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Knowledge and protection of the modern and contemporary architectural heritage: comparative experiences

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Asmara and its context: architecture of Modernity and the Cultural Landscape

Acknowledging a heritage: from the Cultural Asset Rehabilitation Project to the Asmara Heritage Project

In July 2017, Asmara was listed as a World Heritage Site, capping an extremely thorough labour of documentation and analysis of the architectural heritage from the Italian colonial period presented by the Asmara Heritage Project Office (Teklemariam 2018). This activity deepened and completed a commitment already begun in the late 1990s as part of a different endeavour, the *Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project* (CARP), which made protection of the city of Asmara part of a systematic programme for the knowledge and enhancement of Eritrea's enormous tangible and intangible heritage (Tzeggai 2008).

During the years immediately following 1993, in a young nation grappling with the emergencies caused by thirty years of war for independence from Ethiopia, there was no guarantee that the problem of protecting the architecture – no less that from the colonial period¹ left by a foreign culture that had imposed it by force – would be raised; it must be emphasized that this attention matured independently of the debate over Colonial Heritage (now referred to as Shared Heritage) during those same years within Icomos at the initiative of the ex-colonising countries (Enders 2017). Making no claim to reconstruct the complexity of the cultural process that took place in Eritrea, the aim here is to touch upon some salient elements of the context in which this desire for protection developed, while referring, for more in-depth analysis, to the main contributions on the subject by Eritrean and international scholars (Chelati Dirar 2007; Casciato 1999; Fuller 2006; Gebremedhin 2007; *Architecture in Asmara* 2017).

In the aftermath of independence, the enormous housing need due to returning exiles and guerrillas resulted in the rapid development of Asmara, which not only came to include the neighbouring farming villages, but also spurred speculative activity in the central areas, seeing the single-family homes of the early twentieth century supplanted by more profitable volumes. The debate over whether or not to nonchalantly intervene in the centre immediately saw very distant positions which, in their details, are well represented by the declarations made by Michael Mehari, then an official at the Ministry of Tourism, and by the urban planner Gabriel Tzeggai. For the former, Asmara was above all an Eritrean city: the Italian occupation had imposed extraneous values and lifestyles, of which the architectural heritage was clearly the symbol, but the city's destiny now had to be left fully in the hands of the Eritrean people, which therefore had the power to transform and replace that heritage (Casciato 1999, p. 6). For Tzeggai, who just a few years later was openly questioning how it was possible for his countrymen to declare as heritage something that was not born from their culture – and that, moreover, demanded from a poor population enormous resources for its conservation –, Asmara's architecture was part of a heritage that, to be sure, belonged to the Eritrean people, but this entailed in the first place the responsibility of managing it in the common interest of humanity (Tzeggai 2008, p. 38).

Although the Eritrean desire to protect Asmara and its colonial-period architecture prevailed, it may still be seen as the outcome of processes with objectives that, while differing, agreed in recognizing the very high quality of its architecture and of its urban context. One might glimpse an initial but explicit and shared desire for protection when, shortly after the mid-1990s, the never-realized design was submitted for the State Bank of Eritrea, providing for the complete demolition of two central blocks in order to construct a ten-storey building. This episode marked the dawning realization that Asmara had precise and irreplaceable traits that should be conserved in the face of strong pressures for the city's transformation.

The inhabitants of Asmara most likely appreciated their city for its being an urban environment on a human scale, in certain ways egalitarian and 'normal' with no buildings dominating over others, and this character was a value to be safeguarded. The measures adopted following this episode therefore related mainly to protecting Asmara's urban traits and were translated, starting in 1997, into the ban on building and

intervening in the city's central areas. This is the year usually pointed to as the start of the CARP as well.

A committee for this purpose, composed of technicians from the municipality and from the CARP joined by outside consultants, defined the «Historic Perimeter of Asmara» within which about four hundred buildings were surveyed, listed as significant, and divided into three categories that regulated any interventions based on their architectural importance. This drawing of the perimeter, which focused its interest on the 'Italian' city alone, recently raised more than a little perplexity among international observers. According to architectural historian Peter Volgger, in being «scientific conservation» and «nostalgia for the past» at the same time, it reflected the more or less definite combination of conservative and tourism/economic aims (Volgger 2017, p. 215): the objective might have been to valorize the city's aestheticism and its iconic aspects by focusing on their unique and authentic nature in order to attract international investors. Even Ethiopian political scientist Fasil Demissie saw in this initiative chiefly the will to bring Asmara into the consumption flows of organized tourism, and considered it essentially an international marketing operation that exploited the most iconic architecture of the 1930s to create a brand unto itself (Demissie 2017, p. 260).

According to Demissie, it was highly indicative that this strategy in fact marginalized those places that carried a more hybrid, complex memory, such as the 'indigenous' quarter of Aba Shawl, the Kagnew Station, and the Tank Graveyard. These places, more difficult to offer to a broad public but essential elements of Asmara's true palimpsest, were instead included by the experts from the *Asmara Heritage Project* within the perimeter of the core zone proposed in the 2017 candidacy dossier, which broadened the census to more than four thousand buildings and joined attention to the urban scale with attention to the architectural one, to intangible heritage, and to the material authenticity of construction, seeking to restore the city's complexity. The dossier presented in 2017 is therefore the outcome not only of careful documentary research, but also of a process of devoting attention to heritage that has been twenty years in the making, and is still in progress.

