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When Heritage Falls Apart: Spatial Justice and Contested Urban Futures

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the rapid transformation of Addis Ababa's historic core, focusing on the Arada sub-city as a case study of urban redevelopment and heritage loss in contemporary Africa. Cultural and architectural heart of the Ethiopian capital, Arada's vernacular and hybrid built fabric—reflecting Armenian, Indian, European, and local influences—has been subjected to large-scale demolition. Drawing on satellite imagery, GIS mapping, and ground-level photographic documentation, the study traces the diachronic erasure of traditional urban typologies such as *gebi* and the displacement of thousands of residents. Framed within critical spatial and heritage theory, it argues that redevelopment operates as a form of spatial cleansing that reconfigures social relationships, displaces cultural memory, and legitimises new monumental aesthetics aligned with visions of wealth and modernity. Through collaboration with a local NGO, crowdsourcing and the use of forensic visual methods, the research contributes to debates on spatial justice and heritage sustainability in the Global South. Ultimately, Addis Ababa's remaking exposes tensions between economic growth and the right to place, revealing how urban development reshapes not only the material city but also the narratives of national identity and belonging.

KEYWORDS

Urban heritage; spatial justice; Dubaiification; sustainability; heritage loss; African urban development; forensic heritage

Introduction

Arada Sub-city lies at the heart of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Figure 1), and represents its principal historic urban landscape. It is characterised by vernacular architecture and a complex hybridisation of Armenian, European, Indian, and Indo-Muslim influences, collectively known as Addis Ababa houses,[1] developed over five decades (1886–1936). The area also features Italian influences, modernist architecture, and informal settlements. Since the capital's founding in 1886 under Menelik II, Arada rapidly became the city's vibrant commercial and cultural centre. By the 1960s, it had flourished into a cultural hub, known for its popular cafés, bars, and nightclubs. It became an arena of cultural experimentation and performance, particularly for 'modern' Ethiopian literary and entertainment cultures.[2] Residents known as Ye Arada Lij' (literally 'the kids of Arada', meaning

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Figure 1. Representative area destroyed within Arada sub-city. (A,B) Crowdsourced images obtained with contributor consent for academic publication. (C) Author's own image (@author).

'smart and self-reliant'), speak a variant of Amharic called 'Yarada K'wank'wa' to express their unique urban identity.[3] Being from Arada, or possessing 'Aradanet', symbolises adaptability and resourcefulness in a challenging urban setting.[4]

Mezzedimi's[5] planned reconstruction, commissioned by Emperor Haile Selassie I in the 1960s, was never realised. As a result, key landmarks in this historic area[6] have remained largely unchanged for about sixty years, and most of the infrastructure now shows significant signs of decay.

Beginning in 2024, Addis Ababa's redevelopment has erased over a third of Arada's built heritage with little global attention (Figure 1). The ongoing urban renewal of the city's historic core is reminiscent of the aftermath of a disaster (Figure 2). It merits critical examination, particularly considering the social, cultural, and historical consequences of such large-scale urban transformation. Redevelopment ruptures not only physical

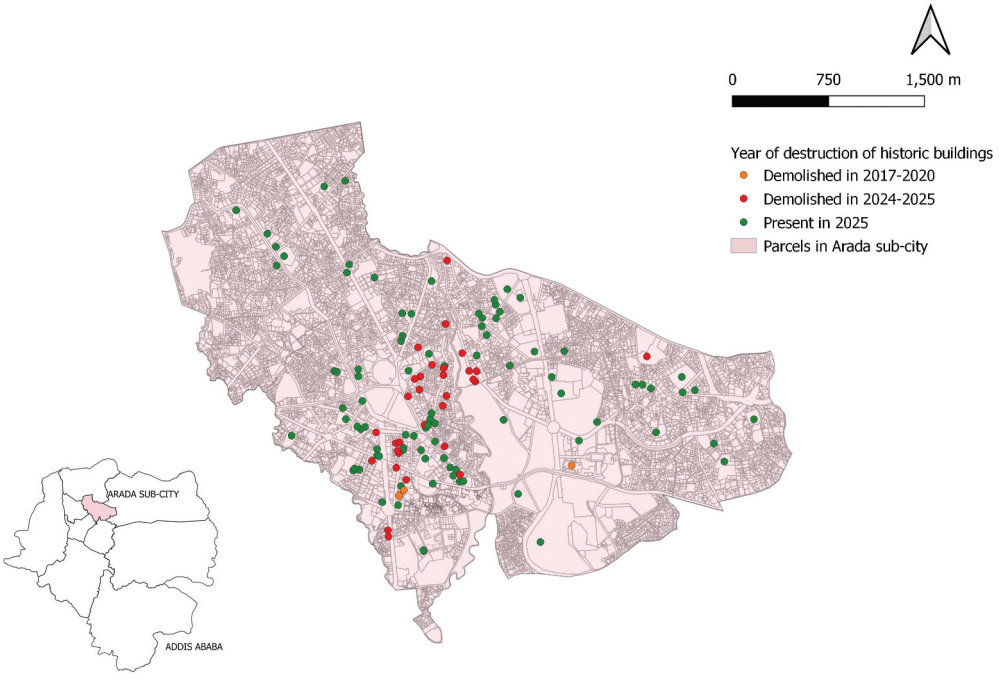


Figure 2. Map of distribution of destroyed historical buildings by year.

infrastructure but also the social dimension of space, i.e. place[7]: social relationships, routines, traditions, and their link to the built environment influenced by shared memories and the flux of remembering and forgetting,[8] of being emplaced or feeling placeless.[9]

