



# Eritrea

## *Refinding Africa's Modernist Experience*

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### ABSTRACT

Modernism in Africa is often conceptualised as a post-colonial experience, a phase through which emerging nation states sought to express and embody independence through new architectural and urban forms. However, one of Africa's most profound encounters with Modernist architecture appeared in Eritrea, six decades before its independence at a time when the whole of Africa was under colonial rule. Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, comprises the most complete manifestation of Modernism in the continent, while outlying towns also host occasional examples from this period. Created by Italian colonialists in the 1930's and augmented through the period of Ethiopian colonial rule, Eritrea's architecture and modern urban landscapes represent unique Modernist experiences in Africa. These architectural legacies have until recently attracted little attention or systematic enquiry. The paucity of academic critique can be attributed to Eritrea's late entry among Africa's independent states. This anomaly has profound consequences for subsequent studies of Modernist articulation through independence in Africa, provoking a reassessment of perceptions in this domain and presenting complex challenges for architectural preservation.

### INTRODUCTION

Eritrea's colonial period, unlike most African countries, lasted until the 1990's, leaving tangible legacies of various colonial rulers spanning many centuries. The arrival of the Italians at the Red Sea port of Massawa in 1885 proved a defining point in Eritrea's modern colonial experience. This incursion can be viewed as one of many by various foreign powers over the centuries, including the Turks, Egyptians and Ethiopians, who succeeded in administering portions of what is now Eritrea at various times throughout history. In 1900, after consolidating their foothold on the Eritrean coast, the Italians moved their colonial capital to the highlands, to the tiny village of Asmara [fig 1].



Asmara grew incrementally through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Italy set about building its East African Empire or 'Africa Orientale Italiana'. Eritrea's urban development occurred slowly, spurred primarily by Italy's policy of resettling rural labourers in Africa from the Motherland and Italy's expansionist intentions in the region. By the end of 1911, Italy's African Empire incorporated Italian Somaliland<sup>1</sup> and Libya.

Urban development in Eritrea before 1935 remained limited to Asmara and, to a lesser extent, Massawa, both of which had had significant city plans devised in 1913 and 1916 respectively and grew gradually thereafter. The divergent architectural and urban character of both settlements can be attributed to cultural, geographical and climatic factors. Massawa's position on the Red

<sup>1</sup> Excluding Jubaland, which it acquired from Kenya in 1925.

Sea coast made it an important trading port with a distinct Islamic character, as well as being located in one of the hottest regions on earth. In contrast, Asmara, in the highlands at 2,500m altitude, had a temperate climate and was situated among predominantly Orthodox Christian communities.

Eritrea's first encounter with Modernism occurred after 1935, when its urban fabric was transformed completely due to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. Eritrea was used as a platform from which to launch this invasion and was flooded with resources to satisfy the war effort. Massawa, the country's primary entry point, was modernised and became one of the most advanced ports in Africa. Formerly diminutive settlements around Eritrea were transformed into modern towns, as they became links in sophisticated road and rail networks that spread out across the Horn of Africa. In a matter of months, Asmara was turned into a stylish city far in advance of most other African cities of that time. In addition to the construction of theatres, cinemas, shops, recreational facilities, spacious residences, and government buildings, it boasted a modern transportation infrastructure that supported over 50,000 motorcars and was said to have more traffic lights than Rome. Asmara's Italian urban population exploded from around 4,000 before 1935 to approximately 70,000 by 1941<sup>2</sup> when they surrendered to Allied forces.

#### THE ROOTS OF MODERNISM IN ERITREA

Before 1935, Italian buildings in Eritrea had been designed in various eclectic styles, reflecting assorted configurations of Romanesque, Medieval, Classical, Colonial, and on rare occasions vernacular compositions. Contemporary debates in architecture and design in Italy had not reached the distant colonial outpost of Eritrea with its small architectural fraternity. Since the early 1900's, Italian architecture, like that elsewhere in Europe and in America, had been struggling to seek a modern discourse more suitable to the emerging machine age.

