

_aba shawl



history

Aba Shawl is an informal settlement in Asmara. The winding streets and small houses make it a unique area in the city. The atmosphere is strong and lively and you do not have to walk far to meet children playing or mothers doing their laundry in the streets. The poverty in the area is impossible to ignore, but the clearly visible social network and big smiles overshadow the poor living conditions and makes the area vibrant and fascinating.

Aba Shawl is also an important part of the history of Asmara. The area can be found on maps dating back to 1906 and you can find families that have been living in the area for more than 130 years. The street network is left almost untouched in all these years, making it a living remembrance of past times.

The settlement is located just to the north of Afabet Street, which marks the limit of the historic perimeter of the city. During the Italian colonisation, Aba Shawl was part of what was called the indigenous zone. The city was strongly segregated and this northern part was designated to the Eritreans. In contrast to other parts of the city this part was left unplanned and neglected.

Some parts of the northern area of Asmara received a strict plan to develop into industrial purposes in 1908. This controlled the further development of the area and has pushed the borders of the planned city straight into the unplanned city, leaving a clear border between the two. Aba Shawl is situated in a hillside, and the rigid pattern of the city plan did not suite this uneven topography, leaving this area untouched.

The Italian planned city received a regular pattern in the North-South direction. Before the Italians were overthrown during the Second World War, the European areas of Asmara were provided with water supply, sewage disposal, broad paved streets and health care. Aba Shawl still has none of these. With no urban planning or provision of services, it evolved in a different way than the rest of the city. No formal street plan or infrastructure existed to ensure sufficient healthcare, education, communication or sanitary facilities for the inhabitants. There is still no running water in the houses and the electrical distribution network has only been improvised by the inhabitants, leaving it an unstable and dangerous system.

The small houses have been arranged without any strict

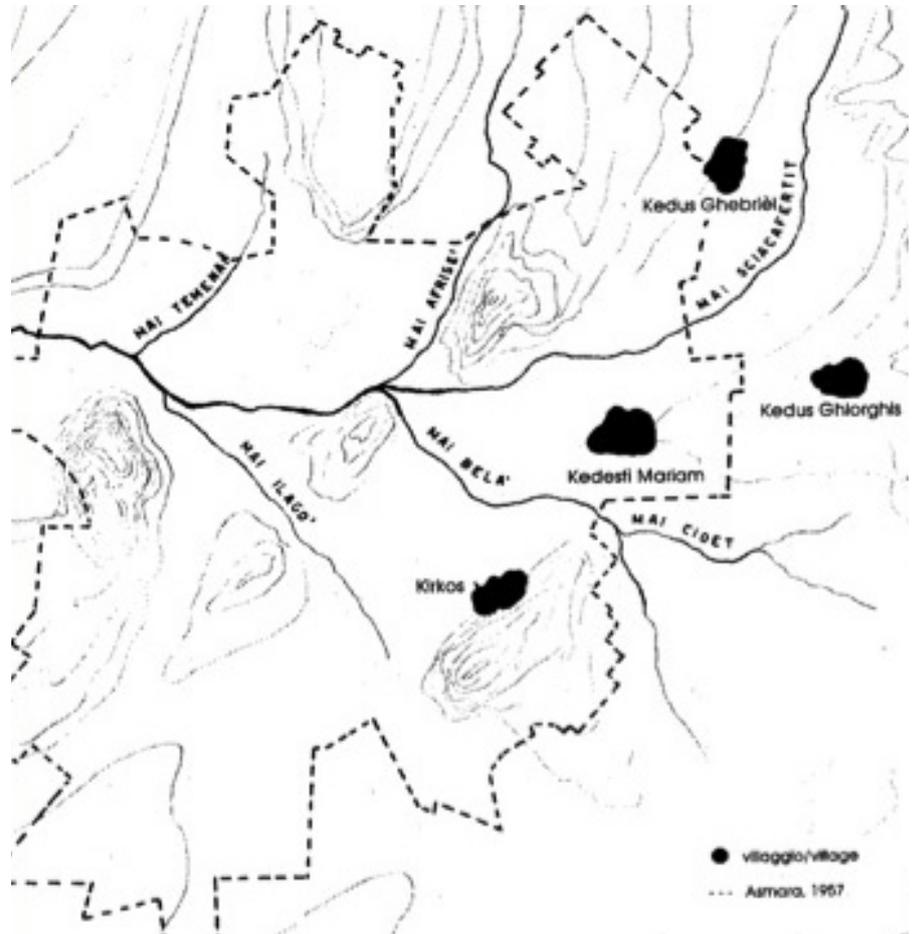
underlying regulation or planning. However, some sort of arrangement between the inhabitants must have existed. There is a structure based on blocks and shared backyards that can only have been build up through some sort of common understanding. The houses have been gradually maintained or rebuilt and kept in good condition by their owners.

