

Published by the University of KwaZulu-Natal
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Journal of Inclusive cities and Built environment. Vol. 2 Issue 4

How to cite: Dr B. Tecele-Misghina. 2022. An inclusive expression of genius loci: a case study of the urban evolution of Asmara, Eritrea. *Journal of Inclusive cities and Built environment*. Vol. 2 Issue 4, Pg 11-23.

AN INCLUSIVE EXPRESSION OF *GENIUS LOCI*: A CASE STUDY OF THE URBAN EVOLUTION OF ASMARA, ERITREA

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Published 30 November 2022

ABSTRACT

Although Asmara developed during the era of modernist urban planning and Italian colonial influence, its genius loci is firmly rooted in place and time. This paper aims to explain the history, impact of administration, planning, and the dynamic synergies between tangible and intangible attributes of place, that led to Asmara being listed as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. This qualitative study analyses the layered expression of genius loci through a timeline mapping the development of Asmara. The methods include map analysis, drawings, and photographs, based on the author's research of the city since 2005. A decolonial conceptual framework underpinned the study. The author's lived experience, having grown up in Asmara, provides a deeper layer of autoethnographic understanding of the city, including the cultural-spatial characteristics that safeguard its genius loci. The article concludes with findings and a proposition for an inclusive transformation of postcolonial cities.

KEY WORDS Architecture, Asmara, genius loci, inclusivity, modernist, urban

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1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Asmara is the capital city of Eritrea located atop the Eritrean Highlands at about 2400m above sea level on the Hamasien Plateau, the northern part of the Ethiopian plateau. Eritrea evolved over time to its current independent state and regional identity from its origins as part of the Abyssinian Empire (Teclé-Misghina 2014:13), through the 15th-19th century of the kingdom of Medri-Bahri -Land of the Sea- (Killion 1998:308) and then Italian and Ethiopian colonization up to 1991, its year of the independence.

The broader Asmara area developed on a site that had been appropriated through occupation since the mid-1st millennium B.C. in the form of a proto-urban culture as per evidence from the archaeological site in the *Sembei* area (Lusini 2018:183), southern Asmara, beyond the so-called UNESCO historic perimeter.

The current city core of Asmara initially developed through settlements along the historical routes linking to Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Red Sea. At that time the Red Sea was also a 'crossroad' along an ancient trade route between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea thereby integrating the Asmara area, and its *caravanserai* (public court for sheltering caravans), with a broader international context. It was therefore a very strategic place of transition for merchants from the neighbouring countries and other places abroad.

According to Killion (1998:340) the aforementioned trade routes were also used by Christian pilgrims travelling from northern Ethiopia to Jerusalem (Israel) via Suakin (Sudan) and Egypt. Muslim pilgrims also used part of these routes to reach Mecca (Saudi Arabia) via Massawa (Killion 1998:340), the port in the Eritrean Red Sea.

The conception and evolution of Asmara therefore could be said to have been based on the dynamic and complex

interactions of different people engaging in different activities in and through place, that gave it a rich complexity through multi-cultural influences. The cultural mix was formed by the interchange of cultural goods, languages and the arts; this generally expressed the non-tangible attributes of the urban place. Importantly, such processes of complex evolution formed layers of memory, in place over time, that defined its *genius loci*. While the socio-economic and cultural activities defined the intangible attributes of the early settlement, the tangible attributes of place through built form proliferated during the colonial period.

The Italian colonial presence defined a critical period in the urban evolution of Asmara, that influenced its social vitality through a holistic urban setting defined by the modernist built form specific to the area (AHP 2016:23). Asmara's urban form and structure primarily developed through the Italian colonial administrative and planning decisions, which would translate into a socio-spatial character of the city into the postcolonial period (Teclé-Misghina 2014:86,90). Asmara's *genius loci*, however, resides in, and is better enhanced by, the expression of human layers of dwelling in place, including its ancient and medieval history (Lusini 2018:191).

A chronological mapping, based on Teclé-Misghina's (2014) work, reveals that Asmara's core planned open space system, complemented by built form and architecture, developed most significantly from the latter half of the 1920s up to late 1930s. The rest of the city continued to develop up to the early 1970s along similar design principles, comprising mixed-use zones within low density precincts. There are exceptions to this, though, of singular high-rise buildings that act as landmarks, not necessarily because of any remarkable architectural aesthetic, but rather due to their large scale, defined by height and mass within the context (refer to the section below titled 'the expression of the layered *genius loci* through built form').

2. MAPPING THE EVOLUTION OF ASMARA'S URBAN FORM THROUGH SETTLEMENT AND PLANNING.

2.1. The evolution of Asmara's planned urban form.

The modern urban history of Eritrea, and so of Asmara, began in the year 1882 with the Italian occupation (Killion 1998:269). The section of the city that developed since the 19th century up to the three first decades of the 20th century define the historical perimeter of Asmara (Gebremedhin, Abraham, Denison, Yu Ren 2003:21) representing the current UNESCO World Heritage area of the city. It is reaffirmed that the Asmara historic perimeter does not solely express as an Italian built colonial city as its origin as a settlement dates centuries back, revealed through hidden layers of its *genius loci*.

The city of Asmara developed on an area that was inhabited by agro-sylvo-pastoral populations that settled in villages such as Bet Mekhae, Gejeret, Godaif and Arbaté Asmera, prior to colonization (Gebremedhin et al. 2003:30). The settlements were all located in strategic geographic positions such as near water streams and on higher and hilly positions (Figure 01) for defense purposes. Amongst these settlements the most significant, in relation to the modern historical Asmara, was the Arbaté Asmera village (Figure 01), one of the cornerstones of Asmara's urban development.

