

The Infrastructure of Amnesia

Coloniality off the road - from Massawa to Asmara and Addis Ababa

1. The emergence of structural amnesia

Like many other mythical stories that become part of the process of building a nation or a people, so-called 'Western civilisation' has used infrastructure as an important basis of its myth. Looking beyond the symbolic and mythological meanings assigned to infrastructure then becomes necessary in order to explore the politics, industry and economy hiding behind this myth.

In many colonial projects and practices, the notion of civilisation is widely used in order to legitimise exploitation. By expanding the heritage of so-called Western civilisation - a series of logistical and infrastructural objects - we find that they were primarily built for extraction of goods, displacing cargo, land and people to serve capitalist ventures. This was paralleled by the creation of a series of institutions that enabled the colonial¹ apparatus to install its power and supremacy in distant territories, far away from the capital of the colonial power. These infrastructural objects and networks are still being used in favour of a hegemonic structure, be it Eurocentric or other, that corresponds to the narration of development² - using the modernisation process to justify exploitation.

At this moment, we point out how questioning the purpose and process of developing infrastructure might provide better insight into the reasons for colonial and imperial relations being maintained even now. We are looking for the mechanisms that facilitate exploitation and hinder the change of power relations. A process of falsification of the past has been going on, leading to what we call a 'structural amnesia'. This structural amnesia plays a crucial role as an obstacle for any kind of change in the persistent perceived hierarchy.

2. Colonial legacies - developing interdependencies

As part of the Decolonizing Architecture program at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, we travelled to Ethiopia and Eritrea to visit former sites and buildings dating from the period of Italian colonisation and occupation³. Another key contextual element was the declaration of Asmara's inner city as a UNESCO heritage site in 2017. The two-week-trip held in February 2019 aimed to strengthen research on architectural decolonisation within the contemporary postcolonial context.

¹ In this article we focus on what is considered as "exploitation colonialism" which means "that colonizers go to a "new" place and dominate a local labor force in order to send resources back to the metropole." (Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014; see also Hinkinson, 2012).

² Trying to find another definition for "development" that goes beyond this narration we prefer to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's description: "I am asking us to allow the concept of development to overflow the interplay of capital and colony. This makes room for an acknowledgment of complicity—folded-togetherness—rather than see "development" to be conceptualized as good or evil or both after colonialism. I am asking for us to see that development as sustainable underdevelopment has a longer history and perhaps even that this history is beginning to make itself visible as the pat- tern of globalization explodes economic growth into developing inequality. I am suggesting that the conceptualization of development must be unevenly inter- disciplinary—statistics and political science folded together, complicit—with the disciplines of subject-formation, the humanities." (Spivak in *Political Concepts*, 2018. p.127)

³ Italian invasion to the Horn of Africa led to colonization of Eritrea in 1890. During Mussolini Ethiopia was occupied by Italy from 1936-1941.

Visiting the buildings and sites, and talking with the community in ongoing projects, we engaged with trajectories in both Addis Ababa and Asmara. While in Eritrea, we had a short visit to the port city of Massawa on the coast of the Red Sea. The road trip from Asmara to Massawa was a tense experience of the landscape and provided new perspectives and insights into the meaning of the colonial interventions, through our physical presence and movement in the territory.

The process of visiting and engaging led us to widen our perspective from mainly the architectural narrative to a broader discussion on the politics connecting architecture - heritage and infrastructure. Coming back from the trip, we came upon a press release⁴ from the EU on its plans for investments in that very road from Massawa to the Ethiopian border, calling it "Roads to peace: EU supports reconnecting Eritrea and Ethiopia." This raised many questions and thoughts for us, one of them being the relation between Europe and Africa. We wondered what the remnants of the 'beneficiary' European approach might be, given Paneuropean Union founder Coudenhove-Kalergi's statement in the 1930s that 'Europe's mission in Africa is to bring light to the darkest of continents ... Europe is Eurafrika's head, Africa its body⁵.'

