

# Present Condition of Historical Italian Buildings in Gondar

TOMOHIRO SHITARA

*Keio University*

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Research on historical architecture is critical before structures are lost to demolition or decay, a risk that is particularly great in rapidly growing developing countries. The historic town of Gondar, Ethiopia, features a wealth of historical architecture, including a palace registered as a UNESCO World Heritage property, traditional houses, and Italian-style buildings constructed during the Italian occupation. However, while researchers have examined many of these structures, the Italian buildings have not been previously researched. Here, I focus on Italian buildings in Gondar and attempt to clarify their historical background, current condition, and important issues for protection.

I found that 352 Italian buildings still exist in Gondar. These buildings have helped form the urban core of the city, functioning as public, commercial, and residential spaces, and have also influenced later Ethiopian modern architecture through construction techniques passed on from Italian to Ethiopian engineers. Currently, 83% of the Italian buildings are owned by governmental sectors (i.e., the government, *kebeles* [wards], and the Rental Housing Administrative Authority). To preserve these historic structures, it is necessary to cooperate with governmental sectors, and further research will be necessary to devise cooperative protection strategies.

**Key words:** Architectural preservation, Ethiopia, Gondar, Italian Buildings, Urban planning

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gondar served as the capital of Ethiopia during the Gondar period (1636–1769) and is one of the most important historical cities in the country (Fig. 1). Central Gondar still houses the castles of the Fasiladas Palace, which was constructed during the Gondar period, historical Ethiopian Orthodox churches<sup>(1)</sup>, traditional circular houses, and buildings constructed by the Italians during their World War II-era occupation. This mix of history and culture creates a unique urban space that is unlike any other in Ethiopia. Today, citizens of Gondar recognize these buildings as historically significant, and protection programs have been implemented. The Fasiladas Palace, for example, has been restored by UNESCO, in cooperation with various European countries, since becoming a registered UNESCO World Heritage site<sup>(2)</sup>. Church members and local craftspeople have also worked to protect historical Ethiopian Orthodox churches. However, no historical preservation programs have yet targeted the traditional circular houses or Italian buildings of Gondar.

Thus, many of these buildings in central Gondar have been lost due to age or changes in lifestyle. Land shortages have accelerated the destruction of these historic buildings. Rapid population expansion has increased the density of housing and residents in Gondar<sup>(3)</sup>. The

*kebele* (ward) 09–12 area, for example, had an average population density of 345 persons per hectare in 2003, a density that is high considering that almost all houses in this area are only one story high. Some parts of this area suffer from slum conditions and sub-standard housing. Given the serious land shortage, the construction of a new residential area is critically needed.

The Gondar Municipality, Amhara Regional State and Building College of Addis Ababa University, and the Miyake Studio of Keio University have therefore launched a joint project to update the urban master plan of Gondar. Work was begun in March 2000 and has continued through a number of workshops<sup>(4)</sup> in which participants have discussed the historical architecture and preservation policies.

For successful preservation, however, fundamental research is first necessary. Recent research has compiled basic data on the traditional circular houses, including information on the distribution, ownership, and design features of these structures<sup>(5)</sup>. However, no previous research has focused on the Italian buildings. Therefore, I examined the Italian buildings, with the following main purposes:

- 1) to clarify the historical construction backgrounds of the Italian buildings and examine the original urban master plan;
- 2) to clarify the current conditions of the buildings, including their total number, distribution, ownership, and structural composition; and
- 3) to compare the results of 1) and 2) and determine important issues related to protection of the Italian buildings.

This research report is based on fieldwork conducted from October 2003 to April 2004 and on archival research<sup>(6)</sup>.

## **2. BACKGROUND OF HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION**

### *2.1 The Occupation of Gondar*

The Italian army occupied Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941. During this time, Italian strategists decided to develop Gondar as a principal city, equal to Addis Ababa, Jimma, Dessie, and Harar. Gondar, located midway between the capital Asmara and Addis Ababa, expanded rapidly as the Italian army planned construction of a main road from Asmara to Addis Ababa. Because a wealth of historical architecture already created a unique and beautiful urban landscape in Gondar, the Italian army envisioned the city as a potential “second Rome” in Ethiopia<sup>(7)</sup>.

