

Mekelle: "The city of competing Castles" and the emerging debate on the identity of the city, Ethiopia,

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Abstract

Mekelle, an economic, cultural and political hub in the Northern region of Ethiopia is known for its iconic castles and old residential stone masonry buildings from the second half of 19th and early 20th century. The city of Mekelle, referred to as “the northern star” by its residents, and “the city of competing castles”, or “a townscape of a stone city” by scholars, which once was an Imperial capital of Ethiopia is currently the regional capital of Tigray National Regional State. This study aims to identify how the role of the castles as character defining elements and icons of the city identity are integrated with the intensive city redevelopment programs taking place following the regime change in 1991, and the reaction of the community towards these change. Accordingly, new mega structures are emerging as competitive icons of the city. Residents of the city are complaining about being excluded from the decision making processes of the redevelopment and monumental heritage conservation process. Due to a lack of appropriate building codes, building regulations and zoning of historical neighborhoods, new structures which diminish the role of the castles are emerging within the immediate neighborhood of the castles. The newly constructed ‘high-rise’ buildings are unfriendly to the castles in scale, construction technique, construction material and design and decorative motifs.

Key words: Cultural heritage, Mekelle, Competing Castles, Local cities, Historic neighborhood

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