

## Asmara – Beyond Africa’s Modernist City

by Edward Denison

Two years ago, the Modernist capital of Eritrea, Asmara, was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List. The Horn of Africa might seem an unlikely place to find one of the largest and most complete ensembles of Modernist architecture in the world, but Asmara’s relative obscurity, like that of Eritrea, belies its role in the history of the twentieth century – Modernism’s century. Despite the global events that have rocked this corner of north-east Africa, one of the most unexpected legacies of Eritrea’s brutal encounter with modernity is its extraordinary collection of Modernist buildings left by the Italians during Mussolini’s attempt to create a new Roman Empire in East Africa, which ended prematurely during the Second World War.

Architectural remnants of this appalling campaign are strewn all over Eritrea, but it was in Asmara, the jewel in Italy’s imperial crown, that construction prevailed, creating Africa’s most modern city. It was an enviable colonial capital and, paradoxically, has been the beloved capital of the State of Eritrea since the country became independent in 1991. Thousands of villas, offices, apartments, shops, factories, cinemas and other typologies were designed and constructed in a relatively short period from 1935 to 1941. Remarkably, these structures remain almost entirely intact, albeit in need of maintenance and investment, the responsibility for which lies with the Asmara Heritage Project (AHP). Established in 2014 to prepare the UNESCO Nomination and to provide the necessary institutional framework for Asmara’s long-term protection, the AHP comprises a small but determined group of Eritrean professionals, whose extraordinary work was rewarded in 2016 when they won the RIBA President’s Medal for Research and again in 2017 with Asmara’s inscription on to UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

Asmara was originally founded on the site where an agglomeration of four ancient villages, ‘Arbate Asmara’, had existed for centuries. The Italian forces first occupied this highland plateau in 1889, but it was not until 1900 that they moved their colonial capital from the scorching Red Sea port of Massawa to this 2,300-metre-high oasis. The arrival of the Italians forced the relocation of Arbate Asmara to the north east to make room for the proposed new city centre, following the classic colonial urban model of separating the coloniser from the colonised. As the seat of the Governor of Eritrea,

Asmara was the primary site of Italy's presence in Africa until the country's invasion of Libya in 1911.

Asmara grew under Italian control from a loose agglomeration of military, civilian and indigenous settlements into a well-established town defined by an organised and innovative urban plan, drafted in 1913 by the city's head of public works, Odoardo Cavagnari. The revised version of this plan in 1916 formally instituted racial segregation as a feature of urban planning, with the Italians and other Europeans enjoying exclusive rights and access to much of the central, southern and western parts of the city, where the administrative and residential areas were located. The central commercial areas were declared a 'mixed zone' for Europeans, other foreigners (Yemenis, Greeks, Swedish, British, Indians, Jews, Ethiopians, Armenians, Sudanese and Arab traders) and Eritreans. The cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of this area of Asmara left an indelible mark on the built environment through a combination of commercial, residential and religious buildings and public spaces.

A third zone on the north-eastern periphery of the city was reserved for industry. Beyond this, away from the watchful eyes of urban planners and architects, the Eritrean community clustered in the inchoate conglomeration of rudimentary dwellings and alleys known as Abbashawl (Fig.1). Abbashawl is as essential to Asmara's cultural heritage as Modernist urban planning and architecture. The two distinct urban conditions were both products of Asmara's encounter with modernity. They were interdependent, yet antithetical – one was planned, rational and modern, while the other was spontaneous, incoherent and cast as 'primitive'.

In the years either side of the Italian Fascists' rise to power in 1922, Asmara was furnished with a modern infrastructure, including the supply of water and electricity, the provision of sewage disposal, the layout of an embryonic road network, and the arrival of the railways. However, Asmara was no *tabula rasa*. Unlike many other colonial cities, whose layout often imposed grand master plans in foreign territories with little regard for pre-existing settlements or natural conditions, the planning of Asmara was determined by the natural topography, including the Mai Bela River, the edge of the escarpment, and the location of previously established landmarks such as the high ground on which military forts had been constructed.

In 1935, Italy's invasion of neighbouring Ethiopia transformed Asmara almost overnight and was the catalyst for the city's rapid and comprehensive development up to 1941, when the Italians were defeated by Allied forces. This short period was a defining chapter in Asmara's architectural and urban development, with the original urban plan being completed, expanded and comprehensively furnished with hundreds of Modernist buildings. The result was a total urban landscape characterised by its human scale and mixed uses, built forms and activities, including well-defined open spaces and a distinctive architectural character evidenced in an outstanding collection of large cinemas, factories, shops, bars and restaurants, hotels and residences.

Asmara's architectural character is defined by Modernism, but stylistically it is not confined to this genre. The city's historic architecture can be categorised in two phases. The first, spanning nearly half a century, reflects the city's evolution from a fledgling colonial settlement in the late nineteenth century to the centre of Italy's expanding African Empire by the mid-1930s, and displays an eclecticism defined by neo-traditional styles recalling classical, Lombard, Romanesque, Renaissance, Gothic, medieval and even vernacular forms. The second reflects the city's extreme encounter with modernity following Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and concluded with Italy's defeat in 1941. During this period Modernism in its various forms proliferated, including the proto-Modernist Novecento style, Rationalism, Monumentalism and Futurism.