The intersection of contemporary EU policies regarding the two countries that signed a peace treaty in July 2019, and our research on the former colonial relations with these same countries, suddenly started to overlap.

Tracing back the intensified European presence in the territories around the so-called Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, it goes all the way to the dismembering of the Ottoman Empire in the late 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s.

Following the nominal abolition of slavery⁶ that was passed by law throughout the 1800s in many countries, deeming it not to no longer be of moral and civilisational value, the massive land grabbing of Africa started. With two newborn European nation-states - Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871 - the quest for colonies and control of land in Africa became a matter of nation building. Thus, along with other European countries, the process of enlarging the market space for their economies, and eventually providing new living space for their citizens through the projects of colonisation accelerated. Subsequently, the tensions and conflicts of interest between colonial powers became more intense.

The Berlin Conference⁷ paved the way for the elitist European diplomacy, capitalists and political groups to partition the African continent into spheres of interest, and eased the exploitation of people and land, to serve their interests. Infrastructure such as railways, roads and ports were of crucial importance in order to bring extracted goods to the coastal cities that would cater to European economies through maritime routes. Construction of the Suez Canal from 1859 to 1869 is perhaps the largest of many infrastructural endeavours that were serving European economic interests at the time.

Focusing on the Italian case in relation to present day Eritrea and Ethiopia, it is useful to bring up the context of Italian colonisation that was intensely practiced from the 1880s. At that time, after failed tendencies of expansion towards Libya and Tunisia due to French and British predominance, the Italian kingdom started to develop the colonisation project in newly defined 'Oriental Africa' - which nowadays includes Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia - a project which lasted up until the second World War. Due to close relations with the diplomacy of Allied

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_868

⁵ Hansen, Peo and Jonsson, Stefan, "Eurafrika", p.38

⁶ The sequences of abolition of Atlantic slave trade didn't mean that it actually ceased. Apart from so-called illegal slave trade to countries such as Brazil it also meant that already enslaved people's work force was going to be used in African territories in order to produce products that were crucial for the ever rising demand of raw material in industrial countries.

⁷ The so-called Kongo-conference took place in Berlin in 1884 and participants included representatives of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, United States, France, United Kingdom, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden-Norway and Ottoman Empire.

forces in WWII and the capitulation of Italy in 1943 that led to the renouncing of colonial lands, the Italian colonial adventure in Africa was neither properly addressed in global narration of history, nor in the frame of Republican Italy after 1946, resulting the colonial history falling into national amnesia.

3. Inherited amnesia

In 2017 a large part of the city centre of Asmara was listed as UNESCO heritage, the description of its authenticity being:

“Asmara’s combination of innovative town planning and modernist architecture in an African context represents important and early developmental phases of town planning and architectural modernism that are still fully reflected in its layout, urban character and architecture.”⁸

The relation between modernisation and colonisation is not questioned in UNESCO’s motivation, although it is the main reason why this architecture is present in the city. We visited buildings constructed during the Italian colonial occupation between 1893 and 1941 in Asmara, some of which were built under the fascist period (1922-1941).

Citing the criteria: “The site has also preserved its historical, cultural, functional and architectural integrity with its elements largely intact and generally in relatively acceptable condition,” it is admitted that many of these buildings with their modern architecture have remained intact and frozen in time. This reinforces a narrative about the modern architecture that is quite detached from the lives of people, implying a desire to be modern at any cost. What does it mean to strive to be on the global map of cultural heritage, to have UNESCO mark a large part of a city centre that was built as a colonial device, where people were separated on the basis of race?

This separation is also very obvious in the motivation, which describes how “Asmara’s urban layout and character (...), taking into account local cultural conditions created by different ethnic and religious groups, and using the principle of zoning for achieving racial segregation and functional organisation, bears exceptional witness to the development of the new discipline of urban planning at the beginning of the 20th century and its application in an African context, to serve the Italian colonial agenda.”