Aba Shawl is still Asmara's poorest area and has been neglected by the following administrations until the independence of Eritrea. However, the fact that these native quarters still exist together with the Italian planned city gives the city its unique identity.

Asmara is understandably a city keen on developing. Poverty is still a big problem and a major part of the city's population lack basic infrastructure and proper facilities. It is important to have this in mind, and be realistic when making the priorities of the future urban planning of Asmara and Aba Shawl. Eritrea has the chance to learn from other countries where irresponsible planning has taken place, with decisions not properly thought through. It is said that the best way of creating wealth, is by developing human settlements in a sustainable way. This can be an important aspect in the future development of Asmara.



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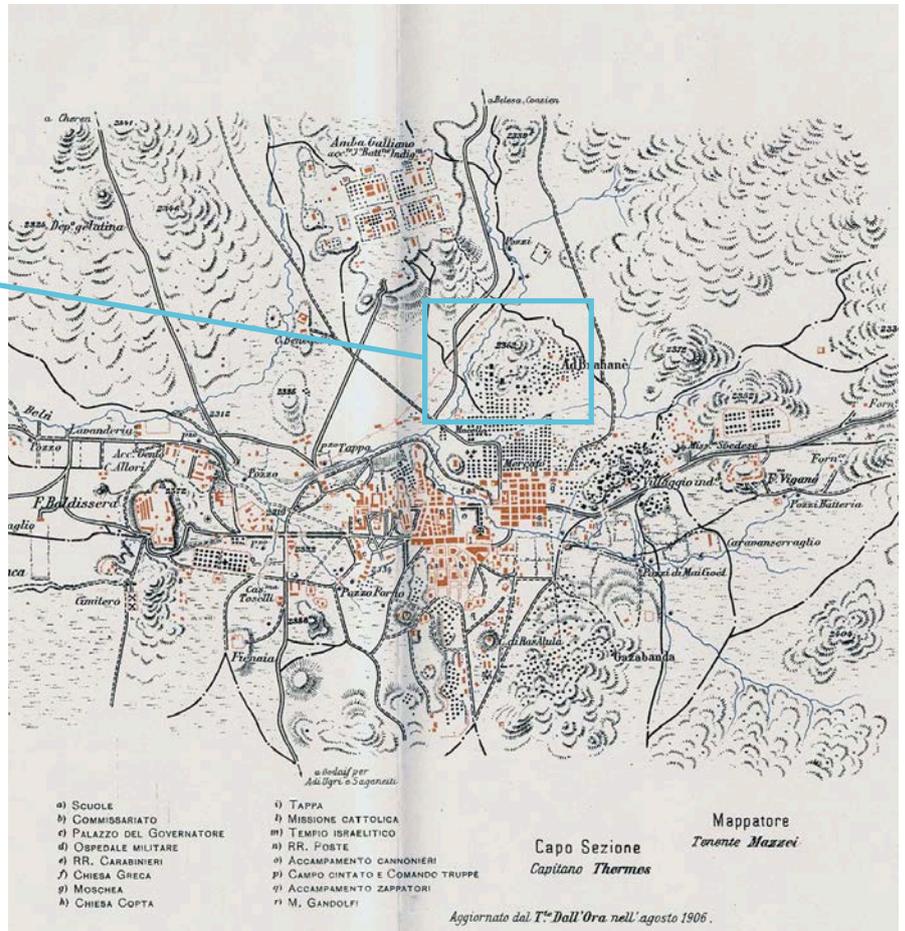


map_1320



map_1906

Aba Shawl



map_1913

Aba Shawl



Aba Shawl does not always appear on the maps made by the Italians. It was not considered a part of the city in the same way as the Italian part and only marked as the indigynous zone.

