

Eritrea's unique architecture under threat

ASMARA ERITREA: 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.

World Heritage status would also be a rare opportunity for Eritrea to win positive international exposure. The Horn of Africa nation normally makes headlines only for its raft of repressive policies.

"The international reputation would be boosted," said Edward Denison, a photographer and co-author of "Asmara: Africa's Secret Modernist City".

A different side of Eritrea

Most of the buildings in the former Italian colony were constructed between 1936 and 1941 as part of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini's plan to expand his foothold in Africa. Asmara used to be known as Piccola Roma, or "Little Rome". In the 1939 census, more than half the city's inhabitants were Italian - 53,000 out of a total of 98,000.

Italian architects were brought over and encouraged to experiment with innovative designs that were frowned upon in conservative Europe. Asmara gained a reputation as an "experimental playground" where wacky designs were welcomed.

Today, Eritreans have a deep appreciation for the buildings - even though many were built by compatriots carrying out forced labour under colonial rule - and are proud of their city.

While some buildings sit unused, such as the Teatro Asmara, with its high arched awnings and Roman-style pillars, many of them remain functional. Tables are busy at Cinema Roma, as regulars sip macchiatos on the terrace beneath the marble facade. Inside, dated American movies and Eritrean shows are screened to visitors who watch from plush red seats.

According to Denison, the buildings could be a major boost for the sagging tourist industry. "The opportunities are boundless, and Eritrea is very aware of that with the various other cultural and natural attractions that it has. I think architecture is a key component of that," he said.

Luckily, the city's slow development has preserved many of its old buildings, most of which have been left untouched since Eritrea's war for independence kicked off in 1961.

Dennis Rodwell, architect and author of "Conservation and Sustainability in Historic Cities", describes Asmara as a "time warp". But preservation efforts have been held back in part by Eritrea's staunch principle of self-reliance. Rodwell said that outside support is sometimes seen as "a threat rather than an opportunity".

The US\$5m World Bank-funded Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project ended in 2007 as funding dried up and relations between the World Bank and Eritrea soured. EU funding earmarked for architectural restoration projects remains frozen for review.

Denison, the photographer, agrees that preservation efforts could be improved through greater collaboration with outsiders, but notes Eritrea's rebel-turned-politician leaders have long struggled to balance "self-reliance and collaboration internationally".

Yet despite stalled progress in recent years, he says he is hopeful that Eritrea's rich architectural heritage can be preserved.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>