



AFRICA'S SECRET MODERNIST CITY

Corinne Archer

One of Africa's best kept secrets, a city crammed full of experimental European modernist architecture, is slowly emerging from the ashes of war and neglect.

Tucked away on a plateau over 2 kilometres high, Asmara, the capital of Africa's newest state, Eritrea, boasts one of the highest concentrations of modernist architecture anywhere in the world. Concealed from the outside world for 30 years as civil war raged through the then Ethiopia, Eritrea's 'hidden capital' was revealed after the country finally gained its independence in 1991.

Eritrea's history is turbulent. Wedged in the Horn of Africa between Ethiopia, Djibouti and Sudan, this little nation of 3.5 million people is strategically situated along 1000 kilometres of Red Sea coast. The ancient port of Adulis, which supplied the powerful kingdom of Axum (in present-day northern Ethiopia) around the first century AD, was located in an area east of the Eritrean port city of Massawa. From the fourth century, Christianity became the state religion, influenced by Syrian bishops. But with the decline of the Axumite kingdom in the seventh century, Eritrea became a staging post for a series of invaders and occupiers over the centuries – Turks, Egyptians, Italians, British and Ethiopians. Each of these forged a distinct influence on the evolution of an Eritrean identity. The country is now equally split between Moslems and Christians.

At the end of the 19th century, Eritrea was colonized as part of Italy's attempts to get a foothold in Africa. Rome controlled the territory from 1889–1941, and during the 1930s fascist leader Benito Mussolini used it as a base from which to expand his African empire. In 1941, the British took over occupation of Eritrea as the Italians faced defeat in World War II; but the international community didn't know what to do with the former Italian colony. In 1952, the United Nations decided it should be federated with Ethiopia as an autonomous entity; but ten years later Emperor Haile Selassie annexed it, using acts of Eritrean armed resistance in 1961 as a pretext.

Thus began one of the longest civil wars of 20th-century Africa. The lead-up to war had seen the growing marginalization of the territory and the replacement of the local language Tigrinya by Ethiopian Amharic. Eritrea's struggle for independence lasted 30 years, much of it fought in isolation after the superpowers took it in turn to support Ethiopia. But in 1991 the rebel Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) marched into Asmara. Two years later Eritrea's independence was formalized in a referendum, in which 99 per cent of people voted overwhelmingly in favour of their new-found freedom.

For a few years Eritrea knew peace. The guerrilla leaders strove to turn themselves into politicians and to create new institutions for the fledgling state. But in 1998, war again broke out with Ethiopia – this time with the EPLF's erstwhile allies, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which had taken over control of Ethiopia in 1991. A skirmish over a border town flared up into a full scale war that was to last two years with the loss of tens of thousands of lives. At the time of writing, there was no fighting; but the situation was tense with the border closed and still to be demarcated. The threat of renewed war made it difficult for Eritrea to concentrate on development activities.

But now, moves are nevertheless afoot to preserve the country's fascinating and evocative capital. The Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project of Eritrea (CARP) is an Eritrean government initiative aimed at preserving the nation's cultural heritage. Its director, Professor Naigzy Gebremedhin, a renowned architectural expert, is one of the authors of *Asmara: Africa's Secret Modernist City*. 'Asmara's historic perimeter covers an area of 4 square kilometres', he explains. 'We have a loan from the World Bank and 50 per cent of this will go towards preserving the architecture of Asmara.'

Other projects are in the pipeline to preserve archaeological sites dotted around the country (some of which date back to the first millennium BC), as well as Eritrea's modern heritage – sites such as underground hospitals associated with the independence struggle.

Asmara was essentially built between 1935 and 1941 when Eritrea's Italian colonizers used the city as a blank canvas to 'design and build their own urban utopia in East Africa'. Although the Italians occupied the region they called Eritrea (after an ancient Greek word meaning red) in 1889, a massive influx of Italians in the colony's capital after 1935 necessitated development on an unprecedented scale. In just six years, the population grew from 4000 to 45,000. Asmara was transformed into the most modern city in Africa.

As the city was so far from home, the Italian architects had carte blanche to try their hand at anything. They were inspired designers and engineers. 'The city reflects the tempo of the time', says Professor Naigzy. 'It is an experimentation with modernism, unparalleled anywhere else in the world.' He notes that the different architectural styles have a typically Italian feel to them. 'I think the Italians were more adventurous; they had more panache', he says.