Arbaté Asmera was formed around the 1520s (Teclé-Misghina 2014:28) from the union of four preexisting villages, located near water streams and positioned along/near a caravan route. Because of their easily accessible positions the four villages, were constantly subjected to invasion from the eastern lowlands. The inhabitants therefore decided to unite into one settlement as a defense strategy that resulted in the formation of Arbaté Asmera. The name was derived from the Tigrinya language, "arbaté"

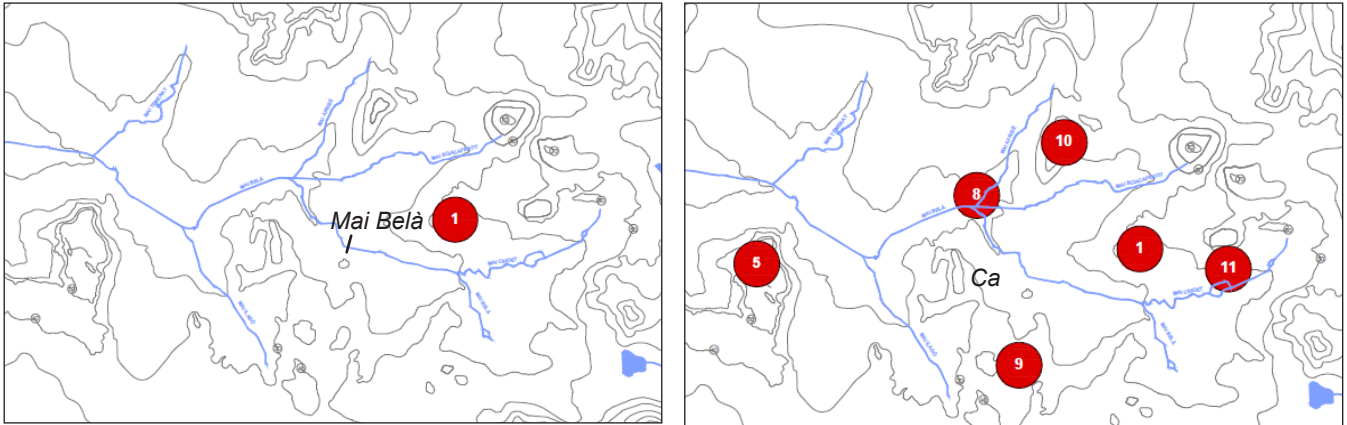
meaning four, and “asmera” meaning united. The name Arbaté Asmera could therefore be the basis for the current city name Asmara (pronounced Asmera in Tigrinya).

Figure 1: A composition of two maps illustrating the Asmara Area between 1320 and 1887 with topography and location of settlements (Source: Teclé-Misghina 2014:26).

On the left (a) the position of Arbaté Asmera around 1320 is indicated, on the right (b) the settlements in the Asmara area around 1887 are indicated.

a) The settlement of Arbaté Asmera around 1320.

b) The Asmara area during Ras Alula’s period.



LEGEND

- 1. Arbaté Asmera and Kedesti Mariam’s church
 - 5. Bet Mekhae. After Italian colonisation it became the site of the Italian Fort Baldissera.
 - 8. Settlement
 - 9. Ras Alula’s camp (1879-1889)
 - 10. Gheza Berhanù
 - 11. Old Caravanserai
- Ca = Location of the future Campo Cintato, the first Italian military stronghold on the Asmara site.

Subsequent to the formation of Arbaté Asmera, and during the succeeding centuries more settlements grew in the surrounding physical context. This is evident in Figure 01.b where the words “gheza” or “bet” are synonymous names for home and indicate a settlement or village. Figure 01.b also illustrates the former camp of Ras Alula (an Ethiopian general/governor of the area), the *Campo Cintato* (Ca) and the *Forte Baldissera*, both Italian military camps, all on strategic hilltops.

Since the beginning of the colonial period the area of the *Campo Cintato* has been the core of the central government in Asmara (Gebremedhin, et al. 2003:93) - a city cornerstone in conjunction with afore-mentioned Arbaté Asmera.

