

Asmara Architecture

A World Heritage



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On February 1, 2016, the Eritrean Government applied to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to have the city centre of Asmara, capital of Eritrea, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage. This marks the peak of endeavours many people in Eritrea and the world at large have been and are making to preserve this jewel of architecture. The UNESCO Committee will make the decision in July 2017.

In October 2006 the Asmara Architecture Exhibition was shown for the first time in Berlin/ Germany – (Architecture Centre of Germany – DAZ). From there it took off for a long journey to 15 venues in 9 countries, seen by more than 50 000 visitors: Frankfurt a.M. / Germany (German Museum of Architecture –

DAM); Kassel / Germany - (Kassel Centre of Architecture - KAZimKU-BA); Stuttgart / Germany - (Gallery of the German Association of Architects - “Wechselraum”); London / Great Britain – (Royal Institute of British Architects - RIBA); Tel Aviv / Israel – (Bauhaus Center); Cairo / Egypt – (Goethe-Institute and DAAD); Lagos / Nigeria – (Goethe-Institute); Lomé / Togo – (Goethe-Institute); World Congresses of the International Union of Architects (UIA) in Torino, Italy 2008, and Durban, South Africa 2014; Tübingen / Germany – (Shedhall); Bologna / Italy - Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in the Museo della Città; Graz / Austria – (House of Architects - HDA); Munich / Germany – (Pasinger Factory).

The exhibition is based on the book *Asmara – Africa’s Secret Modernist City* by Edward Denison, Guang Yu Ren & Naigzy Gebremedhin (Merrell Publishers, London/New York, 2003). It consists of four thematic units examining not just the architecture, but also its current as well as its historical social context. Initiator and owner of the exhibition is the Eritrean-German initiative “4Asmara – Arbate Asmera”. The Bauhaus Foundation Dessau is responsible for the exhibition design, produced by the late Rainer Weisbach. Photographs by the British photographer Edward Denison visualize the architectural culture of Asmara. Michael Tesfai, chairperson of “4Asmara – Arbate Asmera”, has created and manages the website www.asmara-architecture.com. Part of the exhibition is the film *City*

of Dreams (Eye Level LLC, Washington, 2005) by Ruby Ofori and Edward Scott. It introduces the city and its architecture in the form of a documentary with numerous interviews testifying to the love of the people of Asmara, the Asmarinos, for their city and their commitment to preserve it as a cultural heritage.

The Asmara Architecture Exhibition pursues the following goals. First goal is to support the application at the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. This exhibition wants to draw international attention to this cultural heritage. Visitors of the exhibition may sign the appeal in this book that Asmara's architecture becomes a UNESCO World Heritage. The list of signers will be submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee

before it makes its decision on the application.

Second goal is to form a global city-network of classical modernist architecture. To this effect the organizers of the exhibition appeal to cities with similar treasures of classical modernist architecture, among them in particular Miami Beach in the USA, Tel Aviv in Israel, Napier in New Zealand, Bolzano-Gries in Italy, Salsomaggiore in the Italian Emilia-Romagna region, Gdynia and Wrocław in Poland, Lakki on the Greek island Leros, Dessau, Weimar, Stuttgart (Weissenhof Settlement), Darmstadt and Berlin in Germany. Such a network will help the participating cities to preserve their architecture jewels. It will attract culture minded people from all over the world to visit and

support these cities. Tourism scientist Prof. Reiner Hartmann, University of Bremen, introduces in this book his plan for a study, which will help tour operators to develop global tours of classical modernist architecture.

Third goal is to contribute to the postcolonial discourse about colonial legacies in the field of culture. This is particularly relevant in the context of Africa, which has inherited architecture from the time of colonialism with racist segregation in urban development. In this context we document excerpts of a debate that evolved from the presentations of the exhibition.

Eventually, when these goals have been reached the exhibition may find its permanent site in Asmara.

The next venues of the exhibition in 2017/18 will be Cape Town / South Africa (Hertex Company Showroom); Nairobi / Kenya (UN-HABITAT campus and at Embassy of the Order of Malta to Kenya in April); Berlin / Germany (on the World Heritage Day, June 4); Miami Beach / Florida – USA (Art Deco Museum in September 6 – December 31); Havana / Cuba (Art Museum in Old Havana); Stuttgart / Germany (Weissenhof Settlement); Dessau / Germany and probably in other venues in Poland, Lithuania and Italy.

