

Eritrea's capital city "Asmara" is getting close to inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. It is a defining moment to the city's rich and colorful history. The vibrant campaign is happening independently with an objective to promote and support the inscription of Asmara's historic perimeter and Modernist Architecture on the UNESCO World heritage List (WHL).

It is a testimony that shows Eritrea's soft-power on social media is on the rise. When the social media accounts were created (Twitter, Instagram and Facebook) the resulting response was impressive. The magnificent architecture of Asmara flooded the Internet. The campaign echo reached all over the world and the messages were conveyed in several languages (English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish). Everyone in the online group took part and worked intensively. Coordinators from Africa, US and Europe synchronized their time perfectly and gave their energy, wholly to Asmara. It is an amazing experience that shows, once more, the Can Do Spirit of Eritreans.

Based on existing data, a summarized document and video clips were prepared by the campaign group and distributed to relevant stakeholders. The document was distributed to the 21 State Parties of the World Heritage Committee whose final decision is crucial, prior to their meeting in Krakow, Poland in July 2017. As Dr. Edward Denison, leading professional of the project once said, "... people are doing this for Asmara, because there is a hope this bid will be successful not just because of its own value, but because it sheds light on how cultural heritage is treated globally".

Enjoy reading this brief note describing Asmara's prehistoric and architectural history. The plateau of present day Asmara has been inhabited since ancient times. The archaeological relics from the plateau show Asmara is both an ancient and a modern city. Below is a summary of the well researched architectural history of Asmara since the establishment of CARP in 1999.

Let's read a bit of this magnificent city that is close to being inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List.

**Asmara: Africa's Modernist City (UNESCO World Heritage Inscription)
Asmara-for-World-Heritage Campaign 2017**

Prehistory

The city of Asmara is located at the top of an escarpment on an altitude of about 2300 meters above sea level. It is sitting over another hidden and ancient civilization. Archaeological excavations revealed that the earliest settled agro-pastoral communities known in the Horn of Africa inhabited the highlands of present-day Asmara between 800 B.C. and 350 B.C. Excavations at the sites of Sembel, Ona Gudo, Mai Husta, Weki Duba, Adi Segdo, Adi Abieto and Mai Chihot provided key insights into the variation of the settlements in the region. These agro-pastoral settlements that flourished around Asmara were vital precursors to the later mid-1st millennium B.C urban settlements in the central highlands of Eritrea (Such as Matara, Keskesse and perhaps Qohaito). The ancient Asmara communities are the people known for the emergence of complex agro-pastoral societies in the highlands of Eritrea. This evidence shows the emergence of ancient urban civilizations in the present day Asmara 900 years before the emergence of Axum.

The Asmara settlements represent agro-pastoral communities of varying size from scattered homesteads to villages and small towns with a high regional population density. The bronze era in the region is linked to the rise of elite settlements and this has been supported by evidences from the sites of Mai-Chihot and Mai-Temenai. Ceramics from Mai- Temenai show the rise of homegrown civilization in the early 4th century B.C. The claims that communities of the highland of Eritrea owed their cultural genesis to interactions with the peoples of the South Arabian Peninsula are debunked. The Asmara plateau civilization has been dated to ca.3000 years ago. An ancient and organic civilization that led to the creation of the African leading modernist city of the 20th century.

Asmara – a brief Architectural History

Asmara is the site of an ancient highland village called 'Arbaete Asmara'. Originally, it is said, there were four clans living in the Asmara Plateau: Gheza Gurtom, Gheza Shelele, Gheza Serenser and Gheza Asmae. Encouraged by their women, the men united the four clans and defeated the bandits who preyed on the area. After the victory, a new name was given to the place, Arbaete Asmara which literally means, "the four united", in Tigrinya language.

In 1885, the Italians invaded Eritrea and by 1900, Asmara had become the capital city. Asmara is known for its well-preserved modernist architecture, salubrious highland climate, reliable water supply and ideal geographic location. It represents the most concentrated and intact

assemblage of Modernist architecture anywhere in the world. This 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 founded on Western Modernist design ideals realized in a highland African setting.

