

ASMERA: THE SLEEPING BEAUTY

*Asmera: The City High Above the Clouds*¹

by

Ambassador Andebrhan Welde Giorgis

The city high above the clouds depicts the picturesque Eritrean capital, as the clouds literally climb up to Asmera from the deep gorge below, gently caressing the eastern escarpment that rises from the coastal plains adjoining the Red Sea. Perched at the crest of Eritrea's Central Plateau on the northwestern rim of the Great African Rift Valley, Asmera stands out as the capital city with the highest elevation in Africa. The combination of a geographic location at 15 20 N and 38 53 E and an altitude of 2,450 m bestow Eritrea's capital with perennial spring-like weather and year-round mild temperature averaging 16⁰ Celsius.

Modern Asmera, just like Eritrea and the prototype contemporary African state, is a colonial construct. Having established the colonial state, Italy built Asmera, with its unique landscape of art deco buildings. A recent publication, *Asmara: Africa's Secret Modernist City*, presents a brief history of the city and an impressive pictorial review of its main modernist buildings. Indeed, the historical centre of Asmera is the repository of the architectural innovation of the Modernist Movement that found in the backwaters of a distant colony a carte blanche for radical artistic experimentation free from the cares and inhibitions of a conservative milieu prevalent in Europe.

Asmera replaced Massawa as the capital of Italy's firstborn (*primogenito*) African colony in 1897. With the rise of fascism and Benito Mussolini's ambitions for imperial conquest and expansion in the Horn of Africa in the 1930s, Asmera became the centrepiece of the colonial modernisation project of Italy's short-lived colonial venture in East Africa. In the process, the Italians introduced state-of-the-art urban design, city planning and construction, bequeathing Asmera with superb art deco designs, modernist architecture, iconic buildings and magnificent structures.

¹ This article is based essentially on, and draws substantive excerpts from, a recent book by the author, Andebrhan WELDE GIORGIS, *Eritrea at a Crossroads: A Narrative of Triumph, Betrayal and Hope*. Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Company: Houston TX 77065, USA, 2014.

Between 1936 and 1941, Italy's Fascist rulers transformed Eritrea into one of the most industrialized, modern colonies in Africa. [...] Asmara became an Art Deco laboratory during the 1930s for designs that seemed, well, just too out there for mainland Italy. Rationalism, Novecento, neo-Classicism, neo-Baroque and monumentalism are among the varied avant-garde styles played with here. The result today is hundreds of aging, sherbet-coloured buildings.²

Emerging at the dawn of the twentieth century, the Modernist Movement sought to reconcile the essential principles of architectural design with the rapid development of technology and the modernization of society. The urgent need to provide comfortable housing to a nascent officer corps of an expanding colonial army and the civilian elite of a growing administrative bureaucracy, adequate logistics for a rapid military build-up for the invasion of Ethiopia and accommodate a swelling Italian immigrant settler community opened up new employment opportunities for the professional class and attracted Italian architects, engineers and artisans into Eritrea.³



Image 1: The Catholic Cathedral built in 1938 represents Asmara's distinctive landmark

² Jeffrey GETTLEMAN, Eritrea's Surreal Mix of War and Art Deco. The New York Times Media Group: International Herald Tribune, 8 October 2008.

³ Andebrhan WELDE GIORGIS, Eritrea at a Crossroads, p. 40; the number of Italian settlers in Eritrea grew from 3,949 in 1905 to 76,000 in 1939, comprising 10.3 percent of the total Eritrean population of 740,000 at the time. Podestà, Gian L., L'emigrazione Italiana in Africa Orientale <http://www.ilcornodafrica.it/rds-01emigrazione.pdf>.

Experimenting with modernist, avant-garde style architecture, the engineers, architects and artisans drew up master plans, designed structures and constructed striking modern buildings. Driven by an urgent need for rapid development and encouraged by a *laissez faire* spirit in the remote colony, the modernist movement flourished to produce an architectural gem in the colonial capital. Bold, revolutionary experimentation thus invested Asmera with some of the finest and most beautiful designs and transformed it from a sizeable traditional village into a world class modern urban centre.



Image 2: Fiat Tagliero / ©Sailko

That this was accomplished within the span of just five years stands out as a living testament to the marvels that an efficient combination of Italian architectural and engineering knowhow with productive Eritrean labour could create.⁴ The endurance of this engineering, architectural and artistic edifice makes Asmara today home to “one of the highest concentration of Modern architecture in the world” revealing “a sublime urban environment” produced by the “fusion of Modern European architecture with African highland culture”⁵.