This paper seeks to contribute to studies of urban heritage sustainability in Africa and the Global South by situating its analysis within a broader theoretical framework of critical spatial perspectives, an interpretive commitment that prioritises space as a generative force of inequities.[10] Spatial injustice in cities is rooted in accumulation by dispossession: a process through which urban redevelopment redistributes valuable land from low-income populations to higher-income groups.[11] Beyond its tangible dimension, spatial injustice is fundamentally the exclusion and devaluation of a specific history and identity within the built environment. It entails the erasure of place through the misrecognition of difference and the negation of spatial pluralism.[12] Heritage, therefore, as a source of different identities, memories, and senses of place, constitutes a valuable resource that must be distributed equitably across space to achieve spatial justice.[13] Yet the built environment itself is rarely a neutral ground for such resources – it actively encodes the very ideologies that produce injustice. The materiality of the built environment embodies and reinforces ideologies, particularly economic ones, reconfiguring imagined pasts through processes that often involve the social and cultural evacuation of space.[14] From this critical standpoint, heritage is not only emplaced but also contested, producing dynamics of subordination. Hegemonic visions thus carry the capacity to generate material consequences and impose themselves in processes of negotiation,[15] underscoring the importance of working through power relations to 'reveal and disrupt systems of domination, discrimination, and exclusion'.[16] Yet heritage plays a dual role: both producing and resisting inequalities, with its uses shifting under diverse modes of governmentality and place-making.[17] This tension becomes productive when read through Lefebvre's[18] call for the reappropriation of urban life as central to socio-spatial justice: rather than merely reflecting existing power structures, heritage can function as a force that mobilises tangible and intangible dimensions of space in support of social movement struggles for urban equity. This reappropriative potential finds a methodological counterpart in the Forensic Architecture approach of advancing spatial justice by transforming built heritage into an optical device,[19] a mode of investigation that exposes how violence and inequality are inscribed in space. Taken together, these perspectives reframe heritage not as a nostalgic connection to the past, but an active, contested process that is connected to the efforts to achieve social justice in the present through multiple, interrelated mechanisms. Heritage functions as a site for social recovery,[20] serves as a source of legal and political advocacy,[21] and acts as a material archive of historical truth to address environmental violence.[22]

In an attempt to gather visual evidence framing the outlined spatial discourse, this article weaves ground-level photographs and processed aerial imagery to elaborate on a shifting heritage narrative. This narrative is one of contested spatial transformation: a shift enacted through the stereotyping and stigmatisation[23] of certain locations – such as 'difficult' neighbourhoods or slums – to integrate these territories into a new, hegemonic urban fabric.[24] Spatially, this process operates on heritage by replacing a community's everyday narrative with one of crisis, thereby legitimising redevelopment despite the resulting loss of memory, landmarks, and sense of place.

By merging intimate street scenes, including those tied to demolished historic houses, with bird's-eye views of urban change, this work exposes both human-scale impacts and large-scale transformation in Addis Ababa, revealing what either perspective alone might miss. Aerial imagery of Addis Ababa's transformation does more than documenting: it exposes. From above, the erasure of heritage, communal spaces, and informal economies becomes undeniable. From below, at ground level, changes took shape in detailed and vivid images of destruction, dispossession and displacement.

This visual evidence demands accountability: What is being destroyed and rebuilt, and what losses have been sustained? Which narrative emerges? Documenting disappeared heritage or heritage at risk means unveiling the multimodal narrative shaping the city's (un)contested reinvention.

While the paper focuses on a specific event (i.e. urban redevelopment) and geographic area (i.e. historic core of Addis Ababa) it has a pan-African relevance for highlighting the needs of strategic and sustainable conservation of built heritage, in line with the aims of large projects such as Endangered Archaeology of the Middle East and North Africa – EAMENA,[25] Mapping Africa's Endangered Archeological Sites and Monuments – MAEASaM and the Zamani project[26] aimed at evaluating risks and create knowledge and awareness for conservation.

To explore the nexus between urban heritage and social justice, the paper is structured as follows. It first situates the discussion within a broader pan-African framework of urban heritage at risk, providing a brief overview of relevant cases from the literature. It then examines the state of the art in urban heritage conservation in the capital city, Addis Ababa. The methodological section introduces the digital technologies used, outlining the methods and tools employed. The next section presents the study's results, documenting diachronic changes and the loss of built heritage and displacement through the interpretation of multi-temporal satellite imagery, analysis of GIS-based maps, and examination of ground-level photographs. The discussion and conclusion then critically reflect on both disappearing and emerging forms of heritage and point to future directions for research.

Pan-African Overview of Urban Heritage at Risk

As Lane[27] warned more than a decade ago, the alarming pace of urbanisation across Africa has continued to pose a major threat to the continent's archaeological resources and built heritage.

Historic urban and cultural sites across Africa face multiple, overlapping threats driven by identifiable patterns. Weak governance and political neglect leave heritage unprotected, as seen in Kenya's Ojijo Road Flats, which suffer vandalism and redevelopment despite legal protection,[28] and Algeria's Medina of Annaba, where selective recognition and lack of management plans put buildings at risk.[29] Rapid urbanisation and infrastructure expansion often replace historic structures and disrupt communities, exemplified by Tanzania's Dar es Salaam Commercial Business District (CBD), where colonial and post-colonial architecture is altered or erased by high-rise developments,[30] and Egypt's Marsa Matruh and Esna, where urban sprawl and infrastructure projects degrade multi-layered heritage.[31] Lack of financial capacity and poverty exacerbate neglect, leaving culturally rich areas in decay, such as Ghana's Old Accra (Ga Mashie), where elite outmigration and

lack of maintenance threaten sites like Adawso House,[32] and Angola's Luanda, where Portuguese-era buildings deteriorate under squatter occupation.[33] Finally, tourism-driven redevelopment and gentrification marginalise local communities and erode cultural continuity, evident in Morocco's Fez medina, where tourism and planning displace poorer residents and threaten traditional crafts,[34] and Nigeria's Lagos, where demolition and governance pressures impact historic sites such as Ilojo Bar and the Osun Osogbo Grove.[35] Across these African contexts, whether through poverty, political neglect, urbanisation, or tourism-led pressures, these drivers converge to undermine heritage preservation, cultural identity, and community cohesion.