### *2.2 Features of the Italian Urban Master Plan for Gondar*

The Italian government had maintained a consulate in Gondar since the 1920s. The Italian consul, Rafael Di Lauro, gathered information for the urban master plan, allowing city planners from the Italian army to create a preliminary urban master plan for Gondar in advance of the occupation<sup>(8)</sup>. After the Italian army occupied the city, planners revised the initial ideas and began to carry out construction. The main features of the plan included the following.

- 1) The Italian army developed Gondar as the capital city of the province of Gondar, which served as the center of politics, commerce, and defense in northern Ethiopia.
- 2) The maximum population of Italian immigrants, including both soldiers and civilians, was expected to be 10,000. In the central part of the city, the Italian army segregated Gondar Ethiopians and Italians, placing Italians in higher-elevation neighborhoods and Ethiopians in lower-lying areas for security as well as environmental factors such as scenery and temperature.
- 3) The urban master plan was based on topographical conditions. Flat lands were limited in Gondar. Thus, the Italian army focused new construction on small, flat, island-like areas along main roads.
- 4) The Italian districts received the main infrastructural improvements, including asphalt roads, water lines, and electricity networks, and principal buildings such as government-

tal buildings, residences, shops, hotels, and hospitals. In contrast, the Italians built only one elementary school, one hospital, and a few governmental buildings in the Ethiopian districts.

- 5) Fasiladas Palace was protected as a structure of historical heritage and maintained by Italian engineers<sup>(9)</sup>.

### 2.3 Features of the Main Districts

Most Ethiopians moved to Arada because of the segregation policies. Italians settled in areas such as Piazza, Bellico, Autoparco, Che-Che-La, and Azzezo (Figs. 2, 3). Distinctive features of the Ethiopian and Italian districts are as follows:

**Arada:** Roads were narrow and unpaved, and the water and electric supplies were inadequate for the Ethiopian residents of the area.

**Piazza:** The Italian army and civilians<sup>(10)</sup> developed Piazza as a commercial center and constructed many buildings, including grocery stores, cafés, hotels, banks, and cinemas. A public park and square were also built.

**Bellico:** Bellico was built as a security checkpoint for northern Gondar. In addition, some storage buildings and parking areas were set up in Bellico. Between Piazza and Bellico, many residences, military offices, and administrative buildings were constructed.

**Autoparco:** The Italian army constructed military installations such as a large parking area, residences for soldiers, storage facilities, and a military academy in this area.

**Che-Che-La:** The Italian consulate had been located in Che-Che-La since the 1920s; the Italian army converted this structure to hospital buildings after the occupation.

**Azzezo:** Because Ethiopians were already living in Azzezo at the time of the occupation, the Italian army constructed a military camp, soldier residences, some factories, and an airport far from the Ethiopian district in Azzezo.

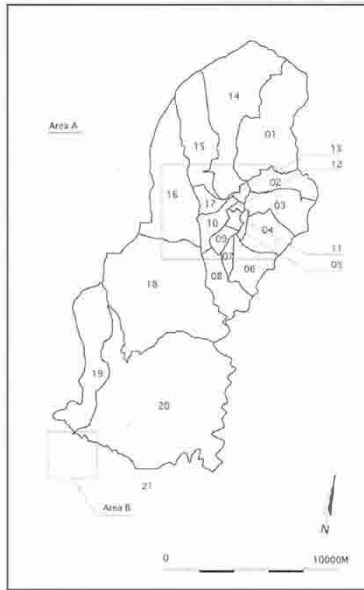
### 2.4 Italian Buildings

The Italian buildings were constructed in Gondar during the occupation based on the urban master plan. Italian architects in Rome designed many principal buildings such as governmental buildings, military offices, banks, hotels, and residences for soldiers and civilians. However, other buildings were designed in Gondar. Most Italian buildings were designed using the metric system and constructed exactly according to the architectural design plan<sup>(11)</sup>.

