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Eritrea and Dilemma of Modernism Beyond the West

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century conventional theories of modernisation, which assume modernisation's equation with Westernisation and an increasingly homogenised and globalised world founded broadly on Western values, are seen as increasingly inconsistent with experiences and challenges globally. The subject of this article presents an opportunity to interrogate these experiences and challenges in the context of Eritrea and from the perspective of the architecture of its capital Asmara – one of the most complete ensembles of modernist architecture in the world.

The article comprises three parts. The first introduces the notion of "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt, 2000) – a recent theoretical development in social sciences that has only begun to be applied to architectural studies. Multiple modernities provides a conceptual framework for investigating the notion of modernity in non-Western contexts. The second part summarises the history and modernist architecture of Eritrea, contextualising Asmara's urban development that over the course of a century formed the basis of an internationally unique and exemplary modernist heritage outside the West.

Drawing on the author's experience[1], the third and final part of the presentation examines the problems and challenges associated with modernist architecture as an aspect of cultural heritage and urban development in non-Western contexts. Asmara has been the subject of two internationally funded projects that provide important lessons for current and future urban heritage projects both in Eritrea and elsewhere in the non-West.

Multiple Modernities

Modernity, a manifestation and an abstract expression of the Renaissance notion of "modern" as well as the theoretical setting for the appearance of the twentieth century idea of *modernism*, is part of a conceptual coterie that has underpinned Western thought for centuries. These notions have accompanied, prefigured even, events and processes that have fundamentally influenced the course of global developments and their interpretation since: industrialisation, the emergence of nationalism, the rise and fall of colonialism, and the spread of capitalism. It is through modernity that the West's hegemonic aspirations have dominated subsequent philosophical and intellectual discourse. From Hegel, Comte, Marx, Tönnies, Weber and Durkheim to Foucault, Wallerstein, Habermas and Fukuyama, a Western conception of modernity remained central throughout.

Although this article is grounded in the intellectual terrain prepared by these thinkers it does not entirely share their views on modernity. Rather than seeing modernity as a singular Western-centric, converging and homogenising (and menacing, according to Berman's account) process, this study proposes that modernity is a perpetually reconstituting global phenomenon (albeit with European origins), with multiple manifestations producing heterogeneous outcomes. The theoretical affiliation of this article lies in the emerging sociological paradigm of *multiple modernities* and is among the first architectural articles to make this association explicitly.

The notion of multiple modernities emerged out of growing regard for precisely those milieus that had until recently (and certainly throughout the twentieth century) been sited on the periphery of perceived centres of modernity. It refutes the "cultural program of modernity" proposed by Marx et al and the homogenising theories of post-war "theories of modernization"[2] and assumes "the existence of culturally specific forms of modernity shaped by distinct cultural heritages and sociopolitical conditions."[3]

This study's concurrence with multiple modernities occurs out of the peculiarities of the three principal themes: architecture, modernity and Eritrea. Whether studied independently, in pairs, and certainly collectively, these themes do not fit within established theories that assume the homogenising and hegemonic impact of Western cultural agency and the inevitability of the "global village", "clash of civilizations" or "end of history".[4] Such themes demonstrate the fallibility of conventional theories of modernity in dealing with subjects outside established centres of modernism, and Eritrea's encounter with architectural modernity is an example that demands and supports the conceptual framework that multiple modernities proffers.

The principal architect of multiple modernities is Shmuel Eisenstadt (for a collection of his works see: *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities,* 2003) and the value of his work to this study exists in his refutation of modernity's equation to Westernisation and his questioning of the narrowness of many of our perspectives on the past. Eritrea's absence from the historical record in architecture, despite its unique heritage, until comparatively recently typifies this experience and has important implications beyond mere scholarly endeavours.

1. Edward Denison, Guang Yu Ren and Naigzy Gebremedhin, *Asmara - Africa's Secret Modernist City*, Merrell, London, 2003.

2. *Dædalus*, Winter 2000, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambrigde 2000, p. vi.

3. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The context of the Multiple Modernities Paradigm" in Dominic Sachsenmaier and Jens Riedel (eds.) with Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations*, Brill, Leiden, 2002, p. 1.

4. *Dædalus*, Winter 2000, Cambrigde 2000, p. v.