map_1953

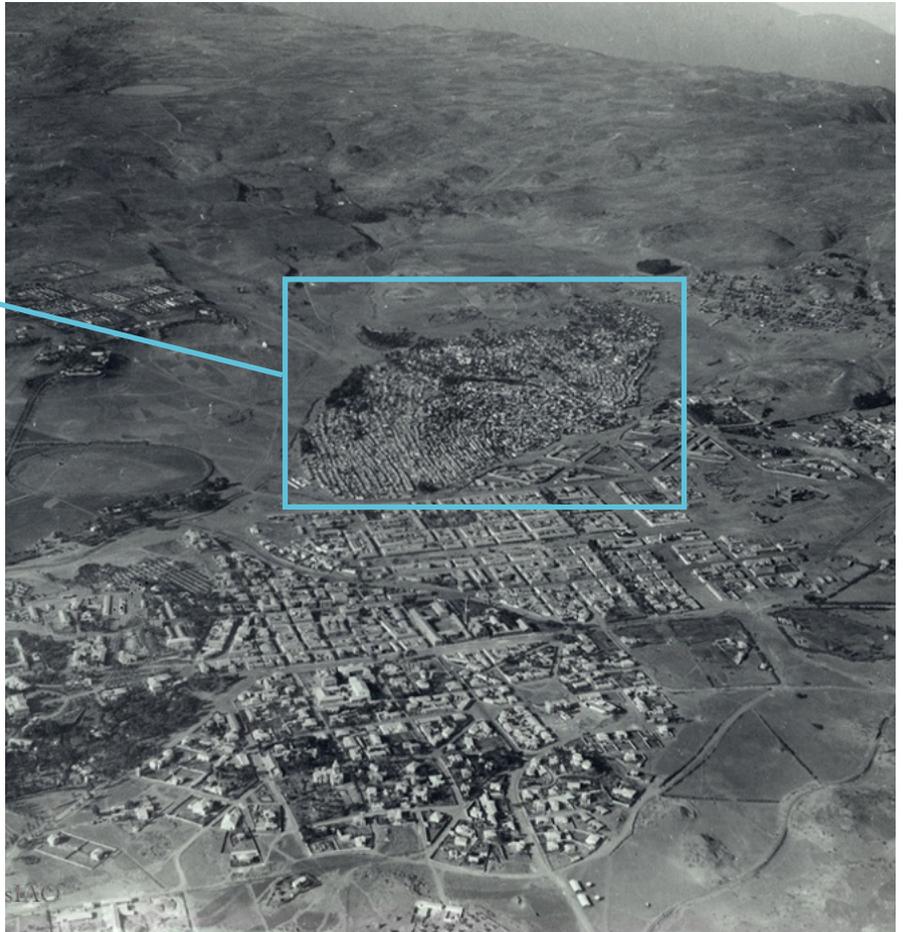
Aba Shawl

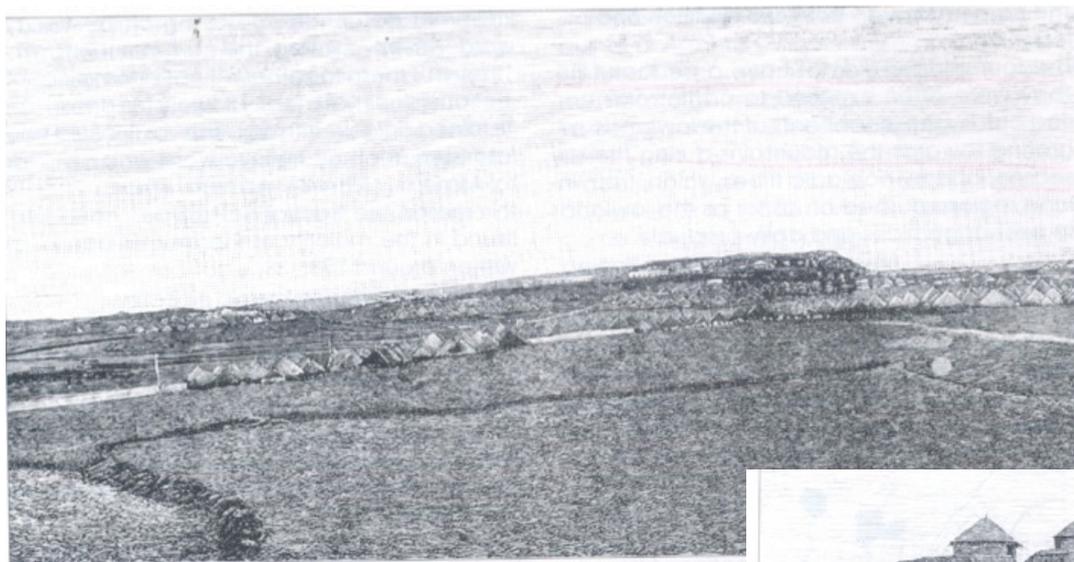
In 1953, Aba Shawl is still only referred to as the indigynous zone.