The actual heritage we might talk about here is not the remnants of progressive architecture and urbanism from the colonial period, but rather the persistence of the value system from the same colonial centres. The discourse of human scale urbanism and architecture, where the colonial society relied on the racial segregation and exploitation of local labour forces, does not seem to come from historical distance or naivety, but rather from the colonial and imperial character of UNESCO itself.

This becomes strikingly visible when we perceive the infrastructure that enabled this very architecture to be erected in this area. The symbolic paradoxal invisibility of the whole network of roads and rail lines, although blatantly present and used today to a great extent, carries a much higher value in witnessing how the colonial project came to exist in its operative terms. Focusing on architecture and urbanism in the name of cultural and universal human values, as defined by UNESCO, actually promotes the (European) genius of creation that was enabled by the colonial apparatus - an action that neglects and subordinates the violence against and the resistance of the local population to the laying out of these ‘human scale’ colonial projects.

The colonising process is thus being efficiently framed and neutralised within the symbolic heritage and ‘universal values,’ in exchange for international recognition and access to

⁸ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1550/>

heritage funds, and subsequently incomes from the tourism industry. Therefore, we propose to counter this amnesia by turning the focus on the very infrastructure as heritage that conveys a much wider story of the relation between the colonial centre, local communities and the extent of its appropriation in the 'post-colonial' period.

4. Colonial infrastructure networks

The Italian occupation of the port of Massawa, in today's Eritrea, was part of a military plan to back up the British troops in Sudan, ensuring their primacy as well as production of cotton for their own economy. Pushing back the Egyptian officials from the port town, Massawa became an entry point for the Italian military troops in 1885. They were soon followed by families recruited by the Italian government as settler colonial groups, being trained to expand their presence mostly through agricultural activity. The aim was to start production to enable the auto-sufficiency of colonies and export of agricultural products to the motherland.

Side by side with military control, civic administration started to impose its governance through devious negotiations with the local population to nationalise the land through a legal framework in favour of Italy. Thus the infrastructure, still widely acclaimed to be bringing prosperity to the people of Eritrea, was starting to be laid in order to serve the advancement of Italian military troops inland, towards Ethiopia and Somalia, but also to provide the coming settlers with an environment for establishing the new Italian society. Roads and railways are perhaps one of the most visible and extensive infrastructural networks being built in that period that still persist to this day.

Following the progressive occupation of Eritrea, the colonial capital was shifted from Massawa to Asmara in 1897. There, the image of the Italian provincial centre was being built by constructing a new administrative network, medical institution, new elementary schools reserved only for Italians (with few exceptions), sewage and water systems, as well as a new marketplace. Massawa's infrastructure was on the other hand enhanced to serve its operative role as a strategic harbour for the import and export of goods and people. In Asmara, electrical illumination arrived in 1904, following the regulation plan in 1901 for controlling the ever-growing built environment.

In 1914, Italy asked Great Britain for help in gaining permission from Ethiopia for the construction of a railway from Eritrea to Lake Abaya (renamed Margarita by the Italians), and later Somalia, to ensure exclusive economic influence in the areas where the railway would go.

With the coming of the fascist political group into power in 1922, the colonial project and ideology included a social, political and economic plan that was supposed to give way to the new Italian man - a spirit that should be manifested through all spheres of the Italian empire - from economy to the physical realm⁹. Infrastructure in this sense was crucial, as the new man was the Italian architect and engineer, a builder of the road, the railway and all supporting networks to the military plan to conquer Ethiopia. Thus, civic life was always doubled with military presence. Public works, agriculture and civic organisation were all part of a plan to impose a racial superiority and racial separation conceived by the fascist elite, enforced violently and with bloodshed whenever the local population was not collaborating.

However, state-led colonisation was always accompanied by the private, capitalist ventures also being incentivised by the state, providing a more solid base for the plan of a new society. This is especially evident in Somalia, where the first envoy was a private capitalist society that was used as an example for other Italian agricultural workers who were supposed to produce food for the motherland. These private capitalist companies remain crucial in the continuation

⁹ As it can be read in the motivation of UNESCO-heritage Asmara is an "outstanding example of the transposition and materialization of ideas about planning in an African context".