1. *Governor's Palace (1905), architect unknown. Photo by the author*

Implicit in modernism, despite its international pretensions, is the assumption of inferiority of sites beyond the West, a postulation asserted through "inauthenticity", "belatedness", "diluteness", and "remoteness", whether geographically, intellectually, and even racially. As Eysteinsson (1990) argued in a manner that anticipated the emergence of multiple modernities: "While everyone seems to agree that as a phenomenon modernism is radically 'international' (although only in the limited Western sense of the word), constantly cutting across national boundaries, this quality is certainly not reflected in the majority of critical studies of modernism. Such studies are mostly restricted to the very national categories modernism is calling into question, or they are confined to the (only slightly wider) Anglo-American sphere."[5]

Bradbury and McFarlane's *Modernism*[6] (1976) makes no mention of sites outside the West. More recently, as attitudes have changed and research methodologies become more inclusive, intellectual attentions have turned increasingly to the role of the West's *other*, but as Curtis's *Modern Architecture Since 1900*[7] demonstrates in relation to architecture, despite attempts by scholars to achieve a greater degree of objectivity, Eritrea's complicated history has caused it to remain overlooked. Concordant with the critical approach of multiple modernities, Curtis recognises that "Modernism needs to be examined in relation to a variety of world views and social projects"[8], but despite his claim that his "net is cast wide", and drawing examples "from places as diverse as Spain and India, Finland and Australia, France and Mexico, and the United States, Switzerland and Japan", and later "Finland and Britain, Brazil and South Africa, Mexico and Japan", and recognition of "new 'strains' of modernism in diverse national cultures (e.g. Spain, Australia, India, Japan)", most of the vast continent of Africa remains absent from Curtis' survey and Eritrea is not mentioned. Africa's distance from modernism's core for structural, geographical, cultural and even racial reasons, has caused it to be overlooked along with many other *others*.

The occlusion of modernity in areas outside the West, and in particular Africa, reverberates with Said's seminal thesis, *Orientalism*[9], the first critical examination of cultural transactions between the West and other parts of the world. Although Said's Orient is not Africa, the asymmetrical relations and interpretations between Africa and the West possess many parallels with Said's analysis. Both are constructed by and in relation to the West; distant, exotic and, importantly, unmodern.

A key element of Said's thesis from the perspective of modernism was the presumption of the one-directionality of its influence: from the modern and civilised West to the unmodern and uncivilised Orient. Vital to deconstructing the illusory line that separates as well as defines the West and its *other* is the multi-directionality of cultural transactions that occurred between the two. Critical studies of Africa's influence on Western modernists are still undeveloped and have received attention largely in artistic fields, where indigenous crafts and art forms were subsumed into the Western modernist canon by artists and, in the case of what would later become known as Art Deco, some architects. As more evidence emerges the true nature and complexity of the landscape around Africa's encounter with modernity becomes clearer, reinforcing the fact that modernism in Africa cannot be conceived as a single entity but is one of multiple entities – multiple modernities.

The first published statement of the "multiple modernities" thesis was in 1998 in *Dædalus*, where it appeared under the precursory heading *Early Modernities*, which sought to "avoid three fallacies: first, that there is only one modernity; second, that looking from the West to the East legitimates the concept of 'Orientalism'; and finally, that globalization and multiculturalism ought to be regarded as indications that a new axial principle has in fact emerged, which goes under the name of post-modernity."[10] Although the articles focus on Europe and Asia, not Africa, there is considerable resonance with the continent's encounter with architectural modernity in the overall hypothesis: "While European (and American) historians have collaborated successfully to analyze the most minute aspects of European life during these centuries … there have been no comparable in-depth analyses of how civilizations of the East during these same centuries and how they changed."[11] The result, which is critically important to the way we understand architecture and its historical development outside the West, is that "Asia, like Africa and Latin America, figures less in major scholarly tomes than do either Europe or North America."[12] Eisenstadt further argues that such intellectual oversights are unlikely to last much longer, with "social scientific studies of the future likely to take into greater account societies and religions, traditions and practices still too little known today, concealed from the West by many factors."[13]

Few sites correspond more aptly with Eisenstadt's postulation than Eritrea, or more broadly Africa. A practical measure of his theory can be observed in the World Heritage List formulated by UNESCO, the foremost authority on the identification, study, and preservation of the world's cultural

5. Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1990, p. 89.
6. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: 1890-1930*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1976.
7. William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., Phaidon, London, 1996.
8. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: 1890-1930*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 10.