In 1902, Art Nouveau emerged from the First International Exposition of Modern Decorative Art, followed by Antonio Sant' Elia's *Manifesto dell'architettura futurista* in 1914, heralding architecture's espousal of Futurism. By 1921, Italian architecture had cultivated a distinct style, known as Novecento, viewed by many as a simplified adaptation of classical forms. By the late 1920's, Italian architecture had created a distinctly Italianate variation of the International Style or Modern Movement which had emerged in response to architectural theories expounded by Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923) and Walter Gropius's *Internationale Architektur* (1925). This new expression was called

Rationalism and differed from Novecento in its application of logical thought processes to create rational design solutions, emphasising functionality and structural integrity over decorative and highly stylised configurations.

As numerous architects and builders arrived in Eritrea from Italy to exploit the inevitable construction boom following Italy's conquest of Ethiopia, they brought with them the latest architectural ideas and styles. These were underpinned by Rationalism, which in turn, helped mould Eritrea's urban character, a character strongly influenced by functionality and devoid of the types of ornamentation popularised by other Modern styles that have since been labelled collectively as Art Deco.

#### MODERN URBAN PLANS

The unique circumstances that defined this epoch from 1935-1941 witnessed the transformation of Asmara into Africa's primary Modernist city and also saw the introduction of modern architectural styles in other towns in Eritrea. Hundreds of buildings designed by Italian architects and built by an Eritrean workforce were constructed all over the country, leaving Eritrea and most especially, Asmara, with a Modernist architectural legacy that is unmatched in Africa and among the most exemplary in the world.

While this legacy comprises many individual structures, the importance of the urban plans that influenced the position and character of many of these buildings should not be overlooked. The urban designs for Asmara had evolved since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it was an explicitly fascist-influenced plan of 1938 by the engineer, Vittorio Cafiero, that is largely responsible for defining Asmara's subsequent urban form. Cafiero's plan was eventually chosen as the winner in a competition corrupted by the organiser and Governor of Asmara, Vincenzo de Feo, who had originally awarded himself winner and collected the 10,000 Lire prize for his rabidly racist plan named *Sannita*. De Feo was swiftly replaced as Governor and his plan rescinded in favour of Cafiero's. Less racially motivated than *Sannita*, Cafiero's plan was nonetheless based on racial segregation and the division of urban spaces according to ethnicity and functionality. The overall plan developed the earlier designs by the engineer Odoardo Cavagnari of 1913 and 1916, which had also implemented divisions of space within the city along racial lines [fig 2 + 3].

A defining characteristic of Asmara's urban plan was the deliberate inclusion of monumental boulevards that radiated from and dissected the city centre. This, toge-



fig 2 Plan for Asmara 1938 by Vittorio Cafiero. From the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project of Eritrea by kind permission of Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente.

ther with Asmara's appealing natural landscape, provided ample opportunity for the design and construction of imposing civic buildings and public spaces. Broad

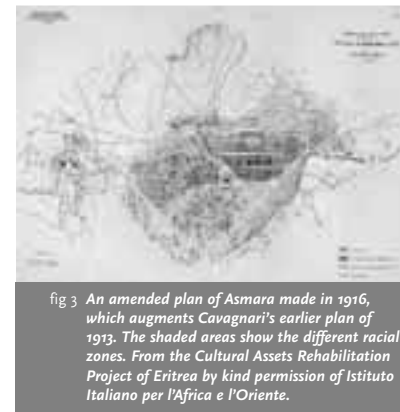


fig 3 An amended plan of Asmara made in 1916, which augments Cavagnari's earlier plan of 1913. The shaded areas show the different racial zones. From the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project of Eritrea by kind permission of Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente.

<sup>2</sup> Most of these were civilians and soldiers sent to Eritrea to assist in the war effort and establish themselves in this new colony between 1936-1941.

avenues intersected and defined different parts of the city according to function and layout. Residential areas for Europeans were laid out along individual streets among the spacious and undulating terrain to the south of the city centre, while non-Europeans shared the land to the north of the city with industrial facilities in densely populated slum areas where street plans and basic infrastructure were not provided. The city centre was occupied by commercial and governmental buildings set among public gardens or along main thoroughfares.