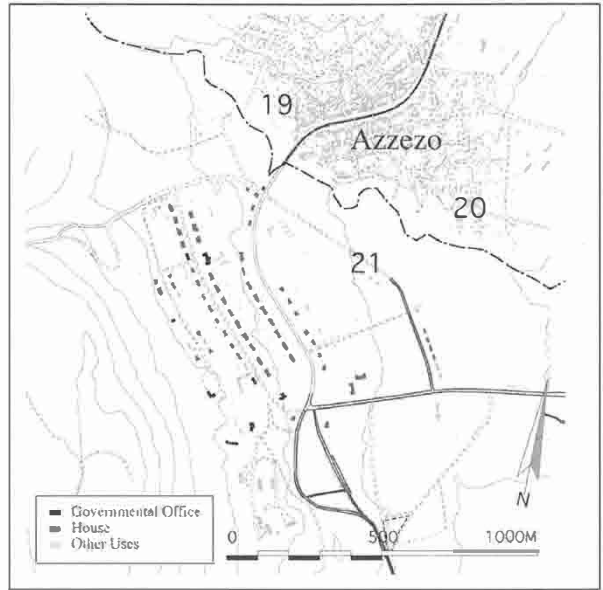
Principal construction materials were stone, brick, timber, reinforced concrete, asbestos plates, and steel bars. Stone served as the main vernacular material around Gondar, where it could be easily obtained. To produce brick, the Italians built a brickyard near Che-Che-La. They also transported cement for reinforced concrete, as well as asbestos plates, timber, and steel bars, from Italy through Eritrea.

Military engineers constructed all governmental buildings such as military offices, administrative buildings, and the hospital. However, many civilian buildings were built by engineers from private companies. Eritrean and Ethiopian carpenters worked with the Italian engineers<sup>(12)</sup>.

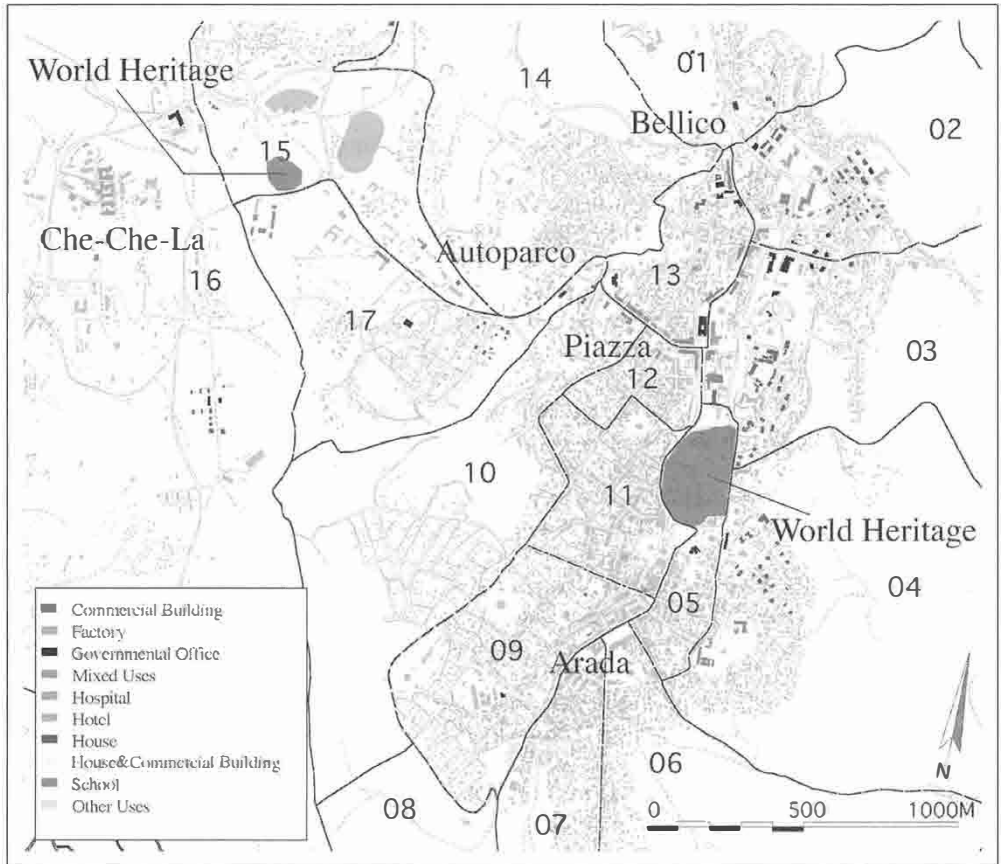
High-ranking military officials constructed G+1-story<sup>(13)</sup> residences from stone or reinforced concrete and stone. Their residences commonly had a living room, kitchen, toilet and bathroom, two to four bedrooms, and a large garden. Mid-level military officials built G+0-story residences using asbestos plates or timber; these houses typically had a living room, kitchen, a toilet and bathroom, one to two bedrooms, and a small garden. Most minor military officials shared residences with three to four people. Civilian residences were similar to those of the mid-level military officials. Most governmental buildings and commercial buildings were constructed from stone walls with concrete beams.