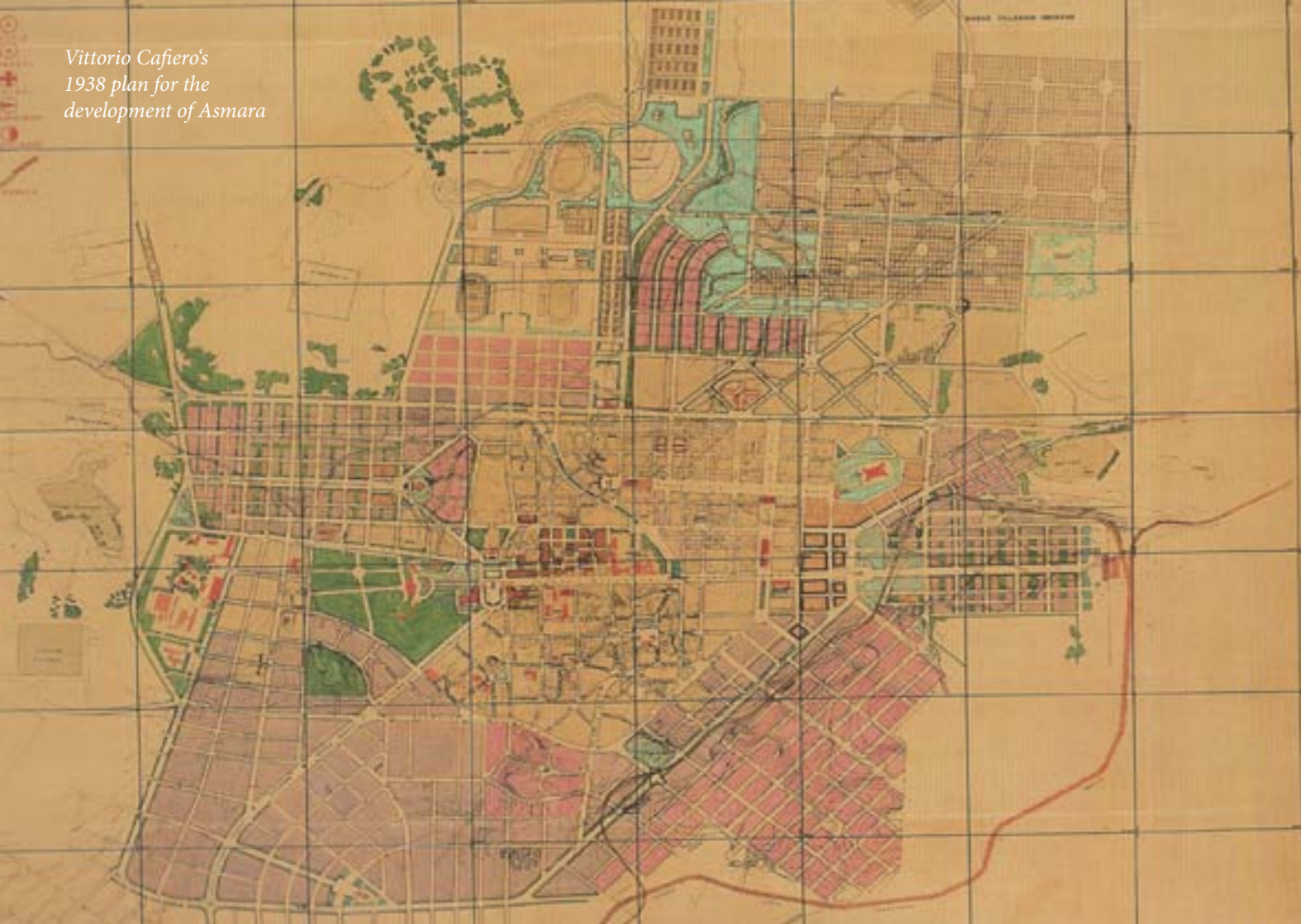
Many people and institutions have supported the Asmara Architecture Exhibition, to whom we extend our gratitude. Only a few can be mentioned here: the patrons Dr. Uschi Eid, President of the German Africa

Foundation and former Africa Representative of the German Chancellor, HE Petros Tseggai Asghedom, former Ambassador of Eritrea in Germany (now Russia), UNESCO, the International Union of Architects (UIA) and the BDA (Federation of German Architects); the curators Naigzy Gebremedhin and Prof. Omar Akbar, former President of the Bauhaus Foundation, Dessau, and the Bauhaus staff, in particular, the late Rainer Weisbach. In Eritrea we received wide support from government departments, in particular the Cultural Asset Rehabilitation Project (CARP) followed by the Asmara Heritage Project (AHP). The main sponsors are the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), KfW (German Bank for Reconst-

ruktion), the German Africa Business Association (Afrikaverein der Deutschen Wirtschaft), the Goethe-Institute and over 30 private enterprises and persons. Hertex Fabrics Company is supporting the Asmara Exhibition in South Africa. It first helped presenting the exhibition at the World Congress of Architects UIA2014 in Durban and has offered a showroom as the venue in Cape Town in March 2017. For more information about the exhibition refer to our website: www.asmara-architecture.com.

For “4Asmara – Arbate Asmera”: Bisrat Kiefle, Carolyn Murphey Melchers, Christoph Melchers, Konrad Melchers and Nina Melchers, Mekonnen Mesghena, Nina Nedelykov and Michael Tesfai.

Vittorio Cafiero's
1938 plan for the
development of Asmara



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Cinema Impero © Edward Denison

A World Heritage

Asmara Africa's Modernist City

Omar Akbar and Naigzy Gebremedhin

The city of Asmara as we know it today developed from a conglomeration of villages. With Italy's occupation of Eritrea in 1889, it grew to become the country's capital city. The design principles and architectural styles were wholly indebted to European tendencies at the turn of the century. Around the still modest city centre, from 1935, a phenomenal expansion took place, initiated by Mussolini's imperialist engagement in East Africa. Asmara was to become the new Rome of the „Africa Orientale Italiana“.

Between 1935 and 1941, Asmara developed rapidly, and transformed itself from a relatively provincial city of the European style into a highly sophisticated metropolis, one of the most modern cities in the whole of Africa. The character of its appearance today derives from this period.

Italian architects designed and built for the needs of the growing city. A spectrum of modernist buildings came into being, which on an area of about four square kilometres in the town centre, unites the most diverse architectonic movements and characteristics of the period. Most of these use the architectural language of the *Architettura Razionale*, the Italian Modernism of the 1920s and 1930s.

In 2001 the Eritrean government, on the initiative of CARP (Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project), put a preservation order on this special part of Asmara's historic heritage. In 2016 the Eritrean government has filed its application to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to have Asmara listed as World Heritage. The application was carefully prepared by the Asmara Heritage Project (AHP).

International Architecture at the beginning of the 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, young advocates, in particular, of the European school of architecture declared war on historicism in order to develop a new form of architecture, which was to express the nature of the worldwide progression of the industrial age. The proposed solutions were highly heterogeneous, moving from the radical revolutionary break with the past to moderate reforms.

From the mid-1920s, the different tendencies in the New Architecture progressively began to converge and find unifying criteria in the design of buildings.

In 1932, these tendencies were summarised by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in their legendary book „The International Style“, and

became a canon of Classical Modernism recognised worldwide.

Up to the middle of the 1920s Italian architecture remained largely uninfluenced by the European avant-garde modernist trend, which had its centres particularly in the Netherlands (De Stijl), Germany (Bauhaus) and France (Le Corbusier).

In 1927, young Milanese architects, known as the Gruppo7, came up with the Italian variant of the avant-garde modern architecture, which was known in Italy as Razionalismo. Initially the group came up with manifestos that were oriented at the theories of architecture expanded by Le Corbusier (Vers une Architecture, 1922) and Walter Gropius (International Architecture, 1925) and in 1927 they presented their designs at the third International Exposition of Modern Decorative Art in Monza.

At the time of Asmara's period of growth from the mid 1930s, the young Italian architects faced a wealth of new, large-scale building projects. By means of Razionalismo, the New Architecture, they made a conscious attempt to distance themselves from the traditions of classical Italian architecture, and from the local African architecture.

