

UNESCO World Heritage Nomination: Asmara – Africa’s Modernist City

Abstract

In January 2016, the State of Eritrea submitted its first ever application to UNESCO for inscription on the World Heritage List (WHL). The nominated site was the country’s modernist capital, Asmara. The 1,300-page Nomination Dossier represents the distillation of nearly two decades of collaborative research by professionals from wide range of disciplines in Eritrea and overseas, supported by many national and international government agencies and non-governmental organisations. This paper seeks to summarise the enormous quantity of work contained in the Nomination Dossier and its most important propositions and findings.

Asmara is an outstanding example of a colonial capital that bears witness to the universal encounter with modernity in the twentieth century and consequent postcolonial experiences. The historic urban landscape embodies in a whole city the unity of innovative urban planning and modernist architecture combined with local natural and cultural conditions. An urban planning process based on functional and racial zoning demonstrates the Italian colonial response from the late-nineteenth century to the challenges of modern urban requirements in a highland African setting. The architectural character exemplifies a period of intense development in the 1930s that coincided with the global proliferation and artistic apogee of pre-war modernism and its various forms. The research challenges conventional perceptions based on universalistic norms, inviting a reassessment of how colonial heritage and modernism are perceived beyond the Eurocentric gaze.

Eritrea’s decision to conserve Asmara’s early colonial era architecture represents a profoundly different attitude towards architectural heritage and its interpretation and treatment compared with many other post-colonial settings. Asmara’s nomination also presents an opportunity to encourage critical reflections on cultural relations and heritage globally, and to promote stability and prosperity locally. The three main aims of the research are: to implement the necessary measures for managing the conservation of Asmara’s heritage assets; to ensure the city’s successful inscription on the WHL; and to contribute to redressing the comparative under-representation of African and modernist sites on the WHL.

1. Brief Description of the Nominated Site

Asmara was founded on the site where an agglomeration of four ancient villages, ‘Arbate Asmara’, had existed for centuries. Asmara was a regional seat of power for local tribal chiefs long before the Italians arrived in the highlands in 1889, having been based in the Red Sea port of Massawa, the first capital of their embryonic empire, since 1885. In 1900, Italy moved their colonial capital from Massawa to Asmara, forcing the relocation of Arbate Asmara to northeast towards the escarpment to make room for the proposed modern urban center. At 2,300m above sea level, the plateau on which Asmara is located provides a perfect environment for settled communities. Its relatively rich soil, sufficient rainfall and flat land suitable for tillage have enabled it to support a large population for centuries. Abundant forests once carpeted the region, sustaining a wide range of flora and fauna and affording plenty of adequate shelter. The temperate climate also ensured pleasant living conditions – particularly agreeable to Europeans compared with the lowland dry areas of Eritrea – and a reliable supply of water. Italy’s relocation

of the new capital from the coast to highlands marked the centralisation of power, altering permanently the social, political and economic fabric of the region and its development.

Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 was the catalyst for Asmara's rapid and comprehensive development throughout the late-1930s until 1941, when the Italians were defeated by Allied forces during the Second World War. The combined implementation of modern architecture and urban planning during this limited but seminal period concluded the development of a complete urban landscape and defined its physical character. Asmara's architecture and its concentration of iconic buildings reflect the innovative approach to the challenges of modern urban requirements in a highland African setting that have retained their integrity and authenticity through a protracted struggle for national liberation involving European and African powers.

The creation of a complete urban landscape arising from the early implementation and continuous adaptation and development of modern urban planning theory in an African context at a vital stage in human history – between two world wars – is one of Asmara's unique qualities. The parallel development of modernist architecture during the same period, when modernism internationally was still in its early phase, is a defining characteristic of the city. In particular the implementation of modernist, or more specifically Rationalist, architectural forms and styles in the period from 1935-41 is of outstanding universal value, culturally and artistically. By 1941, Asmara was Africa's most modern city, possessing the highest concentration of Rationalist architecture in the world. Today, Asmara is by any standard not simply a most convivial city, well planned and executed; its physical character – its architecture, urban form and public spaces – also reflects strongly the nation's wide-ranging encounter with modernity encompassing political ideology through to artistic experimentation. Asmara's world heritage nomination focuses on three principal characteristics: the evolving urban plan; the modernist architecture; and the African context.

2. Description of the boundary of the nominated property

Asmara: Africa's Modernist City, is the capital of Eritrea, in the Horn of Africa. The city is located in the centre of the country in the Zoba Maekel Administration Region on a plateau 2,300m above sea level at the edge of an escarpment that forms part of the great East Africa rift system.

The nominated property comprises Asmara's 'historic' centre developed during the years of Italian occupation from 1889-1941. The boundaries of the nominated property are those of the escarpment edge to the east, the prominent land formation of 'Forto' and the cemeteries to the west, the former native settlement of Abbashawl to the north, and the districts of Gejeret and Tiravolo to the south.

A Buffer Zone surrounds the nominated property and follows urban and natural features (the city limits up to the peaks of surrounding hills and the escarpment edge) and urban districts (industrial and more recent residential zones on the city's southern outskirts and residential developments to the north).

A Protected Zone encircles the eastern and northern perimeters of the Buffer Zone. This is designed to protect the 'green belt' of the escarpment edge which forms a prominent and picturesque backdrop to the city.

The nominated property extends approximately 2.5km from north to south and 3.5km from east to west covering a total area of 481ha. The buffer zone extends approximately 4.6km from north to south and 5km from east to west covering a total area of 1203ha.

