

The Matter of Touch – the Case of Asmara

Gertrud Olsson

PhD, Senior Lecturer, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
gertrud.olsson@hdk.gu.se

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Introduction to Asmara

Asmara is the capital of Eritrea in Eastern Africa. The city of Asmara is placed on a plateau 2,325 meters over the sea. The country is bordering Sudan in the West, Ethiopia in the South, and Djibouti in the Southeast. The Italians began the colonization of the Eritrean coast in 1885 and took control of the highland plateau in 1889. Eritrea was officially declared a colonial state by the Italians in 1890. In 1900 the Italians transferred the capital of the colony from Massawa to Asmara. In Asmara they began the planning of a traditional colonial city. Between 1935 and 1941 Asmara developed into a modernist city with an ambitious city plan. It is this built heritage that has made Asmara famous for its architecture. In 1941 the Allied forces entered Asmara, and the British Military Administration took control of the Italian colony. Despite the Italian defeat, in Asmara constructing and building continued according to the Italian plans well into the 1950s. In 2017 Asmara was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The criteria fulfilled were summarized as follows: “The authenticity of local intangible attributes manifested in language, cultural practices, identity, and sense of place have been retained through Asmara’s evolution from an indigenous center of economy and administration, through a colonial capital, to a modern African capital.” The architecture, belonging to the first half of the 20th century, is a consequence of Italian colonialism, but at the same time the buildings are built by the Eritreans themselves. The architecture manifests aspects of regional, classical, Italian, Ottoman, and “international style” identities. The inhabitants of the city have been using it without changes and additions for around eighty years, and they were also the ones to initiate its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The paper starts with a theoretical background, a phenomenological approach applied to discuss the matter of touch in architecture and is followed by a short introduction of the city of Asmara and its modernist architecture. Then, theory is applied to the chosen case studies, and the modernist ideas of rational architecture and the beauty of speed are discussed. The text concludes with questions of ageing of the buildings as well as the restoring of the Asmara heritage.

Theory Background and Introduction to the Matter of Touch

When one is looking at aesthetics in an architectural context, it is obvious that the senses play a crucial role. In order to revisit the qualities in architecture through the senses, this paper nourishes from theories of the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa (born 1936). He has an overall interest in how we take in and experience rooms, materials and architecture – thus the act of perception.

A seminal body of work regarding the senses belongs to the American psychologist James J. Gibson’s (1904-1979). In *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966), he describes the senses as a perceptual system that cooperates in the perceptual process. Gibson gives two different meanings of the verb *to sense*. The first is *to detect something* and the other is *to have*

a sensation.¹ He uses the first meaning, *to detect something*, when he describes the perceptual system of the senses. Stimuli are self-producing, and the causal chain thus goes both from response to stimulus and from stimulus to response. Gibson argues that the traditional stimulus-response form is no longer adequate, precisely because of this *reunion* from response to stimulus and again back to response. The result of perception is a continuous flow of activity. Stimulation is not imposed upon people, it is something people *obtain*, which means that stimulation is actively obtained *by* the individual.²

In *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (2007), Juhani Pallasmaa describes the first and foremost role given to the eyes already in antique times: “In Western culture, sight has been historically regarded as the noblest of the senses, and thinking itself thought of in terms of seeing. Already in classical Greek thinking, certainty was based on vision and visibility.”³ Giving the ocular principal attention, we diminished the ability to perceive other impressions such as touching, hearing and smelling. Nevertheless, we are flooded with all different kinds of impressions when we walk from one room to the next or take a stroll in a city.

During the early Modernism, vision became exclusive in the act of perceiving. It was the eye alone that determined the aesthetic value. This transition was made with the start of the industrial age, and the change led figuratively from the hand’s work to the eye. In his major opus, the posthumous *The Arcades Project* (1999), the German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) depicts the French capital Paris during the nineteenth century as the first modern metropolis. In several important essays from the 1930s, Benjamin describes the emerging mass culture and the altered position of the arts in what he calls the “age of reproduction,” that is, the epoch when photography and film are born. Industrialization is a crucial turning point. Machines replace handicraft, a new kind of speed is introduced in the manufacturing process, goods are produced on a large scale. By means of technical innovations, new forms of reproduction for printed material, photographs, and film are created. As the role played by handicraft in the production process recedes, the manual element, the work of the hand is replaced by the *eye*, which possesses the power to follow the new, intensified speed of production. The eye is faster than the hand, the eye only can register the new forced tempo. It is no longer the hand that reproduces goods – it is rather the supervisor’s eye that follows production; the gaze makes goods visible. This transition is twofold, both from the viewer’s and the designer’s part.

