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# Aspirations and Contradictions in Shaping a Cosmopolitan Africa: Arturo Mezzedimi in Imperial Ethiopia

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In 1940 Arturo Mezzedimi, an 18-year-old student from the small village of Poggibonsi near Siena, embarked with his family on a boat in Naples to visit his father, a farmer and entrepreneur living in Asmara, Eritrea.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five years later, on February 4, 1965, the emperor Haile Selassie would grant him the highest medal of the Ethiopian Empire in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II on the occasion of the opening of Addis Ababa's City Hall.<sup>2</sup> What was intended as a short trip was extended by approximately 35 years, becoming the adventure of a lifetime and a remarkable professional trajectory.

In February 1941 British and French forces defeated the fascist army in the Battle of Keren, and on May 8, 1941, Amedeo di Savoia surrendered at Amba Alagi: Italian rule on the Horn of Africa had come to an end.<sup>3</sup> Eritrea became a British protectorate, and Mezzedimi, along with his entire family, was blocked on African soil in the city of Asmara. In those years Asmara, the capital of Italian Eritrea, had 98,000 inhabitants—53,000 of whom were Italian settlers—and was one of the biggest cities of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>4</sup> Mezzedimi completed his education and began his career in the cradle of these wealthy and active Italian communities, graduating as a technical surveyor from the Istituto Tecnico per Geometri Vittorio Bottego

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1 A photo in Arturo Mezzedimi's personal archive in Rome shows the family in Naples on the day of their departure. Unfortunately the image is not dated. I was able to confirm through interviews with relatives that the year was 1938. All the information presented in this paper is derived from archival materials and interviews with the Mezzedimi family, whom I would like to warmly thank, in particular Arturo's niece and nephew Martha and Marcello.

2 Giuseppe FARACI, "Gli italiani in Etiopia," *Touring Club Italiano*, April 1966, p. 303-314.

3 The Italian presence in Eritrea began in 1879 when Giuseppe Sapeto formalized the acquisition of Assab Bay. In 1890 Eritrea was officially declared an Italian colony. Between 1935 and 1936 fascist Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia with a gruesome war, and the two territories were united into the Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI). In 1941 the battles of Keren and Amba Alagi confirmed British victory and the end of the AOI. For a complete history, see Angelo DEL BOCA, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. II - La conquista dell'Impero*, Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1979; Angelo DEL BOCA, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. III - La caduta dell'Impero*, Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1982.

4 Data on the population was gathered in CONSOCIAZIONE TURISTICA ITALIANA, *Guida d'Italia, Africa Orientale Italiana*, Milan: Consociazione Turistica Italiana, 1938, p. 199. In comparison with other main African cities, Dakar, the biggest French city in the sub-Saharan area, had 70,000 inhabitants; Leopoldville, the capital of Belgian Congo, 40,000; while Ouagadougou and Porto Novo had fewer than 25,000.

138 | before beginning work as a graphic designer and painter of advertising signs.<sup>5</sup> The strong Italian community constituted a fertile ground and, despite turbulent global political events, Asmara's dynamic entrepreneurial environment allowed Mezzedimi to overcome initial economic difficulties and establish himself as an independent designer fully versed in the technical and functional implications of the process of conception and construction of a building.

## Asmara, a Cosmopolitan Apprenticeship

1940s Asmara was *de facto* an Italian city even under British occupation. The racial segregation between Europeans and Africans, first implemented by Giuseppe Salvago Raggi in 1908<sup>6</sup> and further discussed during the 1937 Congresso di urbanistica coloniale was never fully effective even in Vittorio Cafiero's 1939 plan.<sup>7</sup> Few of the 17,000 Italians who remained in Eritrea under British occupation identified with the residues of fascism. Few accepted the provocative British propaganda, which, while recognizing Asmara's measured grandeur, deplored the "super-fascist" appearance of the city and the state of poverty that the war had imposed on native populations; and many—almost all—continued the controversial but fruitful work of collaboration that led Asmara to be an Italian city with a cosmopolitan vocation.<sup>8</sup> Between 1941 and 1950, when Eritrea was placed under control of the United Nations, thereby linking Eritrea and Ethiopia through a loose federal structure under the sovereignty of the emperor, Asmara continued its arc of pre-war economic growth, seeing the creation, among others, of the Magnotti brothers' nail factory, the Salumificio Torinese, the IVA Asmara Wine Industry, the IFMA Matches Industry Asmara, the PRODEMAR industry for the production of pearl buttons, and the engineer Carlo Tabacchi's Ceramic industry.<sup>9</sup>