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1550/>

of colonial relationships even after the fall of the Italian Empire, as many of those entrepreneurs will have their economic activities roughly unaltered and backed by the Italian state, even after 1947 when Ethiopia was recognised as an independent country by the new Italian democratic state.

Coming back to contemporary politics, the visit of the Italian prime minister to Addis and Asmara in 2019 - during which the delegation visited the AMCE-IVECO car factory (70% in Fiat ownership) in the Bole district of Addis Ababa - shows the contemporary routes of industry and capital which need to be overlaid with symbolic images of architectural heritage. For example, the relationship between the Fiat Tagliero building in Asmara and the ruined Bank of Italy in Masawa can be best understood through the contemporary infrastructure connecting them.

This kind of inequality is a way to ensure the future regulation of the neo-colonial infrastructure between Europe and Africa in the trade and war system. The architectural context then becomes the theatre of politics and business, which is a politics of excluding and exploiting the native population, resources and space of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

5. From the Eurafrican project to the European Union

The geopolitical concept of Eurafrica was one of the components of the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) by the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Peo Hansen and Stephan Jonsson investigate the Eurafrican project and demonstrate that despite the historical rupture caused by decolonisation, the geopolitical and colonial structure are still in existence nowadays¹⁰. During the negotiations for the Eurafrican project, the protagonists of the project were mostly the European political elite such as Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and Paolo d'Agostini Orsini di Camerota. Likewise, the Italian regime was also supporting the idea for the potential economic profits and a possible opportunity to send the most impoverished Italians to the so-called 'Dark Continent.' A possible explanation for European support for and relevance to the Eurafrica concept might be the self-evident European dependence on African resources (i.e. raw materials, gas, agriculture, etc...), even after decolonisation. Therefore, understanding the Eurafrican project contributes to illuminating the transition between colonialism, decolonisation, and post-colonialism, providing new insights into African and European relationships.

In February 1957, the European Economic Community - precursor to the EU - decided to invest millions of US dollars for the initial five years to create a 'common market' between the European empires and the African countries. We argue that the creation of a 'common market' between European and African lands could be instrumentalised by the colonial countries as a method to perpetuate their exploitation. In particular, these financial investments were a way to develop infrastructure and keep the so-called 'interdependence' between former colonial states and their colonies. During this period, colonial politics were shaping the infrastructure with the help of architects and engineers who were serving the colonial interests and the colonial network creation. The emerging treaties and associations during the 1950s lead us to a deeper understanding of the colonisers' profound theoretical and political expectations from the planned financial investments for infrastructure in Africa, by the use of the Eurafrican notion. In this respect, financial investments and conceptualisation of the African countries as a part of the EEC might be considered a way to attract African territories, generating a historical amnesia surrounding colonisation and oppression, and sustaining European profits.

The treaty of Rome was an important milestone in the Eurafrican project, having been created to unify European countries and African colonies and solidify the economic interdependence

¹⁰ Hansen, Peo and Jonsson, Stefan, "Eurafrica". Conclusion: Ending Colonialism by Securing its Continuation. In *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (pp. 239–278)

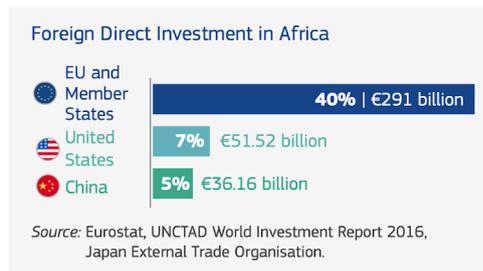
between them during the negotiations in 1956. Moreover, we can sum up by saying that the Treaty of Rome could be considered as a way to prevent the decolonisation and emancipation of African countries that should stay under European hegemony to secure future European exploitations. Besides, in common Western history, the main function of the Eurafrican project and its colonial designation was erased from the map once the wave of independence of new nation states in Africa started, but the colonial trade connections still exist. Eurafrica and the common market with African countries were only created to serve European interests in moving into a global economic order.