Architecture changed from restricted closed spaces into free fluctuation of forces. This alteration was especially manifest in the work of the German and Swiss architects Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier in their striving to bring the scenery into the room visually. As an early supporter of the new technique of the camera, Le Corbusier was occupied with photographing the buildings he designed – from the right angles for the viewing perspective. He published his architecture and theory notes in selected journals and books following the trend of mass culture. Vision became the reliable mind. Examining from the early modernist perspective, Pallasmaa declares that the experience of architecture solely through the eye means that buildings lost “their plasticity, and their connection with the language and wisdom of the body, they become isolated in the cool and distant realm of vision. With the loss of tactility, measures and details crafted for the human body – and particularly for the hand – architectural structures become repulsively flat, sharp-edged, immaterial and unreal.”⁴

In the 1960s, the Danish architect Jan Gehl (born 1936) questions the strict practical and human-less city that followed upon the purely function and structure in late modernist time. He

1 James J Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), 1.

2 *Ibid.*, 1ff.

3 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 15.

4 Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 31.

wanted to retrieve qualities that were gone, that is meeting places for people and spots without heavy traffic. Thus, Gehl wanted to bring back the city to the inhabitants. In *Life between Buildings (Livet mellem husene, 1971)* he introduced the idea of an *eye level perspective* and opened for a reading of the buildings and of the city in relation to human size. This means the use of more senses than the eye. Pallasmaa gives an example related to Jan Gehl's concept:

"I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; my gaze unconsciously projects my body onto the façade of the cathedral, where it roams over the mouldings and contours, sensing the size of recesses and projections; my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door I pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me."⁵

If we may understand the city via a multi-sensory experience perspective, we are so to say in a dialogue with buildings and surroundings. A city that "talks to you" contains the qualities Gehl is asking for.

Pallasmaa underlines that "vision separates us from the world whereas the other senses unite us with it".⁶ The same thought is expressed by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) in his perception theory. Merleau-Ponty points out that our experiences of the visual have a connection with touch – it is the same body, the same observer, who looks and feels.⁷ The tactile belongs to the sense of touch, but it is also apprehended by the eye. Due to of the eye's ability to move, it can be said that vision has an advantage in the perceptual process. Merleau-Ponty puts this as follows: the tactile "has been engaged to visibility."⁸ Nevertheless, there is an "overlap" between the touched and the touching, *and* between the perceptible and the visible. Merleau-Ponty speaks of the intertwining of vision and the visible, and an interaction between them.⁹ Perceiving our world through sight, perceptual experience can be obtained *haptically* by touch. J.J. Gibson in his study derives the word *haptic* from the Greek word meaning "able to lay hold of."¹⁰ A painted surface can both be read, or read off, by sight, and felt by the hand. The somewhat uneven stroke of a paintbrush and the consistency of the color material can be apprehended by a finger run over the surface. "Vision reveals what touch already knows," concludes Pallasmaa.¹¹

Architectural Aesthetics in Asmara

In the city of Asmara, we can encounter the qualities that Pallasmaa and Gehl are asking for. Asmara has buildings no higher than three stories, a customary café life with outdoor seating on the sidewalk, the impression of pulse and activity. The facades are often designed with rounded corners, both convex and concave, these forms creating extra spaces and small squares in the streets. The overall impression is the consistent shape, the neat scale, the uniform proportions of the buildings and the harmonious color scale. These components invite the visitor to easily take in and understand the city. The eye can follow the heights of the facades, see details of the buildings and observe life on the street – thus achieving the *eye level perspective* in Jan Gehl's words. We can feel from our senses and body perspective that this is an architecture with qualities, even though the city is worn. That is worn in relation to its ageing process in eight decades of constant use.

5 Ibid., 40.

6 Ibid., 25.

7 Maurice Merleau Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 139.

10 Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, 97.

11 Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 42.

This city is beautiful due to proportions, materials, details and colors. In Asmara we can certainly feel the human scale when walking around in the city. Also, the bright light is crucial to how we see and perceive the architecture, the materials, the details and the colors.

To follow Pallasmaa, Asmara must be considered as a haptic city. [Fig. 1] Asmara is designed in the early modernist period and thus with a lot of tactile qualities. Even if modernist ideology was focused on smooth and peeled forms, the building structure was made carefully and by hand. In the early stage of Modernism, craftsmanship was apparent, much more than the industrial and machine-made expressions.