**Fig. 1.** Map of kebeles (wards) in Gondar



**Fig. 2.** Distribution of building uses in "Area B"



**Fig. 3.** Distribution of building uses in "Area A"

### 3. ANALYSIS OF CURRENT CONDITIONS

#### 3.1 Distribution

Table 1 indicates the distribution of Italian buildings in each kebele. A kebele is similar to a "ward," as an urban subdivision unit in Ethiopia. Gondar has 21 kebeles, as shown in Fig. 1. The fieldwork for this study identified 352 Italian buildings remaining in Gondar. ● Of these, 46% are in kebeles 1–4 around Bellico-Piazza, 23% are in kebeles 13–17 around Autoparco-Che-Che-La, and 23% are in kebele 21 around Azzezo. The five historically Italian districts house 92% of the Italian buildings, a distribution that coincides with the historical backgrounds of the areas described in subsection 2.3.

#### 3.2 Building Uses

Table 2 indicates the current uses of the Italian buildings. Although there have been changes, most of the buildings are still used for their original purpose. ● Of the study buildings, 55% are residences, and 13% are governmental buildings. Most of the residences are located in the eastern portion of the city between Bellico and Piazza, as well as in kebele 21 along the main roads. Most of the commercial buildings are in Bellico-Piazza (Fig. 3).

#### 3.3 Number of Stories

Table 3 shows the five types of Italian building (by number of stories) that exist at present. Notably, 82% of the Italian buildings are G+0-story. The G+2-story buildings are the highest buildings in Gondar, comprising only 1% of structures. Most of the Italian buildings higher than G+0 are governmental, commercial, or hotel buildings around Bellico-Piazza. All Italian buildings in Gondar were designed as low-rise buildings because the historical landscape was considered important in the urban master plan.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Italian buildings in each kebele

Kebele No.	Number (Percent) of Buildings
Kebele 01	7 ( 2%)
Kebele 02	70 ( 20%)
Kebele 03	58 ( 16%)
Kebele 04	28 ( 8%)
Kebele 05	1 ( 1%)
Kebele 06	0 ( 0%)
Kebele 07	0 ( 0%)
Kebele 08	6 ( 2%)
Kebele 09	3 ( 1%)
Kebele 10	6 ( 2%)
Kebele 11	4 ( 1%)
Kebele 12	5 ( 1%)
Kebele 13	23 ( 7%)
Kebele 14	0 ( 0%)
Kebele 15	11 ( 3%)
Kebele 16	26 ( 7%)
Kebele 17	21 ( 6%)
Kebele 18	0 ( 0%)
Kebele 19	0 ( 0%)
Kebele 20	0 ( 0%)
Kebele 21	83 ( 23%)
Total	352 (100%)

**Table 2.** Current Uses of the Italian Buildings

Current Use	Number (Percent) of Buildings
Commercial Building	25 ( 7%)
Factory	3 ( 1%)
Governmental Office	47 ( 13%)
Mixed Use*	6 ( 2%)
Hospital	11 ( 3%)
Hotel	5 ( 2%)
House	195 ( 55%)
House and Commercial Building	14 ( 4%)
School	30 ( 8%)
Other Uses	16 ( 5%)
Total	352 (100%)

\* a combined hotel and commercial building is an example of the "mixed use" category

**Table 3.** Number of Stories in Italian Buildings

Floors	Number (Percent) of Buildings
G+0	290 ( 83%)
G+0, B1	3 ( 1%)
G+1	51 ( 15%)
G+1, B1	5 ( 1%)
G+2	3 ( 1%)
Total	352 (100%)

### 3.4 Construction material of principle structures

Table 4 indicates the main construction materials of the principle structure of the Italian buildings (14): 32% are stone, 28% are reinforced concrete and stone, 14% are timber, and 12% are asbestos plates. Most also feature stone-wall construction, indicating that the Italians used readily available vernacular material.