In Massawa, the urban plan of 1916 drafted by Odoardo Cavagnari had proposed to erase the traditional urban form on Massawa Island by destroying the existing buildings and replacing the unsystematic street pattern that had evolved over many decades with a new formalised street layout and modern buildings. The plan was too costly and so was rejected. However, in the 1930's the island was extended to the south to accommodate new residential and commercial buildings<sup>3</sup>. A large amount of land was reclaimed on the neighbouring island of Taulud, on which new residences for Europeans and hotels were built [fig 4].

Elsewhere, the urban plans for Eritrean towns were less ambitious. Keren's existing layout was altered only slightly, while Decemhare, to the south of Asmara, was modernised in an attempt to make it the hub of Italy's East African Empire's expansive road network.



fig 4 Cavagnari's plan of Massawa from 1914 showing a proposed street layout and additional causeways. Much of the plan was never implemented. From the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project of Eritrea by kind permission of Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente.

<sup>3</sup> These have recently all been destroyed in the first phase of a plan to build a luxury resort on the island, built by Italian contractors for the Eritrean Government.

Nonetheless, these designs for new cities and towns provided the foundation for the construction of modern buildings and implementation of new ideas in urban design and architecture [fig 5 + 6].



fig 5 An early plan for Keren drafted in 1913. From the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project of Eritrea by kind permission of Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente.



fig 6 An early plan of Decemhare. From the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project of Eritrea by kind permission of Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente.

#### SIGNIFICANT MODERNIST EXPRESSIONS

The earliest manifestation of Modernism in Eritrea was the former Agricultural Office of Eritrea in Asmara, which also once served as a military prison during the Italian period.

Constructed in 1935, the building is not explicitly Modernist, but it reflects a refined Classical style and geometric simplicity akin to Novecento architecture, and serves as an important linkage between the traditional forms previously so popular in Asmara and the overtly Modern aesthetic for which the city is now famous. Within two years, the styles of buildings in Asmara were bolder and brasher in their espousal of Modernism. Italian architects, liberated from the constraints imposed upon them in the more conservative European environment, were able to experiment, often arriving at truly flamboyant solutions. Among the most

extraordinary structures designed during this period was the Fiat Tagliero service station constructed in 1938. Located outside the city centre at the junction of the two main southbound roads, one leading to the new airport and the other to Ethiopia, the Futuristic form of Fiat Tagliero soars above the road, imitating what was the most explicit symbol of modernity at the time - the aeroplane [fig 7 - 10].



fig 7 Former Agricultural Office of Eritrea in Asmara.



fig 8 Interior design for an underground commercial centre in the centre of Asmara, 1937. From Asmara Municipal Archives.



fig 9 AGIP service station, 1937 (architect unknown).



fig 10 Fiat Tagliero service station, designed by Giuseppe Pettazzi. From A. Mondadori, *L'Africa Orientale*, Milan, 1938.



fig 11 Giuseppe Pettazzi's sketch of his Fiat Tagliero service station designed in 1938.

The two-storeyed main body containing offices and the service counter echoes a cockpit with sleek wrap-around windows. Above this soars an ornamental tower - its erectness accentuated by the vertical lines of the window frames, the cockpit's bull-nosed frontage and the two flagpoles crowning the building. More impressive and far more audacious are its 30 metre cantilevered reinforced concrete wings that hang from the structure with breathtaking weightlessness. The unreserved impressiveness of this volant structure is most conspicuous when standing beneath the building's massive wings, the sky forming an appropriate backdrop under the canopy of what surely ranks among the most astounding Modern structures in Africa.



fig 12 The Fiat Tagliero service station in 2002, before extensive renovation in 2003.

The temerarious design stunned the municipal authorities, who, disbelieving the architect's calculations, insisted that supporting columns be included in the final design. This myth proved fact when the original plans were recently unearthed, showing each wing being propped up by 15 poles. The compromise doubtless irked the building's architect, Giuseppe Pettazzi, who saw his bold design unceremoniously rooted to the floor and appearing unfinished. Unbowed by the bureaucratic setback, he constructed his aeroplane with its wings supported by wooden pillars. According to urban legend, at the building's unveiling the architect put a gun to the contractor's head and ordered him to remove the supports. Under duress, the builder duly complied with Pettazzi's demands. When the supports were taken away, the wings stayed aloft and have remained that way for seven decades [fig 11 + 12].

