Asmara: A Case for the City in the City

-Matthew Scarlett, Delbert Highlands Fellowship
Asmara seemed to be Eritrea focused on a mountaintop. It never gave over to the ancient kingdom of Axum. It permitted the Turks to build towers in its foothills but never declared itself theirs. It was awarded to the Italians, in the time of the European carve-up of the Horn, but only because it was so resistant to the Ethiopian Emperor. Through the Italian and British years, sixty-two of them, Asmara kept its clear high head.” - “To Asmara” by Thomas Keneally

Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, is regularly characterized as the most “modern” of all African cities. Yet Asmara’s claim on modernity is peculiar in that it can hardly be described as the most metropolitan or economically vital city in modern day Africa. In fact, Eritrea, located along the southern coast of the Red Sea, sits within a larger region (the Horn of Africa) that has a notorious legacy of economic stagnation and interstate conflict in the 20th century. These circumstances have contributed to the fact that the city and its built environment have remained relatively undocumented outside of a few photo essays and special publications.

During the interwar period of Italy's fascist government, Asmara was built up as the cornerstone of Mussolini’s short-lived dream for an Italian empire in and around the Mediterranean. As a result, ambitious Italian architects participating in the most dramatic debate of the period regarding the idea of a culturally specific or nationalistic form of modern architecture descended upon Asmara as a playground for experimentation. Beginning in the 1920’s and lasting roughly until Italy’s defeat in WWII, Asmara experienced a boom in which striking examples of Novecento, Futurist, and Rationalist architecture were commissioned.

For the most part, Italy's totalitarian government, unlike the Nazi regime in Germany, was receptive to a fair degree of creative leeway so long as it was accompanied by the appropriate fascist propaganda. As David Rifkind points out, regardless of their formal set of values, architects and theorists of this period readily and easily exploited order, hierarchy, the importance of classical precedent, and technological innovation as a way to give concrete form to abstract political values. On an urban scale, there was a general consensus centered upon “corporativism” in which the state emphasized functional, political, and social goals for specific towns and cities in an effort to create a more efficient national framework of production. Referencing projects such as the agricultural towns of Sabaudia and Littoria, the architects of BBPR proclaimed that in “the corporativist order of the future, every city will have its function.”

Within the machine of the Italian fascist state, Asmara was conceptualized and built up as a military outpost. It’s most explosive period of growth coincided with the build up to the invasion of neighboring Ethiopia and as Italy’s “Colonia Primogenita,” the territory of Eritrea was being developed as a military foothold beginning in the late 19th century. The unique aspect of Asmara in this regard is that unlike other colonial outposts such as the agricultural town in Bianchi, Libya, Asmara developed less according to a rigid and holistic urban plan and more as an ensemble of parts. Nevertheless, Sean Anderson shows that there is a legible functional framework that can be read in the architecture of the city which in the colonial era was geared towards instantiating consensus and surveillance. By categorizing the manner in which it relates to the surrounding context, one can characterize Italian architecture from the colonial era as a mechanism to frame institutions of the Italian state and the private home while maintaining a buffer from the indigenous culture of Eritrea. In other words, colonial Asmara can be defined as a city of exceptions.

In the context of the Eritrean government’s current push for UNESCO World Heritage Status, one might find it difficult to reconcile the renewed effort for preservation of Italian architecture in Asmara with these nefarious colonial associations. To be sure, the cultural identity and collective memory of contemporary Asmara is complex, fascinating, and at times counterintuitive. This is in part due to Eritrea’s remarkable history of fighting for independent statehood, its alienated standing on the international stage, and the fact that there is an undeniable social and economic crisis occurring in modern day Eritrea. It’s a situation that architecture cannot solve, but nevertheless it’s one in which architecture is implicated. In part, the purpose of this research is to reframe the current dialogue surrounding the preservation of Italian architecture in Asmara. It is an effort to categorize the typical urban mechanisms of colonialism by using type as a heuristic device. More specifically, it is an argument for using a definition of type that is transparent to function and based on the common structures of the city. The goal is to develop a projective analysis for Asmara that goes beyond utilizing the built environment solely as a commodity for tourism and nostalgia. Rather, the purpose is to offer the possibility for a future that engages the collective memory of Asmara by promoting a redevelopment of the city within the city.
GOVERNO DELLA COLONIA EREITRE

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ASMARA
Dominant Types of Colonial Asmara:
The Plinth, the Villa, and the City Room