

Interview with Medhanie Teklemariam in August 2014

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World Heritage, Infrastructure, Greater Asmara, Archive

Medhanie Teklemariam is an Eritrean urban planner, the coordinator of the Asmara heritage programme and the head of the DoI (Department Infrastructural Services Zoba Maekel, Asmara, Eritrea)

„ASMARA (AFP) – Eritrea’s capital Asmara boasts buildings unlike anywhere else in Africa, a legacy of its Italian colonial past, when architects were given free rein for structures judged too avant-garde back home.

Modernist architectural wonders in this highland city include a futurist petrol station mimicking a soaring aircraft and a funky art-deco bowling alley with checkered, coloured glass windows.

“The city is a living museum of architecture,” said Medhanie Teklemariam, an urban planner in Asmara’s city administration.

Yet while many of the buildings survived a decades-long liberation war from Ethiopia that ravaged settlements elsewhere, preservation and restoration projects have been hampered, threatening to erode the country’s rich cultural heritage.

Medhanie said money remains a critical obstacle, along with a lack of local technical expertise required for specialised restoration projects.

“To undertake a major restoration of all these buildings is very, very challenging because of one, the funding issue and, second, technical capacity,” he said, sitting before a map of central Asmara.

But Medhanie is pushing for change. He is lobbying for the historic city centre to be included on the United Nations World Heritage list and working to renew a European Union-supported project to restore a market building and the Capitol, an Expressionist-style cinema.

He sees the preservation of Asmara’s precious buildings -- mainly from the first half of the 20th century -- as a matter of maintaining the country’s national fabric.

“This heritage... it is very important for Eritrea’s identity,” he said. (...)“

(Excerpt of an article by Jenny Vaughan for AFP, August 21, 2013. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/08/21/eritrea-unique-architecture-under-threat/>)

Peter Volgger: Today we have the pleasure to speak with Mr. Medhanie Teklemariam the coordinator of the Asmara heritage project. First of all thank you very much that you are willing to make this interview with us.

Asmara is famous for its nearly untouched ensemble of Italian colonial architecture. What do you think makes Asmara unique?

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Medhanie Teklemariam: I think when we talk about the uniqueness of Asmara, it is distinct by its buildings, generous tracks, public spaces, different religious buildings, different amenities and social services. I think when we look at Asmara from the point of view of the inhabitant, the pedestrian and the cyclist as well, it is a very convenient city. Is it unique because of its architectural and urban qualities. We can look at different places in the city, there are favelas, there are high-rise buildings, and there are different services in the city. When we look at it as a whole and in its entirety this has quite different characteristics and qualities. So, I think we will have to reserve this built heritage.

Asmara sometimes has been considered a living museum of architecture. Other people described it for example as a frozen city, or a city of dreams... How do you think about such notions?

I agree with the notion of Asmara as a living museum of architecture, because the city is evolving culturally and economically; there is social development. When I look at it, this is not a frozen city. Maybe the current situation, the no war no peace situation, might affect the economic development of the city. But the city is still in a continuous development in its various aspects. So I do not agree with the notion of frozen city. I think the city is a very ideal city, a very dynamic city. And I think when the economic situation will be better it will be even more dynamic and liveable.

The status of UNESCO world heritage is an aim of the city. What advantages and disadvantages would result from being world heritage?

I think Asmara deserves the world heritage status because Asmara as we know, is the result of experimental architecture from the 20th century. So Asmara is bidding for the UNESCO status and we have planned for 2015 or 2016 to prepare the nomination dossier and the nomination plans. I think by listing Asmara in the world heritage would have several advantages. The city would get the status of world heritage together with other sites of the 20th century. It will get also publicity in websites and different magazines. Therefore Asmara's rich architectural and urban treasures would be made public. This would be a real advantage because later on tourists from all over the world would be attracted to visit these treasures. Moreover the city will benefit from the technical and financial assistance from the UNESCO and the world heritage programme. In my opinion the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Maybe in the long run the city will be on pressure how to manage these expected local and international tourists. Perhaps this will be one of the disadvantages. However, I think if there is a proper conservation master plan some of the disadvantages could be solved.

Asmara is very famous for its iconic buildings like the Fiat Tagliero station, cinemas, villas and so on. All those buildings were definitely ahead of their time, whereas Asmaras urban plan seems to belong to the 19th century and it is often considered to be less important. What do you think about that?