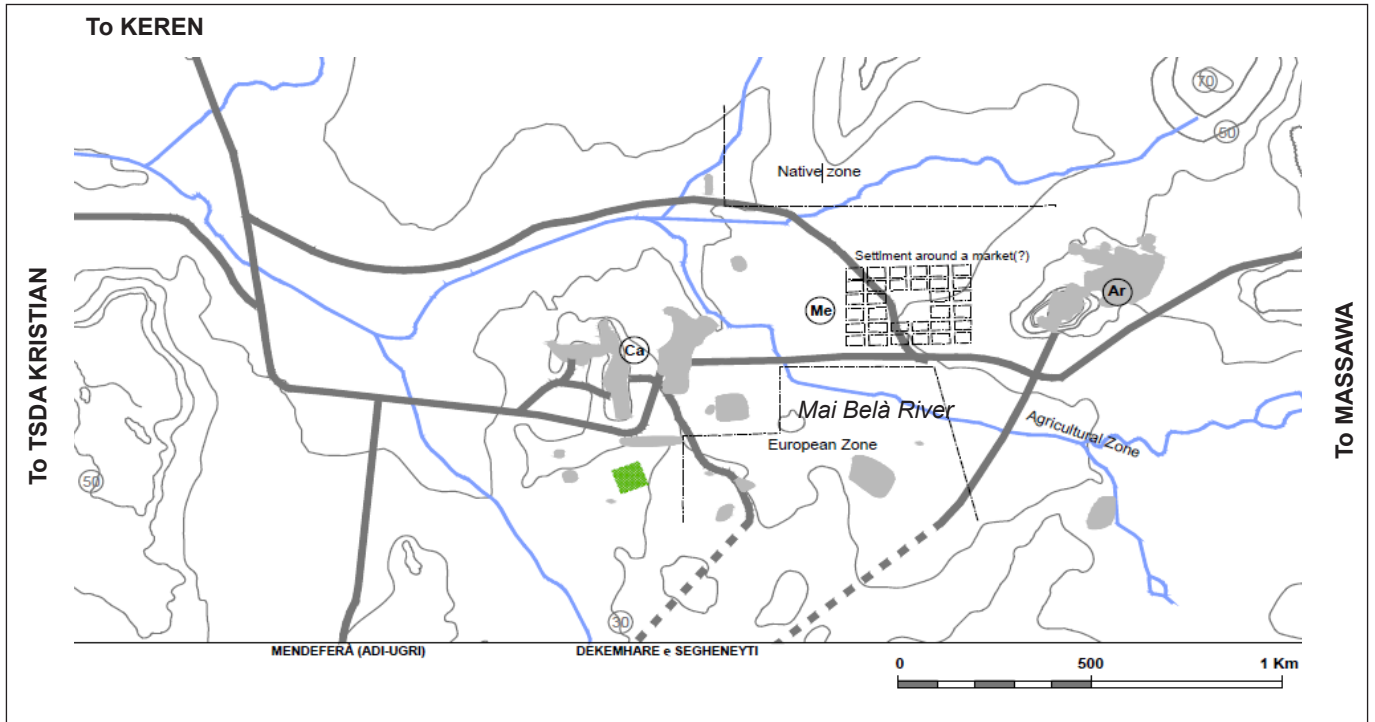
Forte Baldissera was set on a strategic point on a hill of *Bet Mekhae* village (refer to 5 on Figure 01.b) established by the Italians by forcibly relocating the indigenous communities into a different area.

The strategic positions of Italian occupation defined the planned spatial and infrastructural development of the modernist city (Figure 02). It is therefore important to note that at the beginning of the Italian colonization Asmara was just a military base. Around the 1899 the colonial government relocated the capital city from Massawa, in the East lowlands, to Asmara (Teclé-Misghina’s (2014:37).

This change in role of Asmara to a political/administrative capital catalysed a range of architectural, urban and infrastructural development characterized by Italian modernist built form guided by a series of urban planning.

The advent of the aforementioned urban planning, starting from the 1914, was also accompanied by a set of Building Regulations (Teclé-Misghina 2014: 50) that was meant to regulate the characteristics and organization of the built form. It also served as a base for land use management, including racial zonal planning meant to guide the city planning (Teclé-Misghina 2014:50).

Figure 2: A map based on the Town Plan for Civil Constructions to be Erected in Asmara. The planned built form is in rectangular outilies while the solid grey depicts the existing built form by 1893 (Source: Tecle-Misghina 2014:33).