3. Justification for Inscription

3.1 Brief Synthesis

Following its designation as a colonial capital in 1900, Asmara grew from a loose agglomeration of military, civilian and indigenous settlements into a well-established town defined by a well-organised and innovative urban plan drafted by the city's head of public works, Odoardo Cavignari, in 1913 and refined in 1916. In the mid-1930s, preparations by Fascist Italy to invade neighbouring Ethiopia precipitated Asmara's complete transformation. The original urban plan was completed, augmented and comprehensively furnished with hundreds of modernist buildings. The period between 1935 and 1941 was a defining chapter in Asmara's architectural and urban development, but subsequent decades proved equally important in establishing the city's central role in the development of the nation's cultural identity. The decade as a British protectorate (1941-52) witnessed the establishment of Kagnew Station, an American military base and listening station, drawing Asmara into the global politics of the Cold War. The decade also witnessed the emergence of Eritrean national and political consciousness. Federation with Ethiopia (1952) and subsequent annexation (1962) led to three decades of conflict that ended in Eritrean independence in 1991.

Asmara is an outstanding example of a colonial capital that bears witness to the universal encounter with modernity in the twentieth century and consequent postcolonial experiences. The historic urban landscape embodies in a whole city the unity of innovative urban planning and modernist architecture combined with local natural and cultural conditions. An urban planning process based on functional and racial zoning demonstrates the Italian colonial response from the late-nineteenth century to the challenges of modern urban requirements in a highland African setting. The architectural character exemplifies a later period of intense development in the 1930s that coincided with the global proliferation and artistic apogee of pre-war modernism and its various forms. The result is a total urban landscape characterised by its human-scale and mixed uses, built forms, and activities, including well-defined open spaces, cinemas, shops, banks, religious structures, public and private offices, industrial facilities, and residences. The integrity and authenticity of Asmara's functional, aesthetic and cultural values have been retained through a protracted struggle for independence and subsequently assimilated into a national consciousness in which Asmara features centrally.

3.2 Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The historic centre of Asmara is proposed for inscription as an outstanding example of a capital city that embodies the unity of early town planning principles and modernist architecture combined with local natural and cultural conditions consistent with its highland African setting.

The site is proposed for inscription under the following criteria:

Criterion (ii): *Asmara exhibits an outstanding example of the interchange of cultural influences brought about by the encounter with modernity in an African context. The exchange is expressed in the unity of an innovative*

urban planning process and distinguished Modernist architecture combined with local natural and cultural conditions to create a distinctive urbanism based on human scale.

Situated in the Horn of Africa, at the crossroads of Africa, Europe and the Middle East, Eritrea is a nation exposed to and characterised by the continuous interchange of cultural influences and human values on a global scale. The capital city of Asmara bears exceptional testimony to this exchange during the early-twentieth century, exhibited in the innovative urban planning and modernist architecture, combined with local natural and cultural conditions. The synthesis of these three characteristics – urban planning, architecture, and the African context – in the creation of a whole city represents an outstanding and concrete example of the interchange of human values over the course of the twentieth century.

Asmara's plan originated in the early twentieth century, coinciding with the establishment of the modern profession of town planning in response to the problems and opportunities associated with the modern city: transportation, communication, mass housing, industrialisation and public hygiene. The first formal urban plan drafted by the Head of the Civil Engineering Office Odoardo Cavagnari and published in 1916 reflects the consolidation of Asmara's early encounter with modernity and embodies the early interchange of human values at that time. The plan reveals the implementation of modern town planning in a distinct African context, resulting in a combination of gridiron and circuitous radial street patterns that respect topographical and cultural conditions and consciously creates an effective stage for different forms and types of architecture. The plan also exposes the tension between ethnic and religious diversity and racial segregation that was characteristic of many modern colonial encounters. The plan is also an early example of the implementation of urban zoning principles, championed by the contemporaneous Garden City Movement. Finally, the original plan was deliberately adaptable, anticipating future developments and accommodating potential extensions. This adaptability was embraced by future planners and allowed the city to grow without compromising the core.

Asmara's architectural character is defined by modernism, but it is not strictly confined to this style. 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 is defined by an architectural eclecticism encompassing Classical, Romanesque, Baroque and Gothic styles. The second, lasting just six years, reflects the city's extreme encounter with modernity following Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and concludes with Italy's defeat by the Allies in 1941. During this period modernism in its various forms proliferated, including the proto-modernist Novecento style, Rationalism, Monumentalism and Futurism. The quantity and ubiquity of modernist architecture is unprecedented in Africa and possibly even the world.

The unity of an innovative and adaptable urban planning process and modernist architecture has created a built environment renowned for its efficient, distinct and desirable human scale. This key characteristic has allowed Asmara to adapt to the shifting cultural influences and the often violent interchange of human values over the course of the twentieth century and was vital in the formation of a national identity and political consciousness. Despite being planned by a colonial government, constructed and expanded by a Fascist regime, mothballed by a temporary administration, and neglected by a Federal government, Asmara's human scale has been embraced and assimilated by Eritrean cultural values, which have revived the city as the vibrant capital of an independent state.