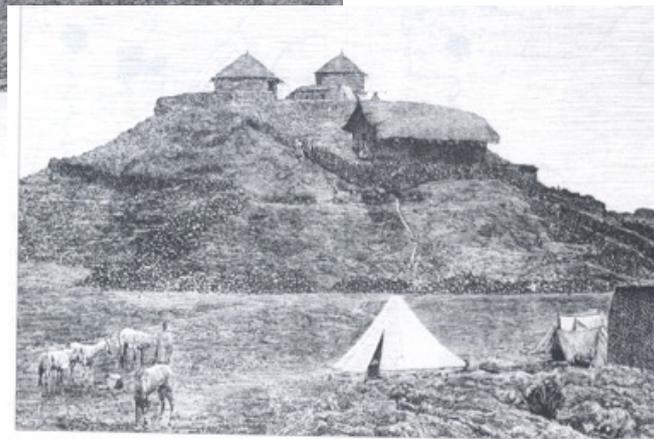
photo_1930

Aba Shawl





Panorama di Asmara nel 1896 - A view of Asmara in 1896 (Fratelli Treves)



Accampamento di Ras Alula - Ras Alula's camp (Fratelli Treves, 1896)

areial view_1994



map_2011

Map made by us.



google maps_2





situation

inhabitants

The density in the area is 1 100 to 1 500 persons per hectare, which is the highest population density in Asmara. The area we are looking at is about 10 hectares, which means that there is in-between 11 000 and 15 000 inhabitants.

Women generally have the role as homemaker and child-taker. They make the food, collect fuel necessary for its preparation, in addition to sweeping and caring for the home and providing primary healthcare for family members who fall sick. They are also responsible for collecting water. Large parts of the male population are in national service. This means that a high amount of the households are run by women on a daily basis and the street life mainly consists of women, children and elder men. A system of shared backyards provide strong social networks and the responsibility of looking after the children is often shared between the neighbors.

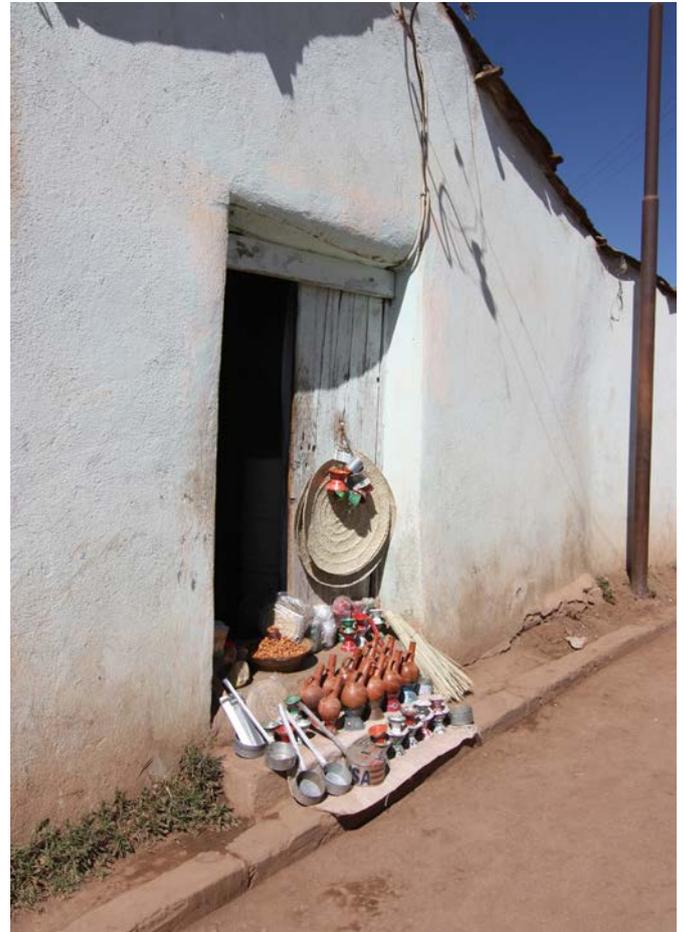
Aba Shawl is mainly a Muslim area, but has also some Christians.