In Addis Ababa, historic districts such as Piassa, an iconic part of the Arada sub-city, have been partly demolished under large-scale urban development projects, including the Addis Ababa Riverside Green Development Project (initiated in February 2019) and the Urban Corridor Development Project (2024). These two programmes are intertwined within the broader framework of the Beautifying Sheger initiative, funded by the Government of Ethiopia and supported through a basket fund mechanism involving multiple development partners, aimed at the urban regeneration of Addis Ababa. Major co-financing has been provided by the Chinese government through the China Communications Construction Company, alongside contributions from the Italian Development Cooperation and the Korean International Cooperation Agency (pers. comm., 15 May 2026), with Italian engagement in Addis Ababa's urban redevelopment continuing into the present (@MoF_Ethiopia, 14 May 2026). The overall aim was to revitalise neglected riverbanks by transforming them into vibrant public spaces that integrate infrastructure, water management, landscaping, and recreation. At the same time, there was a strong focus on enhancing mobility, connectivity, and infrastructure – such as roads, pedestrian paths, and bicycle lanes – across major urban corridors, rather than concentrating development within individual neighbourhoods.[36] These initiatives have caused significant displacement and destruction, deepening spatial injustice.[37] They have also disrupted residential environments that traditionally supported domestic production and small-scale trade, both vital to thousands of livelihoods.[38] Tola's doctoral research provides an in-depth analysis of the link between urban built heritage and livelihood, documenting vernacular typologies that reflect Ethiopian social structures. His work records the 2017 condition of selected *gebi*—communal living spaces that sustain traditional practices such as *iddir* (indigenous insurance), domestic production, and small-scale trade – thereby supporting livelihoods and resilience. Through case studies in Arada, Tola assessed and defined the morphology of *gebi*, establishing key criteria for further research. The present research uses Tola's mapping of *gebi* as a baseline to assess their current presence and disappearance in the study area.

Prior to the most recent wave of demolition, two major civil society-based research initiatives sought to counteract the loss of historical buildings and urban heritage in the Ethiopian capital through risk assessments and knowledge development. In 2006, the local NGO Addis Woubet, in collaboration with the German development agency (GIZ), mapped 173 heritage buildings in what became known as the 'Addis Ababa Urban Heritage Database.' This data was later digitised and made accessible through an interactive Google map in 2021,[39] documenting the condition of 80 key buildings over a 20-year period. By 2021, half of these structures had either been demolished or severely altered.[40]

In April 2019, the local NGO Heritage Watch Ethiopia (HWE) back by funds from the Czech Republic development cooperation agency launched a major architectural survey to address the devaluation of historic buildings in Addis Ababa, driven by the city's construction boom and the demolition of listed historic structures. The project 'Historical Buildings Survey and Mapping in Addis Ababa' successfully obtained a list of historical buildings from the Addis Ababa Culture, Arts and Tourism Bureau and cross-checked it with sub-city heritage offices. Following appropriate training and induction, 28 undergraduate students from the Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development (EiABC), enrolled in architecture and urban planning programmes, supported the building survey. From this effort, the organisation produced detailed maps of several neighbourhoods, including the Arada sub-city, highlighting historic buildings, landmarks, and parks.[41]

During fieldwork conducted under a scientific cooperation agreement between the University of Essex and HWE, the author witnessed firsthand the scale and severity of heritage loss, underscoring the urgent need to update existing data and provide an interpretative framework, particularly in light of the rapid and large-scale displacement of residents that occurred in April 2024. Heritage Watch Ethiopia's unpublished database – last updated in 2019—has served as baseline for systematically tracking demolitions and transformations in Addis Ababa from 2019 through 2025. Building on this baseline, the next section outlines the materials and methods through which these changes were systematically examined, describing how diverse sources of evidence – from satellite imagery to field documentation – were integrated to trace patterns of urban heritage loss and transformation over time.

Materials and Methods

Positioned within a qualitative methodological framework, this paper supports its critical stance through the interpretation of satellite imagery with a spatial resolution of less than 75 cm to study a micro (5 km^2) urban area in Addis Ababa, where urban heritage was lost or is at risk of being lost. Multi-temporal satellite remote sensing imagery of the selected area offers a mechanism for identifying changes over time in the researched landscape,[42] including documenting of structures that have been destroyed in the recent past.[43] This allows disturbances and damage assessment[44] to record the type and extent of the occurred change affecting the cultural heritage assets. The main criterion for identifying historic buildings was the recognition of Addis Ababa's distinctive housing style[45] and its syncretic complexities. Key roof features outlined in Nieder's work, such as finials, roof shapes, verandas, and the presence of one- or two-tiered structures, reflecting Indian, Armenian, and indigenous influences, proved particularly useful for detection of historic buildings through satellite imagery.[46]

In general, using multi-temporal satellite remote sensing imagery allows to assess the change in land use and related phenomenon of spatial cleansing[47] producing displacement along with heritage loss. As free satellite imagery from October 2023 onwards were unavailable, they were obtained from a commercial satellite imagery providers thanks to a European Space Agency Network of Resources (ESA NoR) grant.[48] We used Google Earth Pro for analysing historical images spanning from January 2008 to October 2023.[49] Google Earth Pro provides a robust platform for visualising changes in urban landscapes over

time,[50] allowing for a detailed comparison of different phases of development in Addis Ababa's Arada Sub-city. Quantum GIS (QGIS) was employed to develop thematic GIS maps and conduct change detection analysis. QGIS facilitates the overlay of historical and recent satellite images, enabling the identification and mapping of changes in land use, building density, and the displacement of social and residential areas.

Four thematic maps (Figures 1, 3, 4, 6) were created which are presented and discussed in the following section, both in relation to the case studies across Africa presented earlier in the literature review and to the broader theoretical framework.

Moving from the above to ground-level, photographs were analysed as complementary sources to satellite imagery. A corpus was created containing both images from the author's fieldwork, his ten-year personal archive, and crowdsourced contribution. On 2 July 2024, the author created a group named *Piassa Digital Archive* on a popular social networking platform; the group was later joined by ten members. Participants were briefed about the intent of the group through an online call for expressions of interest. Contributors were informed that, by submitting their work, they retained ownership of their material but consented to its inclusion in research publications, academic articles, and educational websites related to the initiative. Ultimately, some photographers, architectural designers, and heritage enthusiasts joined the group. However, due to fear of public exposure or a lack of sustained interest, only two individuals contributed actively by providing collections of georeferenced images documenting the main demolitions at different stages. One contributor from the diaspora provided pictures of Piassa as he had witnessed it prior to the urban changes. Crowdsourcing faced significant limitations due to the security risks involved and the challenge to tailoring it to the fluid situation and context of rapid demolition, but it nevertheless provided important pieces of information. The final dataset contained photographs of public spaces in which incidental passers-by could be identifiable in the raw files. The researcher anonymised the images on secure storage by manually blurring faces and any unique identifiers. Only the anonymised copies were retained for analysis, and the original files were permanently deleted after confirming that anonymisation was irreversible.

The images collected were then subjected to comparative visual assessment to identify structural changes, surface damage, and evidence of demolition. Where relevant, principles of forensic analysis were applied),[51] including geolocation, temporal verification, and cross-referencing with secondary sources. The main secondary sources used included national and international online newspapers and magazines, local news agencies, government websites, content on video-sharing platforms, and policy reports published between 2024 and 2025.

