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 Mebrahtu Abraham, a C.A.R.P. historian, takes us into “native quarters.” As we traverse the narrow lanes, then sit in a seva house, Ofori and Scott present scenes common to the Western media portrayal of East Africa rather than explore how the Italians re-created 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 co-authored 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.

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 C.I.A.A.O. (Compania Immobile Albergi 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 “Musolini’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.4 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
1. Davide Fossa, Lavoro italiani nell’Impero (Milan, 1938), 403.
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.
Niemeyer’s life and work and could be a reference, the film effectively presents his plastic freedom and the sensuous spaces that resulted from it. How much Niemeyer’s buildings in Brazil are absorbed as one moves through the building. In Brasilia, the camera highlights the monumental aspects of the governmental buildings under blue skies and set against the omnipresent horizontality of the land. It is interesting to perceive, for example, how much Niemeyer’s buildings in Europe, such as the Cultural Center in Le Havre or the Mondadori Headquarters in Milan, look slightly out of place without the tropical light over them.

Wajnberg efficiently demonstrates the Herculean struggle accompanying the construction of Brasilia without questioning the mismatch between Niemeyer’s discourse of building for the masses and the actual city that became gentrified like any other Brazilian metropolis. An interview with composer Chico Buarque de Holanda introduces a much-needed defense of the city when the composer notes that most of the criticism of Brasilia fails to separate the plan from its implementation, especially after the military coup of 1964. For Holanda, Brasilia was a loud symbolic gesture toward a brave new future, and its plan was a significant contribution toward a more equal society. Apartments were allotted to federal employees not on the basis of career rankings and titles but on family size; as a result, a janitor might live next door to a federal judge. The conservative and authoritarian military government installed after 1964 dismantled this egalitarian approach to public housing and reinstated traditional hierarchies of profession and class, supported by a significant portion of the Brazilian population.

A separate clip about Brasilia on the DVD includes many revealing archival photographs and a long sequence of the present-day city recorded from a moving car. Yet, Wajnberg’s film does not refer to the city’s dependence upon automobile. Instead, we are shown an interview with architect Haron Cohen, who claims that Brasilia is so innovative that it has no ties to urban planning in Europe or the United States. This skewed perspective reinforces the film’s treatment of Niemeyer as a singular genius. Moreover, the total absence of Brazilian scholars of modern architecture in the film leaves the impression that the documentary producers only interviewed Niemeyer’s personal friends, art critic Ferreira Gullar being the exception that proves the rule. There is almost no reference to Lúcio Costa, the main articulator behind the best of Brazilian modernism since 1930 and designer of Brasilia’s urban plan.

Niemeyer’s renowned generosity and commitment to the ideals of equality and social justice receive more attention. Yet, viewers not acquainted with Niemeyer’s political views might have wished to learn more about his long personal relationship with Fidel Castro. Instead of providing a
nuanced treatment of his affiliation with the Communist Party while working for virtually all Brazilian governments since 1939, the movie seems to fall for the folkloric side of his political engagement—his friendships rather than his actual political actions (or lack thereof). Niemeyer was a loud proponent of reform all his life, but his party loyalty frequently pitted him against many contemporary left-wing causes.

Never an enthusiast of Soviet architecture, Niemeyer probably had little knowledge of the Russian avant-garde works of the 1920s. The most “communist” of all his buildings is the Headquarters of the French Communist Party, a beautiful curvilinear glass façade built around a sculptural auditorium in a Parisian suburb. Apart from a few housing blocks in Brasilia that, to his credit, were designed without the maids’ rooms and service doors so common in Brazilian residential architecture, Niemeyer never actually built for the masses. However, he also never imposed his political affiliations at the drafting table and consequently was able to accomplish a varied body of work commissioned as much by the political left as by the right.

As the subtitle of this documentary indicates, Oscar Niemeyer is indeed an architect committed to his century. Unfortunately, Wajnberg’s film remains comfortably under the shadow of the architect and does not attempt to engage the contradictions of both the man and his century.

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Notes