functions

You find the highest concentration of shops in the outskirts of the area. Within Aba Shawl, the density is high and there is little space left for such functions. It is mainly a residential area, with little economical activity. There are a few shops and beauty salons in the south-western part close to Wedgan Square. These shops have the public function towards the street, while the private home is placed at the back.



functions in the area



meeting between planned and unplanned

Aba Shawl lies in the meeting between the planned Italian city and the unplanned. A strict regular pattern in triangles meets the informal city with its irregular contour and small and winding streets.



structure

Aba Shawl consists of an intricate system of small houses. Each family has their own house or a small room. One family often has as much as seven members, and often up to ten families can share the same backyard. Others have been able to upgrade their house and now have a private backyard. The social structure of the semi-private backyard is very important to the inhabitants. There is a high degree of interaction with your neighbours. They share responsibilities and the safety such arrangements provide are important aspects to keep. A rough count suggests that the area we have selected in Aba Shawl consists of about 420 backyards.

The houses often have one facade facing the street. They lie in an irregular pattern and the fences are used as a mediator between them, making a continuous street. The backyards are structured together into blocks with a system of main streets and side streets. The chaos has its own order.



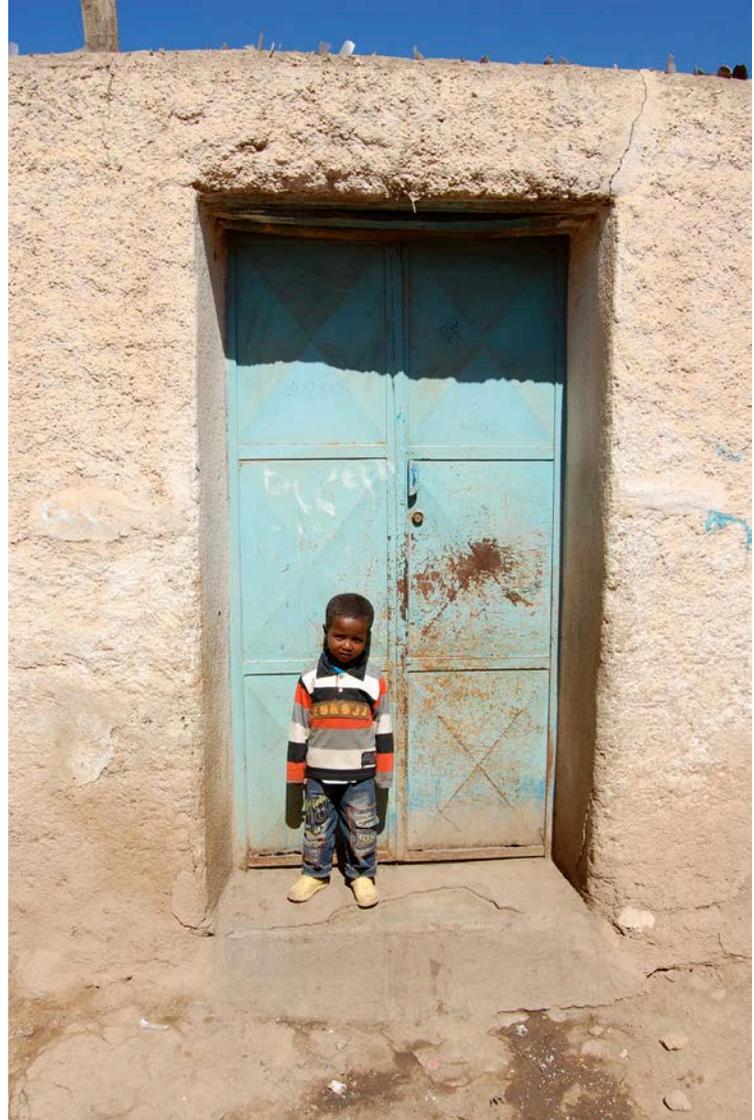


housing standard

The buildings in Aba Shawl are one storey high and made of mud, stone or occasionally brick. You can still find examples of the traditional housing typology of the hidmo and the round agdo, where especially the agdo influences the shape of the street. High fences surround the backyards, keeping this semi-private zone out of sight for any by-passers, however the doorway is usually kept open and gives you a quick glimpse of the daily life inside.