⁴ Andebrhan WELDE GIORGIS, *Eritrea at a Crossroads*, 2014, p. 44.

⁵ Edward DENISON, Ren GUANG YU and Naigzy GEBREMEDHIN, *Asmara: Africa's Secret Modernist City*. Merrell, London and New York, 2003, p.16.



Image 3: Cinema Roma/Impero

The construction boom signified Benito Mussolini's dream of building a second Roman Empire and symbolised Rome's *civilising mission* in Africa. Asmara stands out as an ideal model of a well-planned modern city featuring impressive architecture, with its beautiful villas and graceful mansions, wide boulevards lined with indigenous *shibakha* and palm trees, paved streets, pedestrian pavements, cascading fountains, piazzas, boutiques, bars, restaurants and cafés. At the time the city was being built, Eritrea's capital could boast of "more traffic lights than Rome".⁶ Regarded as the jewel in the crown of Italy's East Africa Empire, Asmara was nicknamed *Piccola Roma*, or Little Rome, for the Italianate façade of many of its buildings.⁷

Eritrea's experience under European domination, like that of the rest of Africa, portrays the good, the bad and the ugly in the colonial system. The modernist architecture and modernisation represented the good; the slums at the periphery of the beautiful centre represented the bad; and rabid racism represented the ugly.

⁶ Vittorio SANTOIANNI, *Il Razionalismo nelle colonie italiane 1928-1943 La «nuova architettura» delle Terre d'Oltremar. Italian Architectural Planification of Asmara*, 2008, p. 64-66

http://www.fedoa.unina.it/1881/1/Santoiani_Progettazione_Architettonica.pdf

⁷ Ibid., p. 65.



Image 4: Bar Zilli / © Edward Denison

While industrialising Eritrea, modernising Asmara, introducing urban amenities in the 1930s in pursuit of its imperial project, the colonial regime initiated the first system of racial apartheid on African soil in Eritrea. Under the policy of strict racial segregation, the much applauded and celebrated edifices of the fascist era in Asmara were all located in the European quarters of the city. They were reserved for the exclusive use of the 53,00 Italian residents out of the capital's total population of 98,000.⁸

Italy's colonial regime enacted racial laws to ensure strict separation of the races, grant special privileges to Italian settlers, espouse white supremacy, and discriminate against Eritreans and other indigenous Africans in the colony. It perpetrated political oppression, economic exploitation and racial domination, treated "Africans as inferior to Europeans"⁹ and excluded Eritreans from the benefits of modernisation, denying them access to urban amenities and a modern lifestyle.¹⁰ In brief, Europeans utilised the magnificent buildings while non-Europeans lived in slums.

⁸ 1939 Italian Census on Eritrea

http://www.italyrevisited.org/photo/Migration_and_Immigration/world/1/page20

⁹ Basil DAVIDSON, *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*. Second Edition: Longman Group UK Ltd 1989, p. 5.

¹⁰ Andebrhan WELDE GIORGIS, *Eritrea at a Crossroads*, 2014, p. 43.



Image 5: Abashawl Slum

Confined to the overcrowded, sprawling slums with their narrow and dirty alleys in the ‘native’ quarters without proper health and sanitary services, Eritreans had no access to tap water, private toilet or sewerage facilities.¹¹ These poor quarters in the capital continue to languish in a similar state of neglect, want and decay to this day.¹² The fact that the city suffers from frequent and prolonged power outages and water supply stoppages has compounded the situation for the residents of the slums.

Asmara’s compendium of modernist architecture symbolises the legacy of Rome’s *civilising mission*. Despite the current loss of their ‘lustre and shine’ to the attrition of ‘time, weather and neglect’, the modernist buildings remain a distinctive feature of Eritrea’s capital. More significantly, these impressive vestiges of the colonial era constitute an enduring cultural bridge connecting Eritrea and Italy. Capitalising on this cultural bridge to conserve and build on its splendid architectural legacy remains one of contemporary Asmara’s greatest challenges.

¹¹ Eritreans were pejoratively referred to as the ‘natives’ by both the Italian and British colonizers.

¹² The Transitional Government torpedoed a German aid project worked out with the Municipality of Asmara in 1994 to rebuild one of the city’s major slum areas, Abashawl.