The city's 'pre-Modernist' phase is exemplified by the spectacular Teatro Asmara (1920) (Fig.2), the first purpose-built venue for the performing arts in Eritrea [say few words more about its style please?]. Standing on raised ground overlooking the western end of what became Asmara's central axis titled Viale Mussolini, Teatro combines neo-classical and neo-Romanesque elements, the most striking of which are the sweeping double staircase leading from the street up to the portico formed of seven round-arches supported on slender Ionic columns. The architect was Cavagnari, whose remarkable professional ability and sensitivity went beyond urban planning and architecture for the Italian community, and can be seen in his neo-vernacular design of the building for the Eritrean Orthodox community, Degghi Selam (1917) (Fig.3). This idiosyncratic building, with its numerous references to local building techniques, not only stands at the entrance of the Orthodox Cathedral of St Mary's (1938), but also inspired its design – a unique example of the architectural union of Italian Rationalism and African vernacular at the

height of fascism that reflected Italy's dependence on Eritrean labour to realise its architectural dreams (Fig.4).

Far from home, the imagination of Italian architects in Eritrea could run a little wild. [Add information here about whether Italian architects came to Asmara to design buildings during the period under discussion please?] Not enough is known about these personalities or what motivated them to venture to the colonies – whether it was political proselytizing, fleeing fascism or the sheer opportunism of architectural adventure – but there is no doubt that dozens were attracted by the building boom from the mid-1930s and modernism was their common language, though the range of dialects is what gives Asmara its delightful architectural character. Asmara's varied architectural style derived largely from the geometric simplicity and aesthetic purity of Rationalism, which had emerged in Italy with Giuseppe Terragni's design for the Novocomum Apartments in Como (1927–9) and reached its apogee in 1936 with the completion of the celebrated Casa del Fascio, also by Terragni and also in Como. One of the best examples of Rationalism in Asmara is the Selam Hotel (1937), formerly the Albergo CIAAO (Compagnia Immobiliare Alberghi Africa Orientale) (Fig.5), designed in Rome by Rinaldo Borganino for a state-sponsored hotel chain providing high-end accommodation for travellers to the colonies. However, in Asmara, Rationalism's aesthetic chastity was often corrupted by an architectural playfulness that flirted with the whimsical through form, detail, material or colour. This light-heartedness can be seen in many of Asmara's buildings, from functional industrial facilities, such as the former Lancia workshop designed by Carlo Marchi (1938) (Fig.6) with its towering beacon that forms the centrepiece in its elongated façade, to the city's extraordinary cinemas, whether in the sublime bar in the lobby of the Odeon designed by Giuseppe Zacche (1937), (Fig.7) the retractable roof crowning the cavernous 1,800-seater Capitol (Fig.8), formerly Cinema Augustus, by Danielle Ruggero (1938), or the showy façade of the Cinema Impero, by Mario Messina (1937) (Fig.9).

However, examples of other contemporaneous building styles are equally important, historically and architecturally. Among the city's rich architectural palette are rare examples of Futurism, the Italian artistic movement that rejected the past and idolised speed, technology and war and had comparatively little architectural exposure. In Asmara, the breath-taking winged structure of the former Fiat Tagliero service station is unquestionably the finest example (Fig.10) and an unashamed tribute to Futurism, whose

founding father, the Italian poet and theorist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, witnessed and delighted in Italy's colonisation of Africa when reporting from Libya in 1912 and from Ethiopia in 1935. With its audacious 30-metre-wide cantilevered wings, cockpit body and sleek wrap-around windows, Fiat Tagliero suits its surreal setting high on the plateau among the clouds. Completed in 1938, the building was designed by Giuseppe Pettazzi months after Italian airplanes dispensed thousands of sulphur mustard shells and the asphyxiate diphenylchloroarsine, killing tens of thousands of innocent Ethiopian civilians. Facing south on a busy junction with its wings aloft, poised for flight, Fiat Tagliero's volant structure is an architectural marvel, but also exemplifies Eritrea's colonial experience and is a concrete reminder of its associated horrors.

Before the Second World War, Asmara was Africa's most modern city, boasting a road network that supported 50,000 cars and reportedly possessed more traffic lights than Rome. The technological ingenuity of the steam railway that made the meandrous 110-kilometre journey from the port of Massawa to Asmara from 1911 was matched in the 1930s by the world's longest cable-car constructed between the two cities. Asmara's strategic location in the centre of Eritrea and in the wider context of Italian East Africa made it the hub of a regional transportation network by land, sea and air. Airports in Asmara and Italy's 'Seconda Roma', the Modernist town of Decemhare a few kilometres to the south, plugged Eritrea into a fledgling international network of air travel that helped define Italian colonialism and reinforced Eritrea's position centrally among Italy's other colonies of Somalia, Libya and Ethiopia.