The city of Asmara developed rapidly between 1935 and 1941, to become one of the most modern cities in the whole of Africa. It is made of buildings such as groceries and enclosed markets, administrative centers and banks, schools and churches, post offices, theaters and cinemas. Historicist styles and elements of past epochs in Italian and Western traditions – the Italian Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Romanesque and Classicism – were crucial in the design of the architecture before the 1930s. Throughout history, Eritrea has been influenced by different cultures and religions, for example the Egyptians and the Ottomans. Naturally – the local building techniques influenced formal architecture, with a fusion of styles and techniques. From the 1935 and onward ruled the Italian Modernism style, *Architettura Razionale*, including some futuristic elements. In 1941, the allied forces entered Asmara, and the British military administration took control of the former Italian colony. Despite this military defeat, buildings in Asmara were under construction according to the Italian plans well into the 1950s.

Piccola Roma

“Africa Orientale Italiana” and “Piccola Roma” became the nicknames of Asmara when Benito Mussolini took over the government of Italy in 1922 as the leader of the National Fascist Party. Mussolini ruled Italy as a dictator until 1943. One of his strategies included architecture as an expression of power, as a means to recreate the grandeur of the Roman ancestors. Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960) was Mussolini’s personal architect and his task was to educate the architects who got the opportunity to work in Eritrea. Piacentini tutored young architects and engineers, pouring into their minds the ideas of the party, and prepared them to go to the African colony. Piacentini expected the architects to work in line with the Fascist dogma:

“First, he wanted them to be ‘sympathetic’ to Mussolini’s Government and the Fascist dogma it espoused. Second, he wanted them to ‘... break away completely from old style architecture and building and to adopt a new style which respects the achievement of the old Roman Empire and maintains its ‘solemnity’, especially in public buildings’. He appealed to them to maintain an architectural mission. *All buildings should clearly maintain a will and a unitary style*.”¹²

The Eritrean architect and professor of architecture Naigzy Gebremedhin, one of the co-authors, together with Edvard Denison, of the comprehensive book *Asmara – Africa’s secret modernist city*, clarifies furthermore:

“Both pieces of advice were probably difficult for young architects and planners to follow and were largely ignored. To these young people a new and rare professional opportunity was opening, an opportunity that may not have been easily available in the mother land. Far from the watchful eyes of Rome, and with a very loose control by local administrators, these young architects and engineers were able to innovate in several technical areas as they let their imaginations soar. And Asmara reaped all the benefits; many of the most fascinating buildings were created under these conditions.”¹³

12 Naigzy Gebremedhin, “Asmara, Africa’s Secret Modernist City” (paper presented at conference *African Perspectives: Dialogue on Urbanism and Architecture*, The Faculty of Architecture, TU Delft, December 6–8, 2007), 16.

13 Ibid.



Fig. 1: The Farmacia Central building in Asmara

This is what we still see today — that the architects tried out an architecture free in style. Leaving their homeland (and thereby the Fascist controlled politics) the Italian architects became interested in the new country and culture. Many of the architects stayed for a long period in Eritrea.

In postcolonial studies the term *subaltern* identifies the colonial populations who are socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power in an imperial colony.¹⁴ In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, broadens the meaning of *subaltern* while studying modernist architecture in a former colonized country and trying to view it not only from a Western perspective. From being viewed in an imperial colonial context where the subaltern is a native man or woman defined by social status, Spivak stressed the importance of listening to the subaltern as an *equal*. Her thought obviously includes

¹⁴ The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) coined the term *subaltern* to identify the *cultural hegemony* — that is the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class who manipulate the culture of that society. This hegemony was upheld in colonial politics in order to deny the subaltern's voices and agency (i.e. the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices).

an understanding that knowledge should not only be viewed (and judged) from a Western perspective, but instead picked up from the subalterns' own voices. Life on other continents clarifies Spivak, looks different due to separate and specific literary and scientific traditions. When we make up a biased homogeneous and absolute picture, we do not discern this richness.

In Asmara, different voices can be detected: of Eritrean craftsmen, of the inhabitants living in Asmara, of the Italian architects, of the Eritrean academia. Despite the ambiguous experience during the Fascist reign, it was the inhabitants themselves who initiated the inclusion of Asmara in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The project was carried out by the independent office Asmara Heritage Project, AHP. The inhabitants did not only build the city by their hands as crafts people, they have also protected the buildings during the past eighty years. No scribble can be seen on the façades, no damage has been done to the Italian designed buildings.

The contemporary Asmara holds a living, winding and sometimes crowded network of markets, churches, mosques and everyday environment; from the inner-city center towards labyrinth shaped outer regions. The modernist city of Asmara was built on a classic grid system, but with the strong directions of the fascist Mussolini era, to divide the city into zones containing different functions such as trade, industries, dwelling and leisure activities. This plan can be easily understood in relation to 1930s Europe, governed by the ideas of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), synthesized in the Athens Charter (1933), which provided for the zoning and reorganizing of the cities by the key functions of the *functional city*, namely: *dwelling, recreation, work, and transportation*. Thus, in the 1930s the city was divided into four zones: a) the indigenous/native-born quarter b) the villa quarter of the Europeans, c) the industrial zone, d) and the mixed zone with administrative and trading facilities. This laid the ground for dividing people by class and race.