Criterion (iii): *As a well-preserved total urban landscape and modern capital of Eritrea, Asmara bears exceptional testimony to the universal aspiration for and attainment of national self-determination founded on the protracted development of indigenous cultural and political consciousness through multiple encounters with regional civilisations and colonial experiences. Asmara was once a centre of established cultural traditions and trading networks spanning the region, before becoming the locus of uniquely varied foreign agendas of global significance before and during the Second World War and throughout the Cold War.*

Asmara's relative proximity to the Red Sea port of Massawa and the routes that connected it to the Mereb River on the border of present day Ethiopia made Asmara a favourite route, destination and resting place for trade caravans associated with assorted civilisations over centuries. These included European (particularly Portuguese), Turkish (Ottoman), Egyptian, and Ethiopian, who, as traders, explorers and invaders, exposed Asmara to outside influence and established it as centre of regional ethnicity, language, religion and culture. Amid the constantly shifting borders of competing regional civilisations, Asmara cultivated a cultural tradition of tolerance and unity that has endured for centuries. Asmara embodied multiculturalism centuries before the term appeared in the modern era. This essential attribute can even be read in the settlement's name, which derives from the centuries old legend of the women from four separate villages uniting to confront adversity; Asmara literally means "They (the women) united them (the villages)".

Italy was a latecomer in Europe's 'Scramble for Africa', but their occupation of Asmara in 1889 reinforced the settlement's reputation as a regional hub in a network of trade that spanned many different cultures and civilisations, and eventually the globe. As the settlement grew, the population was always dominated by Eritreans and Italians (100,000 by 1941), but Asmara's enduring attributes survived and encouraged many other settlers, some of which established sizable communities of Yemenis, Greeks, Swedish, British, Indians, Jews, Ethiopians, Armenians, and Sudanese. Asmara's cultural, ethnic and religious diversity left an indelible mark on the built environment through a combination of commercial, residential and religious buildings and public spaces.

Asmara's development under Italian rule, witnessed a city divided socially and culturally into three parts. The salubrious quarters in the planned and picturesque southern and western districts were designed and designated for Italians. The rectilinear grid that defined the centre with the market at its core was a mixed zone, where the different cultures and religions intermingled peacefully and prospered. To the north, beyond the watchful eyes of urban planners and architects, the Eritrean community clustered in an inchoate conglomeration of rudimentary dwellings and alleys known as Abbashawl.

Abbashawl is as essential to Asmara's modern cultural heritage as modernist urban planning and architecture. The two distinct urban entities were equally 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 'primitive'. Neither could have existed without the other.

Abbashawl was a densely populated and egalitarian community in which district chiefs, judges and native officers of the colonial military and administration freely mixed with less fortunate subjects - small peddlers, grave diggers and butchers - with mutual respect and devoid of class antagonism and acrimony. Every religion and every regional ethnic group was represented, accepted and integrated. Asmara's cultural tradition of inclusivity and tolerance was bred in

Abbashawl. After the defeat of Italy in 1941 the British repealed the racist laws of segregation. The ease and peaceful manner in which Eritreans moved from suburbs like Abbashawl to work, settle and claim rights in the formerly forbidden parts of the city, is testimony to the culture of tolerance that Asmara and its original settlers had nurtured.

A generation of Eritreans grew up in the 1950s and 1960s with the profound sense of ownership of Asmara that had eluded its predecessors. It was a feeling, however, that could not be consummated as Eritrea passed to Ethiopian rule without the express consent of a great majority of its population, causing decades of conflict. As the rest of Africa entered a great era of post-colonialism, Eritrea embarked on a second wave of colonisation under Ethiopian rule. At first, this was supported by Britain and the United States of America before their ally Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in a Marxist coup in 1974 and the Soviet Union poured financial and military resources into the region. Asmara became a vital cog in the machinery of the Cold War, throughout which Ethiopians attempted to erase Eritrean national identity. Cultural symbols were replaced, public and private property was appropriated, local languages and customs were denied, local political and legal institutions were dismantled, the nascent local free press was banned, and the names of streets, neighbourhoods, districts and historical landmarks were changed.

With its cultural traditions threatened by competing global civilisations, Asmara became the embodiment of resistance for Eritreans and the object of love and nostalgia expressed through songs, poetry and theatre. The city symbolised loss and hope and initiated a powerful cultural response to colonial repression. Actors, painters, sculptors and writers used Asmara as a metaphor for the wider pursuit of national liberation throughout the Cold War. The symbolism was acknowledged by international observers at the time, such as the former British MEP Baroness Glenys Kinnock and the international bestselling writer and author of *'Schindler's Ark'*, Thomas Keneally, whose novel about Eritrea's independence struggle adopted the city's name in its title: *'To Asmara'*.

It is significant that in the final phase of the Cold War on the eve Asmara's total liberation on 24 May 1991, the appeal of the encircled Ethiopian garrison in Asmara for safe passage contained the guarantee of the preservation of Asmara and the safety of its citizens as a reward. The Ethiopians knew their lives depended on the Eritreans' deep attachment to their capital as a symbol of national identity and unity. The incident reveals an important fact about Eritrea's cultural traditions. Eritrean identity and citizenship is embedded in the village of origin, the place where "the umbilical cord of the ancestors is buried." For Eritreans at home or overseas, Asmara represents that vital connection to their place of origin. Consequently, Eritrea's cultural traditions and often brutal encounters with regional and global civilisations have made Asmara not merely a capital city, but rather an object of love, unity and of the deep attachment to the universal value of home.

Criterion (iv): *Asmara is an outstanding example of the transition in architecture and town planning at the turn of the twentieth century in response to the universal encounter with modernity in an African context. The synthesis of modern town planning and architecture in a total urban landscape is an exemplar of early-modernism adapted to local cultural and geographic conditions. As an urban landscape, Asmara encapsulates key stages of modernity's development and principal characteristics, including colonialism and global conflict, scientific responses to planning and infrastructure, rapid technological and urban development, and pioneering transportation and communication.*

The nominated site is a complete urban landscape that bears witness to the universal encounter with modernity in the twentieth century manifest in the unity of an innovative urban planning process and modernist architecture combined with local natural and cultural conditions. In 1900, the indigenous village of 'Arbate Asmara' became the site of the capital of Italy's fledgling African empire (1885-1941), which evolved episodically until Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 when it developed rapidly until Italy's defeat in 1941. While Asmara's exceptional modernist urban landscape was defined in the first half of the twentieth century, the city's strategic position at the nexus of Africa, Europe and the Middle East, linked it to events in the second half of the twentieth century that had an equally significant impact in shaping the course of human history.