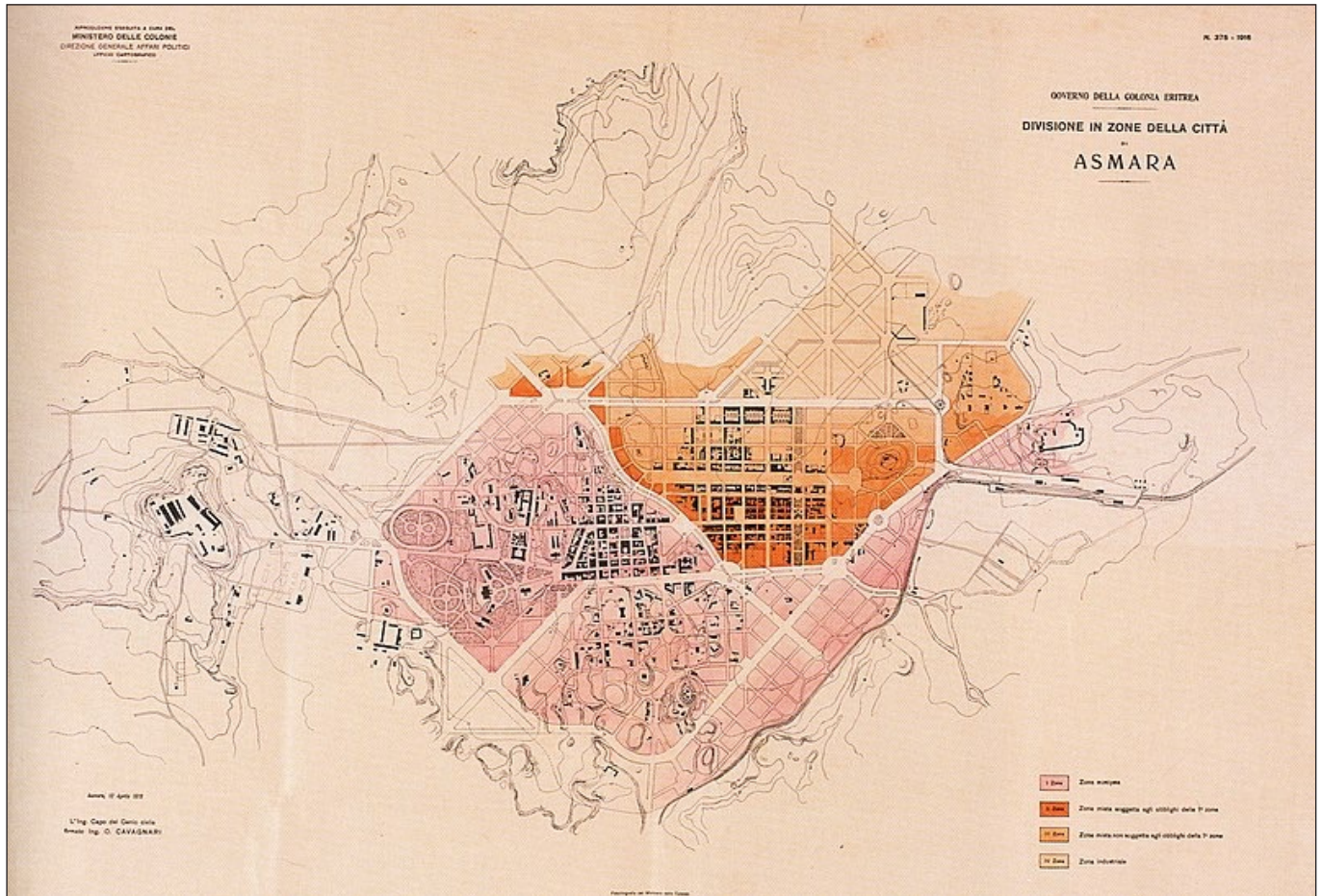
LEGEND

- Ar Arbaté Asmera Ca Campo Cintato Me market main road system

This is evident in 1916 city plan (Figure 03) designed by the architect/engineer Odoardo Cavagnari's who delineated the urban structure into four distinct urban quarters: the European area, two types of mixed area and industrial area.

- The European quarter comprised the area west of the Catholic Mission, including the city centre and the area south of *Harnet Avenue* (at the time *Viale Mussolini*).
- The mixed zone (on the East of *Mai Belà* river) comprising Europeans, other foreigners such as Jewish, Greek and Arab Merchants, and Eritreans who worked in the market.
- The Mixed zone not subjected to *Zone I* rules was also inclusive of the indigenous area located around the Orthodox Church and the area north of the city.
- The fourth quarter was reserved as an industrial zone north-east of the city.

Figure 3: Odoardo Cavagnari: Zoning of the Asmara city, 1916



LEGEND

- Zone I: European zone
- Zone II: Mixed zone subject to Zone I rules
- Zone III: Mixed zone not subject to Zone I rules
- Zone IV: Industrial zone

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Plan_for_Asmara_1913.jpg)

Although the 1914 Building Regulations prescribed racial segregation the map analysis of Cavagnari's approach illustrates elements of 'inclusion' through gradual transitions between the different zones in his urban spatial planning. His plan included the indigenous market, the district of Arbaté Asmera (a complex layering of urban form over time) and the *Mai Belà* river. The river in the planning was not used as an element of harsh separation but it was traversable through a series of bridges that allowed ease of connection and transitions between the different zones.

Cavagnari's planned mixed zone served as a site for multicultural and religious inclusion (Figure 04), where two of city landmarks, the Orthodox Church of *Enda Mariam* and the Mosque formed a dialogical relationship with the market square (Figure 08).

Figure 4: Asmara, 2005



Source: Author: A view from the Enda Mariam Orthodox Church (foreground), Towers of Roman Catholic church (rear left), Al Khulafa Al Rashiudin Mosque (rear right).

Cavagnari's city planning approach is completely subverted by the subsequent rise of the Italian Fascist regime which promulgated strict policies of racial separation, codes and regulations for urban planning and architecture specific for the Italian colonies. This was due to the renewed interest of Italy and its affirmation of colonial power through entrenchment and expansion (Teclé-Misghina 2014).

The resultant colonial ideology led to the invasion and conquest of Ethiopia, in 1936, for which purpose Asmara constituted a base of attack. Consequently, this resulted in a period of rapid infrastructure growth and an unplanned construction boom for Asmara. This catalysed a need for a planned system of growth, which led to architect Vittorio Cafiero's plans of 1938-39. This system of planning would however become an opportunity to emphasise and spatially enforce the segregation of the different inhabitant groups of the city (Teclé-Misghina 2014). Such principles of segregation fortunately were not fully implemented as the Italian colonial administration came to an end in 1941 (Killion 1998:125).

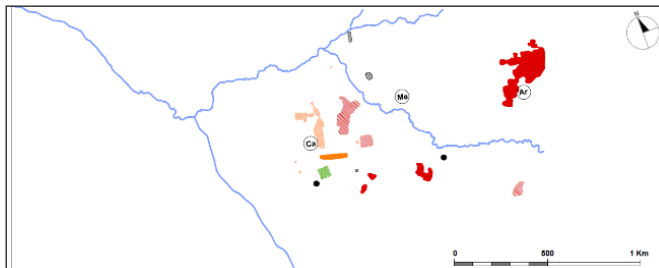
Commencing with the maps and plans of 1916 (Figure 05) there is an evident inherent disregard for the pre-colonial settlement patterns and built forms as these had been demolished. In contemporary Asmara, there are, consequently, no traces of the traditional dwellings nor the organizational patterns of the Arbaté Asmara and the other pre-colonial settlements. The historical perimeter / city (Figure 06) therefore indicates a direct reference to the Italian planned city as opposed to the traditional settlement. From early times, the Italian plans adopted "per norm" racial based planning which were meant to emphasise the power relations between the residents through the zoning system. As the planned city was developing, the indigenous communities were progressively displaced and pushed to the unplanned areas, in the North of the city, that were not given much attention by architects and planners and were also completely neglected by the administrators. An interesting aspect of those areas, however, was that they developed organically around the hillside morphologies of their sites. A current standing example of this type of settlement in the Asmara area is *Aba Shawl* that developed on a hill as one of the highest points in the city.