Research Findings

Temporal Dynamics of Spatial Cleansing

HWE urban heritage database consists of 137 records of historic buildings located in the Arada sub-city, along with key information on ownership, previous and/or current use, cultural significance, and associated values. By comparing recent historic satellite images (2023–2025), this study identifies several destroyed sites. Due to visibility challenges (e.g. covered by high-rise buildings, cloud interference, or uncertain identification), in eleven

cases the NGO partner HWE conducted ground-truthing, which was carried out through direct site visits and photographic documentation.

The results indicate an overall 25% loss of built heritage assets recorded in the database. All of the destroyed sites are clustered in the central part of Arada, corresponding to major redevelopment areas (Figure 2). Only three sites were lost in the eight years preceding 2024, whereas 31 buildings were demolished within just the first quarter of 2024 (Figure 1). Almost three-fourth (74%) of lost historic buildings were found in areas where redevelopment began in 2024, demonstrating how recent urbanisation trends heavily linked to loss of heritage (Figure 3).

The following map (Figure 4) illustrates the spatial cleansing of residential and historic assets, primarily dating from 1888 to 1920, that occurred over a one-year period, from October 2023 to November 2024.

To further illustrate the impact of urban development on the city fabric, a series of ground-level images is presented (Figure 5). A roadside area of the Arada sub-city was monitored throughout the period of demolition. While the perspective does not capture the destruction of heritage buildings directly, it reveals changes in the surrounding environment. The images provide a vivid sense of the redevelopment dynamics in areas adjacent to heritage sites. Social venues – such as local bars and restaurants – were first reduced in size to make space for pavement construction, then later demolished. Over time, the rubble was gradually removed from the fenced-off area. Eventually, the fence

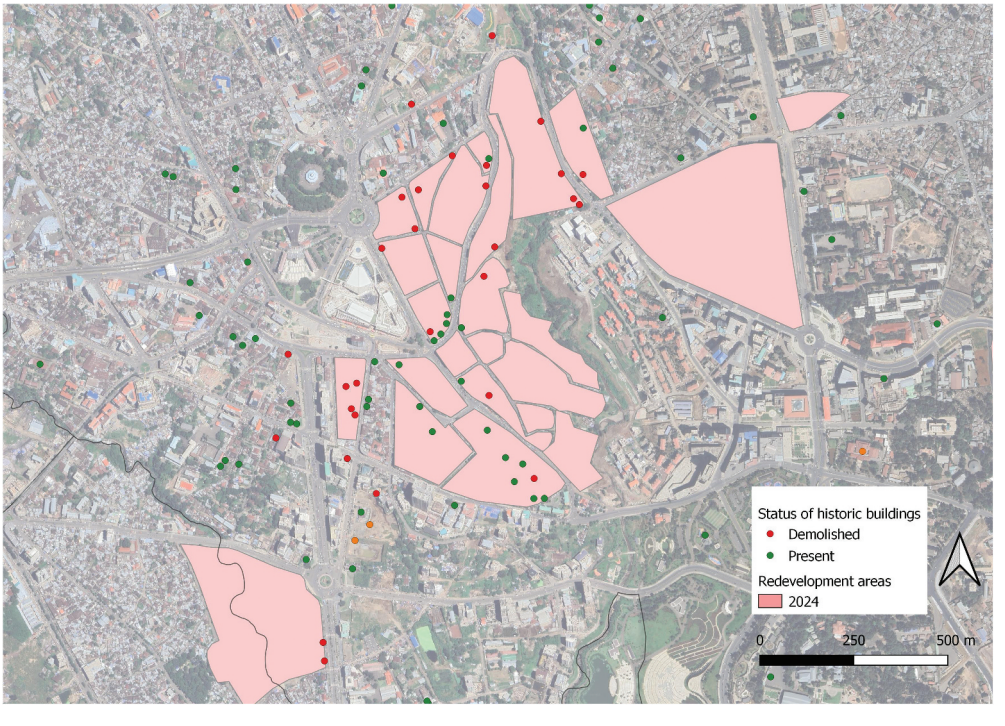


Figure 3. Map illustrating the distribution of destroyed historical buildings, overlaid with areas redeveloped in 2024.



Figure 4. Map of land-use change: from mixed residential to spatial cleansing and redevelopment (Contains modified October 2023 Airbus, November 2024 Airbus Pleiades, February 2025 Airbus Pleiades Neo data processed by the University of Essex).



Figure 5. One year of transformation of the urban fabric around listed heritage. (A–C) Crowdsourced images. (D) Author's own image (@author).

was beautified to conceal the view of the remaining building ruins, which are still awaiting redevelopment pending interest from private investors.

Loss of Cultural Heritage Diversity and Eviction

The redevelopment of Addis Ababa's historic core demonstrates a rapid and profound transformation of the urban fabric. Almost constantly during the last decade, the aerial view revealed a fragmented landscape composed of mixed residential roofs – frequently constructed from reused or repurposed materials – irregular in form and rusted in appearance, encompassing both formal and informal housing.

Traditional *gebi*, with their characteristic inner communal spaces, form an integral part of Addis Ababa's historic urban fabric, woven among narrow alleys and older civic buildings. *Gebi* are inhabited by low-income populations and are often located in areas where the city first developed, such as Arada, reflecting a unique form of communal living. This mixed-income spatial pattern originated from the absence of zoning and segregation policies,[52] reflecting the fundamentally indigenous character of Addis Ababa and its conception of space and spatial organisation, which differed markedly from that of Western cities. As a result, masters and servants, as well as rich and poor residents, were dispersed throughout the new town (Pankhurst 2007), and their patron – client relationships became embedded in the built environment (Bonsa 2012). Unlike the peripheral poverty pockets typical of many other urban contexts,[53] these concentrations of low-income residents embedded within wealthier neighbourhoods persist within middle- and high-income areas in the city centre,[54] rendering such settlements particularly vulnerable to redevelopment pressure. Due



Figure 6. Map of clearance of traditional social housing (Contains modified October 2023 Airbus, February 2025 Airbus Pleiades Neo data processed by the University of Essex).

to economic constraints, *gebi* frequently lack access to improved hygiene and sanitation and are officially categorised as slums under UN-Habitat criteria,[55] a designation that, as argued below, carries significant consequences for their heritage status and redevelopment legitimacy. In the case examined here, within the space of two years (2024–25), this *gebi* landscape was cleared and replaced by construction sites that quickly evolved into foundations for high-rise buildings and large shopping malls (Figure 6).