Since the inclusion on the World Heritage List (WHL) is an operation that may be ascribed to globalization processes, the component of promoting Asmara's heritage for tourism cannot be wholly excluded from the intentions underlying the candidacy; however, this onerous and demanding activity of knowledge and protection would not be entirely explainable if not for the fact that Asmara's architectural and cultural landscape bears social and identity values of significance for Eritrea today.

Asmara: the heritage of Modernity. Dialogue with the contemporary: permanence and transformation

Today, Asmara – an urban model of contained heights and balanced spatial relationships, with its 'choral' historic construction boasting an excellent urban arrangement in a Modernist setting – bears today to civil coexistence in a multiethnic and multireligious society.

On the one hand, Unesco's 2017 decision to include Asmara on the WHL confirms Eritrea's acceptance of its colonial heritage, while on the other hand promoting the idea of a city that is sound – culturally and 'aesthetically', but also 'functionally'. It is hoped that drawing international attention to the preservation, protection, and enhancement of the pre-rationalist and Modernist city might also support a possible incentive plan and an improved quality of life, while also providing an opportunity for possible tourism development in Eritrea.

Asmara is an icon of modern Italian planning in a colonial setting; the value of its built environment is provided by the summary 'measure' of spaces and buildings, at times 'repurposed' over the years, but never distorted to the needs of current social life. Interventions were not limited to designing public and private architecture, but also saw the development of public and semi-public spaces. In comparison with contemporary 'planned cities' from the same period, Asmara's urban built environment retains to this day a certain pleasantness, due precisely to its enduring tree-lined avenues, public greenery, pedestrian paths, collective services, liveability, and an infrastructure network that has managed to keep up with the times. Regulatory plans as well as construction and hygiene regulations – in accordance with national practice – governing the building of the 'planned city' were adopted as early as the turn of the twentieth century, giving Asmara its grid layout with the market at the centre. The phase of its real development as a modern capital, with a new road artery that was to become Viale Mussolini (today's Harnet Avenue), took place between 1936 and 1940: while the outer neighbourhoods were residential, consisting of villas and cottages, Viale Mussolini was lined by institutional buildings, thereby taking on a character that was representative, monumental, and sober all at once.

Constructions in 'Asmara Style' – a blend of Eclecticism, Novecento Italiano, Metaphysics, and Futurism – show high quality and great skill in using traditional materials in modern forms: excellent clays for bricks, and an elegant use of worked stone like granite, trachyte, basalt, schist, and sandstone. Of the Modernist

materials, mention must be made of reinforced concrete and of glass brick for developing 'volumetric simplicities' and the judicious ratios between masonry and window and door size, and also for the construction of loggias or extraordinary overhangs (see Fiat Tagliero). The buildings' volumes are highlighted by plastered surfaces with contained hues (the range of earth tones), and with particular 'thickness' finishings. In order to optimize and integrate the modern methods of the new architecture, such as respect for 'functionality' and the absence of decorations, the traits of the constructions in Asmara, due also to the cost of transporting materials from Italy, are combined out of necessity with a certain economy, with the rational use of raw materials, and with construction responding to its *genius loci*.

In the 1930s, the city saw a double articulation of the concept of modernity: understood on the one hand as constructive rationality and suitability, with particular attention devoted to the innovative reinterpretation of local traditional materials and techniques in order to draw from them those elements of necessity that are the basis for a perfect correspondence between the place and the location; and on the other hand as the avant-garde and experimentation, bringing to this geographically remote location the most advanced points in the national debate, in search of a character that best represented Italian culture, not through ornaments and decorations, but through the proportion of volumes and colours, and their play in the light (Consoli 1992; *Architettura italiana d'Oltremare* 1993).

The preservation of Asmara: practices and challenges

Twenty years of centralization of political power in Addis Ababa by Haile Selassie and the Mengistu Socialist regime, thirty years of war for Ethiopian independence, and, not least, the fragile economy of the contemporary world have severely strained not only the Eritrean population, but the city's architecture, too.

In the absence or near absence of maintenance works, the buildings today now show clear phenomena of decay. While on the one hand there is a clearly undeniable negative connotation, the policy of non-intervention due to budget shortfalls has actually, over the long term, safeguarded these works of architecture from inapt actions, thus preserving their authenticity. It has also been found that, where maintenance or repurposing interventions have taken place, they often have little impact. However, when the country's economy has a chance to rebound, the architecture of the city of Asmara will have to meet the new needs of contemporary society and respond to new development and consumption models, as well as to the necessary functional and regulatory adjustments (the latter, moreover, already required by the Unesco procedures). These needs, if not controlled, may considerably modify the physical and material appearance of the existing buildings.