The Italian colonization of Eritrea lasted until 1941 when the Italians lost power to Britain. The British administered Eritrea for about 11 years (Killion 1998:125). During this period Asmara continued to develop along the principles of the previous/existing Italian plans despite the dismantlement policies of the British which stripped the country of very important infrastructure. The British Administration was followed by Eritrea being federated and then unilaterally annexed to Ethiopia (Killion 1998:215-216). This led to Asmara losing its significant position as capital of a country, until 1991 when Eritrea gained its independence from Ethiopia through an armed conflict. During the Ethiopian regime there was no significant development of the urban built environment except for a few individual high-rise buildings mainly in the 1970's during the Haile Selassie period in which social, religious and cultural facilities were built (AHP 2016:43-44). During the subsequent Ethiopian Military Government Period from 1974-1991 (Killion 1998:160), however, political policies and subsequent economic decline halted the rate of development of the city which effectively led to the stagnation of Asmara's urban development.

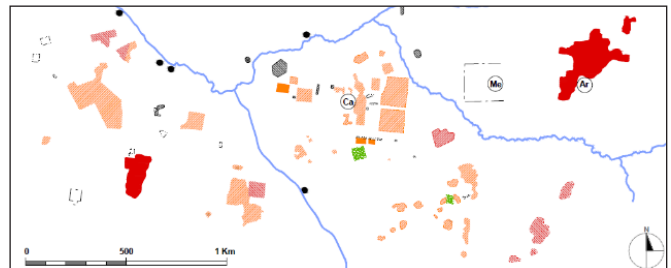
2.2. Mapping the urban evolution of Asmara's built form

This section focuses on the analysis of existing/developed settlement and land use of Asmara to illustrate the growth and evolution of the Asmara city core. The synthesized information is obtained from the analysis of maps and town planning drawings developed during the 1893-1937 of the Italian colonial period and subsequent eras up to 2009 (Tecele-Misghina 2014:32-60).

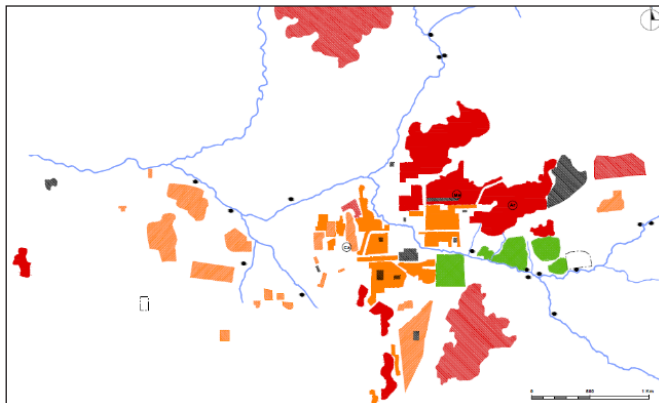
Figure 5: Analysis of Asmara's historic perimeter city development and evolution from 1893-1937 of the Asmara



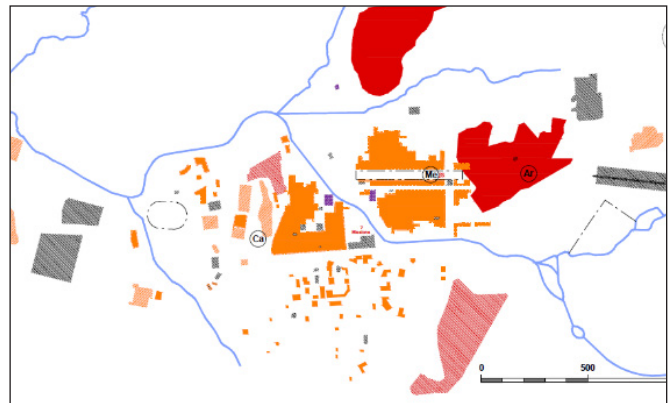
A) Analysis of existing settlement land use of the town plan of Asmara (1893).



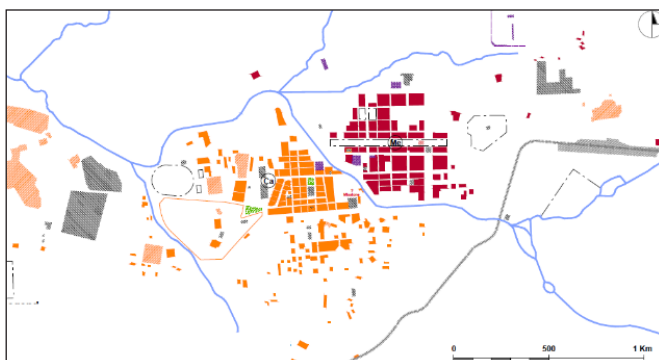
B) Analysis of existing settlement land use of the plan of the 'Piazza di Asmara' (1895).