Ground-level observations further highlight the social consequences of redevelopment. The transformation altered daily rhythms of life, disrupted local parking and transportation routes, and resulted in a marked absence of pedestrians due to the disappearance of residential and commercial functions (Figure 7).

Areas once defined by *gebi* and traditional dwellings were first reduced to rubble and subsequently redeveloped as high-rise foundations (Figure 8).

Traits and Materiality of Emerging Heritage

The ongoing transformation of former residential area of Arada sub-city into a commercial hub has taken the form of large, monumental developments dominated by high-end shopping malls. The traditional fabric of informal and small-scale housing has been replaced by construction sites, where excavation works prepare the ground for deep foundations required by massive new high-rise buildings (Figure 9). These emerging malls



Figure 7. Piassa, view towards cinema empire: Transformation of built and social environment (a) Crowdsourced image. (b) Author's own image (@author).



Figure 8. Preliminary redevelopment of the same area: from demolition debris to high-rise foundations. (A) Crowdsourced image. (B) Author's own image (@author).

are situated adjacent to the Awda km 0 Museum, a government institution inaugurated on February 2024,[56] which itself extends over an area of approximately 3.6 ha, formed by five floors and eleven blocks.[57]

At the street level, comparative photographs facilitate an appreciation of scale by juxtaposing the new constructions with pre-existing landmarks, such as the equestrian statue of King Menelik II (Figure 10) erected in 1930 ahead of the coronation of Haile Selassie I. The monumental scale of these projects is also accompanied by a distinct aesthetic code. Specific details, such as newly installed smart poles with integrated lighting and cameras for control, water fountains with laser colour effects (Figure 11), and the adoption of a standardised dark grey and warm medium orange-brown shade (antique Brass/medium copper) colour palette (Figure 12) reflecting the visual identity of the Adwa Museum, have become identifiable elements of the redesigned urban landscape.

Discussion

Timing proved to be a critical element in the process of spatial cleansing. The Urban Corridor Development (UCD) was approved during the 8th ordinary session of the Addis Ababa City Administration Cabinet on 23 February 2024 as reported by Amnesty International and the local press. Collectively, all online sources confirm that the main physical rollout in the Arada sub-city took place rapidly and primarily in the first quarter of



Figure 9. Progression of construction works for a high-end retail mall (Contains modified October 2023 Airbus, November 2024 Airbus Pleiades, February 2025 Airbus Pleiades Neo, May 2025 Skysat data processed by the University of Essex).



Figure 10. Non-local workforce, Menelik II statue (in the back), and mall foundations: A game of proportions. Author's own image (@author).



Figure 11. Heritage as selfie landscape Author's own image (@author).



Figure 12. Awda Museum (in the back) palette extended on exterior façades of existing buildings (left side). (A) Author's own image (@author). Scaffolding in place for cladding installation and painting in new colours (right side). (B) Crowdsourced image.

2024.[58] Cross-referencing sources with multi-temporal satellite images, we assume that the main demolishment and displacement of households happened during March and beginning of April 2024, with its pace possibly accelerated to avoid social protests. The Ethiopian News Agency,[59] the national wire service, also reported that construction works were being carried out at night, beyond normal working hours.

The rapidity of the UCD's implementation was among the major factors preventing timely intervention by heritage experts, practitioners, and civil society. Speed acts as a significant driver of heritage loss, particularly when linked to state- or market-led large-scale development under the paradigm of neoliberal urbanism.[60] Satellite evidence shows how Addis Ababa resembled 'a vast construction site, straining its 135-year-old historically woven built environment', as Teklemariam[61] observed.

One key concern regarding speed is not only the absence of a participatory governance process in managing public goods, but also the difficulty of adequately surveying and documenting heritage in time to preserve it amid rapid development.[62] While speed exacerbates these challenges, time can also serve as a factor of resistance. Local communities, and even individual families, have occasionally succeeded in halting or slowing such processes. Tactics of resistance, recalcitrance, and renegotiation can frustrate even the most determined planners.[63] Although scholars and heritage practitioners engaged in a timely and heated debate about protecting heritage at-risk (pers. comm., 15 July 2024), no public civil society initiatives are known to have occurred in the country.

This fast redevelopment resulted in the demolition of several historic houses over a century old, together with the clearance of local dwellings, profoundly disrupting established urban forms in Addis Ababa. Due to their weak legal and institutional framework, cultural heritage proclamations in Ethiopia have fallen short of increasing sustainability and protection of 'diverse pasts',[64] neglecting place as a lived, embodied, and relational dimensions of space. The governance structure itself illuminates such failures. Contemporary Ethiopian built heritage governance operates within a complex federal framework primarily overseen by the Ethiopian Heritage Authority (EHA), formerly the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH). Heritage management is administered by regional Culture and Tourism Offices, which supervise local structures down to *kebele* level, Ethiopia's smallest administrative unit. Listed buildings are typically marked with plaques issued by city administrations in collaboration with sub-city Culture, Arts, and Tourism Offices, providing basic information on location, date, and historical significance. The gazettement process is internally managed within the federal system and, in principle, allows for public nomination of heritage sites. Public nomination aligns with the 1995 Constitution, Article 91(2), which mandates the protection of historical sites, and Proclamation No. 209/2000, which assigns responsibility for heritage protection to the state, society, and citizens. However, procedures are not publicly accessible, and standardised application mechanisms are lacking. Consequently, civil society participation in heritage identification and gazettement remains largely theoretical rather than operational.[65] The overall development process has erased residential life as land use shifted to commercial functions (Figure 4), precisely the outcome Lefebvre[66] cautioned against. His critique of technocratic and systematised planning identifies how such process operates through the erasure of the city as historically constituted and the eradication of its social fabric, ultimately trampling upon the human factor that gave the city its identity. Redevelopment extends beyond specific demolition sites, driven by

the expansion of roads and the introduction of modern sewerage schemes. According to a government-linked website and major Ethiopian news agencies, one aim of the UCD programme is the 'revitalisation' of informal settlements in central areas.[67] In practice, this entails the displacement of households from social housing in government-owned buildings, the closure of local businesses and small souks (shops), with historic buildings also among the 'casualties'.[68] These interventions have been also accompanied by the destruction of informal housing and the forced eviction of poorer residents from the city centre. What is being erased are lived environments rooted in specific spatial configurations, resulting in the social evisceration of place.[69]

In Ethiopia, traditional housing clusters are known as *gebi*, an indigenous urban spatial typology formed by households inhabiting a common area with shared practices to cope with scarcity of resources.[70] These areas foster collective practices through shared spaces, communal facilities, pooled utilities, reciprocal economic support, childcare arrangements, and informal education, providing critical shelter for the poorest populations, and functioning as social safety nets (Figures 4 and 6). Where such a culture of social housing once thrived, it is now being supplanted by the construction of high-rise buildings, whose foundations rise from the rubble of displaced communities (Figure 8).