Asmara represents the early implementation and continuous adaptation and development of modern urban planning theory based on functional and racial zoning in an African context at a pivotal stage in human history. The simultaneous execution of modernist, or more precisely Rationalist (a specifically Italian expression of modernism), architectural forms and styles coincided with the global proliferation and artistic apogee of pre-war modernism and its various forms and is of outstanding universal value, culturally and artistically.

From 1935 to 1941 hundreds of buildings were designed by Italian architects and constructed by Eritreans in a variety of styles from modernism's broad palette, including Novecento, Rationalism and Futurism. Far from home, the imagination of Italian architects in Eritrea could run wild. 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 cinemas, factories, shops, bars and restaurants, hotels and residences.

Asmara's renowned architectural style derived largely from the geometric simplicity and aesthetic purity of Rationalism, but examples of other contemporaneous styles are equally important, historically and architecturally. Among the city's rich architectural heritage are rare examples of Futurism, a modern Italian artistic movement that rejected the past and idolised speed, technology and war and had comparatively little architectural exposure. Futurism's 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. Asmara's Futurist buildings are a concrete reminder of the often bitter and brutal universal experiences of the twentieth century that shaped so many cities around the world.

Italy's preparations for invading Ethiopia transformed Asmara into Africa's most modern metropolis. The city boasted a modern water and electricity supply, a modern telegraphic network, and a system of urban roads that supported 50,000 cars and reportedly possessed more traffic lights than Rome. A steam railway and marvel of Italian engineering made the tortuous 110km journey from Eritrea's Red Sea port of Massawa to Asmara at 2,300m altitude. In the 1930s, a more efficient means of transporting supplies from the coast became available when the Italians built the world's longest cable car route between Asmara and Massawa. 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.

Asmara has borne exceptional witness to the modern and universal pursuit of national self-determination and encapsulates in a single city this significant stage in human history. Throughout the course of a century, the city figured centrally in Eritrea's journey to becoming a nation state, a uniquely protracted experience that encountered African colonisation, the rise of fascism, the first Allied victory of the Second World War, intra-African colonisation, Cold War proxy conflict, and post-colonialism.

3.3 Statement of Integrity

Asmara's outstanding universal value not only derives from its swift and often brutal encounter with modernity in the twentieth century, but, paradoxically, these same forces have been instrumental in maintaining the integrity of the site's various heritage assets. War helped create the modernist city of Asmara as much as it helped preserve its integrity.

Asmara's innovative urban plan and modernist architecture were created during the first half of the twentieth century. In the second half of the century many cities throughout the world had been transformed, directly or indirectly, by the impact of the Second World War or by innovations in construction, design and planning that characterised an age defined by modernism's peak and dissipation. Despite being at the centre of often violent political currents throughout the twentieth century, Asmara's physical integrity was virtually untouched by the transformative forces of military destruction and peacetime construction. Consequently, despite bearing exceptional testimony to intra-African colonisation and global tensions during the Cold War, Asmara's historic urban landscape appears almost exactly as it was when built in the first half of the century.

All the significant architectural structures and the original urban layout, including most of the characteristic features and public spaces, have been retained in their entirety. The site has also retained its historical, cultural, functional and architectural integrity with their elements largely intact and generally in good condition.

The only negative impacts have been the occasional unprofessional restoration of older structures and the construction of some buildings in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly since independence, that are inappropriate in size, scale or character. Ironically, it was these developments that motivated Eritreans to question the effects of economic prosperity following independence in 1991. Residents of Asmara quickly recognised that a rash of high-rise developments in the mid-1990s had a greater impact on their city than 30 years of war. The integrity of the nation's capital, which had been so important during the nation's long struggle for independence and had escaped harm during that time, risked being irreversibly damaged by peacetime prosperity.

In 2001, the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP) was established by the Government of Eritrea and the World Bank to research, protect and promote the nation's heritage in four key areas, including the Built Environment. CARP defined a 'Historic Perimeter' around the centre of Asmara and started the process of classifying buildings according to their architectural, cultural and historical significance. Furthermore, to protect the integrity of the entire city and its heritage assets, the Municipality of Asmara took the bold decision of imposing a moratorium on new construction within the Historic Perimeter until adequate building regulations and legal measures were in place to protect Asmara's integrity. The moratorium is still in place, ensuring that Asmara's historic urban landscape has not been undermined any further by inappropriate or insensitive development.

Development pressure since independence has seen Asmara grow considerably, expanding far beyond the original city perimeter consuming large areas of the surrounding hinterland. This development has been largely confined to individual sites and areas outside the historic centre, with some consolidation of brownfield sites on the urban periphery and the majority of construction taking place on outer lying greenfield sites.