I think the research so far conducted emphasizes the architectural aspect. However, As-

Asmara's urban planning is not well researched and there are still a lot of things to come out. I strongly believe that when we look at Asmara, it is not about buildings; Asmara's beauty is on the urban level. I think we have to go for the planners like Odoardo Cavagnari, Guido Ferrazza, Vittorio Cafiero these are the architects who designed and planned the city. The architects and planners who designed Asmara at that time were very well advanced to introduce a new planning concept. So that is why Asmara's beauty is not only about architecture it is about planning. The mixed use types for example: in other cities there are a lot of zoning separations, whereas in Asmara you can find within walking distance any services. You can find schools, post offices, government offices, cinemas, theatres; all this is about the urban plan. Because the town planning aspect is crucial: if there are not all services located in the right and strategic location, the singular building cannot overcome this lack. We have to investigate and conduct further research how the town planning aspect was very innovative, dynamic for the contemporary urban planning. I think we have to further investigate that.

Europeans often think that the historical centre of a city is always a link to the identity of the city. Asmara's historic centre is very well defined but on the other side the city grows more and more and develops towards Greater Asmara. So we speak about the city and its surroundings. Would you all in all consider nowadays Asmara as an European or an African city, or something between those poles?

I think Asmara's city centre is very liveable and charming. There are quite different people, which are coming to the city centre. Therefore I think the city centre is very crucial for the identity of the city. Also because every Asmarino, every city inhabitant has to visit the city centre for recreational purposes or to get the services he needs. So I think in the case of Asmara the city centre is very, very important. Asmara is growing towards the greater Asmara areas because the city has to provide services also outside the centre, if all the services are clustered in the inner city the centre it will be destroyed. So one of the strategies of the city administration is to expand the city to the periphery to provide housing and industry in order to foster economic development. I think such development is not harming the city centre. The city centre of Asmara is quite different from other African cities but still: Asmara is an African city. Even though it has some similarities with European cities. I think it preserves some of the European ideas and culture within the living context of Asmara. We could say Asmara has both European and African characteristics.

What is typical for the development of Greater Asmara? What are the biggest challenges there?

Basically the challenges we are facing are the expanse and the growth of the city. So when the city is expanding you have to provide infrastructural services like roads, transport, water supply and sanitation. And you have to provide services like markets, recreational facilities, and educational facilities. When there is a massive new development towards the peripheral area of the city the city's administration is challenged to provide these services.

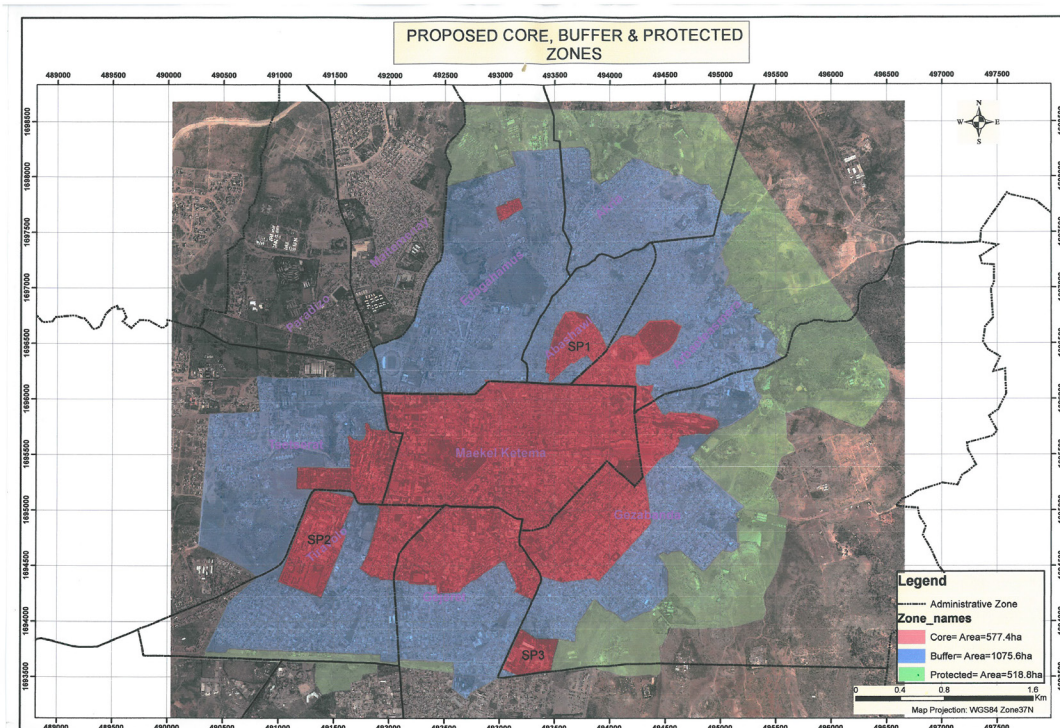
Back to the centre of Asmara. The centre impresses with its beautiful streets, buildings, piazzas and has been protected with the so-called CARP programme. Now there is a new approach in developing the CARP, which implies the addition of new zones. Could you please speak about this?