A closer examination of the eviction of low-income populations from Addis Ababa's city centre reveals a long-standing trend dating to previous administrations.[71] However, the scale of displacement now observed is unprecedented. The Addis Ababa mayor reported that approximately 11,000 people were relocated from Piassa, in the core of the Arada sub-city, and nearly 2,000 houses were demolished for redevelopment.[72] A comparable figure is corroborated by other sources, including the Financial Times, which also notes officials' comparisons of the corridor development programme to Haussmann's remaking of Paris as an act of civic cleansing.[73] The reduction of densely occupied urban zones to relatively empty spaces results in a social and cultural evacuation of space.[74] It is the immediate result of policy-driven spatial cleansing which is fundamentally the disruption of social relationships that define a historic centre as a lived environment, replacing it with monumentalised and sanitised spaces.

Displaced residents typically receive an apartment in a condominium located on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. This arrangement can disrupt social networks, undermine livelihoods dependent on these ties, particularly in the informal economy, and impose additional transportation costs due to increased distance from essential services such as schools and hospitals, let alone the necessity sometimes to find another job due to the distance.[75] The issue of spatial equity for displaced populations in peri-urban areas of Ethiopia has been already extensively discussed in the context of the Integrated Housing Development Program (IHDP), a low-cost condominium construction project implemented by the previous administration between 2005 and 2017.[76] Even in that case, while some condominium blocks were located near the sites of clearance, the majority were situated on the city's periphery exacerbating spatial inequities.[77]

Although cultural and social ties can serve as safety nets and forms of social capital,[78] the utilitarian framing of cultural heritage as a poverty-reduction tool is also problematic in many respects.[79] One example is the paradox of gentrification in the medinas of North Africa and Morocco, where the 'authentic' imaginary built on everyday heritage and handicraft production, largely sustained by poorer populations, is increasingly

undermined as those very communities are displaced by tourism and heritage-preservation initiatives.[80]

Building on previous spatial evidence, observations from the ground confirm that Piassa, one of the principal historical sites of the Arada sub-city, has undergone a fundamental transformation in its sense of place.[81] A comparison of images in Figure 7, taken from the same vantage point facing Cinema Empire in October 2023 and October 2024, illustrates the extent of change in both the built form and social environment. Prior to redevelopment, the area was characterised by street vendors, daily labourers, shoe shiners, local shops (souk), street-food stands, advertising signage, heavy traffic, and even the façade of the cinema marked by dirt and stain displaying Amharic film posters. Following redevelopment, these practices and material traces have disappeared, replaced by a newly painted grey façade and a largely vacant urban space.

Moving from a discussion of the broader study area to a more narrowly defined case study is essential for elucidating particular dimensions of heritage loss and transformation. The Arada Luxury Mall (17,644 m^2)[82] occupies one of the plots appropriated for UCD and auctioned in April 2024. Its scale is approximately four times larger than the 5,000 m^2 minimum standard for malls and hotels.[83] On its website, the architectural firm involved declare that 'the mall's dimensions are harmonised with those of the nearby Adwa Museum, fostering a cohesive urban environment.' Certain aspects of this strategy are already visible, for example, the adoption of a shared colour palette between the museum and the surrounding neighbourhood (Figure 12), with façades of older buildings clad in tones derived from the museum.

This approach, however, reflects a form of scale manipulation which, while ostensibly intended to harmonise with its monumental neighbour, in practice contributes to what has been described as 'an incredibly brutal shift towards an urban design paradigm that has lost any sense of human scale'.[84]

The rescaling of previous heritage landmarks, such as the equestrian statue of Menelik II, now visually diminished beside the massive Adwa Museum, raises the question of whether this new Ethiopian grandeur represents an attempt to downplay heritage diversity in favour of a newly authorised monumentalism (Figure 10). Such monumentalism is justified by appeals to the 'beautification' of the city centre yet also resonates with 'imaginaries of global wealth and plenty in a country with a long history of famine and chronic poverty'.[85]

Looking beyond this single development, the same architectural firm that designed the Arada Luxury Mall is also responsible for the proposal Re-imagining Piassa.[86] Still at the design-proposal stage, it envisions 35 massive new buildings facing the Adwa Museum, in an area once occupied by hundreds of smaller structures. Whether Piassa will ultimately resemble the firm's online renderings is difficult to predict. What is evident, however, is the loss of the indigenous urban fabric composed of both social life and built heritage, including at least three historic residences demolished in the process of improving roads and building a mall:

- The government-owned residence of W/ro Workuha Makonnen (Year of construction: unknown; Year of demolition: 2024) was a stone-and-wood multi-family residence with a semi-circular (rounded rectangular) layout and a two-tiered roof, typical of early 20th-century aristocratic homes in Addis Ababa. It was built by the same

artisans who constructed the residence of Negadras Hayle Giorgis Welde Mikael, a high-ranking official under Menelik II. The structure employed mud-and-stone masonry with wooden beams, although many original elements had been altered prior to its demolition.

- The residence of W/ro Azalech Gobena (Year of construction: 1892; Year of demolition: 2024; Owner: unknown) represented a fusion of Indian and Ethiopian construction traditions. Its first owner was a prominent historical figure with ties to Ethiopian resistance and diplomacy. During the Italian occupation, the house was repurposed as a detention centre.
- The government-owned residence of W/ro Tirunesh Ayele (Year of construction: 1920; Year of demolition: 2024) was a notable example of cultural hybridity, reflecting Armenian influences in Addis Ababa's early urban architecture. The building functioned as both a multi-family residence and a commercial space and displayed distinctive features, including diagonal patterns on its wooden handrails and other refined finishes.

