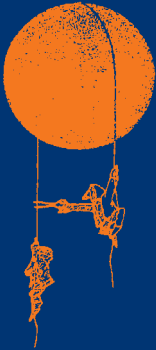


Association to Promote  
Education and Journalism  
on Environment and  
Development



Dossier:

# Asmara

## Africa's Secret Capital of Modern Architecture



Photo: Edward Demison

Can the superlative „Asmara – Africa’s secret capital of modern architecture“ still be topped? There are other well-known sites of early modernist architecture, such as Tel Aviv, Israel, Miami South Beach, Florida, or Napier in New Zealand. However, the rich collection of early modernist architecture in the city of Asmara, the blending of a variety of modernist styles, the urban comprehensiveness of the historic perimeter, and the almost untouched, yet deteriorated, condition of the buildings is unique. Until Naigzy Gebremedhin, Edward Denison and Guang Yu Ren published their standard work „Asmara – Africa’s Secret Modernist City“ in 2003, this architectural world heritage was unknown or unrecognised by most historians of architecture. The goal of the Asmara Architecture Exhibition is to preserve this great architectural treasure. Once stable peace and the respect of human rights are achieved at the Horn of Africa, Eritrea’s development may benefit from a flourishing tourism.

### Dear visitors of the Asmara Architecture Exhibition,

On October 2, 2006 the Asmara Architecture Exhibition in Berlin took off for a long journey. The exhibit consists of five elements:

- 24 panels elaborated by the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, Germany, based on the book *Asmara – Africa's Secret Modernist City* (Merrell, London and New York, 2003, 240 p.) by Edward Denison, Guang Yu Ren and Naigzy Gebremedhin
- reconstruction models by Prof. Wolfgang Knoll, Stuttgart, Germany
- the film „City of Dreams“ by Ruby Ofori and Edward Scott, Eye Level, Washington, D.C., USA and
- a collection of pictures by Edward Denison
- copies of children's submissions to a competition held in Asmara in 2004. The competition entries include paintings, poems and short stories celebrating the built heritage of Asmara and created by schoolchildren all over Eritrea.

The exhibition has met with a large response. It has received wide and often enthusiastic media coverage beyond Germany, praising the „unknown treasure in Africa“. Tens of thousands of visitors have seen it at the German Architecture Centre in Berlin (DAZ), the German Museum of Architecture in Frankfurt and the „KAZimKuba“ in Kassel. Further confirmed exhibition places will be the Bauhaus Center, Tel Aviv, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), London, the Goethe-Institut (German Cultural Institute) in Cairo, Lagos and Lomé, the Wechselraum BDA in Stuttgart and the 2008 UIA-World-Congress in Turin. Additional inquiries have come from Bruxelles, Paris, Rome, Verona, New York, Sao Paulo and Tokyo.

The main aim of the exhibition is to support the Eritrean people and its Diaspora all over the world in their endeavours to preserve the Asmara architecture as a unique world heritage. This will be a long and costly undertaking. Many buildings are in run-down condition requiring an overhaul and modernisation of facilities including sanitation and electricity. An important step in this process will be the recognition of the Asmara architecture as a World Heritage by the UNESCO. The huge costs of renovation and preservation can only be met if Asmara architecture can become the cornerstone of gainful tourism in Eritrea. The potential is there. Eritrea offers many attractions, such as the Red Sea, the scenic mountain region with its year-round pleasant climate, a fauna and flora with

rare species, the historical landmarks of antique cultures of the Axumite Empire, Christian churches and monasteries, the Ottoman urban culture with the port of Massawa, the renovated railway from Massawa to Asmara, and the architecture of Asmara.

The exhibition also contributes to the ongoing international debate about modernism and the problem of how to deal with the colonial and fascist heritage, with which the peoples of Africa and the world have to live. Scientific meetings dealing with these issues were held in the course of the exhibitions in Berlin and Frankfurt. These meetings and discussions will continue.