The Italians constructed a brickyard near Che-Che-La in kebele 16; however, the bricks were mostly used for interior walls, not as the principle structure. Stone-masonry residences took 2–3 months to construct; in contrast, asbestos-plate residences took only 2–3 days to build because of the prefabrication system.

### 3.5 Condition of Preservation

Table 5 indicates the preservation status of Italian buildings. “A” to “F” and “N” stand for “good condition” (A); “some damage to outside wall” (B); “some damage to inside parts” (C); “both B & C” (D); “serious damage” (E); “ruins” (F); and “no information” (N). Although 58% of the buildings are in good condition, 14% require immediate maintenance (categories D and E).

### 3.6 Ownership

Table 6 lists the current ownership of the Italian buildings. The government owns all land in Ethiopia, although four kinds of ownership exist for buildings: “government,” “private,” “kebele”<sup>(15)</sup>, and Rental Housing Administrative Authority (“RHAA”). The kebeles and RHAA established rental housing during the socialism period (1974); after democratization, these buildings retained this use and are rented as residences, offices, and commercial buildings. The governmental sectors (the government, kebele, and RHAA) hold 83% of Italian buildings, an important factor when considering preservation and protection measures.

**Table 4.** Construction Material of Principle Structures

Material	Number (Percent) of Buildings
Asbestos Plates	44 ( 12%)
Brick	10 ( 3%)
Cement Block	1 ( 1%)
RC*	13 ( 3%)
RC & Brick**	2 ( 1%)
RC & Stone	1 ( 1%)
Steel (Bar)	3 ( 1%)
Steel + Asbestos***	3 ( 1%)
Stone	11 ( 32%)
Stone + Brick	2 ( 1%)
Stone + RC	102 ( 28%)
Stone + RC & Stone	1 ( 1%)
Stone & Brick	3 ( 1%)
Timber (wood)	51 ( 14%)
Total	352 (100%)

\* RC refers to reinforced concrete.

\*\* & means two buildings joined together and sharing a wall, such as row houses.

\*\*\* + indicates a mixed structure.

**Table 5.** Current Condition of the Italian Buildings

Condition	Number (Percent) of Buildings
A	204 ( 58%)
B	14 ( 4%)
C	65 ( 18%)
D	38 ( 10%)
E	12 ( 4%)
F	9 ( 3%)
N	10 ( 3%)
Total	352 (100%)

**Table 6.** Current Ownership of the Italian Buildings

Ownership	Number (Percent) of Buildings
Government	177 ( 50%)
Kebele	75 ( 21%)
Kebele and RHAA	3 ( 1%)
Kebele and Private	5 ( 1%)
RHAA	34 ( 10%)
RHAA and Government	3 ( 1%)
RHAA and Private	3 ( 1%)
Private	52 ( 15%)
Total	352 (100%)

### 3.7 Comparative Analysis

Table 7 indicates the relationship between ownership and the preservation status of Italian buildings. Almost all government-owned buildings are in good condition, with 77% having "A" status. However, 36% of kebele-owned buildings need immediate maintenance. Of the privately owned buildings, 54% are in good condition and 27% require repairs<sup>(16)</sup>.

**Table 7.** Comparison between Ownership and Condition of Preservation

Condition	Government	Kebele	Private	RHAA	Other	Total
A	136 ( 77%)	16 ( 21%)	28 ( 54%)	19 ( 56%)	5 ( 36%)	204
B	5 ( 3%)	6 ( 8%)	0 ( 0%)	3 ( 9%)	0 ( 0%)	14
C	14 ( 8%)	26 ( 35%)	9 ( 17%)	11 ( 32%)	5 ( 36%)	65
D	4 ( 2%)	24 ( 32%)	5 ( 10%)	1 ( 3%)	4 ( 28%)	38
E	0 ( 0%)	3 ( 4%)	9 ( 17%)	0 ( 0%)	0 ( 0%)	12
F	9 ( 5%)	0 ( 0%)	0 ( 0%)	0 ( 0%)	0 ( 0%)	9
N	9 ( 5%)	0 ( 0%)	1 ( 2%)	0 ( 0%)	0 ( 0%)	10
Total	177 (100%)	75 (100%)	52 (100%)	34 (100%)	14 (100%)	352

Table 8 indicates the relationship between the building condition and the construction material of the principle structure. For asbestos-plate structures, 55% are in good condition. However, damage to an exterior asbestos wall also damages the corresponding inner wall. Both stone and reinforced concrete and stone are in good condition, while timber structures show the most serious problems.