City Planning and Urban Design

In the early 1930s, the issue of urban design had grown to become the focus of modern architecture and planning. In the view of the international advocates of the New Architecture, cities had yet to put into effect the adjustments deemed essential for the requirements of the machine age. They detected a lack of order in cities worldwide, and saw the fundamental biological, psychological and hygienic needs of the residents endangered. Consequently, in 1933, at the

legendary 4th International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) meeting on board the passenger steamship Patris during a Mediterranean cruise, the „Athens Charter“ for the „functional city“ was formulated. At the core of the declaration was the zoning and reorganisation of the city according to the four key functions of living, working, recreation and transport, whereby the transport network was to provide the connection, and the fluent exchange, between the zones and the surrounding region.

Under Italian rule a number of town plans were prepared between 1913 and 1938. The key planners of Asmara were Odoardo Cavangiari (1916), Vittorio Cafiero (1938) and Guido Ferraza. The early plans, such as those of Cavangiari had little ideological bias, even when zoning according to racial categories was alluded to and feebly implemented. In 1930 the city was divided into four zones:

the indigenous quarter in the north, densely populated and with irregular structures, the diagonal blocks of the industrial zone, the villa quarter of the Europeans and the mixed area around the marketplace. In this mixed zone administrative and trading facilities equally important for both population groups were located. Moreover, this zone also housed the central cultural institutions, and included a number of apartments.

By 1937, the purpose and objective of urban planning changed when Fascist Italy began to adopt strict and doctrinaire racist policies. One key objective became the restriction of residence and work places of Eritreans to designated areas. Already established Eritrean middle class neighbourhoods were dismantled and the people had to move to the smaller area north-west of the present central business district. Cafiero's plan of 1938, the most elaborate, outlines the

philosophy of racial segregation, a native quarter away from the Italian town, separated by a mixed commercial and industrial zone where the more „enlightened“ natives could interact with the Italians. The native quarter was further separated by a „green belt“.

There was hardly time to fully implement the Cafiero plan as the Italians were defeated in 1941, but on the whole the current urban face of Asmara still retains the plan of Cafiero. The crowded native quarter still exists, although not known as a native quarter nowadays, but still there is a complete absence of open and public space, or green space.

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Ministry of Tourism (ca. 1938) © Edward Denison



Asmara World Bank Office © Edward Denison



“Asmara has an excellent chance of becoming listed as a World Heritage”

A number of important persons have welcomed the exhibition and support the preservation of Asmara's architecture. Koichiro Matsuura, UNESCO Director-General from 1999 – 2009, took up UNESCO's patronage of the Asmara Exhibition. He underscored the „outstanding ensemble of modern architecture in the capital of Eritrea, which fully warrants the positive multiplier effect released by the impressive presentation of the exhibition. Asmara has an excellent chance of becoming listed as a World Heritage.“

Wilfried Grolig, Director General for Culture of the German Foreign Office from 2002 - 2007, stated: „This

exhibition about the rich architectural heritage of Asmara provides a unique opportunity to acquaint the wider public in Germany with the little known cultural heritage of Eritrea. We hope that the exhibition may help Eritrea to overcome its isolation. This exhibition also helps to view a country like Eritrea from an angle that goes beyond that of the political conflicts presented by the media, and acknowledges the broader perspectives and facets of Eritrea.“ Grolig welcomed the intention of UNESCO to incorporate Asmara into the list of World Heritages.

Below we document the messages of greeting of Dr. Uschi Eid and Ar Esa Mohamed.

One of Africa's Most Beautiful Cities

Dr. Uschi Eid

*President German Africa Foundation
and Patron of the Exhibition*

Asmara is for me one of Africa's most beautiful cities. Strolling along the main street with small detours into side streets is an excursion into Classical Modernist Architecture with breathtakingly beautiful buildings, for example, the service station Tagliero, connecting harmoniously the daily bustle at the East African fruit, vegetable and spices market and a pause on the sidewalk in front of the Café of the “Art deco” for a “Latte Macchiato.”

It is to the credit of the architectural exhibition “Asmara – Africa's Secret Modernist City” that we are given another view of the country on the Red Sea, other than what the political

and economic circumstances of the last 100 years suggest.

This colonial-historic complex form - in which the architectural languages come together and a completely preserved ensemble of buildings in the city centre tells a story of not only suffering, but of aesthetic bonds rich in tension - is unique in Africa. This is something that Eritreans can rightly be proud of and that should be preserved. The significance of Asmara's architecture extends far beyond Africa's borders.

Making this architectural heritage in Asmara known - in Africa and beyond - is largely thanks to the book

“Asmara – Africa's Secret Modernist City” by Naigzy Gebremedhin, Edward Denison and Guang Yu Ren. However, the city's preservation and renovation are in great need of support. One important step to gain the needed support is the application for acceptance of the city centre of Asmara in the UNESCO World Heritage List. We have come closer to this goal, thanks to the engagement of the Association “4 Asmara – Arbata Asmera” and its excellent exhibition “Asmara – Africa's Secret Modernist City”.

UIA strongly supports initiatives for Asmara

Ar Esa Mohamed

President International Union of Architects (UIA) and Patron of the Exhibition

Human civilization went through many historical stages, which included interventions from external forces in the form of conquests, wars and colonization of the captured territories. These historical legacies were assimilated into the local lifestyle and cultures, which then developed into distinct local identities. During the period that territories were subjugated by imported systems of administration, new forms of urbanization and building developments were necessary.

These are typical legacies of the colonial era to which, upon independence, the local populace would

adapt and which would then serve as a benchmark and platform for future developments. They also form the historical heritage of the country, which deserves preservation.

The New Urban Agenda of the UN Habitat recognizes that the diversity of cultures enriches the development of humankind, which also contributes to the sustainability of cities.

Asmara is the perfect example of how classical modernist imported architecture has impacted on the local cultures and landscape. They are the architectural expression of an era that is frozen in time to be a life sized

historical museum of futurist and modernist architecture despite the ravages of conflict that the country endured. UIA strongly supports the initiatives for Asmara Heritage Project and its application for the status of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. It would be a sacrilege to mankind if these architectural monuments were destroyed through neglect or redevelopment.

Ministry of Lands, Water and Environment © Edward Denison



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Architecture

The expansion of the new capital city as an administrative and representative centre for the Italian Colony since 1900 meant the architects in Asmara were confronted by a huge number of building projects. Administrative centres and banks, schools and churches, the post office, theatre and judiciary all required representative buildings.

