

For An Eritrean Culture, or a Culture of Resistance

GENTUCCA CANELLA¹

Abstract: It is perhaps necessary to explain why this essay may seem in some way not directly related to the character of the contributions presented in April this year at the East-Africa Cities Lab Conference. Urbanization vs Human Survival (held at the Faculty of Architecture of Sapienza University of Rome) and now collected in this publication. This calling of mine – which occurred after the conference itself – thanks to a suggestion by Anna Irene Del Monaco, partly arose out of a shared feeling for “other cultures”, for the in-between lands, the peripheries in general, the Mediterranean, Oversea Countries. But especially it arose on account of my direct participation, between 1999 and 2000, in the phases of the design and subsequent construction of a State-owned hotel in Asmara, and on account of my later doctoral research completed in 2003, under the guidance of Lucio Barbera, my advisor. My dissertation, later published in 2006, already attempts in its title – *Architettura di retroguardia e laboratorio d’oltremare. Per una scuola nazionale di architettura all’Asmara [Rearguard Architecture and an Overseas Laboratory. For a National School of Architecture in Asmara]*² – to offer some content which, after almost twelve years and despite being perhaps a bit schematic in parts, I think could still be of interest, at least in its presuppositions and in the thesis of the dissertation. I will summarize here in short paragraphs its main contents of this thesis, and some its hypotheses as to how to go forward. They address autonomous but interconnected themes, useful for reflection and thus suggesting possible ways – between the past and the urgency of the contemporary – ideally fostering an active “culture of resistance”.

Keywords: culture of resistance, rearguard architecture, Italian colonial architecture.

«Asmara totally unexpected city (...) Here the discretion of the Italian provincialism is also surprising: the air of the small Italian town, with all its espressos, is entirely lacking. (...) And so we come to the Eritreans. They have grace, not a foolish dignity to defend. In this grace, like folk gentlemen, Muslims, Christians and Copts are indistinguishable: being Eritrean is a category that supercedes all other imported or overlapping categories. These are farming people. But for centuries in their villages, the notion of “property” has not existed. The ownership of land is collective, and the possession of the fields rotates among families. This means that for centuries the Eritreans are unaccustomed to possession. It is this, perhaps, which gives them their graceful detachment from things, their sense of natural equality (neither servile, nor proud) with everyone. It is their inner beauty, that is a physical beauty».³

1. Gentucca Canella: Assistant Professor, Politecnico di Torino; email: gentucca.canella@polito.it.

2. CANELLA 2006.

3. PASOLINI 1968.

A "Rearguard" Position

«The rearguard's task is to hold the terrain. This is also the main task of a school today».⁴ Given that in recent years in the developed West, the mandate of civil commitment – and not just in architecture – seems to have lost its intrinsic state of need, and the avant-garde attempt is unconvincing – that attempt by those who thought they could resolve the crisis of languages by creating a “void”, desecrating traditions, in a polemic against values and meaning – it seems time for the countries in the “World's South” (particularly those in North and West Africa, creating parallels with Latin America), to reappropriate their own respective cultural tools, as an instrument for negotiating an alternative form of development, where their own unique traits, and their social transformations, as well as their internal contradictions and even their own instances of cultural contamination can manage to express, together, an aspiration for civil renewal. In these provincial lands, on the peripheries of the dominant centers, and deemed «out of step with the prized culture of the times», even the architectural language must aim to hold its ground, and yet must do so without resorting to easy shortcuts. A form of awareness, an operational realism that seems to be authentically related to Frantz Fanon's idea that the development of the “World's South”, including its architecture, can and must find new and original ways avoiding the “given” stages and models considered essential by the so-called codified culture of the “World's North”.