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 (MP), HE Petros Tsegai Asghedom, Ambassador of Eritrea, UNESCO, the International Union of Architects (UIA) and the BDA (Federation of German Architects); the curators Naigzy Gebremedhin and Prof Omar Akbar with his Bauhaus staff, in particular, Rainer Weisbach, and Prof Wolfgang Knoll, our model constructor. In Eritrea we received wide support from government departments, in particular the Cultural Asset Rehabilitation Project (CARP) which became our partner. The main sponsors are the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, GTZ (German agency for technical co-operation), KfW (German Bank for Reconstruction), Africa Verein (German Africa Business Association), the Goethe-Institut and over 30 private enterprises and persons. Finally, we would like to mention that Listros e.V., an Ethiopian-German cultural organisation, supported us in the initiation and implementation of our exhibition. For more information about the exhibition refer to our website: [www.asmara-architecture.com](http://www.asmara-architecture.com)

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Chairperson

Association to Promote Education and Journalism on Environment and Development („Verein zur Förderung von Bildung und Publizistik zu Umwelt und Entwicklung e.V.“)

#### Christoph Melchers

Coordinator

Asmara Architecture Exhibition Projectgroup

#### Konrad Melchers

Editor-in-chief

eins Entwicklungspolitik

### „Eritreans can be proud of Asmara“ – Welcome messages

(mel) A number of important persons have welcomed the exhibition at the vernissage in Berlin and Frankfurt, among them former German federal minister of the environment Juergen Trittin, minister of culture and science of the federal state Hessen, Udo Corts, the president of the International Union of Architects (UIA), Gaetan Siew, and the CEO of GTZ, Wolfgang Schmitt. In Berlin, the German ambassador to the UNESCO, Hans-Heinrich Wrede, presented the greetings of the UNESCO secretary general, Koichiro Matsuura. The UNESCO chief's words 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.“

The director general for culture of the German Foreign Office, Wilfried Grolig, 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.

The former German deputy minister of economic co-operation and development and G-8-Sherpa to the chancellor, Dr Uschi Eid, describes Asmara as „one of the most beautiful cities of Africa“. In her view „Asmara is the secret capital of modernity“ and for her „the exhibition has gained the merit of allowing us to view this country on the Red Sea differently than what the political and economic conditions of the last century have suggested to us.“ Eid underlines: „The complex colonial-historical form, in which architectural languages combine in Asmara and tell a history full of grief as well as of aesthetic tensions, is unique in Africa. Eritreans can be proud of it. This architecture, which is important far beyond Africa, should be preserved.“

# A World Heritage

Omar Akbar  
und Naigzy  
Gebremedhin

Asmara – Africa's Secret Modernist City



Photo: Edward Deinison

Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, has one of the largest collections of modernist architecture in the world. Within the context of the urban expansion programmes of the 1930s, a unique ensemble of buildings came into being, which, as the Italian interpretation of the International Style, approaches the significance of cities such as Tel Aviv, South Beach (an area of Miami Beach), or New Zealand's Napier. This African treasure was hidden from public and even from expert view by a variety of historical and political reasons. The liberation of Eritrea in 1991 initiated the rediscovery of the spatial and architectural qualities of the capital city of Asmara, which exemplifies the European town planning of the 20th century. This rediscovery of Modernism in Asmara offers not only the opportunity to observe the urban and architectonic qualities and potentials of the modern European city in an international context. Its distinctiveness rightfully prompts a more thorough exploration of the international reception of Modernism characterised by European influences, and its development across the world.

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“.

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 plan-



Photo: Edward Denison

**Cinema Impero – Art Déco style**  
**Current address in Asmara:**  
**Harnet Avenue 176-21 Street**  
**Architect: Mario Messina**  
**Date: 1937**

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. Efforts are currently being made to have the centre of Asmara included on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites.

