

## Classic Touch of a Vintage Building

Written by Winta Woldeyesus

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“ It seems like I can’t have enough whenever I eat in this restaurant.” was the impressed comment of the German reporter Stephanie Apple in describing one of the restaurants in downtown Asmara. The walls and ceiling of this restaurant are decorated by shapes of various fruits made of ceramics and sculptures of different traditional artifacts. The balcony, with its white walls and shining golden lights lifts the spirits of any customer that enters the hotel “Albergo Italia”.

Most of the vintage buildings in Asmara were built from 1899-1925 and all are still standing tall in the city. The buildings around the Postal Office of the city were built by “Electral art deco” design while those around the market place were built by “Rational art deco” and buildings like the city municipality office were built by “monumental” design of art deco and this variety in the design of the classic buildings enabled Asmara to be nicknamed “the hidden African city of art deco”.

To mention some of the buildings of that time is the church of St. Mark, which was built in 1895 and later destroyed to build another larger church at the center of the capital. As a replacement to the St. Mark’s church, the city’s landmark and identity, the Cathedral, was built in 1916. Even though this church was one of the oldest buildings in the city, “Albergo Italian” was built long before Cathedral in the year 1899.

Though there is no record of the architect who build this hotel, it was built at the time the Italian colonizers declared Asmara to be the capital city of the country in a place then known as “Corso Del Re”.



The year 1899 was the time the Italians residing in the coastal area began to migrate towards the highlands. The wars with Ras Alula following their invasion enabled the Italians to see and appreciate the country’s fertile highland plateau and suitable climate, as a result of which they began building small houses called “barakas” and later with the plan they had to expand the capital city those houses were destroyed and replaced by large stone buildings. They even began to invest in the infrastructure of the country in order to have full access of the country’s resources. The resistance many architects faced in their homeland regarding new architectural

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ideas and techniques were another additional reason for the coming of many Italian architects and constructors to Eritrea.

Moreover, the influx of many Italians to Eritrea due to the economic slack down in their homeland was another impetus. To solve the problem of unemployment and lack of agricultural land many Italians were moved to Eritrea, especially from the regions of Sicily and Calabrese. The people of these two regions in Italy had no rights and recognition in their country, as a result they started viewing Eritrea as their homeland and begun to develop the country's infrastructure and economy by investing their asset.

Despite the Italians' effort and investment, they didn't have the time to appreciate what they built, as WWII reached the shores of Africa. The British defeated the Italians, but still the beautiful buildings didn't face any damage neither by the colonizers nor in the long struggle for liberation. They still stand tall and beautiful in the city.



Those ancient buildings remained untouched by the turmoil the country went through by fate. But now the Government of Eritrea has adopted policies to reconstruct those buildings without any major change on the original style and construction of those buildings. "Albergo Italia" is one of those buildings that was renovated in 1998 without any change in the style and design of the building. In reconstructing this building, the owner of the Hotel, Mr. Primo Jovannii and the architect, Mr. Carlo Yakinii imported all the necessary materials from Italy in order to preserve the originality of the building. "I bought this hotel in 1998, considering the importance of the building and its art-deco value," said Mr. Jovannii. The hotel's name was also changed from the one given by the Derg regime, "Keren Hotel" to its original name "Albergo Italia". The hotel was built 110 years ago and is now one of the country's few amazing hotels.

One of the architects involved in introducing Eritrea's art deco architecture to the world is a German architect, Chirstopher Melchure, and he described the reconstruction of this hotel as: "The job was done with extra care and a lot of effort and talent was poured into it. The result is outstanding."



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In addition to the amazing restaurant, the staircase leading to the rooms is another incredible art. This hotel is not only vintage building but also a good example of the work done in reconstruction and preserving the originality of the art deco buildings of the city. There are around 400 art deco buildings in the city and if all of them can be preserved in this way there is no doubt that Asmara will be one of the amazing cities of the world.

Speaking about such buildings, Mr. Ali Abdu, the Minister of Information once said, “Asmara’s architecture is like a frozen music that touches your heart with every passing minute that you spend in a place.” And indeed the architecture of “Albergo Italia” is something that you can’t have enough of whenever you spend time there; it is like a classic music that touches you.

Written by Samson Haile

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