Rapid, monumental urban development, referred to as the Dubaiification tendency,[87] can be analysed within the critical frameworks of spatial justice.[88] This process has significant impacts on cultural heritage and local communities across the Middle East, North Africa (MENA), and other Global South contexts.[89] It is driven by a combination of economic and political imperatives, a pursuit of global visibility (worlding), the neoliberalisation of urban space, including the privatisation of formerly public areas, and substantial investment in monumental real estate (Figure 11).

Similarly, in the Ethiopian context, urban development has begun to follow a seemingly non-autochthonous trajectory, shaped by the marked neoliberalisation of planning practices aimed at providing private and foreign investors with a favourable environment for wealth creation. This process is accompanied by the construction of a striking image and narrative of prosperity that must be circulated and maintained while reshaping both urban and national identities. However, this newly crafted image stands in stark contrast to the everyday heritage and critical socio-cultural infrastructures erased that used to operate at the micro level, such as informal groups, social venues, neighbourhood ties, and vernacular systems of mutual support. This is also tragically reflected in the words of the mayor of Addis Ababa regarding the Arada Luxury Mall: 'This development will reduce the need for Ethiopians to travel abroad, such as to Dubai, to purchase luxury and designer goods'.[90]

Conclusion and Future Implications

The case of Addis Ababa where such drastic rupture with the past have been recorded is emblematic and relevant at a Pan-African level. The development of a central area, implemented with extraordinary speed, and coupled with large-scale destruction, was carried out to prevent any potential reaction or mobilisation from civil society that was to be expected given the magnitude of works.

While the upgrade and the improvement of housing standards could certainly be seen as necessary measure, the eviction of the poor from historic city centres follows a trajectory that mirrors many other cases across Africa and globally. Such evictions not

only jeopardise survival but also risk worsening living conditions and livelihood opportunities for the most vulnerable, those who rely on neighbourhood-based urban forms and informal proximity services to withstand the pressures of rapid social and economic change driven by accelerated urbanisation.

Equally, the former sense of place has been lost. The distinctive urban fabric, made up of traditional typologies, lived environments, and everyday heritage, had over time created a unique attachment to Arada. What has been rebuilt instead is a new city centre, shaped by a visionary idea of a 'Dubai on the mountaintop', marked by the commodification of heritage, fast-tracked high-rise construction, and an emphasis on economic and cultural grandeur.[91] This, however, has not been to the benefit of the historical communities of Arada, whose roots lay in a long process of social stratification that began after the victory at the Battle of Adwa. At that moment, royal encampments gradually transformed, for the first time in the country's history, into permanent dwellings. The city that emerged was not only multiethnic but also international in scope, enriched by diplomatic and cultural influences reflected in the architecture of Addis Ababa, which bore the marks of contributions from Indians, Armenians, and the local African population, together shaping a distinctly Ethiopian style. The life-sized equestrian monument of Menelik II, victor of the Battle of Adwa against the colonial powers, is overshadowed by the scale of the adjacent newly constructed Adwa Museum. Adwa itself has become a symbolic point of reference, with the newly constructed Adwa Museum rightly defined as the 'kilometre zero' of a new heritage project. It stands as a monument to cultural prestige and to the will to impose a new vision of heritage, conceived as monumental works (libraries, museums, parks, imperial palaces) that project the ambition of national greatness, modernity, and wealth. Ubiquitous emblems such as the red, gold, and green colours of the federal flag, the Lion of Judah of the semitic tradition, and the everyday heritage rooted in the human scale have faded into the background, overshadowed by an emerging new regime of heritage. While such shifts may have been predictable, the pressing duty remains to safeguard 'every past'. The general impression is that the overarching pan-Ethiopian centralised heritage narrative heavily playing on the Northern Ethiopia history no longer holds, and heritage falls apart, risking disintegration in the absence of a clear understanding of the ongoing dynamics of a new national heritage and identity in the make.

Moving forward after demolitions, there is a pressing need to deepen our understanding of the intersection between sustainability and the resilience or survival of historic buildings. Why certain structures endure amid widespread destruction, and how such lessons might inform urban heritage protection policies, remain crucial questions. In addition, greater attention should be directed towards the disappearance of heritage in smaller urban centres, as research and resources have traditionally been concentrated on the largest agglomerations and African capital cities. Equally important are stronger collaborations with regional projects, combined with capacity-building and the transfer of knowledge to civil society, further exploring the role of the digital as forensic tool to reinforce claims for spatial equity.

Notes

1. Nieder, *The Addis Ababa House*.
2. Tola, "Addis Ababa's Sefer, Iddir, and Gebbi."

3. Hollington, "Yarada K'wank'wa and Urban Youth Identity in Addis Ababa."
4. Di Nunzio, *The Act of Living: Street Life*.
5. Mezzedimi, "Aggiornamento urbanistico di Addis Abeba."
6. Giorghis and Gerard, *The City and Its Architectural Heritage*.
7. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*; and Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*.
8. Tuan, *Space and Place.*
9. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*.
10. Soja, "Spatializing the Urban, Part I."
11. Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*.
12. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
13. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.
14. Herzfeld, "Monumental Vacuity and the Idea of the West."
15. Baird, "Heritage, Human Rights, and Social Justice."
16. Labadi, *Rethinking Heritage for Sustainable Development*, 196.
17. De Cesari and Herzfeld, "Urban Heritage and Social Movements."
18. Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*.
19. Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*.
20. Forensic Architecture and Forensis, *Shark Island: An Architectural Reconstruction of a Death Camp*.
21. Sfard, "Legal Ruptures."
22. Forensic Architecture and SITU Research, "The Earth Scorched."
23. MAEASaM, "Mapping Africa's Endangered Archaeological Sites & Monuments."
24. Dikeç, "Justice and the Spatial Imagination."
25. EAMENA, "Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa."
26. Zamani Project, "Zamani Project."
27. Lane, "Future Urban Growth and Archaeological Heritage Management."
28. Gitau et al., "Conserving Commons for Whom? Heritage Conservation."
29. Aouchal, Boufenara, and Verdini, "Heritage Exclusivism in Postcolonial Algeria."
30. Ombeni, Mbosha, and Mpyanga, "Urbanization and Vulnerability of Architectural Heritage."
31. Razzu, "Urban Redevelopment, Cultural Heritage, Poverty and Redistribution."
32. El Safadi et al., "Maritime Cultural Heritage and Urbanisation."
33. Amado and Rodrigues, "A Heritage-Based Method to Urban Regeneration."
34. Guinand and Kanellopoulou, "Spatial Imaginaries 'from the Ground'."
35. Adewumi, "Built Heritage and Planning Laws in Africa."
36. Ethioinnovation, "The New Face of Addis Ababa."
37. Teklemariam, "Historic Preservation as Sustainable Urban Development in African Cities"; and Nieder, The Addis Ababa House.
38. See note 2 above.
39. The Urban Heritage Addis Ababa map was published on March 28, 2024, and is available at https://goo.gl/maps/tskaugt2wV4oqt5U6. It is based on the 2006 Addis Ababa Urban Heritage Database (by Addis Woubet/GIZ). The data was converted and interpreted by students of the Technical University of Berlin in 2021 under the supervision of Piet Nieder.
40. See note 1 above.
41. Heritage Watch Ethiopia, "Heritage Maps."
42. Khalaf and Insoll, "Monitoring Islamic Archaeological Landscapes"; Casana, "Rethinking the Landscape"; and Davis and Douglass, "Aerial and Spaceborne Remote Sensing."
43. Mubaideen, Salameen, and Al Momani, "Using the EAMENA Database to Document Modern Heritage"; and Rayne, Sheldrick, and Nikolaus, "Endangered Archaeology in Libya."
44. Rayne et al., "From Above and on the Ground."
45. See note 1 above.
46. Ibid.