### 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

## A chest of architectural treasures and an object of cultural reconciliation

**Welcome message of Gaetan Siew, Mauritius, President of the International Union of Architects (UIA) on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition on Asmara's Architecture in Berlin, Germany in October 2006, delivered by the German UIA-delegate**

**Nina Nedeylkov:** „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.

**Welcome message of Charles Majoroh, Nigeria, former president of the African union of Architects (AUA):** Owing to the construction methods in many parts of pre-colonial Africa, cities were built with bio-degradable materials and as a result, several have disappeared or vanished under the impact of time, rain, sun and wind.

Many of such cities historically dotted the camel routes of the Sahara, across the Nile, all the way to the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers at the Atlantic. Other periods followed: 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.

### Imprint

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ners 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.

### 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

## Asmara – A history of courageous women

Photo: Edward Denison



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: zämäna orit) they embraced the time of Christ (zämäna krıstos). 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 seriously 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 Arbatä Asmära.“ Which means: they (the women) united the four.

**Yisehak Yosief**

Source: Yisehak Yosiefs „The Story of Asmära“, Asmara 1993. Translated from Tigrinya by Freweyni Habtemariam, Dipl. Germanist and Anglicist, lecturer for Tigrinya at the Free University Berlin, freelance interpreter and translator. (c) freweynih@hotmail.com

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 Asmara 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 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 fa-

çades 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.

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 Scu-

ola 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.

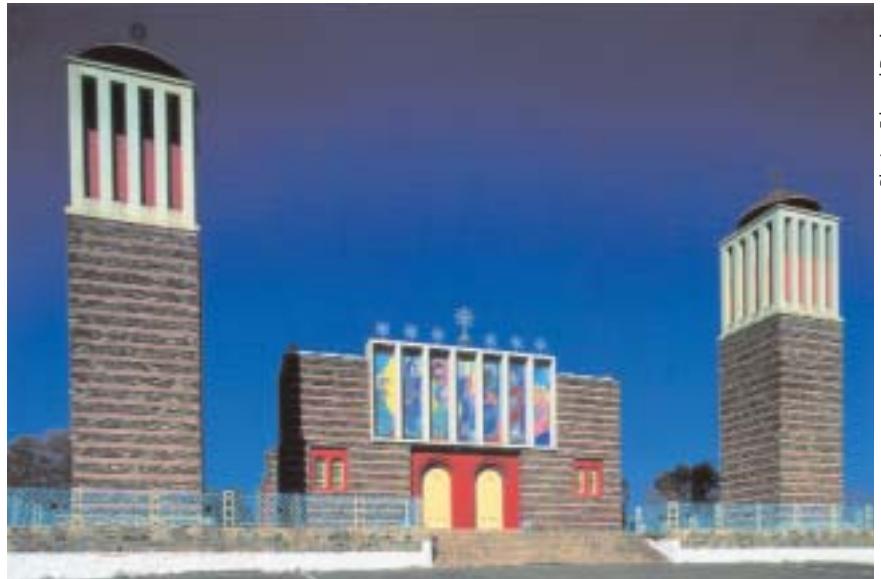


Photo: Edward Denison



Photo: Edward Denison

**Enda Mariam Orthodox Cathedral – eclectic style**  
**Original Name: Biet Christian, Current address: Arbate Asmara Street**  
**Architect: E. Gallo, Date: 1920**

**State Palace – neo-classical style**  
**Current address: Denden Street**  
**Architect: unknown,**  
**Date: 1889-1921**

Photo: Edward Denison



**Fiat Tagliero Service Station –**  
Futurist style. The construction of  
the Nakfa House (small picture  
above) in 1995 caused a wake up  
call for the concerned  
public to protect the cultural  
heritage of Asmara.  
Current address: Mereb Street/  
Sematat Avenue  
Architect: Guiseppe Pettazzi  
Date: 1938

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.