Restoration of architectural sites and the urban realm within the historic centre is tightly controlled by the Municipality of Asmara, but a lack of appropriate materials, specialist skills and human and financial resources makes it difficult to ensure that maintenance and restoration are of an adequate standard. Improving local skills and resources has been the aim of previous international heritage projects, including CARP (2001-2007) and an EU-funded National Heritage Project (2009-2012). Teatro Asmara, Capitol Cinema and the Central Market were among the restoration projects within these two initiatives and although none of the structures were fully restored, complete surveys and feasibility studies were produced. The parallel aims of improving local skills and resources are the foremost ambitions of Asmara's UNESCO application so that these and Asmara's many historic structures can be restored and routinely maintained.

One of the greatest conservation achievements since independence has been the complete restoration of the railway from Massawa to Asmara, which was integral to Asmara's formation and growth during the early twentieth century. This extraordinary engineering feat arrived in Asmara, 2,300 metres above sea level, in 1911. Integral to Italy's colonial expansion, the railway was intended to link with the British-owned railways in Sudan, but it only ever reached a few kilometres beyond Agordat in Eritrea's Western Lowlands. During the protracted war for independence, the railway (and its equally exceptional counterpart, the cable-car) fell into disrepair and large sections of it dismantled to assist the war effort. After independence, the original Eritrean railway workers, most of them by then octogenarians, came out of retirement to restore their beloved railway. Since the mid-1990s the entire track from Massawa to Asmara has been re-laid, with several new bridges and restored viaducts and tunnels. Many of the original steam locomotives have been stripped and rebuilt and now provide a bespoke service for local and international groups.

Despite a dearth of skills and resources, the integrity of Asmara's architecture and well-defined open spaces has been maintained through a relative lack of negative interventions. Original architectural features have been retained in virtually all of the city's cinemas, shops, religious structures, public and private offices, industrial facilities, and residences. Exterior features – signage, paintwork, plastering, sculptures, mosaics and tesserae, and decorative motifs – can be found in abundance on buildings within the historic perimeter. The integrity of internal features has also been largely retained throughout the city, with many bars, shops, cafes, cinemas, offices and residences boasting original interior fixtures and fittings from the 1930s that, in most cities in the world, have long since been stripped out and replaced.

Asmara's well-defined public spaces come in a variety of sizes and serve many different functions, but all have retained their integrity through the regular maintenance of their physical and horticultural elements, including trees, bushes, flowerbeds, grass areas, fountains, pavements and seating.

The integrity of the intangible attributes associated with the indigenous community that has inhabited parts of the nominated site for centuries has been maintained through a process of

cultural continuity that, despite successive waves of foreign influence, has been successfully assimilated into a modern national consciousness and a national capital. When the Modernist city of Asmara was designed by the Italians and built by Eritrean labourers, Eritrean residents were confined to the unmodern 'native quarter' of Abbashawl. Despite Asmara's world-renowned Modernist architecture, the importance of this insalubrious district to the social and cultural development of Eritrea cannot be understated. Today, the entire country, let alone the city, belongs to Eritrea, but most residents of Asmara would agree that the social and cultural heart of the nation's capital remains in Abbashawl.

3.4 Statement of Authenticity

The nominated site fulfils all the criteria for authenticity in relation to World Heritage, as set out in the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) and the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2013).

Asmara's combination of innovative town planning and modernist architecture in an African context represent important and early developmental phases of town planning and architectural modernism and therefore possess a high degree of authenticity. The creation of Asmara's urban plan coincided with the establishment of the modern profession of town planning; while the subsequent accretion of the city's modernist architecture, characterised by the specifically Italian articulation known as Rationalism, corresponded with the pre-war peak of modernism. Climatic, cultural, economic and political conditions over subsequent decades have been favourable in retaining the artistic, material and functional values of the city's architectural elements, which include cinemas, apartment buildings, petrol stations, factories, churches, and public buildings.

The authenticity of local intangible attributes manifest in language, cultural practices, national identity, and sense of place have been retained through Asmara's evolution from an indigenous centre of economy and administration, through a colonial capital, to a modern capital of an independent state.

4 Innovative Urban Planning Process

Asmara's innovative urban plan was laid out at the start of the twentieth century, coinciding with the birth of the modern profession of town planning. Over the course of a decade, several seminal books were published that laid the foundation of the profession and helped to define the form and function of many modern cities throughout the twentieth century. These publications included Charles Mulford Robinson's *'The Improvement of Towns and Cities'* (1901) and *'Modern Civic Art, or The City Made Beautiful'* (1903), Ebenezer Howard's *'Garden Cities of To-morrow'* (1902), Robert Unwin's *'Town Planning in Practice'* (1909), Henry Inigo Triggs' *'Town Planning: Past, Present and Possible'* (1909), and Thomas Mawson's *Civic Art* (1911).

The consequence of this intense interest in the planning of modern towns and cities that found expression across the globe was the reinterpretation of town planning from an overly technical bureaucratic process to a liberating and life-giving artform. Central to this new way of envisioning city planning in the early twentieth century was the radial street pattern, which usurped the uniform grid to become the staple language of European and American planners for its efficiency and the opportunities it afforded in the creation of picturesque views, dramatic vistas, civic plazas, scenic spaces, and monumental sites. The radial city provided a rich and fertile ground for architecture and it was functional too. Radial street patterns afforded faster and more

efficient circulation than a grid. Asmara's planners recognised the benefits of modern planning, adopting their principles and combining them with elements of the gridiron system and adapting them to local topographical conditions. They also adopted the modern theory of zoning, which was a salient feature of the contemporaneous Garden Cities Movement.