Odoardo Cavagnari (1868-1920), architect and engineer, belonged to the first generation of Italians in Eritrea. He designed the city plan for Asmara in 1913, following the idea of segregating people in different zones. At the level of the architectural design, however, he followed another approach. His buildings show a genuine interest in the culture of the country. This can be seen in his use of elements from the vernacular culture of Eritrea, consequently of styles and building techniques from traditional buildings. Other architects became influenced by Cavagnari; he was a forerunner for a new design philosophy. An example of his design approach is seen in the *Degghi Selam orthodox church* (1917), with the use of elements from domestic Eritrean architecture. [Fig. 2] The conical concrete roof of the church has reference to the *agdo*, the traditional round hut with conical grass roof. Also, the church walls' concrete crossbeams "imitating" the *monkey-head-technique*, i.e. the constructing wooden cross-pieces protruding from the façade in the style of local African buildings. In addition, angels are painted in an Orthodox manner following the African tradition. Cavagnari worked in Eritrea from the 1910s until his death ten years later. He designed a series of important edifices in Asmara, among which the *Asmara theatre* (1919–1920). It was the first theatre in town – seating 750 people – later used as a cinema, and now again in use as a theatre. The building has a characteristic façade, constructed in reinforced concrete faced with brick and plaster and stone. Seven arches in renaissance style are overlooking a double staircase to the garden and the boulevard. The design of the theatre is eclectic, different styles are meeting. *Medeber market* (1914), in turn, was built for traders travelling from the coast into the hinterland and further towards Ethiopia and Sudan. [Fig. 3] From being a *caravanserai*, the Turkish word for a stop-over for caravans with trading goods, the building was transformed into a center for trading. From the 1950s until today, the structure is used for recycled materials such as metal and wood furniture. It's a huge area of workshops dealing with cleaning and re-design of objects and things. In our days even manufacturing workshops and chili-pepper mills can be found. The Medeber market is built in a symmetrical form, with stone and tiles and a core of concrete. The tower – which shows the entrance – has been a landmark and is visible all around the city. Visible but close up also tactile due to the original brick material.



Fig. 2: *Degghi Selam orthodox church* (1917)



Fig. 3: *Medeber market* (1914)

The Idea of Rational Architecture and the Beauty of Speed

The style of the architecture was called *Architettura Razionale* [Rational Architecture], a name derived from the Italian Modernism developed in the 1920s and used in Italy until the 1940s. This style was a reaction to historicist models flourishing in Italy; the modernist one searched instead a more geometric-based architecture. Architecture was analyzed from the viewpoint of its functions and its everyday use. In 1926, a group of young architects from Milan founded the *Gruppo 7* and declared that the new architecture – the true architecture as they pointed out – should be a combination of logic and rationality. Among the members were Giuseppe Pagano, Adalberto Libera and Giuseppe Terragni. They shifted architecture away from the neo-classical and the neo-baroque revivalism – and let it be based on abstract perfection of rhythm and with simple constructions. In addition, the roots of the Mediterranean culture should be included. Terragni is known for the *Casa del Fascio* in Como (1936) in northern Italy, built as the headquarters of the local fascist party and a prototype for the new style of architecture. In Asmara, the young Italian architects tried out this new idea of Razionalismo in large scale building projects.

The idea of Modernism involved a new timeless universalism, a negation of local context with its limited geographical location and climatic conditions. Artists and architects alike were searching for a valid universal identification, such as fundamental and formal laws – a *total design* that would pass over into all aspects of people's lives, fitting for the entire world. Modernity in Asmara can be discussed through the Italian futurist manifestos. A certain way of writing manifestos with strong emphasis for or against the matter in question followed the modernist way of thinking and acting. The artistic and literary “-ism” of Futurism was started in 1909 by the Italian poet and writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944). In 1921, Marinetti published *The Manifesto of Tactilism* describing the feeling of different materials against the body, equivalent to the feeling when one is swimming. Marinetti speaks about the need for the education of the sense of touch:¹⁵

It will be necessary to keep the hands gloved for many days, during which the brain will attempt to condense in them the desire for varied tactile sensations.

To swim underwater, in the ocean, trying to distinguish tactilely the plaited currents and different temperatures.

15 F.T. Marinetti, “Tactilism,” in *Futurism – An Anthology*, eds. Rainey, Poggi & Wittman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 269.