A form of architecture came into being, which drew on the proven formal elements of past stylistic epochs such as the Italian Gothic, the Renaissance, Baroque, Romanesque and Classicism. Initially, the architecture remained largely historicised, and stayed close, in doing so, to the role model of the Italian mother country.

Most of the representative buildings built in Asmara before 1935 show this historicism clearly. The Bank of Eritrea, for example, was constructed in the neo-Gothic style, the Governor's Palace and the post office in the style of neo-Classicism, the University of Asmara in the neo-Baroque style, and the Asmara Theatre in the Renaissance style.

For centuries, Eritrea was influenced by the cultures and religions of different rulers, from the Egyptians and the Ottomans to the Europeans. Over the course of history, these left their traces on the culture and architecture of the country. Today, this coexistence of different cultures and religions still has an impact on the vitality of the city. From 1900, the intermixture and neighbourhood of diverse formal languages and styles (Syncretism) in combination with local building techniques influenced the architecture of the new capital city of Asma-

ra and, above all, that of its sacred buildings.

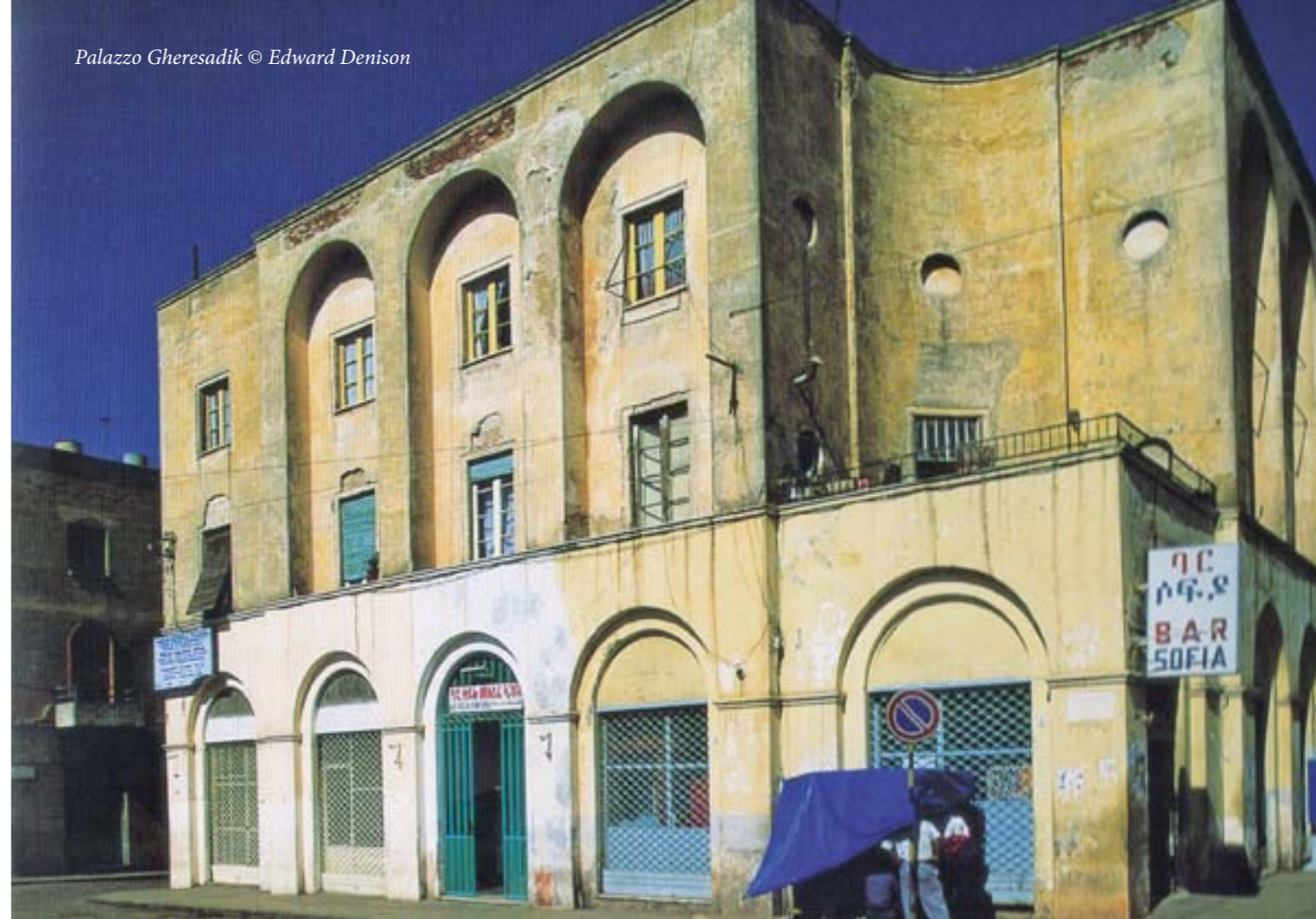
A specific example of the fusion of styles and techniques was the orthodox cathedral Enda Mariam built in 1938/39. Elements of the local African building tradition were absorbed into the design of the tower roofs, the portal, and the main building.

Styles

The exhibition „Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs“ held in Paris in 1925 brought Art Deco to a wider audience. Art Deco embraces the creative alliance of elegant, often geometric forms, new materials, bright colours and sensuous themes. Following the ornate Art Nouveau, Art Deco, with its clear, linear and functional lines, was in keeping with the spirit of Modernism.

The Cinema Impero is one of the most elegant buildings in Asmara in

Palazzo Gheresadik © Edward Denison



Shell Service Station © Edward Denison



Palazzo Mutton © Edward Denison



the Art Deco style and, at the same time, a remarkable example of the cinema architecture of the 1930s. The tiered interior has an organically curved form. Rows of pillars crowned by lions' heads separate the auditorium from the screen. Stucco motifs of African scenes, dancers, palms and antelopes, which distantly recollect Art Deco, adorn the walls. The décor of the external façade, on the other hand, incorporates elements of technical aesthetics.

By 1921, a truly Italian modern style had emerged in the guise of Novecento of which the leading exponent was Giovanni Muzio. His 'Ca Bruta', (ugly house), built in 1922 in Milan became the centre for Novecento architecture, indisputably the first sign of modern architectural taste. As a commitment to an Italian identity, Novecento invoked a more recent reference to the formal vocabulary of Italian Classicism and

Neo Classicism and used simplified classical forms and ornamentation, modulated surface decoration and raised or sunken panelling to imitate traditional Italian Architecture.