2. *The Central Post Office (1916), designed by Odoardo Cavagnari. Photo by the author*

9. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978.
10. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter, „Introduction: Paths to Early Modernities – A Comparative View", in *Dædalus*, Summer 1998, p. 2.
11. *Dædalus*, Summer 1998, Cambrigde 1998, p. v.
12. *Dædalus*, Summer 1998, Cambrigde 1998, pp. v-vi.
13. *Dædalus*, Summer 1998, Cambrigde 1998, p. vi.

and natural heritage. UNESCO describes World Heritage as those natural and cultural legacies of "outstanding value to humanity … irrespective of the territory on which they are located," which suggests that the distribution of sites should be even throughout the world. However, the number of World Heritage Sites in Africa is just 28% of the number in Europe. Italy, France and Spain combined have more sites than the whole of Africa. And the entire Sub-Saharan Africa, an area containing 40 countries, has just 50% more sites than Italy. Such a clear disparity reveals the Westerncentric bias not only of the global institutions that were established throughout the twentieth century and the regulations, laws and guidelines that govern their conduct, but also the detrimental effect this has on achieving a genuinely global awareness of the very subjects that these institutions were established to value and in some cases protect. The example of UNESCO's World Heritage List is also pertinent because Eritrea has long intended to make an application to the list for the Modernist architecture of its capital, Asmara – an endeavour that was encouraged by UNESCO because it would not only counter the disproportionate absence of twentieth century sites on their list, but also help redress the underrepresentation of African sites too.

The concept of Early Modernities was developed further two years later in an edition titled *Multiple Modernities*,[14] where it became part of an expanding intellectual domain critical of "many of the prevailing theories about the character of contemporary society while questioning whether traits commonly described as 'modern' do in fact accurately and fully render the complexity of the contemporary world" and that challenged "many of the conventional notions of how the world has changed … in this century predominantly."[15]

Multiple Modernities has subsequently attracted widespread intellectual attention and has "spread rapidly in social sciences,"[16] with publications such as Sachsenmaier and Riedel's *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations* (2002)[17]. Multiple modernities has since been employed as a conceptual framework for examining a widening range of subjects, from feminist studies, cinema and popular media, to Muslim culture, including Sadria's *Multiple Modernities in Muslim Societies*[18] in which architectural reflections were proffered by Jencks (*Why Critical Modernism?*) and Melvin (*Multiple Modernities in Contemporary Architecture*).[19]

Multiple modernities resonates strongly with other scholarly approaches to the question of modernity outside the West.[20] Common to all these perspectives is an elemental questioning of the West's universal ownership of the concept of modernity which has arisen both out of the increasingly evident disjuncture between the multifaceted modernity that is familiar to those experiencing it and the uniformity of that which has been promoted by Western academia, and the increasing exploration of encounters of modernity in settings outside the West, such as Eritrea.

14. *Dædalus*, Winter 2000, Cambrigde 2000.
15. *Dædalus*, Winter 2000, Cambrigde 2000, p. VII.
16. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The context of the Multiple Modernities Paradigm" in Dominic Sachsenmaier and Jens Riedel (eds.) with Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations*, Brill, Leiden, 2002, p. 1.
17. Dominic Sachsenmaier and Jens Riedel (eds.) with Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations,* Brill, Leiden, 2002.
18. Modjtaba Sadria, ed., *Multiple Modernities in Muslim Societies*, Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Geneva, 2007.
19. As a commentator well-grounded in Western history, Melvin's wanderings into non-Western territory prove how tricky such excursions can be. At a conference focusing on Muslim society, his paper mentions nothing of this subject and where he does stray into peripheral territories he is prone to making mistakes. For example, on p. 141 he claims Eritrea was "still part of Ethiopia in the 1930s", when it did not become part of Ethiopia until the 1950s.
20. Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism*, Routledge, London, 2005; Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash, *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon*, Routledge, London, 2007; Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities*, 2nd ed., Duke University Press, Durham, 2001; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000.