At first hand, Marinetti's manifesto is not related to architecture; it's more about awareness of the sensibility of material as such – as a new understanding. This is a contradiction, or maybe better a reversed consequence, of the one-sided focus on the eye. The Bauhaus teacher László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) developed Marinetti's manifesto and pointed out the tactile sensations and also how to be aware of the haptics of building materials in architecture. Moholy-Nagy created a terminology for describing different appearances of materials in architecture, color and paint included. In *The New Vision* (1938), four component terms were used: *structure*, *texture*, *surface treatment*, and *mass arrangement*.¹⁶ Using this terminology, Moholy-Nagy could describe a color's surface, its chemical composition and how it was processed. Firstly, the *structure* is "the unalterable manner in which the material is built up."¹⁷ Each material has its own structure, and the structure describes the material's internal organization. As to colors, this involves pigments, binders, solvents, and fillers. Secondly, the *texture* is "the organically resulting outward surface," like the exterior layer of a plant, the plant's visible surface. Thirdly, the *surface treatment* means "the sensorially perceptible result (the effect) of the working process." The term *surface treatment* – or its German equivalent *Faktur* – is derived from the Latin word *facere* meaning "to do." This refers to the manufacturing process: metal, for instance, may be waxed, hammered, polished, brushed, etc., a painted surface can be roughed, polished, sponged, or varnished, etc. And finally, the *mass arrangement* is "the regular, rhythmical, or else irregular, massing."¹⁸ Using the expression *mass arrangement* Moholy-Nagy described an accumulation or quantity of something, for example screw heads in metal, an accumulation characteristic of something that reinforces expression through repetition. A brush drawn with the same lines over a surface enhances the expression of the brush strokes and provides a pattern effect. In the city of Asmara we face the matte façades and the materials used. Marinetti, the leader of the futurists, wrote a number of manifestos and gave speeches with strong expression. His concept was mostly and strongly focused on *motion*. He paid tribute to the new age and the experience of power, glorified speed, and spoke in disparaging terms about the sick and weak. In *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* (20 February 1909) Marinetti wrote: "the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: the *beauty of speed*."¹⁹ For the Futurists, the modern city represents the essence of movement – the speed of machine-powered vehicles, people in motion and dynamism. These positions were also in line with the growing ideas ultimately leading to the functional city, and with an overall fascination for machines (as in Le Corbusier's "machine for living in").

Artists tried to explain the concept of speed and motion promptly following Marinetti's lead. The Italian artist Umberto Boccioni formulated in 1914 in his manifesto "Absolute motion + relative motion = dynamism" and went on: "Absolute motion is a dynamic law that is inherent in an object."²⁰ In futuristic painting, speed and motion are the goals to give shape and at the same time the subjects of the paintings. A trotting dog is rendered with a series of successive positions of the legs in a linear sequence (such as in Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog in Motion*, 1912). In one and the same image, the entire motion is illustrated as opposed to just capturing a single snapshot. In his manifesto, Boccioni relates to the photographic technique of *chronophotography* developed in the middle of the 19th century by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey. They worked with rapid, stop-watch images of people or animals in motion. Boccioni writes: "a horse in movement is not a motionless horse which is moving, but a

16 *Struktur, Textur, Faktur*, and *Häufung* in German.

17 László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision* (New York: Dover Publications, 1938/2005), 35.

18 *Ibid.*, 40-45.

19 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, ed. R.W. Flint (London: Secker & Warburg), 41. "An automobile in full speed is more beautiful than Nike of Samothrace" is one of Marinetti's famous theses (Sven Sandström, *Det moderna skedet* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1971), 152. Authors and artists were captivated by the dynamism, innovation and the freedom found in futurism, and did not immediately realize that the theories also reflected the violent ideology of Fascism.

20 Umberto Boccioni, "Absolute motion + relative motion = dynamism," in *Futurism – An Anthology*, eds. Rainey, Poggi & Wittman (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 187.



Fig. 4a, 4b: Alfa Romeo head office (1937)

Fig. 5: The Fiat Tagliero service station (1938). Fig. 6: Train building (1939)

*horse in movement, which makes it another sort of thing altogether, and it should be conceived and expressed as something completely different.*²¹ This is a new approach, a new way of seeing, and Boccioni stressed that “we must try to find a form which will be able to express a new absolute” – and this new is the matter of speed.²² We may be able to follow the speed via our eyes, but also encounter it through our various senses.