The result is an eclectic mix, ranging from futuristic buildings emulating the new fascination with machines during the early 1900s, which then gave way to the simplistic rationalist or Novecento style, followed by the monumentalism of the fascist era, with its imposing and austere façades. As fascism waned, this too was reflected in the architecture, with a return to rustic, classical villas. Intermingled with these various styles are ornate buildings, such as the Asmara theatre, Government House and the Roman Catholic cathedral, which are unashamedly drawn from neo-classical, Romanesque and Renaissance influences. Occasionally art deco touches stand out, although Naigzy stresses that Asmara has been wrongly described as an art deco city. 'It is essentially rationalist', he says. 'Out of 400 buildings surveyed, three-quarters of them were rationalist. Most of the others are eclectic, borrowing from Greek and Roman classicism.'

The simple, straight designs of rationalism can be seen in numerous buildings around the capital, ranging from small apartment blocks to multi-storey commercial developments.

But contrasting sharply with this simplicity are the outrageous futuristic constructions – the old Fiat Tagliero garage built to resemble a plane with expansive wings, or the Bar Zilli, whose boat design juts out into Martyrs Avenue, named after the tens of thousands who perished in the independence war.

With the dawn of fascism, the Italian dictator Mussolini used Asmara as an architectural blueprint and a launchpad for further invasion of the continent. The monstrous façade of the former fascist party headquarters on Asmara's main thoroughfare, Liberation Avenue, appears to have been 'stuck' on to what was originally a very modest building.

When the British took over the administration of Eritrea in 1941, they were surprised to find Asmara as a 'European city of broad boulevards, super-cinemas, super-fascist buildings, cafés, shops, two-way streets and a first class hotel'.

During the intervening years, it has changed very little except that preoccupation with war left no time for paying attention to the buildings, some of which are now sadly crumbling. But hopefully with the CARP initiative, the decline will be reversed before it is too late.

The British also noted the huge disparities between the European areas and the so-called native areas. During the Italian occupation, the historic perimeter area was out of bounds to Eritreans. It was a microcosm of Italy, with vast, solidly built sidewalks for that most famous of Italian occupations, the passeggiata – an activity which the Eritreans have adopted with gusto. Strolling up and down Liberation Avenue or sitting in the pavement cafés, sipping a macchiato, are favourite pastimes of Asmarinos – the inhabitants of Asmara. Naigzy explains that one of the greatest challenges is to preserve the historic perimeter area, while providing for a growing population. Asmara's population, currently around 480,000, is set to rise to 1 million in ten years.

Hurried and unplanned construction, which began after independence, was abruptly brought to a halt after the new authorities realized that this was not the way forward. CARP was born from that realization and a building embargo was placed on the historic perimeter.

At the same time, the authorities are aware that the area 'cannot be converted into an old museum town'. 'It has to be vibrant and serve as a very important commercial centre', stresses Naigzy. 'There should be controlled growth in the historic perimeter area, and the development of effective transport systems into the centre.'

Naigzy is confident that Asmara will be declared a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site and thus help to bring its extraordinary qualities to world attention. 40 per cent of the historical buildings are privately owned by Eritreans. CARP gives them advice on renovation and restoration – a partnership, Naigzy says, which works very well.

In his foreword to the book, Semere Russom, the mayor of Asmara, notes that Eritreans possess a heritage 'that is worthy of international acclaim and of which they should all be proud'. The establishment of the historic perimeter, he says, is 'designed to secure the lasting preservation of Asmara's most valuable structures and public spaces...and, not least, to set about improving living standards for all our citizens.'

Eritrea is one of the poorest nations in the world, where 66 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. Their lives have been constantly turned upside down by man-made and natural disasters. A combination of war, occupation and drought, coupled with a fiercely independent character, has made Eritreans one of the most resilient people on Earth. 'Poverty has some advantages', says Naigzy ruefully. 'If we'd had oil, all this wonderful architecture would have been torn down to make way for glitzy buildings.'

He says that if the book has one aim it is that by granting Asmara the recognition it deserves as one of the world's architecturally magnificent cities, 'broader development in Eritrea may be encouraged'.

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