3. *Asmara Theatre (1920), designed by Odoardo Cavagnari. Photo by the author*

Architectural Modernity – the Eritrean experience

Much of Eritrea's Modernist architecture was constructed between 1935 and 1941, following Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and during a period of fascism when Mussolini dreamt of recreating a Roman Empire in Africa. Eritrea, colonised by Italy in the late 19th century, was the springboard for this invasion. From the early 1930s, Italy poured resources into Eritrea to prepare for the assault. Until then, Asmara had been little more than a small town – a colonial outpost with grand designs for the future. In 1935, Asmara's transformation began, as wide streets, modern infrastructure and grand buildings were hastily constructed, turning it into Africa's most modern city at the time, with more traffic lights than Rome and almost enough cars for every one of its 70,000 Italian inhabitants. By the time the Allies defeated Italy in North Africa in 1941, Asmara was widely revered by both its former and incumbent administrators as a city of marked beauty and charm.

Asmara was the second colonial capital of Eritrea. In 1885, Italy established their nascent colony by taking control of the port city of Massawa, an ancient Islamic settlement on the Red Sea coast, which became their first capital. By 1890, Italian forces had advanced inland and occupied parts the highland plateau where they established a settlement near to the village of Arbate Asmara. This settlement, subsequently known as Asmara, became their colonial capital in 1900.

The first European buildings in Asmara date from the early 1890s and reflected a simple Italian vernacular style. Official buildings, though rudimentary, were more sophisticated, as the first Governor's Palace, designed in a colonial style, demonstrates. Subsequent architectural outputs remained rooted in traditionalism and drew influence from various Medieval, neo-Baroque, or neo-Classical styles,

4. *The Selam Hotel (1937), designed by Rinaldo Borgnino. Photo by the author*

5. *Fiat Tagliero service station (1938), designed by Giuseppe Pettazzi. Photo by the author*

commonly combined in eclectic conglomerations. The Governor's Palace (1905), the Central Post Office (1916), and Asmara Theatre (1920) are examples of these stylistic variations.

Early urban plans for the city from 1913 were based on principles of racial segregation in which Europeans lived apart from Africans. This policy was continued and intensified throughout the Italian period, although necessity and practicality undermined this iniquitous ideological solution. In reality, the two communities coalesced in the areas between the two settlements, where a vibrant commercial area evolved and became the Central Market.[21]

From 1935, Asmara's transition from a town to a city began. The influx of labourers, economic migrants, military personnel and resources from Italy were not the only imports. New ideas and trained professionals helped transform Asmara from the traditional to the modern, figuratively and physically. Italian architectural styles such as Novecento[22] and, later, Rationalism,[23] a style that was in its prime in Italy in the mid-1930s, were employed by Asmara's Italian architects. Before 1935, not a single building had been designed in a either a Novecento or Rationalist style, but between 1935 and 1941, few buildings were designed in a traditional style.

In 1935, Asmara was a virtual blank canvas – a construction site in which Italian architects and engineers were able to realise their vision of a Modernist utopia. Far from the constraints and relative lack of opportunity in Europe, Asmara's architects could fulfil their fanciful plans. The result is an eclectic and visually striking urban ensemble characterised by the refined classicism of Novecento and the geometric purity of Rationalism.

The city's unique political, geographical and social circumstances made it an ideal stage for Rationalist experimentation, embodied by engineered minimalism and uncontaminated by superfluous ornamentation and decoration. The Selam Hotel (1937) is exemplary of this style and represents one the purest surviving examples of Rationalist architecture in Africa.

Ideologically, Asmara's style represents the antithesis of the flamboyant decorativeness associated with Art Deco, a retrospective appellation given to the popular style derived from the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925. In a contemporary airing of Orientalism, the international media continues to exoticise Asmara, designating its architecture Art Deco despite the almost total absence of this style in all but a small selection of surviving interiors.

However, stylistic variations from this period do exist in Asmara. Futurism is manifested most dramatically in the Fiat Tagliero service station (1938), a building designed to imitate an aeroplane, with lofty 30 m cantilevered concrete wings suspended effortlessly from a soaring central tower. And an early example of regionalism can be seen in the design of the Enda Mariam Orthodox Cathedral (1939) which places vernacular references – conical roofs and imitated layers of brick and wood – within a Rationalist scheme in what is a rare and perhaps unique example of European architects (in this instance operating within a fascist system) adopting the style and language of an African vernacular.