From the Eritrean Zero School to the Cuban literacy campaign: a mission of civilization that comes from the South

«There was born, in 1976, the ‘Zero School’, which can be considered the first forge of contemporary Eritrean [culture and] art. Today's artists have learned to produce art under the camouflage coverings of woven twigs that defend them from air raids. Fighters by day, art apprentices by night».⁵ I feel that still today, when reflecting on an Eritrean tradition, partly reclaimed and partly still to be reclaimed, it

4. SEMERANI 1985.

5. CAVALLARIN 2002.

is necessary to take into consideration the profound bond that exists between this culture, its territory and the thirty-year war fought against Ethiopia for national independence (1961-1991, and unfortunately still not fully resolved). In the Eritrean modern history, the periods of military occupation and guerrilla warfare have by far exceeded the moments of cease-fire, and this has transformed the clash and conflict, the flight from bombardments, the imprisonment, and resistance itself, into a dramatic condition that has become life itself, a quasi-natural condition for the entire population, overturning and radically affecting the organization of the civil state, the family, education, human relations, etc. Among the many political and social victories obtained by the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front – where women constituted one-third of the fighters – one should note the reconstruction of the national education system (which had strongly degraded under the Ethiopian dictatorship), which started in 1976 with the establishment of the Zero School, the school of the revolution, in the base camp of the Sahel. Education centres and vocational training schools for *guerrillas* and civilians would soon number more than 150, a long line of classrooms set in the trenches, so to speak, spread throughout Eritrea, hidden among the valleys, with temporary structures that could be disassembled and reassembled to avoid bombardings; camouflaged against the airstrikes, these classes were flanked by field hospitals, laboratories, artisan workshops, radio stations, and even print works and gas stations. The young pupils (often the children of the fighters of the People's Front) received their primary and secondary school education while reinventing for themselves a community life and participating in work in the fields in their rural communities. Once they graduated, the young activists would teach the adults to read, write, and simple arithmetic, in addition to instructing them on personal hygiene, health care, etc.

In this regard, the memory may race to another exciting “literary campaign” that anticipated the Zero School, and was, like it, a laboratory for a new cultural system: the campaign carried out in Cuba starting in 1959 by young revolutionaries, who reinvented a capillary manner for disseminating education. They built hundreds of middle schools, the “centers of the new Cuba”, (for students aged 12 to 16, who divided their time between study and work, and used the school as the place for

all the activities of community life), for a collective re-appropriation of the entire territory, the product and symbol, on the linguistic and typological level, of the boldest cultural transmutation-operation of the Cuban revolution.

Italian architecture in Asmara and “civil affections”

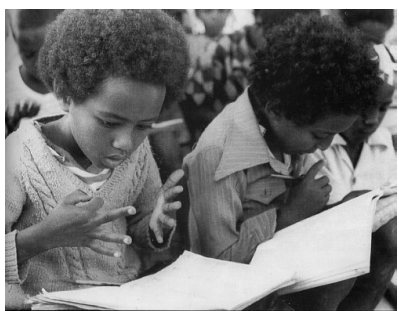
The architecture of Eritrea has always suffered from a lack of documentation and of a system for conserving the few materials stored in the local municipal archives. Perhaps for this reason, even in the most recent publications there often seems to prevail a nostalgic attitude, focused almost exclusively on a few emblematic buildings – such as, in Asmara, the glass tower of the Bosch building or the Fiat Tagliero service station, the latter an explicit derivation of a certain futuristic current – which have become over time, due to their markedly linguistic characteristics and their perspective setting, symbolic fulcrums of a memory that by now has been acquired by the same local population. I feel, instead, that the most striking aspect of colonial architecture in Asmara was and still is today, the presence of a visual balance composed by the quite experimental work of a group of Italian technicians-architects (whose names are still largely unknown, and whose work was done almost experimentally) that, during the population campaigns, exported from their homeland a kind of “minor school” that was original not only for the architectural language and typologies brought in, but also on account of the technical, building and artisanal aspects (from the use of local materials, to the ornamentation on the façades, to the finishes, wall patterns and screening elements, etc.) which have become, over time, a formative heritage for the local people who still today use this knowledge in works of conservation, restoration and functional repurposing.