Though no other buildings match the frivolity of the Fiat Tagliero service station, Eritrea hosts a genuinely significant collection of buildings reflecting an assortment of Modernist influences employed across a wide range of building types such as cinemas, shops, industrial facilities and residential housing. This style, though concentrated in Asmara, also appears in towns throughout the country [fig 13 - 16].



fig 13 Cinema Impero in Asmara, designed by Mario Messina in 1937.

While Fiat Tagliero and other buildings echo the exuberance of Futurism, others are serious in espousing theoretical integrity. Primary among these is the Selam



fig 14 Former Villa in Asmara, 1938 (architect unknown).



fig 15 Former Lancia workshop in Asmara, designed by Carlo Marchi and Carlo Montalbetti in 1938.



fig 16 Cinema in Decemhare, late 1930's (architect unknown).

Hotel, arguably the purest expression of Rationalist architecture in Africa. Designed in Rome in 1937 for an Italian hotel chain, the building boasts a strikingly functional exterior, devoid of ornamentation and expressing clearly the configuration and function of internal spaces. The stark outline of the guest rooms' recessed balconies on the first floor, each aligned with the conspicuously simple square windows on the ground floor, and the uncomplicated entrance in the centre of the building's façade provide a radically Modern appearance, undermined only by the enclosed veranda to the left of the porch [fig 17].



fig 17 The Selam Hotel, designed by Rinaldo Borgnino in 1937.

#### MODERNISM IN RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS

Elsewhere, Asmara's Modern architectural character has been defined by other influences. In religious architecture, the design of the Grand Mosque, built in 1938, represents a fusion of Classical and Islamic styles in a Modern composition. While forming the centrepiece of a master plan by the Italian engineer Guido Ferrazza, the Mosque has a fluted minaret and employs various configurations of Roman-arched colonnades in buildings surrounding the adjacent market places. A similar fusion of traditional and Modern styles appears in the nearby Orthodox Cathedral of Nda Mariam. Built on the site of the old Coptic Church designed by the Italian engineer E. Gallo in 1920 (which itself had replaced the original Coptic Church of the village of Asmara), this distinctive structure was built in 1938-39 and is unique for its adoption of local construction techniques by European architects, especially during a period of profound racial intolerance. The Modern appearance uses simplified versions of vernacular architectural styles, most notably by emulating the conical roofs of traditional thatched huts and the 'monkey-head' method of construction, once unique to this part of Africa. 'Monkey-head' is the term used to describe the wooden dowels that protrude from a wall constructed using horizontal layers of stone and wood. The dowels were used to tie the wall and give it support before lime mortar was introduced from Yemen in the mid-seventeenth century. Although the 'monkey-heads' have been eliminated from the design, the conspicuous layers of stone and brick imitate the layers of stone and wood [fig 18 + 19].

#### POLITICAL MONUMENTALISM

The bold and often imposing character of Modernism frequently found particular favour with political structures, whose physical presence and symbolism sought to endorse the authority and influence of the state. The



fig 18 Cathedral of Nda Mariam, 1938-39 (architect unknown).



fig 19 Grand Mosque, 1938 (architect unknown).

most explicit examples of politically motivated Modernism in Asmara are the former Casa del Fascio and the Municipality, both on Harnet Avenue. The façade of the former Casa del Fascio, now the Ministry of Education, built in 1940 and designed by Bruno Sclafani, was as an addition to the more traditional building behind it, which was designed in a Romanesque style and was also the Fascist Party Headquarters. The additional building is a good example of Fascist Monumentalism with its strident stepped tower including a balcony from which to conduct speeches. A huge Fascist eagle was designed to hang at the base of the tower but this was never realised. The balcony too was never used for its intended purpose, as Mussolini never actually visited Asmara, although a similar feature was included on the new Municipality [fig 20 + 21].