Asmara's undulating topography created by volcanic basalt dike swarms which pass through the Plain of Asmara did not suit a rigid gridiron system. Local physical and cultural conditions as much as contemporaneous developments in town planning theory and practice internationally informed Asmara's physical characteristics. In this uniquely African context the amalgamation of local natural and cultural conditions and modern town planning created the continent's first modernist city. These distinctive conditions were identified by one Italian traveller to Asmara, Mr Paoli, as early as 1908:

I say the 'flat ground' of the city, but instead it is anything else but flat. Light undulations, little hills, mounds, bumps, dips and little valleys in the ground bring a truly picturesque variety to the buildings and to the streets, which therefore never appear similar to one another. They offer suitable areas and remarkable positions in which to make public buildings prominent. In short, it is a ground so made that it would be the torment of a builder from Turin, the horror of an engineer from America, but would be dreamt of by an architect who is truly artistic, a lover of the picturesque, and an enemy of uniformity.¹

Asmara's early development bears exceptional testament to the characteristic features of town planning at the turn of the twentieth century in a specific African context. The urban plan developed not merely as a hybrid of gridiron and radial patterns, but due to its highland African setting, it became a model of a different approach; one that incorporated elements of the picturesque and was more akin to the vision of Camillo Sitte, the author of *Der Städtebau (City Planning According to Artistic Principles)*, 1889). Sitte saw planning as art and challenged the geometric uniformity that had been imposed on national and regional capitals throughout the nineteenth century (e.g. Haussmann's Paris (1853); La Plata (1882) in Argentina; Dalian (1900) in Russian-occupied China; Belo Horizonte (1897) in Brazil; Washington, D.C. (1902); and Barnham's Chicago (1911)).

Asmara's urban plan is evidence of a protracted planning process throughout the early twentieth century that bears exceptional witness to the city's early encounter with modernity and embodies the interchange of human values that existed during its formative phase of development. It reveals the conscious attempt to implement modern town planning in a distinct African context, resulting in a combination of gridiron and circuitous radial road patterns that respect topographical and cultural conditions and deliberately creates an effective stage for different forms and types of architecture. The course of the seasonal Mai Bela River carves a meandering diagonal route through the central grid of the market area, just as the prominent hillocks on which Campo Cintato and the encampment of the former chief, Rasi Alula, once stood became determining features in the surrounding urban landscape and the potential for civic and picturesque opportunity.

The plan also reveals the interdependence of different ethnic and religious groups and the racial segregation that was characteristic of modern colonial encounters. And finally, Asmara's plan is

¹ Paoli 1908, p. 55.

an early demonstration of the modern theory of urban zoning and the accommodation of modern industrial production in an urban context. The Industrial Zone in the northeast of the city is clearly marked by the generous plots formed by a diagonal street pattern and the arrival in Asmara of the railway from the coast at the end of 1911, which was instrumental in accelerating Eritrea's encounter with modernity.

Asmara was the first complete city plan realised by the Italians in the twentieth century and set a precedent for some of the most celebrated examples of modern town planning in Italy, including the towns built on the drained Agro Pontino marshes on the coast of Lazio (Lazio) in the 1930s, including Latina, Pontinia and Sabaudia, and in Italy's colonies, including Tripoli (Libya), Mogadishu (Somalia), Addis Ababa and Gondar (Ethiopia).

Asmara's hybrid plan served the necessary functional and civic requirements of a modern capital, but by combining civic function with the picturesque it also sought and achieved a genuine sense of beauty that lasted decades and under widely divergent political regimes and social conditions. Monumental boulevards, civic spaces, efficient circulation and zoning were secondary to the overriding sense of human scale achieved through a combination of picturesque, grid, and radial elements that have not only been retained in their entirety and formed the nucleus of subsequent extensions, but have also been successfully assimilated into the unique range of tangible and intangible qualities for which Asmara has received much recognition, nationally and internationally.

5 Modernist Architecture

Asmara's modernist architecture represents one of the most complete collections of its genre in the world. As a total urban ensemble, Asmara bears exceptional testimony to the formative stage of one distinct strand of modernism: Rationalism. Hundreds of buildings designed and constructed from 1935-41 possess the characteristics of Rationalism, which emerged in Italy with Giuseppe Terragni's design for the Novocomum Apartments in Como (1927-29) and reached its apogee in 1936 with the completion of the celebrated Casa del Fascio, also by Terragni and also in Como. Rationalist architecture embraced the new machine age and was uncompromising in its promotion of aesthetic purity and geometric simplicity in built forms, volumes and masses. The defining characteristic of Asmara's Rationalist architecture is witnessed in the profusion of pure geometric volumes, asymmetric and abstract forms, and a lack of ornamentation in the design of cinemas, shops, banks, religious structures, public and private offices, industrial facilities, and residences.

In Europe architectural modernism was expressed in new materials of glass and concrete, but in Eritrea, where such materials were comparatively expensive, many of the modernist buildings were built using local materials and made to appear modern. Although reinforced concrete was available and frequently used, many buildings in Asmara used large quantities of local basalt rendered in lime plaster to give the appearance of concrete or to create modern geometric forms befitting the modern machine age, albeit constructed using traditional materials.

Asmara's unique architectural value is derived not only from the prevalence of Rationalism. The city also possesses other expressions of modernism, including Futurism, as well as earlier articulations of architectural modernity such as Novecento and neo-traditional styles recalling Classical, Lombard, Romanesque, Renaissance, Gothic, medieval and even vernacular forms. Collectively, Asmara's architectural character is therefore broad and fairly represents the transformation in architecture during the early-twentieth century from tradition to modernism.

