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Infrastructural scripts

Histories and futures of urbanisation along the Ethio-Djibouti Railway

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the contents and organization of this dissertation constitute my own original work and does not compromise in any way the rights of third parties, including those relating to the security of personal data.

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Abstract

Every day, a constant stream of trucks and people moves between Addis Ababa and Djibouti City, the capital of the eponymous nation and one of the largest and busiest ports in the Horn of Africa. It is from this port that most goods transit to and from Ethiopia making this route a strategic economic corridor for both countries. The importance of this corridor can be traced to the colonial past when, at the beginning of the 20th century, a French company built the *Chemin de Fer Djibouto-Éthiopien*, providing landlocked Ethiopia with railway access to the sea. Partly following this colonial infrastructure, a new standard-gauge railway has been planned and built by China, and inaugurated in January 2018: the Ethio-Djibouti railway. The new rail link is a key component of an ambitious effort to take a country of nearly 100 million people to middle-income status by 2025. It is part of a political strategy that plans to spur industrialisation, urbanisation and economic growth through the construction of new infrastructures and industrial parks.

This dissertation follows the architectural traces — what I call “infrastructural scripts” — of the Ethiopian railways over an extended period of time, during which the desire to connect Ethiopia to the Red Sea for commercial purposes coexisted with various other political rationalities pursued during the French colonial period, during the Italian occupation, and, eventually, during the government of the Ethiopian People's Republic Democratic Front. The railway, intended at once as a narrative device and an object of study, charts the making of a territory according to the different visions of capitalist development that have followed one another in the course of time, revealing the multiple spatial and political logics embedded in its architecture.

By drawing on technopolitics, development scholarship and architectural history, this work brings new insights into the understanding of infrastructure in Africa,

opening new perspectives on the interplay between architecture and ideologies — both political and economic — behind its construction. Methodologically, it combines ethnographic and archival material collected between 2019 and 2020, using the concept of *scripts* to underscore the architectural traces at the base of the investigative process. In doing so, this thesis argues that infrastructures are polyvalent artefacts which reveal at once the recursiveness and the discontinuities and incompleteness of territorial building processes. The architectural traces of Ethio-Djibouti railway, specifically, speak to the ways in which infrastructures give form to different ideologies of statecraft, entangling histories, material realities, and future expectations.

The dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter presents a diachronic narrative by identifying three historical moments in which infrastructure was the protagonist of relevant spatial transformations on the African continent. The following two chapters focus on the case study — the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway — in which traces of the colonial past are juxtaposed with the political narratives of the present Ethiopian government.