

Asmara: A Museum of Architectural Treasures

Written by Robel T.
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The city of Asmara grew from a mere scattering of four villages to what we know today as our nation's beautiful capital. Its development as an urban center came mostly with the advent of the Italian occupation of Eritrea in 1889.

Initiated by Mussolini's imperialist engagement in East Africa, a phenomenal expansion of the city took place with the design principles and architectural styles wholly indebted to European tendencies at the turn of the century. Asmara was to become the new Rome of the "Africa Orientale Italiana" (the Italian East Africa).

Between 1935 and 1941, Asmara developed rapidly, and transformed itself from a relatively provincial city of the European style into a highly sophisticated metropolis, one of the most modern cities in the whole of Africa. The character of its appearance today derives from this period. Italian architects designed and built for the needs of the growing city.

A spectrum of Modernist buildings came into being which, on an area of about four square kilometers in the town centre, unites the most diverse architectonic movements and characteristics of the period.

Most of these use the architectural language of the *Architettura Razionale*, the Italian Modernism of the 1920s and 1930s.

For centuries, Eritrea was influenced by the cultures and religions of different rulers, from the Egyptians and the Ottomans to the Europeans. Over the course of history, these left their traces on the culture and architecture of the country. Today, this coexistence of different cultures and religions still has an impact on the vitality of the city.

From 1900, the intermixture and neighborhood of diverse formal languages and styles (Syncretism) in combination with local building techniques influenced the architecture of the new capital city of Asmara and, above all, that of its sacred buildings. A specific example of the fusion of styles and techniques was the orthodox cathedral Enda Mariam built in 1938/39. Elements of the local African building tradition were absorbed into the design of the tower roofs, the portal, and the main building.

Art Deco gained a wide audience only at the exhibition "Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs" held in Paris in 1925. Art Deco embraces the creative alliance of elegant, often geometric forms, new materials, bright colors and sensuous themes. Following the ornate Art Nouveau, Art Deco, with its clear, linear and functional lines, was in keeping with the spirit of Modernism.

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