The results are nothing short of moving. There is, to list a few, the serene, subdued architecture of the apartment buildings on Viale della Liberazione (Faletta, Devignotti, Kasai, Mutton and still others), and of the Ophthalmic Hospital, the police headquarters of Italian Africa; the Office of Public Works for Employee housing building; the Bristol and the CIAOO Hotel: all examples where the traits that suggest a purified “Novecentismo” – one less solemn than that emphasized in

certain common types of such buildings in Italy – manage, in some cases, to blend with typical features of oversea architecture such as, for instance, in the outsized arcades of the covered market and of the new mosque by Guido Ferrazza. Or, in a second, parallel current, there are architectures that, in the plurality of their typologies, display an innovative, hybridized rationalism – examples of this are to be found in the Vittorio bar (today, the Zilli bar), the State Tobacco-Monopoly Building, the Augustus cinemaplex (today, the Capital cinemaplex), the Lancia repair shop, the AGEA building, the Cicero soccer field, the Principe auto-garage – where the robust plasticity, expressive force and a certain figurative rawness become the matrix for individual construction well-integrated in the original urban context, so willingly disassociated from that delicate, almost miniaturized precision that can be seen in a few isolated buildings in Libya: from the homes and villas of Giovanni Pellegrini in Tripoli to the villages of the Public Works residences of Cirenaica. The figurative strenght of these buildings emerging in the city preserves, however, thanks to their dimensions and sobriety, the equilibrium of its streets and squares, and of the urban block itself, as occurs with the enchanting Mai Già Già fountain, a project by the Municipal Technical Office, where the imposing double stairways, separated by a central strip of water pools on several levels, mark the entrance to the Ghezza Banda neighbourhood.

I am convinced that the strong expressive, typological, and figurative contamination that characterizes the Eritrean landscape (mostly fixed in the 1930s, also due to the subsequent war of independence) was present in the conception of the State Hotel built in Asmara by Guido Canella between 1998 and the end of 1999 and inaugurated in January 2000, an almost explicit homage to the “migratory culture” of those Italian architects transplanted here.

Evident traces of this can be found: in the treatment given to the jutting facades, symmetrically arranged around the glass central nucleus; in the geometric order drawn by the cement and red grit concrete panels (made on site in single blocks with the railing included) deliberately interrupted only by the pitching forward of the volumes housing the rooms and suites, in the use of red stone, a local motif, for the fences, the terraces of the terrain planted with fruit trees, the locker



Figs. 1-2. Eritrean Zero School during the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front (www.ertra.com)

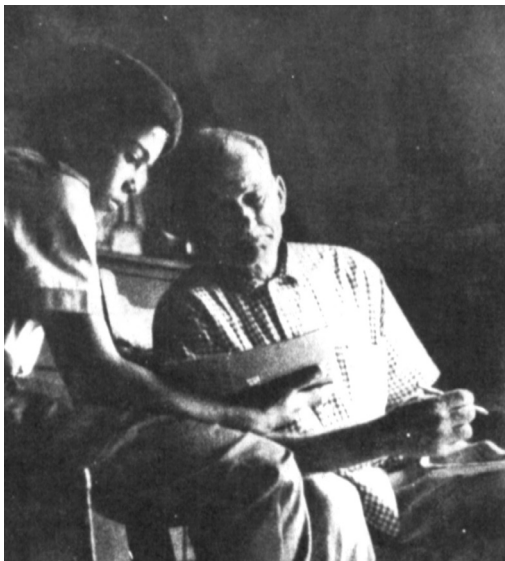


Fig. 3. One of the one-hundred-thousand young students disseminating education with one of the six-hundred-thousand illiterates (in: «Révolution», a. I, n. 1, settembre 1963)



Fig.4. Giuseppe Pettazzi, Service Station Fiat Tagliero, Asmara, 1938 (in: L. Oriolo, Asmara Style, Asmara 1998)

room of the indoor and outdoor pools, and the pools of the fountain and its sphere for the jets of water.

But it is in the main building where, I believe, the “detachment” occurs more clearly, the proof of the new: the large inclined glass *façade* of the full-height space of the atrium (with the common areas in the entrance, the balconies, the elevator-stairwell units) seems to attempt a leap of scale, albeit restrained by the semi-cylindrical white bodies on the sides and, above, by the doubling of the protruding roofs. And this, I think, becomes an occasion to experiment again, seeking the relationship with the other oversea countries, that of the North African coastal towns, and to import from those places to Asmara the large sizes (here, moreover, almost unknown), an architectural scale that is noticeable from afar – in fact, the hotel is located on the main road linking the historic centre and the airport – in memory of the striking colonial interventions scattered amid the cities and territories of the North African region: the Inps-Inail office building in Tripoli or the Marble Arch along the Libyan coast, both by Florestano Di Fausto.