Italy's defeat to the Allies in 1941 brought a swift end to Asmara's artificial prosperity and architectural extravagance. The frail status of a war economy that had fuelled the city's expansion for over five years also helped isolate it for the next fifty. Although there were periods of development in some parts of the city in the intervening decades, Asmara's became seen as a detached outpost of the Ethiopian Empire, with which it had been federated in 1952. The colonisation of Eritrea by its African neighbour (which in turn was supported by both the United States of America and the Soviet Union during the Cold War) is just one of many historical anomalies encountered by Eritrea that challenge the simplistic interpretations often posited by conventional post-colonial and modernisation theories that assume power relations based on the West and its other. Ironically, the deepening crisis that defined Eritrea's struggle for independence from 1961 helped to cocoon Asmara until 1991, when Eritrea was finally liberated. Asmara escaped the destruction wrought by war, but was shattered instead by a lack of maintenance and years of neglect.

Despite the odious political doctrine of its creators, Eritrea's struggle for independence helped Asmara to become revered by Eritreans. During the 30-year conflict, the Eritrean capital assumed a profoundly reverential status: the liberation of Asmara meant the liberation of the country. To reach Asmara was to attain the greatest prize of all – independence.

Architectural Modernism as cultural heritage

Today, Asmara represents very different things to different people. To Eritreans, Asmara is viewed with pride and respect – a civilised, clean and beautiful capital. It is the figurative and geographical centre of the nation – the jewel in their crown. For Western audiences, Asmara represents a nostalgic revelation and exotic arena –

21. The areas occupied by European residences and governmental offices excluded African assimilation, except for domestic labourers and military personnel.
22. The Novecento movement, which preceded Rationalism by just under a decade, is difficult to define concisely, though it originated as a contemporary reflection of certain classical styles.
23. Rationalism emerged in the mid-1920s, borne out of an Italian response to the "Modern Movement" or "International Style" that advocated the use of functional pure geometry devoid of ornamental nostalgic references.

6. *Enda Mariam Orthodox Cathedral (1939), architect unknown. Photo by the author*

7. *Capitol Cinema (1938), designed by Ruppert Saviele. Photo by the author*

a conflicting reminiscence manifested in physical actuality but culturally incongruous – a construct of white supremacy forcibly imposed into black Africa. To Europeans in particular, Asmara reminds them not just of home, but an idealised version of home that exists as a distorted memory than a true recollection, though admission of such a sentiment is muted by the intellectual fallibility of this position and its uncomfortable proximity to the abhorrent vacuity of neo-colonial rhetoric.

Although Asmara's cultural heritage shares equal legitimacy in its role in Eritrea's recent history as it does in the context in which it was created, most observations are framed within a Eurocentric perspective and overlook the historical experience that is uniquely and exclusively Eritrean. Although essential and valid in their respective domains, international scholarly architectural critique and academic specificity in response to Asmara's individual structures are immaterial in relation to the wider significance of Asmara's past, present and future and its role as the capital city of an independent state freed from the bonds of colonial suffrage.

Asmara's buildings, the physical constructs of 1930s colonial brutality and subsequent subjugation by an African neighbour, have been successfully reconstituted into one of Africa's most exemplary urban settings – a more pertinent and remarkable observation concerning heritage and the urban whole than an opportunity to analyse a series of isolated units within that whole in the context of glorifying a distasteful past. Asmara's successful transfiguration into a heritage setting has more to do with Eritrean culture than it does for the design of the buildings or their physical appearance. So important is this, that Asmara's unique setting, its *genus loci*, influenced largely by its intangible heritage, was specifically highlighted in the city's application for World Heritage listing. Asmara is an exemplary case of the cultural value of a city being more than the sum of its parts.

Whereas some countries pursued the destruction of former colonial buildings in the belief that this would erase colonialism from the collective consciousness, others did not. Historical events conspired to preserve the tangible remnants of colonial subjugation in Eritrea, and unlike those former colonised nations who actively destroyed colonial structures after liberation, Eritrea chose to retain and restore these legacies, albeit often without their divisive connotations and symbols. This decision has led to the development of a remarkably functional and pleasurable urban environment. It is remarkable, ironic perhaps, that although the urban plan of Asmara was designed with racial segregation in mind, over half a century later it has produced an exceptionally well-functioning and egalitarian urban landscape.