The British mandate, which left the Italians in control of civil administration, laid the foundations for a transition based on the continuity of relations between former colonizers and the colonized. This attitude, despite some underlying contradictions,<sup>10</sup> allowed for the

5 Marcello Mezzedimi, from an interview conducted by the author and Filippo De Dominicis in Milan, September 2015. Mezzedimi, throughout his career, personally designed all the signs on his construction sites. An example can be found in the Getty Images Archive at [www.gettyimages.it/detail/fotografie-di-cronaca/ethiopian-people-walking-near-the-building-site-fotografie-di-cronaca/152216889](http://www.gettyimages.it/detail/fotografie-di-cronaca/ethiopian-people-walking-near-the-building-site-fotografie-di-cronaca/152216889). Accessed October 18, 2016.

6 Salvago Raggi's plan is analyzed in Giulia BARRERA, Alessandro TRIULZI and Gabriel TZEGGAI, *Asmara Architettura e pianificazione urbana nei fondi dell'IsIAO*, Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2008, p. 12-17.

7 The first Congresso Nazionale di Urbanistica was held in Rome, in the Palazzo della Sapienza, on the April 5-7, 1937, and was organized by the Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica under the presidency of Giuseppe Bottai, minister of education. The first topic discussed was colonial urbanism. Giuliano GRESLERI, "1936-1940: programma e strategia delle città imperiali," in Giuliano GRESLERI, Pier Giorgio MASSARETTI and Stefano ZAGNONI (eds.), *Architettura italiana d'oltremare 1870-1940*, Venice: Marsilio, 1993, p. 179-201.

8 For a deeper understanding of the complex history of post-war Asmara see Angelo DEL BOCA, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale - IV. Nostalgia delle colonie*, Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1984, p. 111-124.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

10 Like the strikes and clashes of 1943, which involved workers from Eritrean and Italian companies. See Edward DENISON, *Asmara, Africa's Secret Modernist City*, London: Merrell, 2003.



Figure 1: Anonymous, Bahobesci Building in Asmara, 1954.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).

growth of a progressive and independent cosmopolitan middle class. To understand the different realities that constituted the postcolonial transition, it is enough to note the names of Mezzedimi's clients in Asmara: Bahobesci, Mingardi, Ceci, Trinci, Babatin, Becchio, Bion, Moledina, Sciausc, Beshir, Kahjee Dossa, Patrignani, Mutahar Said, and Shoa Benin<sup>11</sup>—entrepreneurs from Italy, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Palestine, and the Gulf States who invested in the construction of the city and entrusted Mezzedimi with representing their social status. A building commissioned by the Bahobesci<sup>12</sup> family in 1953 shows Mezzedimi's willingness to shape Asmara post-war cosmopolitan conditions: the large building comprises six floors with a long facade composed of a multitude of loggias, balconies, terraces, and overhangs. Technological appropriateness, the savvy distribution of spaces, and urban traditions meet in the search for a new building type, the high-density housing block, which was intended as a tool for the development of a fully modern city.

The unique circumstances of the Eritrean capital, paradoxically, partially solved the contradiction inherent to any colonial city. The similar conditions faced by the Italian and Eritrean populations—both immigrated from the motherland or from the surrounding countryside—their numerical equivalence, and the necessity for collaboration allowed for the creation of a bourgeois society. The racial segregation, despite a clear imbalance in the

11 The names of the clients are taken from the list compiled by Mezzedimi on the occasion of the exhibition of his work at the Accademia d'Egitto in Rome in 2006. The same list has been used as a starting point to compile a list of the documented projects in Ethiopia and Eritrea that constitutes the appendix of the book Benno ALBRECHT, Filippo DE DOMINICIS and Jacopo GALLI, *Arturo Mezzedimi, Architetto della Superproduzione*, Rimini: Guaraldi, 2015.

12 The Bahobesci Building, from 1953, was the first building designed and constructed by Mezzedimi with the engineer Mario Fanano, one of his partners throughout the remainder of his career.