The architectural eclecticism that defined the early-twentieth century was swept away in Eritrea by Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, heralding an extreme encounter with modernity that concluded with Italy's defeat by the Allies in 1941. The quantity and ubiquity of modernist structures designed and built in Asmara from 1935-41 has created an outstanding example of an urban landscape that illustrates a significant stage not simply in the development of architecture and town-planning but also in human history. Asmara provided a setting in a unique African context where modern ideas in architecture and planning from Europe could be designed and realised when at home on the eve of the Second World War, attention and resources were being diverted from construction to destruction – modernism's omnipresent bedfellows.

Asmara's architectural heritage was concealed from the world by subsequent events that neither bolstered nor undermined the integrity of the city's physical character but which added significantly to its intangible heritage and led to the publication of the first book to acknowledge its name, *To Asmara* (1989) by Thomas Keneally. Until comparatively recently, there was little if any recognition of Asmara's architectural qualities. The first book to examine Asmara's architecture and urban planning was *Architettura Italiana d'Oltremare 1870-1940* (Marsilio, 1993) by Gresleri, Massaretti, and Zagnoni, which included it in a wider survey of Italian colonial settlements. The first book to concentrate on Asmara's architecture was *Asmara Style* published by the local Italian School in 1998, followed by the international publication *Asmara – Africa's Secret Modernist City* (Merrell, 2003) by Denison, Ren and Gebremedhin, which stimulated international interest in the city for the first time and led to the production of an international exhibition of the same name that has been touring the globe since 2006. Since then, a number of books and films have been produced focussing on Asmara's architectural style and unique urban character. These include: *Asmara Beloved* (Kimaathi, 2003); *Asmara – The Frozen City* (Jovis, 2006); *Asmara – City of Dreams* (2006); *Architettura italiana in Eritrea-Italian architecture in Eritrea* (La Rosa, 2008); and *Modern Architecture and its Representation in Colonial Eritrea: An in-Visible Colony, 1890-1941* (Ashgate, 2015).

6 African Context

Beyond the physical attributes of Asmara's innovative urban plan and modernist architecture, Asmara is an outstanding example of the interchange of cultural influences brought about by the encounter with modernity in an African context. The built environment embodies the expression of native, cultural and local identity through interaction with successive foreign forces and colonisers over decades that culminated in the universal aspiration for and attainment of a national identity.

Asmara's historic urban landscape not only encapsulates key stages of modernity's development and its principal characteristics (colonial encounters, rapid technological and urban development, transportation and communication, cultural and political consciousness, conflict and national identity), it also evidences highly innovative and experimental architecture drawn from local precedents.

In short, Asmara can be seen as an urban ensemble and cultural landscape defined by a wide-range of human experiences that defined the twentieth century and culminated in the city becoming the nation's capital following independence in 1991. As the political and spiritual centre of Eritrean national identity, Asmara has helped define a people as much as they have defined it.

Topographical features, such as the escarpment, the basalt dykes, the Mai Bela River and the hillocks dotted around the plateau, helped to define Asmara's physical character as much as the city's location and setting encouraged an intense interchange of cultural influences across the

region and engender a sense of national identity at home. The former 'Mixed Zone' around the market was home to the native Orthodox Christian and Muslim communities concentrated respectively around Arbata Asmara's native church of St Mary's and the Grand Mosque nearby. It also harboured the Catholic mission, a Swedish Protestant Mission, a Greek Orthodox church, and a synagogue established by Jews exiled from Aden and from Turkey and across the Arab region. (In 1941, Asmara's population was approximately 100,000, almost evenly divided between Eritreans and Italians, though there were also sizable communities of Yemenis, Greeks, Indians, Jews, Armenians, Sudanese, other Arabs and individuals and groups from other nations and races.) This exchange of religious and cultural values had a significant impact on developments in architecture and town-planning, where Islamic styles from the coast and even vernacular styles from the highlands were adopted and assimilated by Italian architects, engineers and planners in the design of buildings and public spaces. The preeminent example of highland African building traditions being incorporated into the prevailing modernist idiom of the 1930s is the architecture of St Mary's Orthodox Cathedral, built in 1938.

Asmara's modern planning and architecture is celebrated for its design qualities, but less is said about the construction, which was carried out by Eritrean labourers who dug trenches for water and sewage pipes; installed telegraph cables, power lines and substations; laid railway track; quarried basalt for building and granite for the paving of streets; mixed cement; laid bricks and plaster; and painted walls for a pittance. Young Eritrean men were also contracted into the Italian army as askari, fighting colonial campaigns in Libya, Somalia and Ethiopia. Eritrean women provided most Italian families with manual labour in the home; some families had many maids to carry out the daily housework.

Racial laws introduced in 1938 meant Eritreans were prohibited from moving freely around the city and forbidden from entering or passing through the centre. These restrictions were lifted when Allied forces defeated Italy in 1941 – their first major victory of the Second World War. Throughout the following decade as a British Overseas Protectorate, Eritreans had access for the first time to secondary education, public service, the legal system and a free press, which heralded the birth of political activism in Eritrea. Asmara has always been a cultural and political focal point for Eritreans and central to the formation of a national identity, which was inexorably linked to a yearning for ownership of the capital. Throughout the Struggle for independence, Asmara became a stronghold of the occupying Ethiopian forces, supported first by the United States of America and, following the Marxist coup in 1974, by the Soviet Union.

For exiled Eritreans, Asmara became the object of love and nostalgia in songs and poetry and a vital source of cultural expression. Artists, painters, sculptors and writers used their various talents to praise its beauty and mourn its fate. "How is the most beloved? How is the cradle of the family? Have they damaged its beauty? I miss Asmara, the retina of my eye," went one typical song. The gravity of Asmara as a cultural site and a symbol of freedom was acknowledged by the renowned Australian writer and author of *Schindler's Ark*, Thomas Keneally, who visited liberated areas in the late 1980s and titled his subsequent novel *To Asmara*.