6. (Geo)politics of aid

As Hansen and Jonsson argued in their book, the disappearance of Eurafrica from the conscious history of European integration has helped foster amnesia and has also secured the continuation of colonial power structures. The colonial discourse has then been replaced by a so called 'partnership'¹¹ and has been legitimised under notions such as 'human rights' and it is moreover presented as a 'partnership of equals,' set to eliminate 'the traditional donor-recipient relationship' between the two continents¹². This is exactly how European investments in African countries are termed nowadays, as shown in the chart below¹³. But a closer look at the situation reveals that the so-called partnership is far from equal and African countries are not benefiting as much as is described¹⁴.

Tapping the full potential of economic integration and trade

The EU is Africa's biggest trading partner, accounting for **36% of Africa's trade in goods, worth €243.5 billion** in 2017. **The EU remains the most open market to African exports in the world.**



From the beginning of the formation of EEC, "aid was oriented toward financing of infrastructures and was markedly biased against industrialisation... so the association did not mark a major departure from the historical pattern of colonial development." Consequently "they [African territories] remain (...) what they were: agricultural appendages to Europe."¹⁵

Even though the EU's investment in the road from Massawa to Asmara is announced in the name of improvement of the condition of human rights, it at the same time turns a blind eye to this very aspect, being dependent on the forced labour that the government of Eritrea will most likely use for building this road.¹⁶

¹¹ See Federica Mogherini, the EU's chief diplomat stating "We are already strong political partners, the next step is to be true economic partners and deepen our trade and investment relationship." in September 2018: https://twitter.com/eu_eas/status/1040567579910320129. Note the hashtag #EUAfrica and how it rhymes with Eurafrica.

¹² Hansen, Peo and Jonsson, Stefan, "Eurafrica", p. 276.

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-factsheet-africa-europe_en.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-investment-in-africa-europe-racing-to-catch-up/a-45500068> and <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-africa-free-trade-will-create-more-imbalances-say-critics/a-45018168>

¹⁵ Hansen, Peo and Jonsson, Stefan, "Eurafrica", p. 274.

¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/world/europe/conscription-eritrea-eu.html>

Today, in the making of the new political constellations, it is interesting to look at the stance of European diplomacy, manifest in the visit of the Italian delegation being the first 'Western' one after the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2019.

The press release issued by the European Commission in February 2019, bearing the name 'Roads to Peace,' can be read as another attempt to establish the foremost extensive trade relationship between the countries. The fact that the EU will finance a new road from Massawa to the Ethiopian border resembles the older colonial organisations of capital and market. Reading statements such as "This will boost trade, consolidate stability, and have clear benefits for the citizens of both countries" and "...improvement of human rights... pursuing development cooperation to tackle root causes of poverty"¹⁷ with a decolonial gaze, it is obvious which side is dictating the direction and nature of development. Ignoring the fact that the root causes of poverty are often the mechanisms behind building infrastructure itself, once operated from the colonial, today from the neocolonial centres, what this discourse actually does is rewrite and negate the history of colonialism, feeding the structural amnesia.

7. Blindspots of the decolonial gaze

While the focus of our research has been colonial infrastructure and its reoccurrence today in different forms, it is important to point out the incomplete picture of the political processes, both locally and globally, that were shaping the region of the Horn of Africa after the period of Italian occupation. Moreover, the complex layering of local Eritrean struggles in relation to Ethiopian supremacy throughout the years needs also to be confronted with the British, American, Soviet, Israeli and UN power relations being enacted in order to pursue these governments' own interests in the region. The geopolitical situation of a country such as Eritrea, on the line of global maritime routes through the Red Sea, also needs to be considered when positioning international relations within local politics.

