

L'ARCHITETTURA DELLE CITTÀ

UNESCO-Chair SERIES



BELULA TECLE-MISGHINA

Asmara, an urban history

Forewords by
Lucio Valerio Barbera and Piero Ostilio Rossi

L'ARCHITETTURA DELLE CITTÀ
UNESCO-Chair SERIES



EDIZIONI NUOVA CULTURA

L'ARCHITETTURA DELLE CITTÀ

UNESCO-Chair SERIES #1



Società Scientifica Ludovico Quaroni

L'ADC L'architettura delle città. UNESCO-Chair Series
The Journal of Scientific Society Ludovico Quaroni

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This volume has been edited and published with contributions from:
Dipartimento di Architettura e Progetto, Sapienza Università di Roma;
UNESCO Chair in "Sustainable Urban Quality", Sapienza Università di Roma.



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair in Sustainable Urban Quality
and Urban Culture, notably in Africa
Italy



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Translations: Italian to English by Paul David Blackmore

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ISSN: 2281-8731

ISBN: 9788868123543

DOI: 10.4458/3543

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book could be published only because some important Institutions and dedicated persons sustained and encouraged me. Without their constant attention to my research, my work on Asmara's urban history could not be undertaken and concluded. First of all I wish to thank professor Lucio Valerio Barbera, Chairholder of the UNESCO Chair in Sustainable Urban Quality and Urban Culture, notably in Africa, who guided me since my first academic studies and, afterwards, during my Doctorate as tutor, spur and severe screener of my work. I am likewise grateful to professor Piero Ostilio Rossi, he also tutor of my research, director of the Department of Architecture and Design (Dipartimento di Architettura e Progetto) of Sapienza, University of Rome and coordinator of the Doctorate when I was received and accepted during my research period. I deeply thank the Department of Urban Development (DUD), Ministry of Public Works (MOPW) State of Eritrea for the access to its indispensable and recent documentation about Asmara's urban development. Likewise I thank ISIAO (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente) Italian Institute for Africa and East, which generously allowed me to have access to its precious and unique archives. A special gratitude goes to the Mezzèdimi family for the courtesy with which they made available the very rich documentation saved in their professional and private archive regarding the Asmara Plan of Arturo Mezzèdimi. I am deeply grateful to the department of Cooperazione Italiana allo Sviluppo, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) for the constant support to my academic formation with their scholarships. This book seeks to be a first positive answer to such generous an investment. Moreover I thank the Fondazione Sapienza, University of Rome, and its President, professor Renato Guarini, for the scholarship – year 2010 – especially addressed to the conclusion of my research. I am very grateful to the UNESCO Chair in Sustainable Urban Quality and Urban Culture, notably in Africa, in which I am presently engaged, for the financial support to the publication of the present book. A special thank, finally, to Anna Irene Del Monaco, for her personal help as Secretary-General and Co-Editor of the UNESCO-Chair Series.

Foreword

by
LUCIO BARBERA

The City and History

Like any city, Asmara, a young city even by the standards of young African capitals, is a stage set where the drama of history has unfolded in the most intense and eloquent manner. The territory of Asmara stands at the edge of a space of almost mythical civilisations, ancient religions and proud empires. It is also a natural acropolis in the vastness of Africa, an astoundingly high crest that looks down from above on the coast of the “Eritrean” sea, coming to a halt where the Afar Rift expands and, year after year, rips into the heart of Africa where lions and gnus still roam free. However, in its body, and thus in its history, Asmara is also a fragment of Europe, imported atop the undulating highlands of Hamasien by the presumption of the most fragile and thus most presumptuous of colonial nations: Italy. Less than 130 years later history appears to have intentionally concentrated a host of events, projects, interests, delusions, conflicts and hopes in Asmara that, within the vaster expanses of historical time could have filled dozens of centuries. These metamorphoses were similar to immense waves lapping at a resistant soil, introducing and withdrawing diverse foreign armies, peoples, languages and cultures; and adversities. The results of so much labour have forged the identity of Eritrea, jealously defended for decades, and jealously guarded to this day.

Looking carefully in libraries, among printed works dedicated to particular aspects of this identity – numerous and some very important – it is impossible to find a history of Eritrea that is scientifically complete and up to date. This is a serious shortcoming. Yet everything has remained impressed upon the land and, even more eloquently, on the city, on the face and limbs of Asmara. Hence the reconstruction, like that made by the author of this book, of the difficult process of planning the city signifies not only restoring, similar to an animation, the history of the complex growth of an urban organism. It also reconstructs political objectives, cultural ambitions, the comprehensive sense of the actions and hopes of the those who succeeded one another at the helm of the city’s, and the nation’s urban administration. An attentive reader cannot help but notice the presence, apparently mute, of the vast chorus of the thousands, the hundreds of thousands of people that make up the physical city, as they construct it, their home, the social organism in which individual hopes and dramas become a collective request.