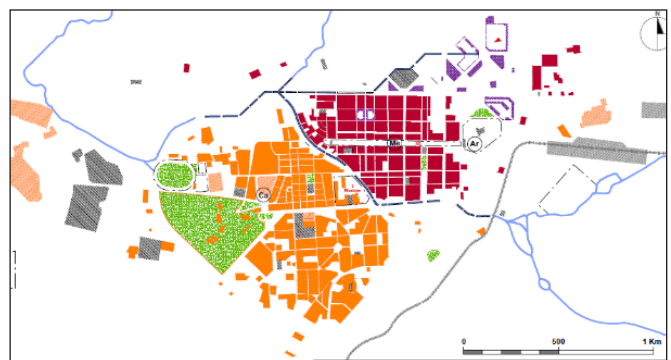
C) Analysis of existing settlement land use of the Asmara and its Surroundings (expeditious Survey 1906).



D) Analysis of existing settlement land use of the Preliminary Town Plan (1913).



E) Analysis of existing settlement land use of the Town Plan of Asmara (around 1916).



F) Analysis of existing settlement land use of the Site Plan for Asmara (1937).

LEGEND

European military settlement and their adjacent areas	native and mixed race civil settlement and their adjacent areas (1883-1913 maps)
native military settlement and their adjacent areas	common amenities and public facilities, private or public services
European settlement consists of block buildings, completed lots and those under completion	outdoor amenities
Governor's mansion and its adjacent area	manufacturing and/or transformation area
mixed race settlement consists of block buildings, completed lots and those under completion	railway track and train station
'Nda Mariam	green area
Campo Cintato	
Me market	

Source: Tecele-Misghina 2014: 32-60

Figure 5.A illustrates a map of the development of the city with zonal subdivisions such as the 'European Zone' and the 'Indigenous Zone' separated by a natural edge, the *Mai Belà* river. The traditional dwellings of the Plateau were still the dominant built form typology during this period. This was also due to the most constant development occurring in Arbaté Asmera around the Orthodox Cathedral of *Enda Mariam*. The map (Figure 05.A) clearly illustrates a sporadic and random built environment defined by amorphous forms set in the natural topographical landscape. The mixed-race zone formed the largest built mass at this time. A European military settlement started to develop just outside *Campo Cintato* (Tecele-Misghina 2014: 31).

Figure 05.B depicts a map from around 1895 that illustrates an expansion of the European military settlement south-west of the *Mai Belà* river. No less than three military encampments were formed: the initial settlement around *Campo Cintato* with the addition of *Forte Baldissera* on a small hill of the village of *Bet Makhae* on the far west, and *Fortino Vignano* on the East side of the city. To the north-east of the river the pre-existing mixed-

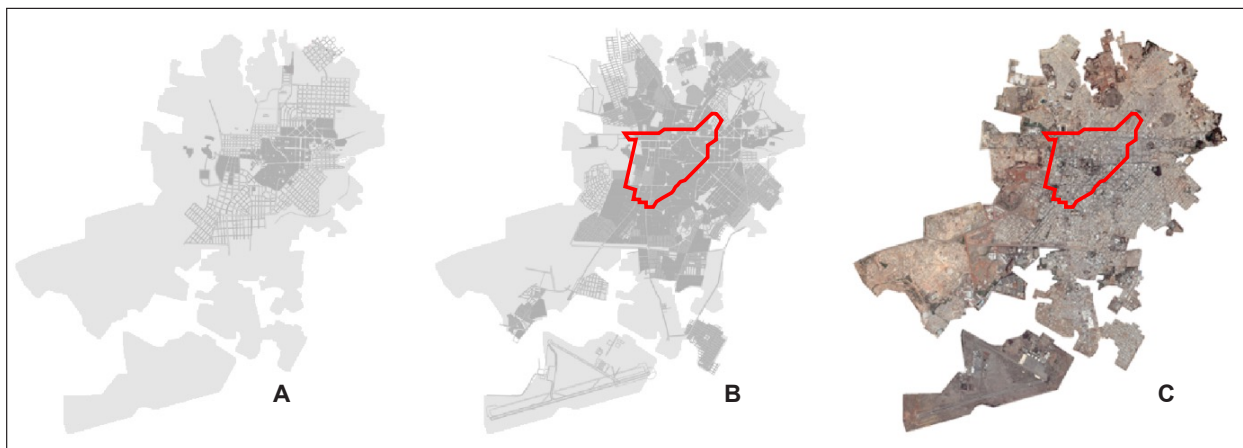
race settlement of Arbaté Asmera is clearly expressed and indicates slight expansion. To the south-east the former headquarters of Ras Alula (Figure 05.B) is still present as a settlement. *Campo Cintato*, the first Italian military settlement, on a plateau overlooking the valley of the *Mai Belà* river, became the core node as an administrative centre around which the prolific development of other buildings happened. The future city of Asmara, defined by the grid of intersecting axes, would develop in the valley, a central space between the aforementioned landmark zones: Arbaté Asmera, *Forte Baldissera* and *Campo Cintato* (Tecele-Misghina 2014: 31).

Figures 05.C-D illustrate, at a larger scale, the densification of the city as development expanded. Figure 05.C illustrates the gradual formalisation of the organic town, while Figure 05.D expresses the first preliminary town plan in 1913. Around 1916 (Figure 05.E) an expression of modernist formalisation of the urban form and structure of Asmara started to evolve through a gridiron layout that more formally represented the 'European' and the 'Mixed Race' zones. By 1937 (Figure 05.F) the site plan of Asmara expressed the spatial character

of a modern city through intersecting axes, boulevards, social and economic nodes such as the market and other public facilities also around important squares, as well as a considered greening of the city. The development of the industrial zone is also depicted in the 1937 map, expressing Asmara as a vibrant socio-economically vitalised city.

