

soaring plane, a surging ship, a swirling staircase. Disconnected as they may seem, these elements all come together in Asmara, capital of Africa's newest country Eritrea, in a veritable Aladdin's Cave of architectural riches. The symbolism characterizes the eclectic buildings of this extraordinary city, which is now slowly revealing itself to the outside world.

For more than three decades, Asmara's hidden wonders were kept secret as civil war raged through the craggy mountains, narrow valleys, and desert plains of Eritrea—then a province of Ethiopia. Guerrilla fighters struggling for independence from successive oppressive rulers finally marched into their newly liberated capital in 1991 and, with peace, Asmara's unique architecture was at last brought out into the open.

Straddling a plateau over two kilometers high, the "city in the clouds" houses one of the highest concentrations of modernist buildings anywhere in the world. It was an experimental playground for the Italian colonizers of the early twentieth century, whose architects and builders were given free reign to dabble to their heart's content.

The result is a mishmash of inspired engineering, packed into an area of four square kilometers, which fits together in the most charming way imaginable. Futuristic buildings depicting the new fascination with machines in the early 1900s stand alongside the simple rationalist styles of the 1930s and the austere monumentalism of the fascist era.

As fascism waned, this too was reflected in the architecture with a return to rustic, classical villas. Intermingled with these various styles are fabulously ornate buildings, such as the Asmara Theatre, the former palace and the Roman Catholic cathedral—neo-classical designs, with touches of Gothic and flourishes of art deco.

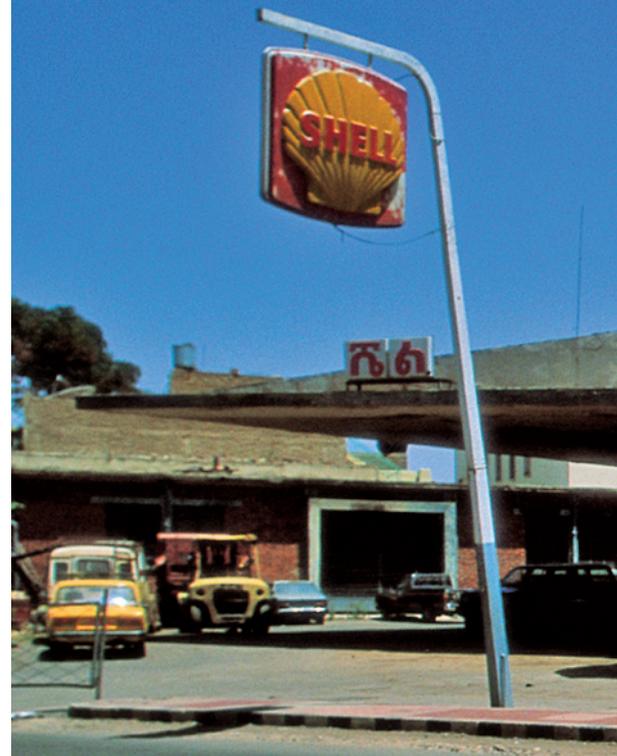
But all this history requires preservation, a fact that was quickly acknowledged by the new Eritrean authorities. After the war, hurried and unplanned construction began sprouting everywhere to the horror of world-renowned architects like Naigzy Gebremedhin.

