

20th Century Modern Cities – Asmara, Gdynia and Tel Aviv

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One major concern in the first half of the 20th century was the provision of housing solutions. Three modern cities, Asmara, Gdynia, and Tel Aviv, underwent in the course of this period revolutionary architectural changes that impacted the urban residential space. Each of these cities is located in an entirely distinct geographical and cultural region and context and has its own particular version of modern heritage architecture and urban planning, as well as intangible characteristics differing from those of the other two. Such differences derive from several factors: the city's unique history, the existing reality, the specific cultural perception, and the varying circumstances leading to its establishment.

A presentation of the case for every city, along with a brief comparative analysis between the cities, will serve to demonstrate the principles of the modern characteristics that distinguish the modern heritage of each one.

Asmara – a modernist African city

Asmara is the capital city of Eritrea, located in the centre of the country on a highland plateau. The city was founded on the site where four ancient villages united and became known as “Arbate Asmera”. Its modern development began in 1889 with its occupation by Italy and the transformation into an Italian colonial territory.

The beginning of the 20th century marked a significant development in urban planning in Asmara, shifting from organic evolution to modern orthogonal development. In the African context, urban development resulted in a combination of grid and radial road patterns that respected, and were sometimes defined by, topographical and cultural conditions.¹ In Asmara, the early urban plans of 1913 additionally included principles of racial segregation so that Europeans lived apart from Africans. The two communities coalesced in the areas between the two settlements, where



Fig. 1: Cinema Impero, Asmara, architect: Mario Messina, 1937

a vibrant commercial area evolved and became the central market. The areas occupied by European residences and governmental offices excluded Africans, except for domestic labourers and military personnel.²

The period that left the most significant modernist mark on the city was 1935–41. It commenced with Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and spanned the period of Fascism and of Mussolini's dream of "Africa Orientale Italiana" – the embodiment of a Roman empire in East Africa. This placed Asmara in the frontline of unprecedented developments that would dictate its urban planning and architecture, characterised by wide streets, modern infrastructure, and grand buildings such as movie theatres, shops, public buildings, and Italian manufacturers (Fig. 1).³ Indeed, the city became known as "little Rome". The architects and engineers of that period understood and actualised the modern utopia in their planning in the city, and the architectural expression was an urban ensemble combining variations of and experimenting with Rationalism, Futurism and Art Deco (Figs. 2 and 3).⁴

The 1930s saw an exceptional quantity of materials and labour flowing into Eritrea, reinforcing the vision of modernity within the expanding city, as expressed in the work of architect Vittorio Cafiero. His plan emphasised city zoning distinguished by varied functions in line with the doctrine of Fascism, including racial segregation, which was central to his plan.⁵ The crisis that defined Eritrea's struggle for



Fig. 2: Fiat Tagliero service station, Asmara, architect: Giuseppe Pettazzi, 1938

independence from 1961 onwards helped to cocoon Asmara from trends further afield until 1991, when Eritrea was finally liberated. Thus, the city was revealed as a modernist architectural laboratory, far away from the grim events taking place in Europe at the same time. Asmara became an outstanding example of a colonial capital bearing witness to the universal encounter with modernity in the 20th century.⁶ "Asmara – Africa's Modernist City" was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2017.



Fig. 3: Original function: casino, late 1930s, Asmara

Gdynia – city and port

Gdynia is a Polish port city located on the Baltic Sea in northern Poland, established at the site of the original small historical fishing village of the same name. At the beginning of the 20th century, Gdynia became a seaside resort town with a wide pier.

The background to Gdynia's modern planning lies in Poland's reestablishment as an independent state, after the First World War.⁷ Granting Poland access to the sea via a narrow land corridor was one of the guarantees offered by President Wilson of the United States, in his Fourteen Points proposal of 1918, which declared: "An independent Polish state should be erected, which should include the territories (...) which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea (...)." However, the granted land did not include Gdansk, which had access to the sea, and this lack of a port became a point of conflict. Consequently, the Polish government's modernist vision was to build a seaport owned and controlled exclusively by Poland that would connect the country via the Baltic coast to the rest of the world.

Gdynia was chosen for this purpose and subsequently evolved into a well-established seaport.⁸ The port became the focal point of the city and this affected the urban city planning. All plans later drawn up for the city centre inevitably possessed the common motif of a tight connection between the city centre and the sea. The wide pier at the port transformed, with no change in width, into an extension of the city's main axis and the main square, thus opening and exposing the main part of the city centre to the sea and



Fig. 5: Polish yachtsman's house, Gdynia, architects: Bohdan Damiecki and Tadeusz Siczkowski, 1936–37

reflecting the city's openness as an emigration port to the wider world (Fig. 4).⁹

Modernism began its spread in Gdynia in the late 1920s, taking the place of Historicism, in two different variants: moderate and avant-garde, creating the city's specific genius loci. The architects brought with them a new spirit under the influence of the Bauhaus school (Fig. 5).¹⁰

Architecture in the city of Gdynia is identified with Modernism that flourished and developed in tandem with the city, and the strong ideological connection with international architecture during these years illustrates the great extent to which this architecture was international.¹¹



Fig. 4: Gdynia port

Tel Aviv – The White City of the Modern Movement

Tel Aviv is Israel's main modern city, located on the Mediterranean coast. It was established in 1909 as an extension of the old city of Jaffa.¹² The utopian planning of the new „Ahuzat Bayit“ neighbourhood moved away from the sea to the point of actually ignoring it, and served as the basis for the establishment of a new city and society.