Following the idea of speed, and in the context of architecture, the car racing event in Asmara can be mentioned. The *Circuit of Asmara* was a sport contest between the years 1938-1972. An Alfa Romeo 8C 2300 won the very first 1938 Asmara circuit. The interest in car racing was manifested in architecture by the Asmara head office of *Alfa Romeo* (1937), designed by an unknown architect. [Fig. 4] This is one of many industrial firms that established offices in the Eritrean capital. The Alfa Romeo head office complex includes facilities such as residential buildings for the company’s workers, a bar and a large number of garages. Today, all the Alfa Romeo buildings are worn-out, but we can still experience the qualities of their design and composition, the paint material and the visible construction bricks. We can feel the careful work of the surface treatment, both with hands and eyes. Also, the worn parts of the façade add something to the experience of the building, a narrative of eighty years of use. The special entrance is framed with width angles plastered in red ochre. The original Alfa Romeo sign from 1937 still hangs above the entrance.

In accordance with the concept of speed, the Eritreans became fascinated with cycling. It started in the 1930s with Italian cyclists racing, followed shortly by Eritreans cycling in the streets. In 1937, the first bike race event was held in Asmara and in 1939, an Eritrean cyclist won a much-watched race against Italian sportsmen, giving a further boost to the sport. Trains, aeroplanes and ships are some of the machines that futurist architects tried to copy or transform into buildings. Among the buildings in Asmara which address qualities of speed in their design, *The Fiat Tagliero service station* (1938) by architect Giuseppe Pettazzi (1907-2001) stands out. [Fig. 5] This is a

21 Ibid. 188

22 Ibid.



Fig. 7: Shell Service Station (1937) in Godiaf
 Fig. 8a, 8b: The Bar Zilli (1930s)

futuristic design of high quality, an outstanding building. The service station has the streamlined and dynamic form of an aeroplane, painted in a modernistic matte white. With a thirty-meter-long freestanding concrete roof, the wings hang unsupported above street level. In a metaphorical way the Fiat Tagliero makes us imagine that the airplane has landed – so to say waiting for passengers to leave the plane. The service station symbolizes the innovative confidence of Italian technologies and business in the international context.

In the so-called *Train building* (1939) designed by Aldo Fornarini, we can feel the sense of a train in motion. [Fig. 6] The gradient, curved course of the building celebrates modern transport and travel. It honors machines as symbols of modern reality. Apart from the technical aspects, the flaked of ochre yellow plaster shows the ageing life of the Train building. It was built as the head office of the district group of the fascist party, but also accommodated shops and apartments.²³ Further, the *Shell Service Station* (1937) in Godiaf, outside Asmara, has a design (by an unknown architect) connected to *nautical style* – a modernist fashion related to ships and steamers. [Fig. 7] It is built in a small curved white plastered form, with round windows in two rows, and a flat roof hanging out. The style mirrors the typical elements of international Modernism. There is activity around the service station, people wait for buses to arrive. We can recognize the building as a small ship; but far from the sea and in the torrid climate, the entire building signals to be a bus stop as well as a service station. The relation between building and vehicle can be part of a reflection, due to the neat size of the building. The proportions and size of the building relate

²³ Edwards Denison, Guang Yu Ren and Naigzy Gebremedhin, *Asmara: Africa's secret modernist city* (London: Merrell, 2006), 187.



Fig. 9a, 9b: The colours of Asmara

to the body, thus Jan Gehl's *eye level perspective* can be used to understand the totality. Also, the *Bar Zilli* from the 1930s (unknown architect) is connected to the *naautical style*, not unlike the passengers of a ship overlooking the sea from the construction's huge window on the curved part. [Fig. 8] The edifice contains shops and apartments and on the ground floor the Bar Zilli. The small repeated round windows follow the adornment of a ship. In size, the building is somewhat like a transatlantic steamer. The material of the façade is worth highlighting: the stone material has a surface treatment mix of *al fresco* and *stucco lustro* including lime and soap, polished by hot iron. This technique is ancient.

Colors, Materials, and Tactile Properties

Asmara was self-sufficient on a range of building materials. *Brick*, *tile* and *mosaic* were produced in Eritrea. The same goes for most of the *marble*, and other *stone* materials. *Wood* was imported to Eritrea from Yemen and Italy, while *timber* was used on small scale from their own supplies. *Metal*, *reinforcing iron bars* and *Portland cement* came from other countries.