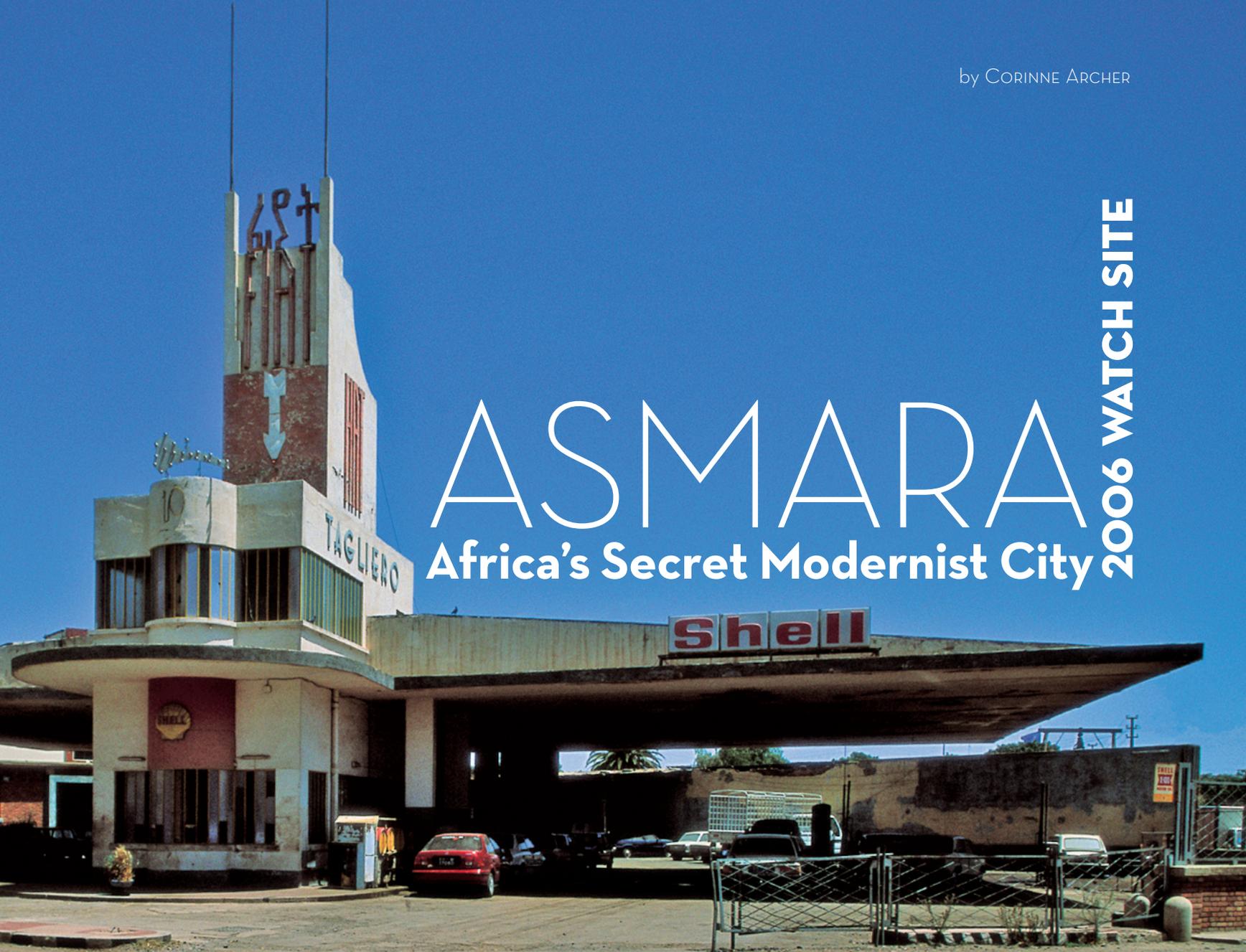
Realization of the threat dawned, and the government placed a building embargo on Asmara's historical center. Naigzy returned to his native Eritrea in 1994 to establish a national environmental program, and became the independent country's first director of environmental protection.

Aided by World Bank funding, he launched an initiative known as the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP) in a bid to save the buildings, many of which had started crumbling badly due to war, isolation, and neglect. He worked as the coordinator of CARP until his retirement in 2004, serving without pay in recognition of the many sacrifices made by fellow Eritreans in achieving the nation's independence.

Before liberation, Naigzy trained as an architect and city planner at various institutions including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and lectured at the faculty of building and architecture at Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa. He then went into private

THE UNSUPPORTED CONCRETE WINGS OF ASMARA, ERITREA'S FORMER FIAT SERVICE STATION ECHO BOTH AN AIRPLANE AND AN EARLIER SERVICE STATION DESIGN BY FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT. THE CINEMA IMPERO, BELOW LEFT, WAS ONE OF THE LARGEST ITALIAN DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CITY DURING THE LATE 1930S.