The CARP (Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Program) has conducted an inventory of historical buildings and has defined also the historic perimeter of Asmara. A new Asmara heritage pro-

ject was just initiated and started this year. CARP emphasized the colonial settlements and the city centre and missed a significant part of historical buildings that are outside its historic perimeter. In the new proposal we included some other parts of the city as well. For example parts in the north and the south were missed out. Another very important part that we included in the new drawn perimeter is Gheza Banda, the villa area, where the railway station is located. We extended the perimeter to include all this missing parts of the city. And another important area in the north of the city is Aba Shaul, the indigenous area. Historically this area is very important; I think the entire city is part of its heritage and so it will be good and justified to include this northern settlements. In another part in the west we find the cemeteries, which are historically, and culturally a very important landmark of the city. The CARP missed this part and it is proposed to be included in the new perimeter.

We created a layer of zonings; first we proposed a core zone, then a buffer zone, because for the operational guidelines of the UNESCO it is required to propose such a buffer zone. If you look at the light blue line, this is the proposed area for the buffer zone. Another zone we included in our planning is the green belt from the southwest to the east west of the city. So also this will be a protected area.

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Plan for the new Asmara Heritage Project

The Eritreans appropriated the colonial heritage and gained a positive relationship towards it. There is a continuing appropriation of the built environment. Do you know some good examples of specific Eritrean appropriation of architecture or urban space?

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I think one of the good things in Eritrea is that we Eritreans already inherited the tangible and intangible cultural heritage. When we look at the city, specially the Mekel areas, we see that during Italian colonial time there is segregation: there is a European zone, a mixed zone, an indigenous zone and an industrial zone. So Eritreans got an opportunity to meet with Italians and other ethnic groups like Arabs, Jews and Greeks. The market area is a mixing point for different ethnicities to meet together and to exchange culturally, economically and in other social matters. So this is a very beautiful urban space for cultural exchange. Specifically when the Italians left Eritrea, the Eritreans where living in the city belts. However everything was built by Eritreans, therefore they feel that they own and protect the city. I think if you would have some hatred towards the buildings and the urban spaces, these buildings might have been demolished or destroyed. Look at other places! But in the case of Eritrea it is something very special: there is an appropriation of the buildings and the urban space.

What does the historic heritage means for the identity of the Eritreans today? Is there a linkage between nation and architecture?

I think Asmara's and Eritrea's heritage is very important, because all Eritreans are proud of their identity. Separating Eritreans from this heritage means to deny their identity. They are deeply rooted with their history and their cultural background. Asmarinos love their city, not only here, but also all over the world. So I think for the Eritrean identity it is very crucial. Especially during the liberation war for the fighters on the field Asmara was the aim - the road led to Asmara. This is deeply rooted in the movement of liberation. The fighters have great respect for the history of Asmara. It is very important for the nation's identity.

What is your personal vision for Asmara in ten or twenty years?

Asmara will try to make the city very liveable. There will be massive restoration work and we will upgrade the infrastructure. And we hope that Asmara's architecture and urban planning will be recognized by the international community and will lead to a very positive image of Asmara, especially as a tourist attraction. The city will be very liveable and dynamic - that is my wish and my expectation.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Thank you for your archival support and I think we will enforce our cooperation on the long-term and work together in different programs and projects.