Belula Tecele Mishgina is a young Eritrean scholar. Born in Asmara she graduated from the Faculty of Architecture at the Sapienza University of Rome. After completing a European Master in architecture, she earned her PhD in Architectural Composition and Design Theory. Her dry prose is that of a skilled researcher. All the same, the text has the flow of a travel diary and is just as involving. Belula Tecele Mishgina’s approach to research is passionate, meticulous and inexhaustible. An approach that led her, among other things,

to the discovery of an important, unpublished and forgotten document, a modern plan for Asmara complete in all its details and rich in elements useful to understanding a crucial and yet obscure period in the city's history: the Master Plan by the architect Arturo Mezzèdimi to which a fundamental chapter of this book is dedicated. Asmara, as its passionate scholars of any culture are well aware, is a fascinating city. contrary to the history of its planning, the architecture of Asmara is well-known and sufficiently well published; it constitutes a chapter in the story of early modernism. The studies of Belula Tecle Mishgina will thus be of service to those studying the architecture of Asmara; hence forward they will establish the indispensable urban fabric of reference for the various phases of designing and building this precious cultural inheritance.

Foreword

by
PIERO OSTILIO ROSSI

Azmerà, the forest in the bloom

Lucio Barbera was tutor to Belula Tecle Misghina during the drafting of her Doctoral thesis on which this book is based (along with me, but he was much more active and involved), and he points out that there is a sliver of Europe in the history of Asmara, during the fifty years of Italian occupation (1890-1941) and ten years of British rule (1941-1952), a fragment that managed to come to terms with the complex realities of the region, with its several ethnic groups, its various languages and different cultures.

Italy and Eritrea were geographically far apart until November 17, 1869, when the opening of the Suez Canal made the Red Sea, the Strait of Bab el-Mandib (at a width of 30 km, it divides Africa from Asia) and the Gulf of Aden within reach of a few days sailing, thanks to technological advances in steamship design over the previous thirty years, which allowed ships to open commercial and passengers routes throughout the world's seas.

The first edition of the Italian Guide to East Africa, published in 1938 by the CTI –the Touring Club Italiano had that very year Italianised its name to Consociazione Turistica Italiana –, opens with a handy map on which Italy, Libya and the Horn of Africa are physically shown as close and companionable, with maritime routes joining them together. At the end of the Thirties, from Naples to Massawa (the ‘Port of Empire’, since 1890 an important commercial base and natural access point for anyone wishing to reach Asmara and the Eritrean uplands), the voyage took five days; from the port one could reach the capital of the Colony by train, on an intrepid mountain railway, or by a motor road, Road n° 1 from Dogali – Asmara was only 120 km away. If one wanted to make the journey by air, it took three and a half days, thanks to the ‘Empire Line’, which involved taking a seaplane from the Carlo Del Prete base in Ostia to Benghazi in Libya, and then a plane to the Umberto Maddalena Airport in Asmara, with stops at Cairo, Wadi Haifa, Khartoum and Càssala, on the Sudanese border.

And right next door to the Airport stood the Teleferica Massawa-Asmara, an extraordinary cableway for transporting goods up on to the plateau, at a height difference of 2,326 metres; the cableway had been built in two years, between 1935 and 1937, and at a length of 75 km, was the longest industrial cableway system in the world. It could move in one day the equivalent of thirty train loads, but it was at its full operational capacity for only a few years: in 1941 it was damaged in the war with the British, and ten years later, when Eritrea became a British Protectorate, it was unexpectedly decided to dismantle it.

So there was not just Italy in that sliver of Europe present in Asmara. In fact, Belula Tecle Misghina's valuable study not only examines the various stages of Italian presence in the city, but also looks at the English occupation that lasted until 1952; then came the federation with Ethiopia (1952-1962) followed by the annexation to Ethiopia and the war of liberation which ended in independence for Eritrea in 1991, with Asmara as the capital of the new country. These events act as a backdrop and form a solid framework for Tecle Misghina's research – which is not only meticulous but emotionally involved – of which

this book is a well-documented summary. Her research is important in that it reconfigures and puts in order various documents, both known and unpublished, in order to build up a chronology and an armoury of references that are indispensable for anyone wishing to carry out further studies on the Eritrean capital. For a project developed within a Doctoral programme, this is, in my opinion, the most important outcome of her research.

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