ASMARA

Africa's Secret Modernist City

2006 WATCH SITE

practice and his many projects included preparing the masterplans for campuses of the new university system in Ethiopia. When the brutal military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam ousted Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, Naigzy joined the Nairobi-based UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) where he headed projects dealing with urban planning and its environmental aspects. In 1994 he left the UN and went to work for his newly independent country.

Naigzy's love for Asmara and its remarkable heritage is infectious. You gaze in awe at the old Fiat Tagliero garage constructed in the shape of a plane with its two enormous concrete wings ready for take off. You wonder at the sight of the Bar Zilli, built to mimic a ship whose bow juts out into Martyrs Avenue—named after the tens of thousands who gave their lives for the country's independence. You linger over a macchiato in the panelled art deco interior of the Cinema Roma café with its zinc top bar alongside the former projection equipment, kept in the foyer as an exhibit.

"This is a city where experimentation with modernism is unparalleled anywhere else in the world," Naigzy points out.

He says much of the Italian architecture in Asmara is Novecento and rationalist. The designs are simple, straight lines as evidenced in

the apartment blocks dotted around the city or commercial buildings such as the Hotel Selam—a classic example of the rationalist style.

Round the corner there are more treasures in store. Naigzy takes you inside a delapidated, unprepossessing apartment block. You are stunned by the sight that greets you—a perfectly preserved spiral staircase of yellow-painted concrete swirls that make you feel giddy as you follow them to the top of the building. An Italian experiment with interior decoration.

The Italians, who controlled Eritrea from 1889 until 1941, spared no expense to create themselves a "home away from home." But the building spree really took off in the 1930s when fascist leader Benito Mussolini decided to use the territory as a springboard from which to expand his African empire. Between 1935 and 1941, as Italians flooded into the colony, Asmara's population grew tenfold.

Eritreans were not allowed into the area now known as the "historical perimeter," where vast pavements were constructed for the Italian *passaggiata*, lined with plush cafes for the well-heeled colonizers to pause and take a cappuccino. Solidly-built cinemas, hotels, and restaurants in a variety of styles were erected for their entertainment. Pastel colored villas surrounded by gardens

overflowing with bougainvillea and frangipani constituted the residential areas—an explosion of taste and color.

Walking down Liberation Avenue—the palm-fringed main thoroughfare that has undergone a series of name changes—the eclectic range of Asmara’s architecture is on full view. Rationalist blocks of flats hug the sides of imposing, severe fascist buildings such as the former party headquarters, now the Ministry of Education. Across the road is the art deco Cinema Impero with its nearby café terrace. Further up lie the gigantic Romanesque-style Catholic cathedral and the Renaissance-inspired Asmara Theatre. Although many buildings are suffering from the ravages of time and adversity, central Asmara still has the feel of a pleasant Italian town. The altitude means the climate is temperate and the filtered sunlight bounces off the multi-colored buildings, creating hues of pale greens, yellows, and pinks. And from every corner, the tell-tale sign of a café society—the pervasive aroma of roasting coffee.

But Naigzy fears that grinding poverty in Eritrea could hamper the continuation of much-needed conservation efforts. The World Bank project is set to expire at the end of this year. “Given the lack of financial resources, it is likely that conservation work will be given a low priority,” he says. “The needs of architectural preservation pale in contrast to health, nutrition, and education.”

Eritrea is one of the poorest countries in the world, with over 60 percent of the population living below the poverty line. And the territory has been devastated by war, occupation, and natural disasters for hundreds of years.

Wedged in the Horn of Africa between Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Sudan this tiny nation of nearly four million people is strategically situated along 1,000 kilometers of Red Sea coast. Its location has resulted in a steady stream of invaders and occupiers over the centuries—Turks, Egyptians, Italians, British, and Ethiopians. Each of these foreign occupiers has had a distinct impact on the

creation of an Eritrean identity, resulting in a resilient and fiercely independent people. Eritrea, which is equally divided between Moslems and Christians, was given its name by the Italians, taken from ‘Mare Erythraeum’ meaning Red Sea in Latin.