140 | level of planning of different parts of the city, never fully led to physical separation. Asmara, in spite of fascist planning tools, grew almost naturally from a village to a city with its workers' residences, mixed-use zones, commercial areas, and dwellings, openly challenging any attempt at a clear racial separation. This physical proximity soon transformed into social promiscuity, with a shy but growing cosmopolitanism<sup>13</sup> that made Asmara a unique case in the complex framework of colonial Africa. If, as Anthony King has argued, the colonial city is characterized by a physical apartheid between different ethnic, social, and cultural groups,<sup>14</sup> Asmara never fully reached this condition. In 1940, at Mezzedimi's arrival, as well as during the following years, Asmara was, in the words of its own inhabitants, a city with "a lot of traffic, shops and everything we could possibly want [...] we lived very well, it was a big town with many cinemas and restaurants; it was simply a beautiful city, populated by Italians, Africans and mix-raced."<sup>15</sup>

## Piscina Mingardi, the Debut

Mezzedimi perfectly personified the cosmopolitan spirit of the city and enjoyed a level of wealth that was impossible on a European continent reduced to rubble. As a young self-taught professional Mezzedimi fully exploited the vibrant life of the city, producing designs for dwellings, villas, factories, shops, and commercial spaces at an impressive rate. The architectural concepts displayed in these buildings show a personal vocabulary of Italian rationalism learned mainly from the few architectural journals and books available in Africa, mixed with influences from Arab and Ethiopian architecture.<sup>16</sup>

At the age of 22 Mezzedimi embarked on his first major project: the Mingardi swimming pool, a leisure building constructed in the middle of World War II that showed the deep distance—physical and emotional—from the conflict. The construction was a complex architectural and technical work that required a long series of design tests through which the architect perfected distribution patterns and gradually calibrated technical solutions in keeping with available materials and labor. In doing so he built a solid relationship between the modern leisure building and the city, in spatial and cultural terms, giving architecture a public character that made it an integral part of the urban landscape.<sup>17</sup> From the first solutions, including a long curtain facade, to the complex volumetric configuration that characterizes the final construction, Mezzedimi undertook a process of modifying and

13 Mia FULLER, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

14 Anthony KING, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment*, London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.

15 Quoted in Maristella CASCIATO, "Da campo militare a capitale: Asmara colonia italiana e oltre," *Incontri. Rivista Europea di Studi Italiani*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2013, p. 44-57.

16 Casa Sciausc, built between 1946 and 1947, clearly shows this contamination process with an Arab Mashrabiya re-proposed within a rationalist architectural language and the contemporary use of traditional materials such as perforated wooden panels and modern ones such as structural concrete.

17 Filippo DE DOMINICIS, "Il razionalismo efficace di Arturo Mezzedimi," in Benno ALBRECHT, Filippo DE DOMINICIS and Jacopo GALLI, *Arturo Mezzedimi, op. cit.* (note 11), p. 116-125.



Figure 2: Anonymous, Piscina Mingardi in Asmara, 1945.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).

shaping the building. As the technical data were integrated into the architectural discourse,<sup>18</sup> it was gradually pared down to the essential elements, and the hierarchy of the parts that made up the whole became progressively clearer. The arrangement of the pool, the roof, the distinction between main spaces and service areas, the search for different solutions for the corner, the main prospect and the shading device on the terrace are the key steps through which the architect formed his design.

On the morning of September 2, 1945, while the emperor of Japan was signing the end of World War II, Asmara's entire Italian community was gathered around Mezzedimi and Ines Mingardi, the owner of the pool, for the inauguration of a building considered of great interest for the entire population.<sup>19</sup> The press gave news of the construction of the building, focusing on the high quality of the mechanical and technical characteristics: the size of the pool (which, at 9 x 20 meters, was considered exceptional given the confined space and irregularity of the area) and the number of services that the designers had succeeded in building. Great importance was assigned to the mechanisms that allowed the continuous rotation of the water, completely filtered twice a day.<sup>20</sup>

18 Mezzedimi worked alongside the best Italian companies permanently present in Eritrea: the concrete and steel structures were entrusted to Vincenzo Costa Costruzioni Metalliche, founded in 1936 and still active in Asmara, while the electrical system, "which meets the most modern standards," was assigned to the Società Anonima Ingegneri Lucini e Ziliani. Angelo DEL BOCA, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. IV – Nostalgia delle Colonie*, op. cit. (note 8).