The indigenous area (solid red) generally situated in the north-east part of the city (Figure 05.D), as stated in Tecele-Misghina (2014:51), was not represented on the maps after 1913 as it was confined to the north, beyond the industrial zone and not subjected to planning. It would reappear only later, in the 1938/39 Town Plan (Tecele-Misghina 2014:51) planned to be positioned further north of the city (Figure 06.A). The 1938/39 Asmara's Town Plan, designed by Cafiero, is currently the last evidence of Italian planning for Asmara (Tecele-Misghina 2014: 58), conceptualised just few years before the British government took over the Italian colonisation of Eritrea, and therefore of Asmara.

Figure 6: Asmara development from 1930s to the year 2009 as per the Google satellite map



(Source: Tecele-Misghina 2014, adapted by Author).

LEGEND

Solid light grey = limit of the city up to 2009.

Solid darker grey = Existing built form.

Empty outlines = 1938/39 development plan (last Italian development plan).

Red line = Outline of the historic perimeter / UNESCO World Heritage Site (UNESCO 2016)

Figure 06 presents three images that illustrate the development of Asmara through satellite map analysis from Google Maps dated 2009. The existing built form is indicated as dark solid grey and the plan of development as grey outlines. The map 06.B illustrates the urban scaled built form and density in 2009, also depicted in the aerial photo to the far right.

3. THE EXPRESSION OF A LAYERED GENIUS LOCI THROUGH BUILT FORM

As evident in the preceding analysis, the contemporary infrastructure of Asmara and its built form, within the historic perimeter, can be traced to a succession of city plans developed mainly in the three early decades of the 20th century. Asmara presents an intriguing collection of architecture through time (Figures 07-11), from western Neoclassic architecture to modernist and even hybrid architecture that resulted through the combination of elements from modern and traditional building system (Figure 09).

Asmara's historical perimeter is characterized by a varied range of late 19th and 20th century architectural and urban elements defined by modernist architectural expression (with its various forms emanating from conceptual approaches aligned to movements such as Rationalism, Futurismo and Art Deco) as well as a few indigenous vernacular architectural styles and a series of open spaces that have remained largely unaltered since the 1940s. It is to be noted that architecture before the 1930s tended to mimic classical Italian styles and forms. Since the late 1930s, however, the built form of Asmara started to express as modernist architecture in harmony with other existing buildings as response to place and time. During this period, the built form significantly developed, nurturing both tangible and non-tangible attributes, such that many decades later a latent vitality of place continues to express through a rooted genius loci.

Figure 7: Food market (Left) and fish market (Right) both located perpendicular to Harnet Avenue. Designed in the 1930s by Guido Ferrazza, a Milanese architect with professional experience from Libya



Source: Author 2022

In contemporary Asmara, the genius loci continues to express, defined by the preserved precolonial vitality of certain spaces and locations such as market/caravanserai and historic trade routes. Therefore, while the genius loci is on one hand related to actual built forms, it is also powerfully defined by hidden layers of memory and other non-tangible historical / cultural layers of place. This results in an interesting complexity of urban / built form defined by modernist methods and forms that are specific to the Asmara area (Gebremedhin et al. 2003:13). It is therefore that the evolution Asmara built form can be considered a continuous built form 'experiment' in place and time, that defines its complex genius loci.

The gridiron morphology of Asmara set upon the natural topography of the terrain (Figure 11), and the historical caravan routes and natural features such as the river (Figure 01), expresses an intrigue of the built form that is not typical of a usually static grid iron formation. The author's experience through walking and being in the city confirms a characteristic of place that is defined by a considered approach to design for the human experience. It is through such existential perception that the city, proportioned through human scaled public spaces and architecture, can be phenomenologically experienced. The careful proportioning of open spaces consisting of streets, piazze and their relationship to the flanking buildings is what gives Asmara its harmony of scales. It is at once a human scaled city where the pedestrian movement is efficient yet stimulating through the dynamic interplay of open spaces and the edges formed by small-scaled mixed-use buildings and foliage. Even as a child walking to school one would never feel overwhelmed by the scale of built and open space forms (Figure 10). The author's perceptual experience of the city was further enhanced by the presence of trees along the street, and housing hedges dense with bougainvillea and jasmine shrubs, which all served to soften the edges between built form and open space.

Another aspect of the Asmara urban structure and form is its complex geometrical layout comprising multiple axes. With regard to the importance of axes in urban order and structure, reference is made to Saxena and Sharma (2013: 9), on the historical complex of Fatehpur Sikri, Agra in India, who stated that the "city has a highly developed sequence of well-modulated and interlinked spaces most suitable for the pedestrian... The wide employment of axes which are implied, denied and then rediscovered hold varying spaces together by providing visual links from one court to another... therefore, axes connect the buildings visually giving a sense of unity and balanced co-existence within one ensemble."