Asymmetrical construction and a consciously fragmentary composition distinguish the Novecento from the to date familiar Eclecticism. Windows, niches, panels and other incisions in the façade appear as exact forms in sharp relief. Although the façades feature familiar classical decorations, these are nevertheless strongly abstracted.

In the late 1930s, during Asmara's period of growth, a number of the buildings constructed bore the typical stylistic trademarks of the Novecento. The form of the medieval fortification, for example, the classical arrangement of façades or, as in the case of the Palazzo Gheresadik, the surrounding buildings, the arcades

and arched windows of the marketplace and mosque were all adapted. In 1927, young Milanese architects came up with the Italian variant of the avant-garde modern architecture, which was known in Italy as Razionalismo. This movement began to rival the Novecento and the traditionalists of the Scuola Romana.

Razionalismo combined an artistic concept, which, first and foremost, incorporated a new understanding of spatial concepts, with the application of contemporary scientific insights into, among other things, technology and hygiene. Architecture was to evolve from the analysis of its functions and its everyday usage. The formal language thereby referred to basic geometric elements such as spheres, cuboids, cylinders, cubes and pyramids.

Selam Hotel © Edward Denison





Tagliero Service Station (1938)
Architect: Giuseppe Pettazzi
© Edward Denison



A large number of buildings in Asmara follow this architectonic tenor: The Palazzo Mutton – originally designed as a six-storey building – is, with its interlocking of cylindrical and cubic forms, almost bizarrely modernistic. Equally noteworthy is the City Sanitation Office, the administrative building of the municipal utility and waste disposal provider. In the entry area, vertical and horizontal lines combine to form a striking alliance with the circular awning. With its clear structure, plasticity and colouring Selam Hotel is the most brilliant example of rationalist architecture in Asmara.

Futurism, with its vigorous references to the changes wrought by modern industry and technology, held one of the most radical artistic positions. The speed of machine-powered vehicles and violence, destruction and war were glorified as breaks with tradition. In architecture, the designs

of, most notably, Antonio Sant’Elia came to be influential in and beyond Italy. These focused on factories and multi-storey apartment blocks, whose formal language was directly derived from the world of machines.

In Asmara, the Fiat Tagliero service station, designed by Giuseppe Pettazzi and built in 1938, is the most impressive example of the influences of this movement. With its 30 metre-long freestanding concrete cantilever roof, it not only echoes the design of an aircraft – the machine most admired by the Futurists – but also symbolises the innovative confidence of Italian technologies and businesses in the international context.

In the 1920s, the Italian architectural scene was deeply divided. The most significant movements of Futurismo, Razionalismo, the Novecento and the Scuola Romana were characterised by divergent formal languages.

Nevertheless, to varying degrees each group in its own way invariably claimed, with reference to ancient Rome, to create a new national style. With Mussolini’s takeover in 1922, the state’s desire for a significant image to represent a glorious Italy received a new dimension. This issue was resolved in the second half of the 1930s. Under the aegis of the traditionalist Scuola Romana, aspects of each individual movement came together in the so-called Monumentalismo.

In Asmara, the Casa del Fascio building is the clearest example of this transition in Italian architecture. The frontage was erected in 1940 as an amendment to the rather modest headquarters of the fascist party lying behind it, which was built in 1928 – a strategy, which testifies to a politically demonstrative motivation rather than to practical necessity.

Palazzo Falletta © Edward Denison



Casa del Fascio © Edward Denison



Critical Issues for Asmara's Architecture

The end of Italian rule brought Asmara's rapid growth to a standstill. With the invasion of the united British and Ethiopian forces in April 1941, the Italian engineers and architects withdrew. They left behind, as the British Ministry for Information reported in 1941, „a European city with wide boulevards, fantastic cinemas, imposing fascistic buildings, cafés, stores, two-lane streets and a first class hotel“.

When the British military administration took control in 1941, their preoccupation was the war in Europe. Architecture and urban planning issues in Eritrea were not as critical as fighting the Nazis. From an architectural perspective, the period of the British Administration was marked primarily by the reversion to styles more traditional than the bold

rationalism that had characterised the late 1930's.

Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952 under a United Nations agreement and annexed by Ethiopia in 1962. Its status as a federated state was suspended, and Eritrea was assimilated as one of the 14 provinces of Ethiopia. Asmara lost its role as a capital city – a role regained on 24th May 1991 with the liberation of Eritrea from the Ethiopian annexation.

The intervening period was marked by a 30 yearlong liberation war. This war caused extensive devastation in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Asmara, however, survived this period relatively unscathed. The beauty of Asmara's buildings convey the image of modernity despite peeling paint, falling plaster or unhinged shutters.

Since independence Asmara has grown rapidly extending its coverage over a wide area of the hinterland. Migration, the new functions as a capital city and investment changed the city.

Fortunately Asmara's expansion has not followed the pattern of other African cities where slums and squatter settlements prevail. Asmara's growth has been relatively controlled. However, major challenges remain, most important is the provision of adequate water and sewage for all.

The issue of rebuilding after independence and decades of foreign rule when nothing happened, has infused all Eritreans with the hope of future development. While facing the problems of urban planning there is growing concern that this world-





the problems of urban planning there is growing concern that this world-renowned centre of early twentieth-century architecture should be preserved by all means.

An incident of 1996 illustrates perfectly the determined and liberal attitude of Eritreans: The German architectural firm commissioned to design the new headquarters of the National Bank of Eritrea suggested that the most prestigious location for the building was the site in front of the Catholic Cathedral. A grotesque fourteen-storey glass building with numerous smaller structures around it occupying four blocks of historic Asmara was proposed. The central