The Municipality was designed at the end of the Italian period but constructed later in the 1950's. Here the monumental tower is positioned in the centre of the two-storey building. In 1965, the huge assembly hall was added at the rear of the building 4, followed six years later, towards the end of Haile Sellassie's reign, with the addition of an extra floor and the extension of the tower. Elsewhere, the former Casa del Fascio, built at the end of the 1930's in the northern city of Keren, also reflects a conspicuously Modern appearance, contrasting with the traditional character of the busy market town [fig 22].



fig 20 Asmara's former Casa del Fascio, designed by Bruno Sclafani in 1940, now the Ministry of Education.

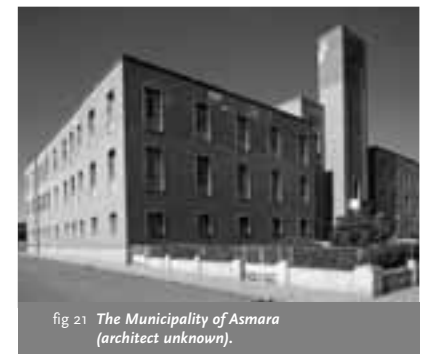


fig 21 The Municipality of Asmara (architect unknown).



fig 22 The former Casa del Fascio in Keren (architect unknown).

4 The inauguration of the extension was conducted by Queen Elizabeth II, who, for her services, had one of Asmara's main streets named after her (now Martyrs Avenue).

## DECLINE OF MODERNISM AFTER 1941

In 1941, Keren was the scene of the first Allied victory in the Second World War, as they broke through the Italian defences and went on to drive Italy from the Horn of Africa. Eritrea faced economic decline as the unsustainability of Italy's war economy was exposed. While Massawa was laid to waste by the retreating Italian navy, Asmara and much of the rest of Eritrea enjoyed a relatively quiet remainder of the war under the newly established British Military Administration. Throughout the decade of British rule, Eritrea experienced relatively little development, as much of the country's industrial capacity was dismantled and sold overseas to pay for the cost of administering the country. The most notable change in architecture was a reversal on back to more 'rustic' traditional references from the stark boldness of some forms of Rationalism favoured, though far from exclusively and not officially, by Mussolini's government. Two notable exceptions were the new Municipality, built in the 1950's, and the adjacent Palazzo Mutton. This commercial and residential building, originally designed to be six storeys high, was an imitation of Giuseppe Terragni's Novocomum



fig 23 Giuseppe Terragni's Novocomum building in Como.



fig 24 Antonio Vitaliti's Palazzo Mutton in Asmara.

apartment building (1927-29) in Como, Italy, one of the first Rationalist buildings. After the defeat of Italian Fascism, Antonio Vitaliti's design for the Palazzo Mutton in 1944 might well be regarded as a nostalgic architectural espousal of one of Rationalism's foremost buildings, and was among the last Modernist buildings from this period to be constructed in Eritrea [fig 23 + 24].

In 1952, the United Nations federated Eritrea with its neighbour, Ethiopia. The uncomfortable union led to an armed 'struggle' that started in 1962 and lasted three decades. While the rest of Africa was embarking on independence and seeking their own expressions of architectural modernity, Eritrea was cocooned by a belligerent neighbour that lacked the will or the means to ensure the long-term development of its cities and towns.

## SECOND PHASE OF MODERNISM

Internationally, architecture during the 1950's and 60's saw the emergence of high-rise concrete apartments and offices. Asmara, at this time Ethiopia's second largest city, had several projects for high-rise structures, but few were built, as the economy faltered due to the uncertainty caused by war. Several high-rise buildings were completed, puncturing Asmara's predominantly low-rise skyline. Arguably the most ill considered is the Ambassador Hotel, standing superciliously opposite the Cathedral. Built in 1972, this ten-storey block dominates the vista of the Cathedral from the south, while obstructing the views from other angles. Other projects included a five-storey building on Harnet Avenue designed by Haile Sellassie's favoured architect, Arturo Mezzedimi, who completed many large projects in Addis Ababa, Asmara and throughout Eritrea.