#### Critical Issues for Asmaras 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.

left: modernist villa  
Current use: World Bank office  
Architect: unknown,  
Date: unknown

right: Selam Hotel – Rationalist style  
Original name: Albergo CIAAO  
(Compagnia Immobiliare Alberghi  
Africa Orientale), Current address:  
Mariam Gimbi Street  
Architect: Rinaldo Borgnino  
Date: 1937



Fotos: Edward Denison



The intervening period was marked by a 30 year-long 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-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 Avenue, 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 several 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



Photo: Edward Denison

**Palazzo Gheresadik – Novecento style**  
**Original name: Palazzo Gheresadik,**  
**Current address: Nakfa Avenue/Ad Ebrihim**  
**Architect: Carlo Marchi**  
**Date: 1938**

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.



**Dr. Omar Akbar,** born in Kabul, Afghanistan, director and president of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, Germany, professor for theory of architecture and townplanning, University Anhalt, Dessau.



**Naigzy Gebremedhin** born in Addis Ababa, founder and first director (1998-2004) of the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project of Eritrea (CARP), founder and first director of the Eritrean Environment Agency (1994-1998), 1976-1994 director of the division for the built environment, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Nairobi, 1957-65 professor of architecture and building science, dean of the faculty of building, Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

## In the modern context

### The adaptation of the colonial architecture in Asmara

Omar Akbar

**In Asmara, Classical European Modernism is re-contextualized and grounded in the postcolonial culture of independent Eritrea.**

Many of the artists and architects of Classical Modernism were convinced that culture could only be something international - something global. One central ambition and motivation of the avant-garde in modern art and architecture was the conquest of, and the imposition of discipline on, chaotic conditions. The end goal was a universal reorganisation of all forms and structures. It was to comply with the industrial society's principles of rationality and efficiency, and claimed international, global validity. At the same time, the new world, characterised by modernity, was to also advance social equality and, by means of industrial mass production, provide a higher standard of living.

#### Fit for the whole world

At the same time, allied with this imagined, universal new world was the negation of local contexts in favour of timeless and „placeness“ principles. The decline of national formal traditions was therefore to be offset by a new, timeless, universalism. The new, radical modern design, in its aspirations to global validity, had neither regard for national, regional or local contexts, nor did it allow itself to be influenced by these.

This stance was above all particularly characteristic of European avant-garde art. Many artists such as, for example, Wassily Kandinsky or Paul Klee, who also taught at the Bauhaus in the 1920s, laboured in their paintings to surmount the natural and individual reality in order to identify universally valid, fundamental, formal laws. The vision was of an art that, as „total design“, would pass over into all aspects of the lives of the people.

This quest for a universalism in visual media, and for an art and design that was to be „fit for the whole world“ (Piet Mondrian) eventually also affected the architects. In the terms of a radical architectonic Modernism, not only buildings, their rooms and interior design, but also ultimately whole cities, were to be developed according to a single principle of design. The distant goal was nothing less than a newly configured world. Even if this utopia incorporated hopes of emancipation, this vision also has, without a doubt, tyrannical and imperial features.

Classical Modernism in architecture and urban development ignored, where the building owners provided it with the opportunity - that means where the balance of power permitted it - the existing urban context. It ignored the fact that each city, firstly by means of its geographical location and climatic conditions, and above all by means of its particular cultural and social structures, generates a specific context for its spatial organisation.

This framework determines urban development and the local and regional identity, albeit without being static. Cities per se are places for interexchange, and act as intersections for a variety of affiliations and networks. The interplay of local and remote influences, the capacity to absorb outsiders, the openness to new ideas and to new concepts of images and form, are essential constituents of the urban character. In an ideal case, the city itself would press ahead with, guide and promote the integration and transformation of foreign influences. That this, however, is the exception to the rule is shown, for example, by the centuries-old history of colonisation.

#### Colonial heritage

The colonisers paid little attention to the urban context they

conquered, focusing rather on how they could implement and manifest their rule. They built themselves their own world in accordance with their notions of life, their aspirations and their values. This applies also to the city centre of Asmara - built in the 1930s, as is generally known, under Italian colonial rule. This city centre is particular. Here, a fascist society, which also introduced a policy of racial segregation, emerged to contribute to the architectural language of Classical and European Modernism.