Colonialism for Asmara is complicated by Eritrea's subsequent bitter experiences at the hands of competing powers that have attempted to exert their influence over this strategically vital region. Following Italy's defeat, Eritrea endured a decade as a British Overseas Protectorate (1941–52) during which the American military base and listening station, Kagnew Station, was established, drawing Asmara into the global geopolitics of the Cold War. This decade saw the emergence of Eritrean national and political consciousness, which was sorely tested in 1952 when the UN agreed the country's Federation with Ethiopia. In 1962, this fragile relationship was shattered by Ethiopia's full annexation of Eritrea, leading to three decades of conflict, referred to locally with characteristic understatement as 'The Struggle'. This protracted war pitted Eritrea against both of the world's major power brokers through proxy wars during the Cold War. The

United States backed Ethiopia until a communist coup in 1974 deposed its ally Emperor Haile Selassie, and support for Ethiopia shifted to the Soviet Union.

For Eritrea's guerrilla fighters, exiled in the mountains in the north of the country, Asmara became an object of love and symbol of freedom during the 1970s and 1980s. This profound recasting of a former colonial capital was acknowledged by a small number of foreign observers, including the renowned Australian writer Thomas Keneally, who visited liberated areas in the late 1980s, and wrote his novel *Towards Asmara* (1989) about his experiences. Independence arrived comparatively late for Eritrea and at an unfathomable cost to countless families, who had endured years of economic ruin, famine, oppression and even torture. The country's experience since 1991 has been anything but easy, with a resumption of conflict with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000. Last year a formal peace agreement was signed between these two sibling rivals, signalling a resumption of normal relations after two decades and hopes of improved economic and political conditions.

Eritrea's complex experiences throughout the twentieth century belie the simplistic portrait so often painted by others, whether directed at countries like Eritrea by foreign media or at cities like Asmara in the context of architectural heritage, Modernism and colonialism, the depiction of which too often errs dangerously close to colonial nostalgia. Asmara is Eritrea's first World Heritage site and Africa's first Modernist site. These two facts reflect and challenge the way comparatively young, non-Western, post-colonial nations have been treated over the course of the twentieth century. The legacy of colonialism, however, is not confined to bricks and mortar – or steel and concrete – but runs much deeper, sustaining institutional prejudices that continue to make a deep impact on how we understand 'the other'. In architecture and heritage such otherness is evident both in the comparative lack of knowledge about Africa compared with the West, and in defining the values we ascribe to different built environments. For example, to succeed in earning a place on UNESCO's heritage list, a site must prove itself to be of 'outstanding value to humanity irrespective of the territory on which it is located'. Despite efforts to create a level playing field, Africa's 85 cultural sites are conspicuously overshadowed by the 424 in Europe.

Asmara's inscription was an important contribution to a wider effort to redress the List's inherent cultural asymmetry, but it also aimed to go further in raising important and often thorny questions around colonial and Modernist heritage, and the heritage industry

more broadly. UNESCO has long been criticised for being the kiss of death for historic cities, turning them into museums in thrall to the international tourist, but Asmara's nomination had different motives. Asmara's physical integrity was, ironically, protected in a large part due the conflicts and instability that have undermined the region throughout much of the last century. Today the city needs to evolve, but in a way that does not threaten its precious tangible and intangible characteristics. Asmara's nomination was therefore undertaken to encourage the city's sustainable development, an approach that could be an example to other historic cities that in the twenty-first century face growing and potentially devastating pressures, ranging from rapid urbanisation to climate change.

Despite such a tortuous history, Asmara today affords Eritrea the opportunity to build international bridges through cultural and architectural heritage with a world that has been unkind to Eritrea. Through its exceptional architectural and urban heritage and the global recognition afforded by the UNESCO inscription, there is at least hope that the future of Asmara will be brighter than its past.

Figure 1: Panorama of Asmara overlooking the former native settlement of Abbashawl in the foreground – the antithesis to the 'European' city, but every bit as modern.

Figure 2: Teatro Asmara (1920), designed by Odoardo Cavagnari (interior or exterior)

Figure 3: Degghi Selam (1917), designed by Odoardo Cavagnari.

Figure 4: St Mary's Orthodox Cathedral (1938, architect unknown).

Figure 5: Selam Hotel (1937), formerly the Albergo CIAAO (Compagnia Immobiliare Alberghi Africa Orientale), designed by Rinaldo Borganino.

Figure 6: The former Lancia workshop (1938), designed by Carlo Marchi.

Figure 7: The foyer bar of Cinema ODEON (1937), designed by Giuseppe Zacche.

Figure 8: The spacious interior and retractable roof of Cinema Capitol (1938), designed by Danielle Ruggero.

Figure 9: Cinema Impero (1937), designed by Mario Messina.

Figure 10: Fiat Tagliero service station (1938), designed by Giuseppe Pettazzi, one of the finest examples of Futurist architecture in the world.