Mezzedimi was the most prolific architect working in Ethiopia and Eritrea during the 1950's and 60's and a proud exponent of Modernism. His first buildings in Eritrea included the Public Swimming Pool (1945), but he went on to design much larger projects including several high-rise developments in Asmara and many government buildings in Ethiopia, as well as numerous public, private and religious buildings throughout Eritrea. With Ethiopia's independence after the Second World War, Mezzedimi became the country's leading architect until Haile Sellassie's overthrow in 1974. Among his most important work is the Headquarters of the Organisation of African Unity in Addis Ababa.

Following the Marxist revolution in Ethiopia that deposed Haile Sellassie, Eritrea's predicament worsened. A devastating period of repression under the communist Derg regime lasting nearly two decades effectively

sealed Asmara and the rest of Eritrea from the world. The only major construction in Asmara for nearly 20 years was Bahti Meskerem Square, the monumental concrete stadium marking the eastern end of Harnet Avenue. The structure is actually only the smaller half of a colossal parading ground that was never completed.

## INDEPENDENCE

In 1991, the 30 year 'struggle' for independence ended. Eritrea fervently embraced a world bearing no resemblance to the one in which it was created a century earlier. Independent Eritrea, like other independent African states before it, attempted to find an architectural dialectic relevant to its new identity. Italy's other former African colonies of Somalia and Libya had attempted to erase the physical manifestations of their colonial past by pulling down many of these architectural legacies. Ironically, after the construction of a number of landmark buildings in Asmara's centre, Eritreans chose to question the relevance of these new structures, recognising their incongruousness with the character of their beloved city - albeit a character forged by 1930's Modernism under abhorrent colonial conditions [fig 25].

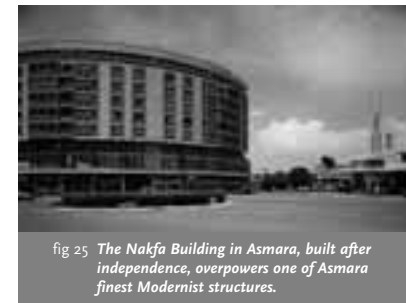


fig 25 The Nakfa Building in Asmara, built after independence, overpowers one of Asmara's finest Modernist structures.

Fittingly, it was the former military prison, Eritrea's first Modern building, that heralded the country's call for architectural preservation. In the mid-1990's, a German architectural firm was contracted to provide a plan to build a series of high-rise glass towers to house the financial and commercial heart of this new country. The new complex would have required four blocks of the city centre, including the former prison, to be demolished. So incongruous and disrespectful of Asmara's character were the plans, that Eritreans protested vehemently against the development. Leading the protest were inmates of the former prison, demanding that their history be preserved as a monument to their struggle for independence.

Though Asmara had been designed by Italians and altered under British and Ethiopian administrations, after 1991 it was undisputedly Eritrean. The centre of the city, with its wide, well planned streets bristling with varied activities gave rise to a diverse and prosperous urban environment and a high residential density. The daily 'passeggiata'<sup>5</sup> and Asmara's café culture form important linkages between the street and buildings, and are prime examples of an adopted cultural legacy that is now a cornerstone of Asmara's social character founded on a renowned and distinctive sense of place. These and other civil activities have forged an urban identity unique in context and form that are distinctive to contemporary Asmara and antithetical to the regimes that contributed to the city's creation.

## PRESERVING AFRICA'S EARLY MODERNISM

Today, virtually unaltered since its most profound period of development in the late 1930's, Asmara represents a complete Modernist city and Africa's oldest Modernist architectural heritage. Africa's youngest country, with its distinctive tangible and intangible heritages that have derived from its Modernist experience, therefore confronts contemporary academic perceptions. The active preservation of colonial Modernist articulation appears, at least for now, preferential to new architectural expressions motivated by independence. With two distinct phases of Modernist development prior to independence, Eritrea's architectural heritage remains among Africa's most significant, despite being the legacy of two separate and iniquitous colonial experiences, and therefore impels a re-evaluation of Africa's architectural heritage and its comprehension internationally.

<sup>5</sup> 'Passeggiata' is an Italian term for a leisurely walk, which Asmarinos continue to conduct each evening in order to stroll and talk to one another.