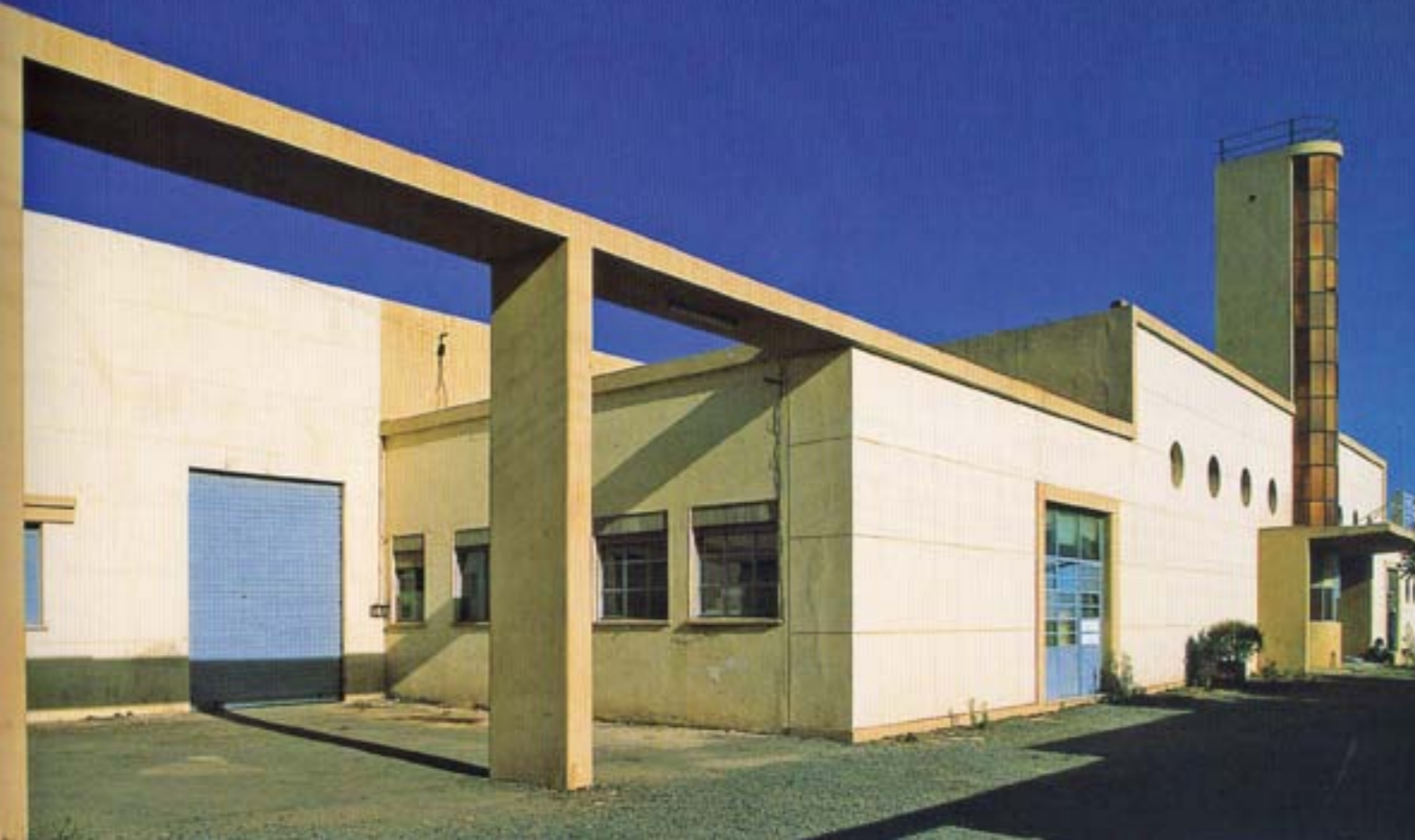
building was to be the tallest in the city, towering over the campanile of the Cathedral.

Before the bank could be constructed the building occupying the site, the notorious former Italian prison „Caserna Mussolini“, would have to be demolished. When the plans for this move were made public, a group of Eritreans, mainly former inmates, protested vehemently and successfully against the destruction of the prison building.

However another construction project was put into practice: When the colossus called Nakfa House rose at the Southern end of Sematat Ave-

nue, dwarfing that icon of Asmara’s modernist architecture – Fiat Tagliero – the people of Asmara, began to feel the horror of something that was going terribly wrong. The Nakfa House did not only desecrate Fiat Tagliero, that fine example of modernist architecture; it reduced the area around it to a mean and disorienting small space.

There were other buildings (Nyala Hotel, The Red Sea Corporation Building, etc.) that upset the delicate qualities of Asmara’s Modernist Architecture, but the building of Nakfa house provided the wake-up call.



Preservation

The government and people of Eritrea have realised the special character of Asmara and are determined to preserve this exceptional heritage for the benefit of its own population and for present and future visitors.

At the same time there is an increased awareness of the need to ensure further development. Thus in 1997, the State of Eritrea invited The World Bank to collaborate with it in formulating a strategy for preservation of Asmara's architectural heritage. In the sequel an extensive inventory of the architecture of Asmara was undertaken.

In this context the cultural assets rehabilitation program (CARP) was established to coordinate preservation and rehabilitation of cultural assets, especially architectural assets. Furthermore the process to register Asmara as a modern heritage site under the rules of UNESCO was initiated.

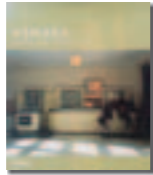
In 2001 a historic perimeter in Asmara was established, encircling an area of about four square kilometres of 4% of the total area of the city. This area contains the city's historic centre and the majority of its historically significant buildings that need protection

from unwarranted modification. The government promulgated a moratorium on new buildings or modifications of old buildings in the historic perimeter until new guidelines and regulations have been finalised. The guidelines and regulations will establish stringent criteria that aim to ensure that the integrity, harmony and scale of Asmara's unique urban environment are preserved.

On February 1, 2016 the Eritrean government presented its application to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to have Asmara put on the World Heritage List.



Naigzy Gebremedhin
Eritrean, born in Addis Ababa;
founder and first director (1998-2004) of
the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project
of Eritrea (CARP);
founder and first director (1994-1998)
of the Eritrean Environment Agency;
director (1976-1994) of the division for the built environment, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Nairobi; Professor (1957-1965) of architecture and building science, Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; dean (1957-1965) of the faculty of building, Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; cofounder and member (2006-2013) of the “4 Asmara - Arbate Asmera”; honorary curator of the exhibition “Asmara – Africa’s Secret Modernist City”



„Asmara – Africa’s Secret
Modernist City“
(authors: Naigzy Gebremedhin,
Edward Denison and Guang
Yu Ren; Merrell Publishers,
London & New York, 2003,
240 p.).