The survival of Asmara's Modernist architecture is a fortunate by-product of Eritrea's historical experience. Even by international standards, Modernist legacies have only recently assumed a status worthy of the heritage label and so their survival until now has often relied on a lack of development since their construction. For the last seven decades, Modernist buildings have faced varying degrees of damage, maltreatment and destruction. In Europe, war, political divisiveness, public ambivalence and subsequent development has destroyed many Modernist structures, yet in Africa, these forces ensured the survival of Asmara's architectural landscape in its entirety and in other countries often helped in the creation of Modernist icons in newly independent states from the 1960s onwards.

In Eritrea, the immoral politics of imperial desire that helped create Asmara were quickly replaced by a different kind of political conquest, whose architects were closer to home. Eritrea's liberation did not arrive with the undignified departure of a European colonial power, but through a protracted struggle against an African neighbour. Framed in this context, the architectural legacies of a brutal colonial oppressor did not carry the same degree of resentment and hostility.

Furthermore, Eritrea greeted liberation with empty hands. The country was shattered and impoverished and in no position to be demolishing functional structures that contained homes, offices and businesses simply on the grounds of political animosity for a regime that was defeated half a century earlier. This conundrum is common to many heritage sites. The tangible legacies of iniquitous regimes tend to outlast the relatively ephemeral nature of their ideological dogma. The tangible legacies of former times, however, atrocious or laudable should be measured by both historic and contemporary factors.

The decision to retain Asmara's unique character after independence and not have it replaced or irrevocably altered in favour of new structures was based on public will and practical necessity and not, as Western observers might prefer, out of respect for Modernist architecture. In the 1990s, designs were drafted for several glass-clad high-rise offices that would have required the demolition of four entire blocks of the city centre, but the project was strongly opposed by Asmarans and abandoned.

Subsequently, Eritrea has come to realise that fascination among foreign visitors for its architectural heritage is a key facet of future development in a country with negligible natural resources. Cultural heritage tourism has been proven to play a role in the long-term development

8. *The Central Market (1938-52), designed by Guido Ferrazza, Ferruccio Mazzanti (1941) and Giuseppe Arata (1942). Photo by the author*

of the nation and is central to the country's tourism policy. In light of this, Eritrea has over the past decade been researching and documenting its architectural history in order to gain a more complete understanding of its Modernist heritage and promote it to an international audience.

In 2001, the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP) was formally established under Eritrea's Ministry of Finance. CARP worked extensively to research and document the country's tangible and intangible heritage assets, undertake specific restoration projects, implement legislation and guidelines to protect sites, and establish relationships with international bodies in similar fields.

A consequence of this broader dialogue achieved the nomination of three Eritrean sites on the World Monuments Fund's Watch List of Endangered Sites for 2006, one of which was the Modernist heritage of Asmara. Ongoing dialogue with UNESCO concerning World Heritage listing is another long-term objective, as is continued collaboration with international organisations in this field. In October 2006, a two-month exhibition supported by international businesses and the German and Eritrean Governments titled *Asmara's Architecture* was held at the German Architectural Centre. It has since travelled to venues across Europe, the Middle East and Africa and continues its tour, exposing Eritrea's heritage to new audiences globally. In 2008, the European Union sought to establish a Heritage Project in Eritrea with the aim of restoring the Capitol Cinema (1938) and the Central Market (1938-52). €5m was set aside, but diplomatic differences caused the project to be postponed.

Conclusion

Eritrea and the Modernist architecture of Asmara offer a unique chance to interrogate prevailing theories of modernisation and how these impact our understanding of modern history. This unique heritage asset also represents an important opportunity for international discourse in two key areas of heritage preservation – Modernism and Africa's underrepresentation. By adopting a multiple modernities approach, a broader and more objective picture can be established of the problems and potentialities of sites beyond the West.

Eritrea is a valuable example where the buildings and notions of modernity were originally of the West, but can no longer be considered on these terms. In this light, the problems associated with the underrepresentation of Modernism and Africa become opportunities that will benefit not only the heritage community and its capacity to deliver more equally in all areas of the world across all genres of cultural and architectural heritage, but also the countries where such heritage assets are currently not given due recognition on a global stage.