**Table 8.** Comparison between Condition of Preservation and Construction Material of Principle Structure

Material	A	B	C	D	E	F	N	Total
Asbestos Plate	24 (55%)	0 ( 0%)	12 (27%)	6 (14%)	1 ( 2%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	44 (100%)
Brick	5 (50%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	0 ( 0%)	0 ( 0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (100%)
RC	5 (38%)	4 (31%)	3 (23%)	1 ( 8%)	0 ( 0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (100%)
Stone	83 (71%)	2 ( 2%)	16 (14%)	8 ( 7%)	1 ( 1%)	0 (0%)	6 (5%)	116 (100%)
Stone + RC	76 (74%)	2 ( 2%)	12 (12%)	1 ( 1%)	0 ( 0%)	8 (8%)	3 (3%)	102 (100%)
Timber (Wood)	6 (12%)	2 ( 4%)	14 (27%)	19 (37%)	10 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	51 (100%)
Other	5 (31%)	2 (31%)	5 (31%)	3 (19%)	0 ( 0%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	16 (100%)
Total	204	14	65	38	12	9	10	352

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Sections 2 and 3 highlighted the importance of Italian buildings in Gondar and factors that should be considered when planning to preserve these buildings.

- 1) Italian buildings help form the center of Gondar around Bellico-Piazza and create a unique urban landscape. The Italian buildings in Gondar are critical not only as part of the heritage of this city but also as part of its current urban structure.
- 2) Later Ethiopian architecture was influenced by Italian construction techniques. Ethiopian carpenters working with Italians inherited the Italian techniques.
- 3) Although the total number of Italian buildings constructed during the occupation period is unknown, 352 buildings exist at present.
- 4) The kebele-owned buildings and those constructed from timber require serious attention. However, all Italian buildings ranked as "E" ("serious damage") are residences, 75% of which are private.
- 5) The Ethiopian army (government) owns 82 of the Italian buildings in Azzezo and uses them as a camp. The army holds 23% of all Italian buildings.
- 6) Government sectors own 83% of all Italian buildings (government, kebele, RHAA). It

is thus necessary to cooperate with governmental sectors, as well as citizens, and discuss methods for protecting the Italian buildings.

The next fieldwork steps will involve attitude surveys of citizens and detailed research on the construction systems. Archival research focusing on architectural drawings and history is also needed.

## NOTES

- (1) The famous historical Ethiopian Orthodox churches are the “Debre Birhan Selassie” and “Yohannes Metmequ.”
- (2) UNESCO began to restore the “Fasiladas Bath” in cooperation with the Norwegian government in 2001.
- (3) According to research by the Gondar municipal government, the city’s population increased at a rate of 1.62 between 1994 and 2003.
- (4) Four workshops (March 2001, December 2001, March 2002, and March 2004) were held with professionals, including a town planner, ecologist, socio-economist, and architect.
- (5) The architect Fasil Giorghis is conducting research that Tomohiro Shitara is studying.
- (6) I conducted three periods of fieldwork in Gondar (October 2003, February-March 2003, and March 2004) and collected documents from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, and Addis Ababa Civil Service College.
- (7) Based on interviews of Ethiopians who worked with the Italians during the occupation period.
- (8) “*Architettura italiana d’oltremare 1870–1940*,” p. 171.
- (9) Based on interviews of Ethiopians who worked with the Italians during the occupation period.
- (10) Civilians who worked in Gondar as merchants, engineers, bankers, and other professions.
- (11) Based on interviews of Ethiopians who worked with the Italians during the occupation period and “*Architettura italiana d’oltremare 1870–1940*,” p. 171.
- (12) Based on interviews of Ethiopians who worked with the Italians during the occupation period.
- (13) “G” indicates ground floor; “B” means an underground basement floor.
- (14) Principle structure means the wall pillars and beams, except for the roof structure.
- (15) Kebele has two meanings: one is “ward” and the other is a governmental organization.
- (16) From section 3.5, “D” and “E” require repairs.

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