Dr. Omar Akbar,
born in Kabul, Afghanistan;
professor (since 1993) for theory of architecture and townplanning, University Anhalt, Dessau;
director and president (1998 – 2008) of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, Germany;
project-consultant (1987-1993) of the German Technical Co-operation Agency (GTZ/GIZ) in Banjul, Sanaa and Kabul;
curator of the exhibition “Asmara – Africa’s Secret Modernist City”

Asmara – A history of courageous women

Yisehak Yosief

At the place, where Asmara was founded, there used to be four villages. It is said, that these villages were founded around 982 BC. Passing the time of the Old Testament (tigrinya:zāmānā orit) they embraced the time of Christ (zāmānā krβstos).

At the time of the foundation of Asmara plunderers that came from the other side of the Red Sea were kidnapping children and stealing cattle.

Therefore the women of the four villages gathered together to discuss their difficult situation. Thus they spoke: „To be able to protect ourselves we have to ask our men to make us live together on one and the same spot. To make our men take us seri-

ously we refuse to serve them dinner. If they beat us because they don’t get dinner we scream loudly. When we hear one of us screaming, we shall all go to her and help her screaming. If they still don’t accept our demand, we shall continue refusing to serve them lunch the next day!“

After all, on December the 28th or 29th in 1508 the men held a conference to discuss the demands of the women. The women said: „The reason why our children are being kidnapped, our men being killed by robbers and our cattle is being stolen, is because we live dispersed in several places. In order to be able to defend ourselves from our enemy we need to build one big village and live closer together“.

The conference lasted for a whole day.

Finally all men agreed upon accepting the women’s demands with one voice and decided upon a name for the newly united town: „Since our women have succeeded in uniting our four villages the name shall be a memorandum of their success. We therefore have decided to name our new village Arbatā Asmāra.“ Which means: they (the women) united the four.

Source: Yisehak Yosiefs „The Story of Asmāra“, Asmara 1993. Translated from Tigrinya by Freweyni Habtemariam, Dipl. Germanist and Anglicist, lecturer for Tigrinya at the Free University Berlin.

Asmara Architecture and the Postcolonialism Debate

In the course of the presentations of the Asmara Exhibition a controversy evolved whether the exhibition is adequately addressing the colonial and fascist historical context of the Asmara architecture. The debate has become an example of the post-colonialism discourse, which will be dealt with extensively in a forthcoming anthology by Peter Volgger (ed.): Asmara: Colonial City and Postcolonial Experiences, Berlin: DOM Publishers 2017. The most outspoken criticism against the exhibition was expressed by Raimund Rütten, Emeritus Professor for Romance Languages at the Goethe University Frankfurt/Main. Naigzy Gebremedhin and Edward Denison, co-authors of the book Asmara – Africa's secret modernist city, replied. The following texts are shortened versions of the originals. Gaetan Siew, Mauritius, UIA President (2005 – 08) and Charles Majoroh, Nigeria, former president of the Africa Union of Architects (AUA) refer to the issue as well. Ed.

Futurism on blood-soaked ground

Prof. Raimund Rütten:

I was quite upset and shocked about what was presented about Asmara: how could it come to such thoughtlessness and such unprecedented absence of historical awareness? I think about the imperial megalomania of fascist Italy and its forced colony Eritrea, at least since the thirties gateway for the war of aggression and conquest of the fascists against Abessinia, being subjugated to its overseas territory; about the bombardments from the air, about the technologically superior air force, about the large-scale use of poisonous gas against the

civilian population in Abessinia; etc. How does it come to pass that fruits are only harvested as an expression of presumed civilization and culture, when in reality these fruits arise from a superficially futuristic blood-soaked ground, products of the barbarism of civilization, of the horror and unease within the culture?

Asmara is the result of the fascist politics of colonization, designed only for the Italian colonists. The ideas of megalomania, war enthusiasm and of the omnipotence of a technological power, as distinguishable within the futurist movement and avantgarde were useful to fascism and its imperial claim of rule over the Horn of Africa.

In no way should the fascination attributed to the architecture of the city

center of Asmara be denied; but, this fascination cannot lead to a blending out of the mass murder, racism, and torture of those who had to leave the material for art buildings for the apartheid regime at a height of more than 2000 meters.

Eritreans don't harbour quarrel with the inherited buildings

Naigzy Gebremedhin:

Why preserve the architecture of Asmara? It certainly is not to extol the virtues of Italian colonialism. The architecture of Asmara is being preserved because it celebrates the labour of thousands of Eritreans.

Eritreans have appropriated, completely and unequivocally the colonial architecture in their capital city. This appropriation has never implied minimization of the evils committed by Fascist Italy in Eritrea. Eritreans will

never forget the humiliation or the excesses of racial discrimination. But they no longer harbour any quarrel with the buildings that have survived. They refuse to be drowned into self pity and endless recrimination as regards the past history of these buildings. Wisely, they are determined to put them to good use.

The exhibition simply contributes to this wise decision. It does not extol racism. It is an exhibition about architecture that survived against all odds. The mature stance of Eritreans should not be insulted.

Edward Denison:

Prof. Ruetten's critique raises many valuable issues, most of which cannot be denied by any civilized person, but the premise of this commentary seems to have misunderstood, or rather misinterpreted, the subject of the exhibition entirely.

Consequently, this renders what could have been a valuable critique a tirade blinded by personal disdain for past atrocities which are not condoned by anyone, least of all those that have expended so much time, energy and effort to realise this exhibition.

It is vital that while we must never forget the depths to which mankind can plunge, this exhibition is evidence of a deeper consideration of this subject in the context of Eritrea than Prof. Ruetten has given to it, and, as such, while I share his patent disgust for fascism, I also see the need to examine such histories objectively so that we might learn from them and progress, personally and collectively, rather than be so blinded by hatred that we cause history's pendulum to swing in the other direction. If Eritreans, as I would argue, have successfully adopted Asmara and reinvented this 'life space' in

their own manner, then who are we, as foreigners, to argue against such a bold and mature stance because of a guilt complex brought on ourselves by the inexcusable behaviour of our forefathers?

Prof. Ruetten's remarks ignore the overriding premise of this exhibition: architectural heritage. If we are to support the argument that the tangible legacies of past regimes are to be reviled, the natural conclusion leads to the erasure of such legacies. Asmara is revered by Eritreans.

In my opinion, Eritrea's love for its capital is unrivalled in Africa, and this is evidenced in the beauty of the city's character. Italian Futurism does not equal Fascism.

