architectonic sophistication achieved in these late sixteenth-century projects.

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Note


Ruby Ofori and Edward Scott, directors
City of Dreams

Ruby Ofori and Edward Scott's 2005 film, City of Dreams, treats modern architecture built during the colonization of Eritrea, Italy's “first-born colony” in northeast Africa. In a 1938 book describing public works in the Italian colonies, Davide Fossa contends that Asmara, the capital, was simply a trading center before 1935 and worthy of mention only for its parallels with the Italian campagna.1 The filmmakers also begin their history of Asmara soon after 1935, the year in which the largest deployment of Italian army personnel moved through the country en route to subterfuge and later occupation in Ethiopia. City of Dreams follows this problematic account while engaging the contentious terrain of Italian colonialism, modern architecture and urbanism, and race.

Almost 140 architects built Asmara during Italian colonial rule, which commenced in 1889 and ended in 1947. Its territory stretched from Somaliland (now Somalia) through Ethiopia to Eritrea and also included Libya to the northwest. These architects sought a visual language that was Italian in character and yet reconfigured a regional idiom. City of Dreams is an abbreviated gloss of architecture constructed in the latter half of the colonial period, from 1925 until 1941; it omits the myriad distinctive works built prior to this period and demonizes the Italian colonial mission. With the exception of Edoardo Cagnini, architetto integrale (architect, engineer, and artist), no other architects are named in the film. The innovative works of Cesare Valé, Giuseppe Petazzi, and Guido Ferrazza appear briefly, but the buildings of Asmara are presented as clandestine trophies whose association with a culpable regime rendered them peripheral to discussions of European modernism.

In City of Dreams, visitors arrive in Asmara by train, through the precipitous Hamasien highlands, as many a latter-day Italian traveler might. This movement soon is replaced by a tour of Harriet Avenue (formerly Viale Musolini) by Naigzy Gebremedhin, director of the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP). We follow him onto the sidewalks and into the courtyards of downtown Asmara, Eritreans brushing our shoulders. The film juxtaposes the aesthetics of Asmara's architecture with lackluster commentary by Eritrean architects and designers now working in and around the city. Modern architecture is incidental to the story that Ofori and Scott tell; they interrogate the antecedents of colonialism and the racial divide that cordoned off much of the colonial urban realm. As Gembemehin laments, “Asmara [is] so special despite that it was created by an odious regime . . . a very, very racist regime.” City of Dreams suggests that Italians were complicit in the moral subjugation of Eritreans, but we do not come face to face with any of the Italo-Eritreans living in Asmara today.2 Rather, the former colonial presence is summarized in the guise of the Italian ambassador Emanuele Pignatelli and his house, the Villa Roma, an early example of Italian construction in the “villa quarter.” Ironically, Pignatelli at times speaks far more precisely about the history of Asmara's built environment than the architects who are interviewed. The ambassador challenges the generalization that “real Roman buildings” were transposed onto the colonial landscape. He advocates “respect for the modern tendencies” seen in Asmara, “which do not necessarily have a legacy from the Roman style.”

Although the colonial architecture of Eritrea did not assume the technocratic or touristic agency of Libya, the Mediterranean mystique of the Aegean Dodecanese, or the monumental plunder valued in Ethiopia, Pignatelli implies that the architecture in Asmara was fundamentally linked to the aesthetic debates of the period concerning modernism in Italy, Western Europe, and the United States.

In a second segment entitled “A City Divided,” we linger in doorways, staircases, and liminal zones that some were forbidden to enter during the colonial period. The film is careful not to only document architecture but also to include the voices of those imprinted with the memory of colonial spaces. We are shown an apartment in the centrally located Palazzo Falletta, which, according to Gembemehin, “represents one of the most finest [sic] buildings of Asmara.” With the din of community close at hand, Ofori and Scott have the opportunity to explore the complexities of occupying modern Italian architecture today; instead they heroize one Eritrean resident’s appropriation of the Palazzo Falletta. We look from the window and balcony to hear Tesfahunai Woldu declare, “it is one of the finest buildings in Asmara. . . . That is why I am proud . . . because my grandparents were not allowed to pass through here.”

Several newsreel images by Istituto Luce in the late 1930s punctuate “A City Divided” and personalize the combined effects of urbanism and sanctioned racism. However, much of the footage we see is of Libya and Ethiopia, not Asmara. In an effort to contextualize the place of Asmara today, the film includes recent footage from the nearly thirty-year civil war fought between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Against this bloody background, we meet an elderly gentleman, Yisehak Yosief, whose story of being taken to prison for walking in the “zona nazionale” remains hollow until he bemoans that, in Asmara, “the whites were always the masters.” The filmmakers here choose to lend superficial intimacy to their footage by toning it black.
and white, as well as sepia, while we quickly pass through the city at dusk.