47. Herzfeld, "Monumental Vacuity and the Idea of the West"; and Forensic Architecture, "Humanitarian Violence: Israel's Abuse of Preventative Measures."
48. Pleiades PHR-1B (February 6, 2024, 74.41 cm), Pleiades Neo PNEO-3 (October 21, 2024, 55.29 cm), Pleiades PHR-1B (November 25, 2024, 71.34 cm), Pleiades Neo PNEO-4 (February 15, 2025, 41.19 cm), and SkySat (May 27, 2025, 75 cm) imagery obtained from UP42.
49. 3 Maxar (GSD 30 cm, GE Pro declassified): January 25, 2008, June 3, 2009, December 17, 2009, June 17, 2011, May 3, 2012, Feb 18, 2013, December 26, 2013, December 14, 2014, October 24, 2015, June 22, 2017, May 13, 2018, March 15, 2019, January 19, 2020, December 19, 2020, November 19, 2021, October 2, 2022, November 15, 2022; and Airbus (GSD 30 cm, GE Pro declassified): October 4, 2023.
50. Luo et al., "Google Earth as a Powerful Tool for Archaeological and Cultural Heritage Applications."
51. See note 19 above.
52. Zewde, "Early Safars of Addis Ababa: Patterns of Evolution."
53. Recent scholarship has challenged the assumption that informal settlements are inherently peripheral (McFarlane 2012), arguing that such framing perpetuates an exclusionary approach to realities that resist easy categorisation and make significant contributions to urban life. In Addis Ababa, therefore, the presence of low-income enclaves in the city centre, now erased by redevelopment, is far from the uniqueness that Teklemariam (2022) suggests.
54. Teklemariam, "Does Location Matter? The Spatial Equity Implications."
55. UN-Habitat, *The Ethiopia Case of Condominium Housing*.
56. Fana Media Corporation, "PM Abiy Presides over Assessment of Progress of Addis' Corridors Dev't Project."
57. Mayor's Office, "Adwa Museum Project."
58. Ethiopian News Agency, "Addis Ababa Corridor Dev't Project Advancing Rapidly"; and Fana Media Corporation, "Adwa Victory Memorial Museum Visited by Over 31,000 People."
59. Ethiopian News Agency, "Addis Ababa Corridor Dev't Project Advancing Rapidly".
60. See note 17 above.
61. Teklemariam, "Historic Preservation as Sustainable Urban Development," 1.
62. See note 31 above.
63. Zhang, "Contesting Spatial Modernity in Late-socialist China"; and De Cesari and Herzfeld, "Urban Heritage and Social Movements."
64. Zewdu, "Looking at the Cultural Heritage Proclamations of Ethiopia."
65. Addaney and Gbomagba, "Climate Change and Cultural Heritage Protection in Africa."
66. See note 18 above.
67. Ethioinnovation, "The New Face of Addis Ababa"; Ethiopian News Agency, "Addis Ababa Corridor Dev't Project Advancing Rapidly"; and Fana Media Corporation, "PM Abiy Presides Over Assessment of Progress of Addis' Corridors Dev't Project."
68. Bersabeh, "In Addis Abeba Progress Measures its Success."
69. See note 17 above.
70. See note 2 above.
71. Di Nunzio, "Evictions for Development."
72. The Reporter, "Ethiopia's Corridor Development Project."
73. Labadi and Logan,
74. Herzfeld, "Monumental Vacuity and the Idea of the West," 132.
75. See note 68 above.
76. See note 55 above.
77. See note 54 above.
78. Razzu, "Urban Redevelopment, Cultural Heritage, Poverty and Redistribution," 403.
79. Labadi, *Rethinking Heritage for Sustainable Development*.
80. See note 34 above.
81. Selam Abdellah, "Yemeramedebeten Meret Alawqewim [I Do Not Recognize the Land I Walk On]"; and AMN/LinkAddis, "Arat Kilo to Piassa."
82. Habararchitects, "Arada Luxury Shopping Mall."

83. Wanofi, "City Admin to Auction Piassa Plots Appropriated for 'Corridor Development'."
84. Nieder, *The Addis Ababa House*, 53.
85. Di Nunzio, "Evictions for Development," 8.
86. Habararchitects, "Re-Imaging Piassa."
87. Steiner and Wippel, "Urban Development in the Middle East and North Africa."
88. Herzfeld, "Spatial Cleansing: Monumental Vacuity and the Idea of the West"; and Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.
89. See note 31 above.
90. Fana Media Corporation, "Luxury Mall for Elite Global Brands Under Construction."
91. In 2013, Vanessa Watson cautioned against the "urban fantasies" driving major development projects (urban extensions, satellite cities, and large-scale urban interventions) across sub-Saharan Africa's larger cities, including those in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, and Rwanda. These projects, she argued, sought to mimic the image of cities such as Dubai, Shanghai, and Singapore, pointing to a shared vision of redevelopment dreams (or nightmares) that has persisted across African countries.

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