For over a century, Eritrea had to endure many years of hostilities that effectively isolated it from the rest of the world. The destructive forces of political instability and war, so often the ravager of cities, mercifully protected Asmara from subsequent ill-planned urban development and have left intact the integrity of its cultural traditions and physical heritage. As the capital city of a comparatively recently independent state, Asmara has become the spiritual home of Eritreans all over the world.

7 Requirements for Protection and Management

Measures to protect and manage Asmara's historic urban landscape have been established and implemented. The Asmara Heritage Project (AHP) was founded in 2014 under the auspices of the Central Region Administration. The AHP is responsible for the production and

implementation of the *Integrated Management Plan for Asmara* (2016) and the *Disaster and Risk Management Framework*. They have also completed a comprehensive building survey for the entire site encompassing over 4,300 buildings, which will provide the basis for a future system of heritage listing. The AHP and the Department of Public Works Development (DPWD) are also responsible for issuing building permits, granting permission for maintenance and restoration, and enforcing compliance of building regulations.

The country's first heritage law – *The Cultural and Natural Heritage Proclamation* (2015) – was proclaimed on 30th September 2015, guaranteeing legal protection of heritage assets in their various forms.

Since 2001, a moratorium has been imposed by the Municipality of Asmara on all construction within Asmara's Historic Perimeter, a boundary that was drawn up by the now discontinued Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP) to protect Asmara's historic city centre. The site boundary of the nominated property is based on this previous Historic Perimeter with various amendments.

8 Present State of Conservation

Most buildings in central Asmara were built between 1935 and 1941. The buildings are therefore old and many have either been improperly maintained or under-maintained. Most of the building elements, especially those constructed with mortar, brick, hollow concrete block, wood and aged roofing materials are deteriorating and pose a risk both to the inhabitants and to the aesthetic and material value of the nominated site. Where minor ad hoc and unplanned maintenance has taken place, it seldom adheres to the original material and lacks the integrity of the original.

To overcome these problems, the municipal authorities have drafted new planning guidelines, legislation and building codes to address the maintenance, rehabilitation and conservation of the built environment to safeguard the site's heritage value and integrity. The following strategies are designed to protect, avoid, reduce or mitigate the risks and threats associated with Asmara's present state of conservation.

To make it easier to define and describe the present state of conservation across the entire city, the nominated property has been sub-divided into 15 Areas according to the AHP's categorisation of Asmara. The AHP has drafted detailed maps of each individual area, one of which appears below to illustrate building typologies.

A table below summarises the ongoing surveying of Asmara according to these Areas, which presently exceeds 4,300 buildings, followed by a more detailed description by Area.

Area	Number of Buildings Surveyed
1	204
2	204
3	1205
4	274
5	169

6	156
7	214
8	391
9	445
10	108
11	594
12	127
13	210
14	45
15	na
TOTAL	4346

9 Factors Affecting the Property

The *Integrated Management Plan for Asmara* (2016) is the principal planning tool for balancing the long-term demands of Asmara's development and conservation. It is expected that World Heritage status would have a positive impact on the city, as well as presenting various challenges. It is the responsibility of the relevant authorities at state, regional and municipal levels to address these challenges by managing an equitable approach to development and conservation so as to achieve the sustainable growth of the city and the social and economic development of its residents. Development and conservation, rather than being treated as incompatible or opposing objectives, are treated in the *Integrated Management Plan* as mutually exclusive. The much-needed economic benefits of development are expected to serve the equally pressing needs of conservation of buildings and public spaces, as well as raise the overall standard and awareness of design and construction. Five primary factors were identified as having the potential to severely affect the nominated site and have been thoroughly detailed in the Nomination Dossier: development pressures; environmental pressures; natural disasters and risk preparedness; responsible visitation at World Heritage sites; and number of inhabitants within the property and the buffer zone.

10 Conclusion

Architecture in the twentieth century was dominated by the notion of modernism; its rise, its global dissemination, its conceptual and material apogee, and its demise or reconstitution. Modernity was a central facet of European colonialism. Often framed benevolently in the guise of progress or modernisation, modernity became a justification for the exploitative processes that motivated colonialism and became explicitly manifest through the built environment. Contemporaneous modernisation theories equated modernisation with westernisation and presupposed an increasingly homogenised and globalised world founded broadly on western values. Consequently, modernist historiography and the recording of the myriad experiences of

modernity globally, have been shaped by a westerncentric perspective, magnifying western ideas and architectural types at the expense of ‘non-western’ experiences.

Such partial interpretations of historical encounters are seen as increasingly inconsistent with global experiences and challenges. They also have a detrimental effect on the way we engage with and understand built environments globally. This problem manifests itself variously, from the writing of history to the creation of institutions charged with researching history or protecting historical artefacts. Nowhere is this perhaps more explicit than UNESCO’s World Heritage List – an inventory that could be seen as an international catalogue of cultural prejudice.

Eritrea’s current application to UNESCO for Asmara’s inclusion on the World Heritage List for its outstanding modernist architecture and urban planning and its exceptional testimony of the universal aspiration for and attainment of national self-determination goes beyond merely pursuing international recognition for its cultural assets. Viewed in a wider context, Asmara’s UNESCO application – as a modernist site in Africa – challenges some the fundamental principles underpinning the heritage industry and calls for a decentering of modernist history to more fairly reflect and better understand global encounters with modernity.

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