In the early twentieth century, Asmara represented little more than a tiny highland village, which grew incrementally to become a well-established town by the 1920s. The rapid transformation of Asmara from a relatively minor town into one of Africa's modern and sophisticated cities at that time overlapped with equally momentous events in the world of design and architecture, which involved the global proliferation of Modernism and its various forms, including Futurism, Rationalism, Novecento, and Art Deco. The spirit of this new age of travel and adventure was embodied in these new architectural forms. Asmara was an ideal blank canvas on which Italian architects could practice and realize these modern ideals. From 1935 up to 1941, thousands of buildings were constructed in the city, most of which reflect various Modernist styles and some of which represent inimitable architectural forms, such as petrol stations mimicking aeroplanes and boats, commercial buildings designed as trains, cavernous cinemas with fine period plasterwork and Art Deco interiors, fine ultra-modern hotels and offices, and government buildings. In 1941, Italian rule in Eritrea and the rule of fascism came to an end. Since the 1940's no major construction has taken place in Asmara's central perimeter.

The Government of Eritrea established the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP) in 1999 to preserve and promote the unique architectural heritage of Asmara. The project restored several key buildings in the city, including cinemas, a theatre and the central Post Office. Other work includes the establishment of a Historic Perimeter and a series of Planning and Conservation Guidelines to assist local residents and the Municipality of Asmara in ensuring that the architecture and the unique urban environment are conserved in concurrence with the city's necessary development.

The Asmara Heritage Project (AHP) was established in 2004 with the aim of continuing the nomination process and further preserve and promote the unique architectural heritage of the city. According to the director of the project, Engineer Medhanie Teklemariam, the AHP organizational structure was designed to fulfill three primary objectives: (i) the preparation of the Nomination Dossier for UNESCO World Heritage Listing (WHL); (ii) the Integrated Management Plan; and (iii) the Conservation Master Plan.

- 2000-2007: The Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP)
- 2004: Eritrea hosted UNESCO's "Meeting on Modern Heritage of Africa."
- 2005: Asmara selected in the Tentative List for inscription in the World Heritage List.
- 2009-2011: A National Heritage Programme (NHP) was initiated with the aim of safeguarding

heritage conservation practices at the Municipal level.

- March 2014: Asmara Heritage Project (AHP) officially established by Zoba Maakel Administration.
- January 2016: the State of Eritrea submitted its first ever application to UNESCO for inscription on the World Heritage List (WHL). (See: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13602365.2016.1276093>)

The result of a two - decade research works, a Nomination Dossier was submitted in January 2016. The Asmara nominated site covers 481ha and contains more than 4,340 buildings, all of which have been extensively surveyed for this research. More than 80,000 documents and technical drawings from the municipality's phenomenal archive have been digitized and it is the first ever publication by the project to UNESCO for the inscription on the world Heritage List (WHL). The Nomination Dossier is a document of 1,300-pages. This document is a summary of an enormous quantity of work conducted in the last two decades by national and international researchers. The research has been awarded a medal by the Royal Institution of British Architecture (RIBA), in 2016.

After a long journey, the time has come. In one month's time (July 2017) a decision will be made at the session of the World Heritage Committee in Krakow, Poland. According to the UNESCO World Heritage guidelines, in order for a site to get selected it must have an outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria. Asmara is proposed for inscription under four criteria (ii), (iii), (iv) and (v). Based on existing researched information the possibility of inscribing Asmara on the World Heritage List is high. Several preparations are underway by Eritreans at home and abroad, relevant government institutions, Eritrean Embassies, and friends of Eritrea. These include: (i) preparing exhibitions (ii) organizing seminars (iii) giving awareness for state members and stakeholders...etc. The people and government of Eritrea are working hand in hand to inscribe Asmara at the place it deserves. At this time Eritreans all over the world are eagerly awaiting an affirmative decision by the World Heritage Committee. They have travelled long to get to this day. For many there is no doubt; Asmara will achieve a historic success.

On this occasion, the Asmara for World Heritage Campaign 2017, extends its thanks to all the people of the world for their love and support to Asmara and its citizens at this defining moment.

Once more our campaign seeks your unreserved support for Asmara's inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List and advances its thanks for your appreciation of our City of Dreams.

Victory to the Masses!

For further information please visit the followings:

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/2024/>

<http://www.asmera.nl/asmara.htm>