Aba Shawl is in constant change and development. As families evolve through generations, they slowly upgrade their homes, piece by piece. Others get a higher income level and can even build new homes with a quite high standard. This is clearly visible in the streets of Aba Shawl. Suddenly new facades face the street and even the cover of the street is upgraded.





ownership arrangements

The inhabitants of Aba Shawl own their own properties and the houses built on them. This means that there is a legal obligation to compensate for any impacts the new formal interventions will have on their private properties. Families that are forced to move, have to get compensation for their loss and given the feeling that they are given back something of a greater value than what they had.





qualities

identity

The streets of Aba Shawl are winding and narrow, always changing and giving new spatial experiences. Every street is unique with every wall built in different ways of brick, stone or mud. The walls follow old borderlines and the typography of the terrain and are a remembrance of old times. It is a part of the areas history. In addition there is a mix of new houses with satellite dishes and the traditional typology of the agdo and hidmo. It is like walking in both the past and the present at the same time. The palette of materials has a natural rhythm of earth colours, often with a door or a window in a contrasting shade of blue. It is also the contrast to the Italian planned city that makes Aba Shawl unique and in this way an important part of Asmara. It is a part of its identity and history.





step by step development

The houses in Aba Shawl are in constant change. Some places new facades face the street and even the cover of the street is upgraded. This upgrade has happened without conflicting with the existing street network and shows that it is possible to get a better living standard step by step without going through with a “tabula rasa” project.





social network

The social structure of Aba Shawl is too complex for us to fully understand, but that the social relations are strong is clear. The social aspects of the shared backyard seem to be very important to the women and children living there. Often, they share the responsibility of looking after the children and can even have a common kitchen. It gives a sense of security, in addition to strong social relations. They depend on each other in their daily life. One should interfere with these social structures as little as possible. It is of great interest for the inhabitants to keep this network, and moving people by force is to remove them from their safe social environment.







challenges

water

Today, water is distributed from trucks. They leave big barrels at distribution points where it is collected by the inhabitants. They use small tanks that they can carry on their backs. This is very time consuming and hard work. They have to take about 10 to 15 trips to fill the barrel in their own backyard. A few backyards have a pump system for water, but this system is not reliable and gives no solution for grey water. There also exist a few public tap stations. Some families have as little as 5 to 10 litres per capita per day.

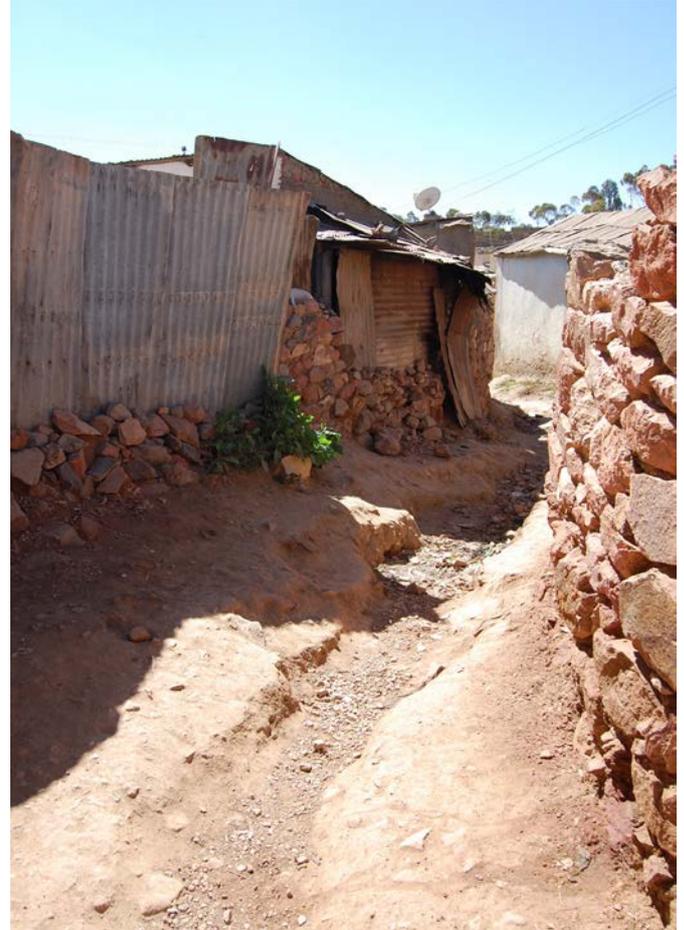
There is a big risk of the water getting contaminated when it is left in open barrels. Grey water is usually thrown out into the streets.