The uniform color scale in Asmara follows the classic Italian design with a preference for gold ochre tones. The colors are based on the pigments ochre, gold ochre, red ochre and burnt terra. If one looks more closely at Eritrea's own color scale with regard to the soil, the sand and the light, it is the same warm yellow ochre tone that is evident. [Fig. 9] The *Cinema Odeon* (1937) is one of many cinemas built during the 1930s. Designed by architect Saltelli E. Beltrami in a pure and geometric twentieth-century classicism, the gold ochre façade appears. The building is completed to the ground with gray semi-columns in concrete, which are stone-imitated in *sgnaffito technique* (that is the material's *structure*, using a word from Moholy-Nagy's concept). The reddish ochre color can be found on *Casa dei Fascio*, today the *Ministry of Education* (1928/1940). In 1940, Bruno Sclafani (active in the city between 1937 and 1952) designed a new façade to the building, a new monumental expression which was meant to symbolize "the power of the state." A staircase was removed, the building met the street, which figuratively meant that the party and the people met.²⁴ The same color combination, gold ochre and red ochre, is seen on *Cinema Impero* (1937) designed by Mario Messina. [Fig. 10] The style of the building follows the Art Deco and is also a remarkable example of the cinema architecture of the 1930s. It is a two-story cinema with an organically curved formed interior. Rows of pillars crowned by lions' heads separate the auditorium from the screen. Seats in wood, green walls with African stucco motifs, red velvet together with lion sculptures are parts of the interior. For a visitor in the room, all senses are involved in the experience. The building – it occupies an entire block – includes bars, shops, apartments and offices.

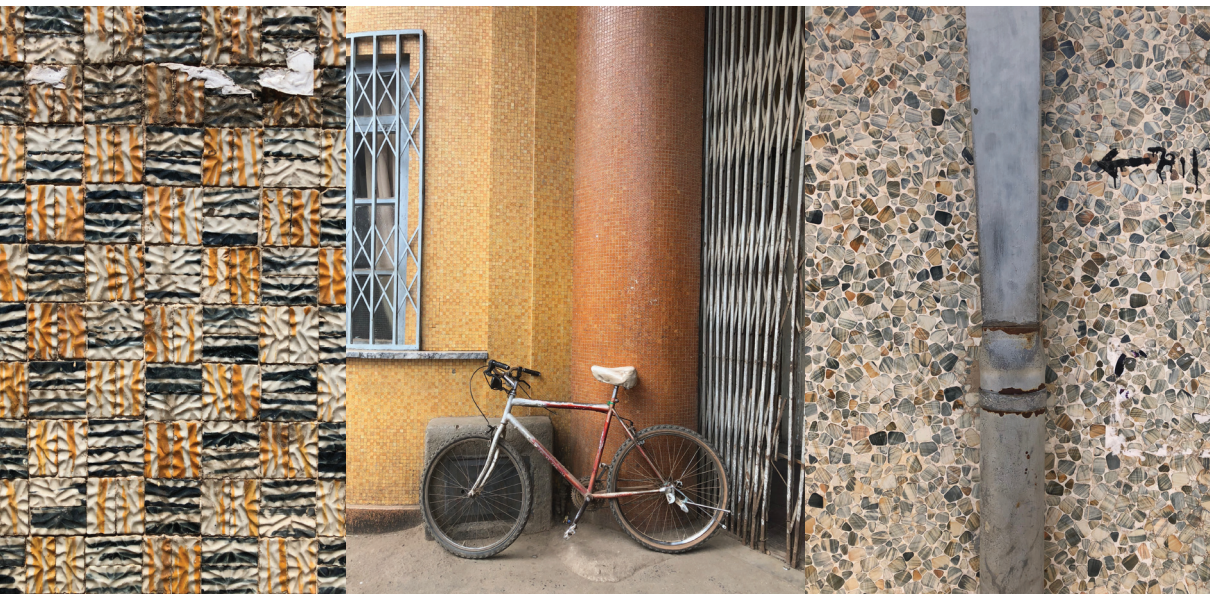
Mosaic is another technique that holds the parts together, but also shows their differences. The mosaic began to be used as a façade material in Asmara in the 1950s; previously it had been used only for decoration and adornment. The city's mosaic factory was built in 1954 and operated for 30 years. It is a completely different mosaic compared to what we are used to see. It is not produced in glass mosaic or marble, but instead as ceramic mosaic pieces of 20 x 20 millimeters. The so-called *Mother-of-pearl* mosaic is noteworthy as well. [Fig. 11] The ceramic

²⁴ Ibid., 123.



Fig. 10: *Cinema Impero* (1937)

Fig. 11a, 11b: ceramic mosaic pieces; Fig. 11c: *Mother-of-pearl* mosaic



surface is ribbed with small reliefs, turned and twisted in various directions and glazed against the mortar. The color range is light, drawing towards the pastel palette, each piece is one- or two-colored. From the viewing distance, the mosaic pieces are blended into yellow, green or greyish surfaces so that they catch the light and glitter.