A similar statement can be made for Asmara whose axes intersect as vibrant urban nodes, such as the marketplace, or along the axes themselves through journeys of discovery of natural features or intriguing architecture. One of the most complex urban nodes in the city is indeed the market. The Asmara Market is considered an important cornerstone and socially cohesive civic spaces in the urban order and structure since the early 20th century. Whilst it represents such a significant urban landmark, the Asmara Market, established prior to Italian colonization, formed an important node at the intersection of existing caravan routes between Massawa and the highlands as well as the routes to Sudan via Keren. This node was served as both a caravan stop and node for trade, leading to the eventual formalization of the market in the urban structure. Towards the North-East of the market area is the industrial quarter of Medeber (refer to the triangular plots in Figure 08), a craft hub, place of various small scaled self-owned stalls that create a variety of workshops for recycling / upcycling products that cater for various needs of the citizens. The market area and the Medeber therefore form a vibrant place of socio-economic engagement that reinforces the genius loci of the city.

Figure 8: Asmara market area



(Google Maps 2022 adapted by author): A) Orthodox Cathedral, B) Great Mosque, C) Greek Orthodox Church, D) Covered Grain Market, E) Food Market, F) Fish Market, G) Market Pavilion, H) Bus station.

In Asmara the critical dialogical relationship between axial open spaces and the edges of human scaled built form, expressed through architectural proportions, defines an ever-present vitality of place that facilitates various layers of interrelationships at various layers, tangible and non-tangible. These can be seen in the city center, where carefully scaled open space system through well-proportioned axes is complemented by a diverse range of 19th to 20th century modernist architecture including key iconic buildings that have generally retained their original architectural integrity (Figures 09-11). The urban order is defined by human scaled and detailed mixed-use buildings along the open space system that comprises an orthogonal grid that is also considerably adjusted to maintain and complement the original routes and natural elements such as the Mai Belà river.

As previously affirmed, Asmara is also a site of hybrid architectural samples generated from the fusion of local vernacular techniques and modern methods (Figures 04, 09.A-C) that are a distinct and unique architectural style found only in Asmara (Gebremedhin et al. 2003:13).

Figure 9: Asmara's Enda Mariam Orthodox Cathedral complex



Enda Mariam Cathedral

Degghi Selam

Vernacular construction detail

Source: Author 2005

Figure 10: Asmara's architectural samples



Figure 10.A) Sematat Avenue (Author 2005).



Figure 10.B) Bdho Avenue (Author 2008)



Figure 10.C) Harnet Avenue (Author 2008).



Figure 10.D) Harnet Avenue (Author 2008).

Source: Author 2008

Figure 11: Asmara, Mai-jah-jah Fountain



Source: Saliko, 2015

(Source: https://kids.kiddle.co/Image:Asmara,_mai_jah_jah_02.JPG)

The Asmara Heritage Project in its dossier “*Asmara Proposed World Heritage Site. Integrated Management Plan 2016-2021*” (2016:23) also affirms that “*Asmara represents perhaps the most concentrated and intact assemblage of modernist architecture anywhere in the world. The urban design within the Historic Perimeter has remained untouched since its original implementation and subsequent evolution throughout the 1930s, and the architectural elements exemplify a superlative example of -modernist architecture in a complete urban setting. These two contiguous and exceptional tangible components have nurtured a unique and distinct intangible social environment.*” This position reinforces the argument that the layered *genius loci* of the city is formed by the dynamic and fluid dialogical interrelationship between being in placed, defined by layers of memory and the evolution of its built form.

The above attributes are in line with the UNESCO Recommendation from 2011 (as cited in AHP 2016 p. 51) that defines a Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) as an urban area understood as being the result of historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes. This supports an inclusive reading of the built form and its dialogical synergy with cultural layers, whereby modernist forms are transformed through socio-spatial interaction.

4. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of the maps and photographs, along a timeline in the historical spatial evolution of Asmara, reveals some interesting expressions of its *genius loci* during the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. The study found that although the indigenous settlements were displaced, the *genius loci* of the city is underpinned by indigenous memory and cultural artefacts layered below and between the modernist-built form of the city. Therefore, although Asmara transitioned through various political regimes, it continues to express a layered vitality through cultural and spatial memory. This perception of memory in place is what continues to draw different communities to the city, enhancing its heterogeneous social and cultural vitality.

A critical attribute of the cultural expression and social vibrancy of the city is the human-scaled built forms that dynamically complement the vitality of its open space system. Overall, the city expresses as a considerate response to human scale and activity, emitting its *genius loci* through tangible (architecture and urban landscape) as well as

the intangible layers of place through the socio-economic and cultural activities of its people. Such scale emerges through its architecture, which further fuses the local traditions with the modernist traditions through an almost eclectic mix of modern and traditional elements that presents a unique identity of place through time. A constant connection of memory in place and built form thereby safeguards the ever-present *genius loci* of the city.

The harmonious interrelationships between people, place and time in the urban structure, built form, architecture, as well as the natural environment affords complex expressions of vitality in different places through time. Asmara will therefore continue to express its *genius loci* from a complex system of tangible and intangible interrelationships through the memories and activities of people in place. These are some of the attributes that, in addition to its modernist architecture in a comprehensive urban setting, resulted in the Asmara historic perimeter being declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017 for its Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) and precisely as an urban area understood as the result of historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes (AHP 2016:51).

The paper affirms that to move and transform cities through an inclusive process one needs not discard the layers of history. All traditional cities themselves are laden with layers of historical transitions and built form may be the only tangible form of expressing the colonial histories of place. Given the fact that decoloniality itself be considered an inclusive process, the spatial transformation of postcolonial cities would require a careful consideration of all new built form and refurbishments to express critical dialogues, inclusive of diversity through critical counter-positions to the colonial forms. To disregard the colonial-built forms, or even destroy these, therefore would be counterintuitive to expressing the emancipatory vitality of postcolonial, inclusive cities.

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