The Italian cultural debt and the Eritrean migration, including that of the youth

«(...) In 2013 there were almost 700 unaccompanied children who arrived in Italy by sea from Eritrea. In 2014, by May 31, there have already been 1,700. Their arrival in Italy takes place several months after their departure and after an extremely risky journey through Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya, that can last over 2 years. From the tales of Eritrean children, met by Save the Children workers at the border, what emerges is that the decision to leave is made by these youths themselves, often because they feel strongly a responsibility to ensure the maintenance of their entire family, from an early age».⁶

The Eritrean question today does not allow for distraction. In recent months, in fact, we have been witnessing a dramatic migratory phenomenon involving, in particular, the younger part of the Eritrean population (who together with children of Syrian, Somali, and Egyptian origin constitute 20% of the total number of arrivals on Italian shores); boys between ten and sixteen years of age who are arriving illegally in Italy, alone, without accompanying adults, seeking a temporary politi-

6. BELLINI, VALASTRO, PROSPERI 2014.

cal asylum, almost as if the task was up to them, as the new generation, to continue the “culture of resistance”, to physically extend it beyond national borders, seeking to reunite the Eritrean communities who are distributed throughout the world in their flight from the long Ethiopian occupation. In this current drama, Italy could try to compensate, at least partly, for the cultural debt it has historically contracted with the Eritrean people during successive colonial occupations, and transform it into a new social problem involving the countries of an enlarged Mediterranean.

This would involve, for example, in our cities, intervening on some of the facilities of the public housing endowment to try to give at least an initial response to the juvenile migration emergency. Perhaps by using part of the military barracks recently affected by divestiture and repurposing programs (thus limiting the risk of real estate speculation) to make room for new hospitality and education systems. A basic school (primary and secondary school, and technical training schools), also committed to the conservation and enhancement of the hallmarks of the overseas countries' culture.

Finally, the search for a new architectural design within consolidated typologies, of a compositional exception, of figurative inserts capable of unhinging the symmetry of the existing layouts with unexpected typologies and forms for a cultural, linguistic and religious multiplicity, would have the no-less-important task, and one, moreover of an Eritrean mould – that of a territory, where Copts, Christians and Muslims have always lived together – to resolve a question that is urgently requesting a response also from us in the West.



Figs.5-6. The Ophthalmic Hospital, Asmara - Condominium apartments 1930s (in: D. Pizzi, G. Muratore, Oltremare. Itinerari di architettura in Libia, Etiopia, Eritrea, Sirai Edizioni, Cagliari, 2001)



Fig.7. Guido Ferrazza, Fish Market, Asmara 1937 (in: L. Oriolo, Asmara Style, Asmara 1998)



Fig.9. Bar Vittorio (Bar Zilli), Asmara, 1939 (in: L. Oriolo, Asmara Style, Asmara 1998)



Fig.10. Fontana di Ghezzabanda, Asmara 1939 (foto G. Canella)



Canella Achilli Architetti, Hotel Inter-Continental, Asmara, 1996-99 (Foto S. Topuntoli. Archivio Guido Canella)

Fig.12. Florestano Di Fausto, Palazzo INPS-INAIL in the square of the Tripoli Cathedral, 1938 (In: G. Gresleri, P.G. Massaretti, S. Zagnoni, Architettura italiana d'oltremare 1870-1940, Marsilio Editori, Venezia 1993)



Fig. 12. Florestano Di Fausto, Arco dei Fileni lungo la litoranea libica, 1937 (R. Besana, C.F.Carli, L.Devoti, L. Prisco, Metafisica costruita, Touring Club Italiano, Milano, 2002)



Canella Achilli Architetti, Hotel Inter-Continental, Asmara, 1996-99 (Foto S. Topuntoli. Archivio Guido Canella)



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