Our perceptual experience can “feel” the structure of a painted façade or the mosaic wall or the texture of the carpet via our vision. The brain will signal the plaster without our need to touch the façade. Both Merleau-Ponty and Pallasmaa’s thinking have significance for the contemporary interest in materiality; the senses become decisive for an understanding of architecture. Jan Gehl, in his turn, points out the value of social activities on the street scene. People meet in the street, in corners, in small squares, in cafés. The architecture of Asmara provides an accurate scale to the city, the block, the house. In public spaces, the heights of the buildings are often no more than 2 or 3 levels. Mosaic, tiles, brick and stones co-operate in daily life, and give a relation to the human scale.

The Process of Ageing

Today we find the city co-existing; the rules and zones with prohibition on trespassing are removed. The buildings are as we have seen, worn out but well preserved. They have stood, been used since construction time, and are almost untouched as if only time had passed. The façades have aged naturally, paint and surfaces have been worn, matted, weathered. They have endured changing weather and glued and pasted advertising. The Swedish art historian August Brunius (1879-1926) took into consideration a hundred years ago in *Hus och Hem* [House and Home. Studies of the Swedish villa and the villa town, 1912] the wear and tear of buildings: “The house is not built to stand and look pretty during a sunny summer, it must harden out all the weathers, rain, frost, sun, for years, and not only cure all thorns but become more beautiful by them.”²⁵ Worn, accordingly, but usable and still in use. The eye may be captured by a “flaky beauty” with naturally worn paint, a natural ageing of plastered façades; sometimes visible stones and bricks emerge from a lower layer. We recognize this approach to the ageing of architecture in Italy. Matte color captures the light and tells of decades of use. Nonetheless, it is important to underline that renovations are needed to allow the heritage of Asmara to be preserved.

If we go back to the UNESCO report, a paragraph reads: “All the significant architectural structures and the original urban layout, including most of the characteristic features and public spaces, have been retained in their entirety. The site has also preserved its historical, cultural, functional and architectural integrity with its elements largely intact and generally in relatively acceptable condition, although a number of buildings suffer from lack of maintenance.”

Before and after the world heritage nomination, work with planning of conservation, restoration and protection have been ongoing in Asmara. The *Integrated Management Plan (IMP)* for Asmara 2016–2021 includes descriptions of preservation of the built heritage, conservation over time, and how the city can be transferred to future generations. In 2005, an *Outline Urban Planning Regulation (OUPR)* was developed in order to control land use allocation, and to conserve buildings with certain heritage significance. The *Asmara Heritage Project (AHP)*, established in 2014) promoted the nomination dossier for the UNESCO. Now, the project’s aim is to preserve the 4,300 edifices that made Asmara worthy of the world heritage list. AHP is carrying out research, documentation, data collecting, and has founded an archive including more than 75,000 documents. This independent office is responsible for the entire documentation of architectural drawings, technical plans, sketches, letters and correspondence. Further, AHP has formulated a

²⁵ In original: “Huset är inte byggt för att stå och se nått ut under en solig sommar, det skall härda ut alla väder, regn, frost, sol, i årtal, och icke blott härda ut alla vidrigheter utan bli vackrare af dem.” August Brunius in *Hus och hem. Studier av den svenska villan och villastaden* (Stockholm: Rekolid, 2001 – orig. ed. 1912).

Protected Building List of the heritage and is working to define strategies for preserving the historic character of the city. In the present, a guidebook on Asmara is in production, and a *Conservation Master Plan* (CMP) is ongoing, supplemented with a *Building Technical Regulation*, the latter conducted together with Italian restoration experts.

The architecture in the city of Asmara consists of meetings; between different cultures, separate traditions, building materials from several continents, collaborations between architects and craftspeople, and the union of two countries, Italy and Eritrea, with different backgrounds and contrasting conditions. There is in Asmara a relationship between the vernacular building tradition and the modernist functionalist architecture, the meeting of *global* and *local* in architectural design. The people behind the city manifest the importance of both the Italian architects and the Eritrean craftspeople. According to Omar Akbar, former Director and Chairman of the Stiftung Bauhaus in Dessau, “the Eritrean population came to adopt these buildings over time, and accept them as part of their architectonic inheritance, a unique ‘City of Modernism’ could develop where today different cultures, religions, population groups and ethnic groups live side by side.”²⁶ No doubt, the architecture of Asmara bears testimony to this intercultural history. In addition, the architectural quality of touch is clearly visible, the feeling of colors and the surface treatment appeal to the eyes and the fingertips. The careful cladding, the relation between the human body and the building proportions show a profound knowledge of architecture.

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ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

Fig. 1-11: Photographs by the author.

²⁶ Omar Akbar, “Asmara: Africa’s Secret Capital of Modern Architecture,” *EINS Entwicklungspolitik* (2007): 10.