The complex situation in the aftermath of Italian colonial presence and the global political landscape of post WWII led into the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which is another main aspect into which we lack insight. The bullet marks in the building of the former Bank of Italy in Massawa witness a story that needs another gaze to understand and a wider approach to encircle.

Infrastructure plays a crucial role in imperialist politics, along with state loans and extraction of national resources in colonial territories. The mythical value of infrastructure as a symbol for progress and development has been mainly serving the economical and political interests of the colonial states and has also helped in justifying underlying violence.

Even though the historically written colonisation period is supposedly over in many parts of the world, we can agree that *coloniality*¹⁸ - the systemic matrix of power - has been happening parallel to the modernization process¹⁹.

We are now facing a number of new questions that outline those parts missing in our inquiry. How are we going to understand the transformations after decolonisation? What are the risks of maintaining a Western gaze in addressing these questions? What are the tools to understand without falling into the white-man's-burden trap?

How has infrastructure been appropriated after decolonisation? Has decolonisation ever happened in terms of sovereign and powerful nation states?

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_868

¹⁸ Definition of coloniality according to Anibal Quijano as "*the living legacy of colonialism in contemporary societies in the form of social discrimination that outlived formal colonialism and became integrated in succeeding social orders*"

¹⁹ See "The darker side of western modernity" by Walter Mingolo, 2011

The nation building process has seemingly worked as a tool for preserving global capitalist networks and power.

Can the impoverishment that so many formerly colonised countries are facing today be described as a result of shifting the colonial/imperial power from former coloniser states to today's corporative ways of colonising?

What does it mean to have a national heritage while those who inherit it are not included? What is the relationship of the inhabitants to these buildings and how are they reappropriating them?

The list of questions can continue, but the fact that complexities and unfolded histories are there leads us to a more cautious conclusion, remaining humble and open to other perspective and a broader insight.

8. Instead of conclusion

Throughout the development of this essay, starting from the journey and the visit to the architecture from the colonial era, to the understanding of the power structure that is ongoing and effectively making itself invisible and therefore persistent, one of our challenges has been in how to understand the complex situation whilst avoiding typical simplifications.

In brief, the colonial countries used infrastructure as an instrument to create the so-called (Western) civilisation myth during their invasions and conquests. But in fact, the colonial presence mainly served the extraction of goods, displacing cargo and capitalist ventures in the colonised territories. At the same time, construction of this infrastructure was used to pretentiously highlight so-called development and progress.

By celebrating imported 'modernisation', colonial powers have been trying to justify their hegemony and falsify their occupant history through maintaining structural amnesia in the narration thereof. In this study, we investigate the case of the road from Massawa to Asmara and Addis Ababa, and we question neocolonial infrastructural investments and their possible benefits to the former colonialists in favour of strengthening their hegemonic relations to Africa.

Interestingly, several colonial heritage sites have been identified as possessing universal humanitarian values by UNESCO, thus creating symbolic value. In the case of Asmara, this colonial heritage has obtained international recognition, funds and subsequently tourism. This highlights that while focusing on infrastructure we need to be aware of its relationship to colonialism, and thereby counter historical amnesia.

Amnesia is at the core of the official historical narrative (mechanisms) of coloniality. By questioning the construction of this narrative and turning back to facts, it is revealed that 'amnesia' works as a cover for quite accessible historical facts that bring out the suppressed local histories and struggles.

The way that we have broken down these colonial issues into manageable parts to understand them, should be seen as a way to reach different aspects of what is a many-sided complex entity. The risk of simplification is, however, always hanging over us, thus we want to acknowledge possible misformulations in our reasoning.

Every narrative serves specific interests, and by questioning and re-searching beyond and beneath it, the likelihood of coming across changes to the 'story' is quite high. The story of post-colonial relationships goes beyond the simple good-evil and master-slave dichotomy, and that is the main challenge while constructing new narratives. The need for another paradigm to re-think and re-narrate is then even more urgent.