains to make their park more inviting. These multiplying built forms fold

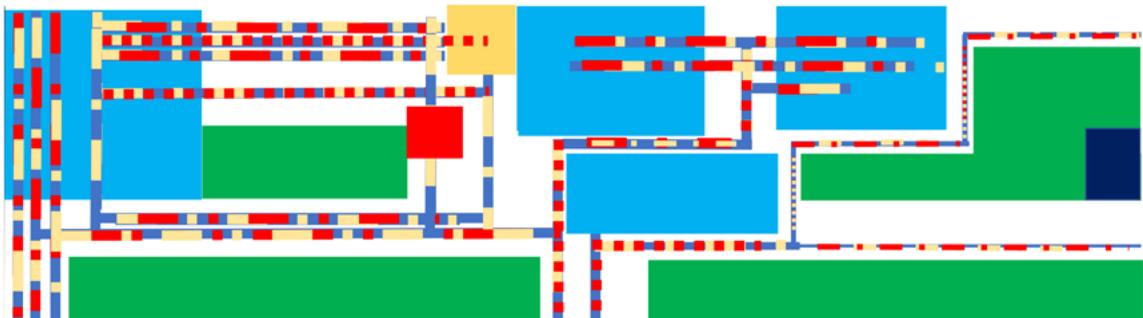


Telephone booth in the public toilet park. Photo: Cady Gonzalez, 2017.

into urban spatial practices of commerce, production and circulation. By flattening the grid, I underscored how the city is a place of continual accumulation as well as destruction and subtraction; a place where design compresses the juxtaposition of materials as well as layering historical breaks, junctures and chronologies.

Continuing this process of translation, I turned to Mondrian once more, and his *Broadway Boogie Woogie* of 1943. Here, Mondrian replaced the black grid that had long governed his canvases with atomized bands of stuttering chromatic pulses to suggest the city's moving traffic, blinking electric lights and rhythmic jazz. While the grid's modernist preoccupation gives place to "matter out of place" (Douglas 2002: 44), the removal of the rigid black lines that fragmented the previous translation foregrounds how the grid is as much about connectivity as it is compartmentalization. Rather, the grid facilitates particular patterns and speeds of movement, or patterns of traffic to the parks, and indicates new rhythms and relations of urban daily life. Modern art thus allowed me to uncover the public utility grid's dual dynamism and expansion – or rather its momentum.

Trajectories of movement within grid abstraction. Illustration: Cady Gonzalez.





Gonzalez

*Abandoned public toilet
park.*
Photo: Cady Gonzalez,
2017.



*Unfinished public toilet
park repurposed as social
hub for construction
workers.*
Photo: Cady Gonzalez,
2017.

Rhythms of momentum and stagnation apply to the urban grid-as-archive as well. Across town, two parks suffered the same fate as the telephoneless telephone booth when – as the land was repossessed for road development – their construction halted. One remained as a skeletal structure, overtaken by weeds and waste, while the other’s cubicles were repurposed as a pool hall for day laborers asphaltting the road. Despite fading into the archival record of the city, these parks’ abandonment also engendered new enclaves of social and material engagement in the city center.

Drawing together written and visual description can trigger shifts in perspective that shed light on the processes by which infrastructural archives are constituted. Neither the archive nor the urban grid is a site that points merely to “that which happened and that which is said to have happened” (Weld 2013: 12–13). Instead, an archival approach to the urban landscape foregrounds the fact that they both gesture towards that which never happened and that which still could. This exercise in design anthropology demonstrates that, as historical forms of order and reorder, neither the grid nor the archive may be as oppressive as previously conceptualized. They both create and inscribe plotlines of possibility.

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