Gaetan Siew:

Past is past and whether it reminds us of painful memories or not. One


can see the worst or the best in our past. We – today – are not responsible for our past but for its memory and we are certainly responsible for our future and the future of our children. For some people architectural heritage is represented in monuments or objects glorifying certain political systems or – in this case colonial-periods. That applies to Asmara as it does to any colonial heritage for instance in India or Latin America. It was conceived by others. But for us who live there, it is also part of our history and it is a testimony that one should not forget, for good or for bad. It now belongs to us more than to its initiators.

As architects, we have a duty to show to the authorities and to society the value of heritage, its contribution to our future. Let us see in it an object of cultural reconciliation. Reconciliation between past and future, reconciliation between people.

Charles Majoroh:

The theme of the exhibition is emblematic of an urban collage of old and new; poor and wealthy; war and peace. It is a joy in our time to celebrate any city that has endured the ravages of war and man made destruction to come out unscathed like Asmara. Asmara's outing therefore – should be quite revealing!

For me as an African this effort is also a bright moment in the tendency of global negative portrayals of the heritage and creativity of our continent. One hopes that this is only the beginning, when it is Asmara today that Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Harare, Mogadishu and others will follow tomorrow – in a procession of studies of African cities. A huge chest of architectural treasures awaits those, who strive – as you are doing, for Asmara.



*Staircase in the shop and appartement building in 176-9 Street/176-2 Street
© Edward Denison*

Asmara World Heritage Appeal

Asmara is the world's outstanding living museum of classical modernist architecture comprising a whole city with all its urban functions: housing, industries, services and administration, shopping, leisure, culture and recreation.

Most of the architectural language is *architettura razionale*, the Italian modernism of the 1920s and 30s. However, there are also numerous examples of *novocento*, *futurismo*, *neoclassicism*, *neo-baroque*, *monumentalism*, as well as buildings with links to local Eritrean architecture.

No other city in the world can be proud of such a comprehensive ensemble of classical modernist architecture. We see the people of Asmara and of all Eritrea united in admiring and preserving their jewel

against all odds and despite some extreme adversity.

We therefore welcome and endorse the candidature of the city of Asmara to the UNESCO World Heritage List.



Eritrean Ambassador Hanna Simon (at the very right) presenting the application to the Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre Dr. Mechtild Rössler

The application for candidature was filed February 1, 2016, at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris to be decided by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2017.

We appeal to cities with similar treasures of classical modernist architecture, among them in particular Napier in New Zealand, Miami in the USA, and Tel Aviv in Israel, to form a global city-network of classical modernist architecture under the auspices of UNESCO.

Such a network will help the participating cities to preserve their architectural jewels. It will attract culturally minded people from all over the world to visit these cities and thereby help them preserve their heritage. To this effect, tour operators may develop global tours of classical modernist architecture.

First Signers

„4Asmara – Arbata Asmera“ (Bisrat Kiefler, Christoph Melchers, Carolyn Melchers, Dr. Konrad Melchers, Nina Melchers, Mekonnen Mesghena, Michael Tesfai); Edward Denison, Photographer and Lecturer in Architecture, The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College, London; Dr. Uschi Eid, President, German Africa Foundation; Naigzy Gebremedhin, Director (ret.), former Cultural Asset Rehabilitation Project (CARP), Asmara; Dr. Micha Gross, Director, Bauhaus Center, Tel Aviv; Professor Dr. Klaus Hüfner, Honorary President, World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), Berlin; Professor Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Ephraim Isaac, Princeton, NJ; Prof. Pier Giorgio Massaretti, Università di Bologna; Florian Mausbach, President (ret.), Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, Berlin; Hugh Merrell, Merrell Publishers Limited, London;

Ar Esa Mohamed, President, International Union of Architects (UIA), Petaling Jaya, Malaysia; Nina Nedelykov & Pedro Moreira, Architects, Berlin; Dr. Helmut Orbon, Harare; Prof. Dr. Richard Pankhurst, Addis Ababa; Dr. Claudia Perren, Director, Bauhaus Foundation, Dessau; Wolfgang Riehle, Honorary President, Association of Architects, Baden-Württemberg; Manuel Schupp, ORANGE BLU building solutions, Stuttgart; Prof. Arno Sighart Schmid, President (ret.), Federal Association of Architects, Berlin; Dr. Norbert Spitz, Regional Director, Goethe-Institut South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa; Dr. Thomas Welter, CEO, German Association of Architects, Berlin; Stefano Zagnoni, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici e del Patrimonio Culturale - DIUM Università degli Studi di Udine; Dr. Peter Volgger, Lecturer, University of Innsbruck; Dr. Andreas Zimmer, German Ambassador, Asmara

Preserving Asmara - the Role of City Tourism

The preservation of Asmara's architecture heritage must be economically viable. The owners of the buildings and the community of Asmara should have more economic benefits than costs. Developing and tapping the tourism industry may be the best method to achieve this aim, if the gains from tourism can be widely spread among the affected people. Cultural tourists who focus their travels on architecture heritage may prefer to visit several cities, settlements and sites in different countries during one journey. Therefore such cities should join forces to develop this cultural tourism together. Such a network will not only boost this special cultural tourism but may also be used for mutual advice and technical assistance to the preservation of the heritage. Professor Rainer Hartmann, a specialist not only of Eritrea Tourism, is launching a research project, which he describes shortly below. Ed.

The Potential of Architecture-Tourism with special Reference to Asmara

Research Project at the City University
of Applied Sciences in Bremen

Prof. Dr. Rainer Hartmann



Architecture-Tourism is a special form of Cultural Tourism that concentrates on the viewing and visitation of well worth seeing buildings or ensembles. Prestigious architecture is not a new phenomenon and today new buildings are

often constructed as tourist magnets. And the target groups for these attractions are not only architects but in many cases also the public at large.

These architectures mostly have something special - a Unique Selling Proposition. They offer the possibility to transform former unknown places to veritable tourism destinations. Like the Classical Modernist Architecture in Asmara!

So far the tourism science has not researched this topic profoundly. That's why the goal of the research project is to analyse and unearth the potential of early modernist architecture als a unique selling proposition in the strategies of city tourism.

The market of city tourism with a focus on Classical Modernist Architecture has to be analysed from both sides, demand (potential tourists) and supply (destinations and tour operators).

The results of the study will show, whether architecture-tourism in general and city tourism with the focus on early modernist architecture ensembles in particular have a realistic chance to become established in the tourism market.

Furthermore, the results of the study may be applied to the example of Asmara. If Asmara becomes a UNESCO World Heritage Site this will be a signal for the reanimation of the city tourism.



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