The broad discussion of the Jewish people's rights in Palestine gained legitimacy in Lord Balfour's declaration of 1917: "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people". The ruling British Mandate chose to handle the conflict that had erupted in Palestine by creating a vision for the expanded city of Tel Aviv. Urban planner Sir Patrick Geddes was asked to prepare a master plan for Tel Aviv (Fig. 6), provide the physical structure for the Jewish homeland and open its gates to new immigration. Geddes' modern vision presented the city as a special type of garden city and set a clear hierarchy between types of urban streets: main roads ran parallel to the sea, while side streets were directed towards the sea. This urban plan enabled the sea breezes to penetrate the city's streets. The length of the coastal strip was designated for uses that included recreation and health, but the area was not planned as a major public space for the city's residents.¹³

While Tel Aviv's port was of importance in the struggle for independence by the Jewish community in Palestine, in practice its function was short-lived and its influence is



Fig. 6: Patrick Geddes' Plan (1927), Tel Aviv, illustration from 1931



Fig. 7: Zina Dizengoff Square, Tel Aviv, architect: Genia Averbuch



Fig. 8: *The Rubinsky House, Tel Aviv, architects: L. Kranowski and E. Marcusfeld, 1935*

not ultimately felt in Geddes' urban fabric. This stands in contrast to Gdynia, where the connection between port and city was a long-term planning principle.

Geddes' urban plan for Tel Aviv included urban spaces in the city centre, such as the Zina Dizengoff Square (Fig. 7), constituting a spectacular integration of city planning and modern architecture. Over time, traffic and pedestrian schemes have changed, and, in fact, the square has now been transformed back to its original form, combining once again the unique architectural and urban characteristics that previously characterised this site. Tel Aviv was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2003. The buildings, designed by architects trained in Europe, where they practiced their profession before emigrating, create an outstanding architectural ensemble of the Modern movement in a new cultural context. Within the urban fabric of the White City, as part of a residential solution for the nascent society, housing was planned in a communal spirit, with the inspiration coming from Europe (Fig. 8).

When comparing modern architecture in Gdynia and Tel Aviv, we find that, although the residential block differs, much similarity can still be found between the two. Models of geometrically shaped, light-coloured "smooth-façade" houses inspired by the Bauhaus school can be seen around both cities. The one pronounced divergence in their architectural expression lies in the adjustments for climate, which differs greatly between the two cities. Asmara's architecture, in contrast, is distinctly rationalist, with a few exceptions

adopting local vernacular or Islamic styles and forms.¹⁴ It was, moreover, designed as a total city, not as an extension of an existing urban settlement as in the case of Tel Aviv.

Modernism in Tel Aviv, which in the 1930s was characterised by the International Style, underwent a metamorphosis. In the 1950s – 1960s, following the establishment of the State of Israel, significant urban development and architecture of residential social housing occurred. The White City now received an additional layer one could term the „gray city“ – the image being created by the new concrete structures.¹⁵ Urban planning and architecture outside the city centre changed. The development of Modernism in the second half of the 20th century was reflected in the post-war architecture of the city's new neighbourhoods, for example Ramat Aviv Aleph and Ramat Aviv Bet – the latter taking as its inspiration Berlin's 1957 Interbau housing development (Fig. 9). This experimental residential neighbourhood demonstrated new residential typologies and its influence is evident in the new areas of the city.¹⁶

Conclusion

Asmara, Gdynia, and Tel Aviv are model examples of urban planning and modern architecture and represent part of the struggle for independence and self-determination that characterised trends of the early 20th century. The cities became experimental laboratories for the application of modern ideas in accordance with their geographical, cultural, and local contexts. The living cultural traditions of each city are manifested through the individual plan and fabric, representing an encounter between modernity as expressed through the urban and architectural realm and the local national or cultural identity. As different as these three cities located in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East are, the role of architecture and planning as formative processes in the development of a national identity is an important component they all share.

¹ UNESCO Nomination Dossier, 2016.

² DENISON, Eritrea, 2014, p. 22.

³ UNESCO Nomination Dossier, 2016.

⁴ DENISON, Eritrea, 2014, p. 22.

⁵ ANDERSON, *Modern Architecture*, 2016, p. 124.

⁶ UNESCO Nomination Dossier, 2016.

⁷ HIRSCH, Gdynia, 2014.

⁸ MARCINIAK, *New Towns*, 2016, p. 119

⁹ SOŁTYSIK, *Modern City*, 2014, p. 57.

¹⁰ SOŁTYSIK, *Modern Movement*, 2009, p. 71.

¹¹ SOŁTYSIK, *Modern City*, 2014, p. 57.

¹² METZGER-SZMUK, *Dwelling*, 1996, p.19.

¹³ FENINGER / ALON-MOZES, *The Light*, 2016, p. 48.

¹⁴ UNESCO Nomination Dossier, 2016.

¹⁵ HOFFMANN / NEVO-GOLDBERST, *Aphoria*, 2017, p. 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 285.



Fig. 9. Ramat Aviv Bet, experimental residential neighbourhood, Tel Aviv, architects: Robert Bannett and Yitzhak Perlstein, 1959

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Urbane Weltkulturerbestätten des 20. Jahrhunderts – Asmara, Gdynia und Tel Aviv

Abstract

Der moderne städtische Wohnraum in den Städten Gdynia (Polen), Asmara (Eritrea) und Tel-Aviv (Israel) erlebte in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts eine architektonische Revolution. In jeder Stadt wurde eine spezielle Version von Architektur und moderner Stadtplanung entwickelt, die sich aus dem jeweiligen kulturellen Kontext und den spezifischen örtlichen Bedingungen ableitete. Auf der Grundlage dieser drei Städte ist dieser Artikel als Vergleichsanalyse gedacht.