Overall, the built-up area of Asmara has common problems, to be ascribed mainly to the lack of maintenance over time: damage to roofs, poorly functioning collection of rainwater, infiltration, detached plaster, obsolete networks and plant, and, now, phenomena of pollution-caused decay as well. Important alterations include improper operations on the finishings – for example the new surfaces/paint jobs being incompatible, in their materials and colours, with the existing substrata – while the most widespread phenomena include window and door replacements.

In order to avoid unsuitable interventions or removals, it will be indispensable to prepare a specific research work aimed at learning the original material and technological characteristics of the buildings' various components, and of the Modernist materials and finishings², at times experimental and 'autarkic', whose performance capabilities in the Eritrean context are still little known.

Volumetric alterations include transformations of the 'voids' in existing buildings in order to meet real housing needs, with the consequent modification of frontages through closures of loggias and balconies. Key architectural features are undermined by a host of uncoordinated interventions with the addition of accessory elements by juxtaposition, such as: satellite dishes, air conditioning systems, awnings, screens, road signs and advertising, and so on.

All the interventions, lawful in and of themselves, carried out without rules and with no unifying plan, can bring about considerable modifications to the buildings and their context.

The additions by functional adjustments, now deemed indispensable, suggest finding, as quickly as possible, criteria that make it possible to intervene on the structures in a correct fashion, thereby adapting them to the new needs of contemporary living, but without irreversibly transforming their arrangement.

Therefore, it is urgent to adopt the Plan of conservation and maintenance interventions and *Progetto colore* for Asmara – a genuine open-air museum of architecture and of modern urban planning, where work will necessarily have to be done also with a programmed incentives plan for safeguarding the urban

fabric, the individual buildings, but also the finishings and colours of Modernism (Boriani, Toniolo *et al.* 2009; *La sfida del Moderno* 2003).

It will also be important to clarify certain principles through a set of exemplary construction interventions that can show the possibility of solving problems compatibly with the needs of conserving the heritage. Lastly, a phase not to be underestimated in dealing with the Plans is the spread both of intentions and of results, since all levels of the community must be involved in order to achieve the objectives that have been set³. In fact, plans imposed from above, if they are not adopted by the inhabitants as well, remain ends unto themselves, with no continued valorization in the future.

Asmara and its context, between past and future

For Asmara, combining protection and development is a passage necessary for the very sustainability of the city's protection. If the core zone and the buffer zone are important for identifying and characterizing the heritage, it is difficult to think of development while containing our gaze inside them. Asmara's recognition as a heritage site might therefore be not so much as a point of arrival but one of departure for spurring understanding of the network of relationships and exchanges⁴ that made this city a strategic centre in the Horn of Africa – relations that are just as significant in the contemporary age. While at the end of the nineteenth century Asmara became the capital of the Eritrean colony even though it was less inhabited than Massawa or Keren, it was above all a development in the transport network that placed it at the centre of the highland's road grid and linked it to the port of Massawa via what later became, in the late 1930s, the most infrastructured axis in the Horn of Africa, endowed with a railway line, a blacktop road open for traffic in all seasons, and a three-cable aerial line, the world's longest at that time⁵.

This broadening of the gaze leads in the first place to reflecting upon what the impact of the colonial presence outside of urban settings was, and what took place along this axis in terms of transformations of the cultural landscape after 1889, the year when a link – first physical, but then cultural as well – began to be established among the various populations of the coastal lowland and the highland. This also encourages examination of the material results – in terms of infrastructures and constructions – of the design efforts by the Italian engineers who, between 1885 and 1941, put their polytechnic culture to the test in such extreme and diversified settings, making constructions that would today merit being recognized and protected. But above all, it spurs us to consider what type of growth to promote: the hoped-for development for Asmara, also in light of the peace finally signed between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the lifting of international sanctions, might once again find one of its resources in the strategic position of the country and of the city. How urban development, conservation of road and railway constructions, and protection of the cultural landscape can be reconciled is an extremely difficult topic, but one that spurs grappling with new complexities⁶.

Notes

1 Eritrea was established as an Italian colony in 1890. In 1941, it came under British Military Administration and in 1952 was federated with Ethiopia, which downgraded it to a simple province in 1962. A struggle for independence began during those same years, intensifying in 1975 when the *Derg* military regime was established in Ethiopia. The war ended with Ethiopia's defeat in 1991, and in 1993 Eritrea officially became an independent nation. Throughout these years, Asmara was never a battlefield, and has thus been preserved intact to this day.

2 On Modernist finishings, see *I materiali* 2008; for the specific case of Asmara, see Callea 2019.

3 Gebremedhin, Denison *et al.* 2003; Denison, Ren *et al.* 2003 are the instrument for disseminating the results of the CARP's research on Asmara.

4 Icomos 2005 greatly emphasized the context into which the sites were inserted.

5 In Maggi 1996, the very close relationship between Italian colonialism and transport was examined.

6 Since 2012, Polytechnic University of Milan, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, has been working in Eritrea with conservation, protection, and valorization activities. In 2017, the Polytechnic University – with the office of the *Asmara Heritage Project*

and thanks to European Community funding – initiated a training project in the restoration area; in 2018 it also activated a research work on the Massawa-Asmara road, entitled *Polysocial EMotion: Eritrea Mobility and Cultural Heritage: New Frontiers of the Horn of Africa*.

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