accessibility

Narrow and winding streets make it almost impossible for a car to enter the area. Some places streets are only one meter broad, and in addition, the rainwater has washed away much of the ground cover and made the surface rough and uneven. This makes it a challenge for even bikes to get around.

The poor accessibility makes it difficult to get things in and out of the area, such as waste, goods and ambulances. The fire safety is also very bad.





sanitation

Public sanitary stations provide toilets and showers. Most of the stations are more than 25 years old and in bad condition. A fee has to be paid to use the facilities and the stations provide jobs for the inhabitants. A few backyards close to access roads have private toilets. These are connected to a septic tank or the sewage system. The ones having a septic tank rely on big trucks for collecting the waste.





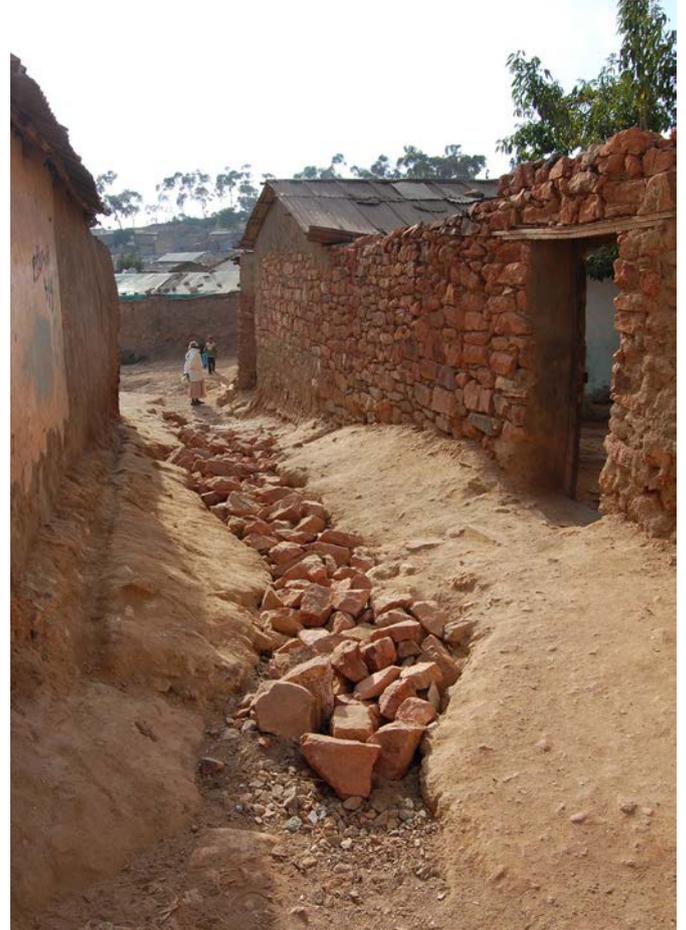
density

The density in Aba Shawl is very high. 1100 to 1500 persons per hectare in one-storey high buildings give high numbers. Often, a room of 3 meters x 3 meters is shared by a family of 7 persons. In addition, the population in Asmara is expected to double within the next 20 years.



surface water

Heavy rains in July and August wash the streets bare of gravel and dirt. It erodes the street cover, leaving it difficult to use a bike or even walk.





lack of functions

Today, there is a lack of public functions in the area. Aba Shawl is mostly a residential area and there is little space left for other functions. But there is a big need for this, especially schools, kindergartens and health stations.





lack of public space

Some places the narrow streets widen up and create small open spaces. These spaces have no sort of urban development, but often there is a public function placed in connection to it.



economy

Aba Shawl is the poorest area in Asmara. Most men are working in national service, while the women are care-takers in the household and usually do not work. More functions that can provide jobs for the inhabitants are necessary.