The British took over the colony in 1941 after defeating the Italians at the Battle of Keren. But they were never very interested in their new acquisition and in 1952, the UN decided Eritrea should be federated with Ethiopia as an autonomous entity. However, ten years later Emperor Haile Selassie annexed the territory using acts of Eritrean armed resistance as a pretext. Thus began one of the longest civil wars in African history. Eritrea’s struggle for independence was mostly fought in isolation after the superpowers took it in turn to support Ethiopia. But the seemingly formidable foe was defeated, the victorious Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) entered Asmara in 1991 and two years later Eritrea’s independence was formalized in a referendum.

Eritrea was peaceful for a while. The guerrilla leaders strove to turn themselves into politicians and create new institutions for the fledgling state. But in 1998, war again broke out with Ethiopia—this time with the EPLF’s erstwhile allies, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) who had taken control of Ethiopia the same year as Eritrea gained its independence. A skirmish over the border town of Badme flared up into a full-scale war that lasted two years with the loss of tens of thousands of lives. The situation remains tense with the border closed and still to be demarcated.

“The current no-war-no-peace situation will impact negatively on any initiative aiming to raise investment funds,” warns Naigzy, who is co-author of the seminal book *Asmara: Africa’s Secret Modernist City*, which brought the capital to the attention of the world.

But the Eritrean government plays down any suggestion that historical preservation is about to take a back seat. In fact it was CARP, which is administered by the Eritrean Ministry of Tourism,



ONCE THE OFFICES OF LLOYDS BANK, THIS 1938 RATIONALIST STRUCTURE TODAY SERVES ERITREA'S MINISTRY OF TOURISM. THE RESTORED CINEMA ROMA CAFE, BELOW LEFT, WAS ORIGINALLY SLATED TO BE CALLED CINEMA DUX, BUT THE NAME WAS REJECTED AS TOO BLATANT A REFERENCE TO IL DUCE (MUSSOLINI).



that sponsored Asmara's recent nomination to the World Monuments Fund 2006 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites*, a move they believe will aid in their effort to harness private-sector support for restoration of the city.

"This is an equal priority for us, along with other programs," says Information Minister Ali Abdu. "The past is very important in order to build the future." The conservation project, he says, will continue with a budget under the Ministry of Tourism.

However private investors are now paying hard currency for empty plots both within the historic perimeter and in urbanized parts of Asmara. Naigzy is afraid that investors, who have paid dollars for prime land, will want to maximize their return by building "high and wide."

"Persons who have fought against concrete monstrosities may be in for a rude shock," he says. "I hope and pray that one is wrong with this dire prediction."

Ali Abdu seeks to allay any fears in this regard. He admits there have been "one or two mistakes," but stresses that the government is very aware of this potential problem. "We do have a say with the private investors," he says. "We are protecting the historical buildings and we emphasize the importance of this to the investors."

The government, he says, is endeavoring to separate the old and the new by building a modern city around the historical center.

Naigzy acknowledges that up to now the moratorium on new construction or even substantial modification within the historical perimeter still holds. "This is remarkable," he says. "Is it the result

of detached and unadulterated responsibility? Difficult to say. The economy is in stagnation mode, hence no construction."

Whatever their politics and beliefs, Eritreans have one thing in common—an unbridled devotion to their capital city. And the government has continued the trend of building unusual monuments in the city center. Rather than cultish statues or distasteful memorials to commemorate the independence of their country, they built a monument in the form of a huge pair of sandals—the *shidda* worn by the freedom fighters.

Far from denouncing the architecture as a colonial reminder, as in so many other African countries, Eritreans believe their capital is unique. It is this belief that might well propel the push for continued preservation.

"Our architecture is like frozen music," says Ali Abdu. "It's like wine—the longer it stays, the better it tastes. It is magnificent—very, very unique." His favorite buildings, he says, are the art deco pastel post office on the main square, and the former Fiat Tagliero garage.

"African countries are very quick to destroy their architecture," he adds. "But it's not bad to remember the past. You can't cancel history, you can learn from it."

Naigzy agrees. "Eritreans in general and the citizens of Asmara in particular seem to have thoroughly appropriated the colonial architecture, to the extent of almost perceiving it inherently as their own," he states. "There is most definitely a feeling that Asmara is a unique city in Africa, indeed, in the world." ■