While architectonic Modernism in Europe is generally viewed as an emancipatory movement, and as a move towards social equality in an industrial society, in Asmara, the modern architecture stood as a model, and as an instrument, of a modernisation of the colony in terms of subjugation.

The ensemble of modern buildings erected in Asmara during the colonial expansion of the city therefore presented a huge challenge for the existing urban context. These public and private buildings utilising the different styles of architectonic Modernism were, in essence, an antithesis to the settlement structures in existence up to that point. This form of Modernism was an attack on the urban context, which had developed over centuries. This was not only to manifest the colonial power's aspirations for order in spatial terms, but also, at the same time, to represent their dominance over the local culture.

That this massive colonial reconstruction of the city centre did not lead, at the end of the period of colonisation, to the destruction of its modern architecture is another peculiarity, or characteristic, of Asmara's. As the Eritrean population came to adopt these buildings over time, and accept them as part of their architectonic inheritance, a unique „City of Modernism“ could develop where today different

cultures, religions, population groups and ethnic groups live side by side.

#### Post-colonial re-contextualization

By means of the residents' confident appropriation and autonomous re-interpretation, the Modernist buildings have been integrated into the context of the city. This implied emancipation from the manifestations of the former colonial rule in favour of an independent way of thinking focused on both progress and development. Without this post-colonial re-contextualisation, the current debate on the preservation and maintenance of these buildings would be inconceivable.

In that Asmara „assimilated“ this Modernism, the buildings were given a context, which was foreign to the canon of Classical Modernism. In this, they offer the opportunity for a discourse on Modernism, which establishes a counterpoint to the Eurocentric reading, which still dominates today.

These Modernist buildings are no longer mere testimonials to the ambivalence inherent to European Modernism, but, equally, testimonials to an intercultural history of transformation, which has much to do with the critical and productive negotiation of differences. Not least because of this, the specific configuration of Modernism in Asmara - as an invaluable Potenzial for urban progress - is open to development.

In Asmara, Classical European Modernism was - beyond its original programmes and systems of representation - ultimately contextualised, made relative and in the end grounded locally in a very pragmatic way. In this sense, Classical Modernism is no longer out of the modern context.

# The historical context of the Asmara Architecture

**eins** Entwicklungspolitik 2-3-2007 published a controversy on the historical reference presented in the Asmara architecture exhibition. Raimund Rütten, Emeritus Professor for Romance Languages at the Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, strongly criticizes the exhibit,

Naigzy Gebremedhin and his co-author of the book *Asmara – Africa’s secret modernist city*, Edward Denison, as well as the Italian architect Anna Godino defend the approach of the exhibition. The following texts are shortened versions of the originals. **Editors**



## Futurism on blood-soaked ground

**Prof. Raimund Rütten:** I was quite upset and shocked about what was presented about Asmara in the Architecture Museum: 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 avant-garde 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 heave 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, 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 over-riding 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

**Anna Godio:** It is not possible to minimize the contributions of futurism to the modern culture. Futurism arose as part of the general artistic ferment that characterized the intellectual life of Europe, and particularly France, in the period before 1914. The connection between Italian futurism and fascism is well known, but we cannot say that the two things are the same, or that the relation between them is direct and automatic. On the contrary, the development of art, literature and music follows its own immanent and specific laws. The development of art and politics forms two entirely separate lines, with their own determining features, turning points, complex relations and revolutions.

Futurism and fascism had some common aspects: the blind activism, the irrationalism, but also remarkable differences: the state-worship and the fascist hierarchy against the general anarchy of futurism. The rapid rise of industry and the widespread application of new technology captured the imagination of the new generation of artists who rejected the conventionalism of the Academy. The cult of the machine was central to futurism. Cubism had already started to represent reality as a series of geometrical forms. Futurism took this one step further, elevating the straight lines and streamlined forms of industry to a new form of art



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