A street, formerly named Campo Cintato, separated Italian settlers from Eritreans, but this division is not palpable until Mebrhatu Abraham, a CARP historian, takes us into “native quarters.” As we traverse the narrow lanes, then sit in a sewa house, Ofori and Scott present scenes common to the Western media portrayal of East Africa rather than explore how the Italians recreated regional building typologies, such as the tukul and the bedams, of which a few examples still exist today. It is difficult for the viewer to assess these byways after hearing Dessalegn attest, “You know the Italians built Asmara … for themselves. They built it with a lot of soul, a lot of care, a lot of attention to details.” The filmmakers’ reliance on photographs from a 2005 book Gebremedhin coauthored with Edward Denison and Guang Yu Ren entitled Asmara: Africa’s Secret Modernist City further distances City of Dreams from a meaningful presentation of its contemporary residents in their own words.1

We then return to the driveway of the Selam Hotel. Even if it is “nothing fancy,” the building, according to Gebremedhin, is a “classical example of rational architecture.” Revered for its political significance, the former Albergo Nazionale (Compania Immobile Alberghi Africa Orientale) is a modernist tour de force. Our brief walk moves from outside in: through the crowded lobby, a “subdued art deco” bar, and into the courtyard, concluding with the curt provocation that “as Italians, they nearly always have to have a little fountain in the garden.” Thus, the third and final segment of City of Dreams segues from this refuge of Italian surveillance to a veritable Garden of Eden, evidenced by footage exhibiting one of the earliest buildings of Asmara, the Catholic Cathedral (Cavagnari, 1900–22).

Turning to one developer’s recent attempt to build a fourteen-story residential complex on the site where Caserma Mussolini (Mussolini’s Prison) still stands, Gebremedhin extols the need for careful planning in a city that he feels remains too defined by its colonial-era surroundings. For him, there is “a chance for Italy to contribute” in rectifying a perceived imbalance with the fundamentals of modernity and a lack of Eritrean history in Asmara. Yet, when Yosief concedes that “we had some profits by the works of Italians,” the filmmakers’ hope of an unequivocal Eritrean city is lost.

The matrix of histories in Asmara is blurred rather than scrutinized in City of Dreams, and local inhabitants are introduced without substantive analysis. Had Ofori and Scott linked their own research with that of any number of scholars who already have interrogated Asmara’s architectural distinctions, simplistic pronouncements such as “Mussolini’s ambition, I assume, was to recreate the Italian Empire again” might have been avoided. Mia Fuller has deftly traced these congruencies within the Italian colonial architecture of Libya, Ethiopia, and Eritrea in her recent text Moderns Abroad.2 Indeed, one of the conceits of fascism—that modern architecture was a tool for the perpetuation of a classical ethos—also became one of the principles guiding the design of emergent colonies. City of Dreams, however, fails to adequately examine this legacy, leaving unresolved questions about the evolution of Italian modernity by and through its colonial cities.

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Notes
2. Silvana Palma has determined that nearly 35,000 mixed-race individuals were living in Italian East Africa after the fall of the empire. The figure may be somewhat less today but nevertheless is substantial. See Silvana Palma, L’Italia coloniale (Rome, 1999), 53.

Marc-Henri Wajnberg, director
Oscar Niemeyer. Un architecte engage dans le siècle

At the southern end of Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro, on the top floor of an otherwise unremarkable building, works a man whose life is synonymous with twentieth-century Brazilian architecture. Oscar Ribeiro de Almeida Niemeyer Soares Filho was born in Rio in 1907; labored as an assistant for Le Corbusier in Rio in 1936; designed the Pampulha buildings in 1941; was part of the work shop team that created the United Nations Building in New York in 1947; created all the monumental governmental buildings in Brasilia between 1957 and 1964; and built in Europe and North Africa in the 1970s. He realized the Sambadrome (Carnival Parade Stadium) in Rio in 1984 and is still designing and building at the age of ninety-nine.

Niemeyer’s career encapsulates much of the twentieth century in Brazil. The older and more fragile he becomes, the longer the shadow cast by his legend. Few scholars and filmmakers have managed to resist Niemeyer’s heroic account of his own work, and Marc-Henri Wajnberg’s film is no exception. It opens with the building for the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Niteroi floating like a spaceship over various beautiful Brazilian landscapes: the Amazon, the sandy beaches, Rio’s statue of Christ the Redeemtor, the Maracanã soccer stadium. When the flying building lands on its site, a cliff by the ocean with a breathtaking view of Rio’s Pão de Açucar, Niemeyer, the pilot, comes out of his spaceship to greet the viewer.

These clichéd opening images reinforce the stereotype of Brazil as a nation of exhilarating natural tropical landscape, an exotic and chaotic virgin land waiting to be conquered. At once recalling traditional tourist promotions, they also introduce the idea of the architect as a