19 Filippo DE DOMINICIS, "Piscina Mingardi Asmara 1944-1945," in Benno ALBRECHT, Filippo DE DOMINICIS and Jacopo GALLI, *Arturo Mezzedimi*, op. cit. (note 11), p. 28-61.

20 Information on the Piscina Mingardi is taken from paper cuttings kept in Mezzedimi's personal archive: "Realizzazioni Eritree," *Il Quotidiano Eritreo*, July 27, 1945; "Realizzazioni Asmarine. La nuova piscina coperta," *Il Quotidiano Eritreo*, August 9, 1945; "La prossima inaugurazione della piscina coperta," *Il Quotidiano Eritreo*, September 10, 1945; "Stile Libero," *Il Lunedì dell'Eritrea*, September 10, 1945; "La piscina Mingardi, sede adeguata della Rari Nantes Eritrea," *Il Quotidiano Eritreo*, September 4, 1948.



142 | Figure 3: Anonymous, Piscina Mingardi in Asmara, 1945.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



During this apprenticeship phase in Asmara Mezzedimi was mainly engaged in private commissions and, although he was not trained as an architect, he worked essentially alone, dealing with the architectural design as well as structural calculations and cooperating with external technicians only in rare cases, often for the preparation of in-depth design of mechanical systems. The ongoing, self-administered professional training that the architect pursued was indispensable in searching for the most effective solutions, and these were never realized in a uniform language: each construction can be recognized only from the special domestic and urban conditions for which it was designed and built. Mezzedimi searched for recognition of his work in his home country. In a 1949 issue of *Domus* the pool was described as “a swimming pool built in Asmara [...] a remarkable construction obtained with local materials and work force.” A thank-you note personally signed by the editor Gio Ponti confirms his appreciation of Mezzedimi’s work.<sup>21</sup>

## Wrapping the Emperor’s Gifts

The initial contact between Mezzedimi and the emperor Haile Selassie is yet to be fully disclosed. Angelo Del Boca, the most important historian of Italian colonialism and post-war Ethiopia, contended that the lack of technical experts in the 1950s must have made it simple for a young and talented architect living in Asmara to be introduced at the imperial Ghebbi.<sup>22</sup> Haile Selassie fully understood the importance of the Italian community in the modernization of his nation, so much so that he granted personal protection to the

<sup>21</sup> “Una piscina ad Asmara,” *Domus*, vol. 2, no. 233, 1949, p. 47. Gio Ponti’s letter is dated April 26, 1948.

<sup>22</sup> Angelo Del Boca from an interview conducted by the author and Daniela Ruggeri in Turin, July 2015.

Figure 4: Anonymous, Mosque in Agordat, 1958.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



community from any harm caused by retaliation after the end of the fascist occupation.<sup>23</sup> The strong relationship that Mezzedimi forged with Haile Selassie from the early 1950s was a turning point in his career, affording him the possibility of increasing the quantity and quality of his work. Mezzedimi's designs functioned as a key element in Haile Selassie's politics towards Eritrea throughout the 1950s. In 1950 the United Nations had approved a federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea that had effectively made the second a colony of the first.<sup>24</sup> Haile Selassie considered Eritrea to be an essential element of his empire, allowing him to break Ethiopia's landlocked condition, seen as an obstacle to economic growth. In order to contain social unrest, he constructed a series of buildings in Asmara, Massawa, and Assab, the main Eritrean cities, and to a lesser extent in Ethiopian rural areas.

Among Mezzedimi's impressive list of constructions one may include "regime gifts": the Menen Hospital in Asmara, the Navy Academy in Assab, the St. Mariam church in Massawa, the St. Stephanos church in Assab, the Mosque in Agordat, the General Hospital in Assab, the General Hospital in Massawa, the Giyorgis Bete church in Adi Ugri, and the St. Michele church in Asmara.<sup>25</sup> All of these buildings were constructed between 1953 and 1958 alongside numerous other private and public designs. In this period Mezzedimi partially

<sup>23</sup> This concept is expressed by Haile Selassie in his speech to the population of Addis Ababa on the day of his return from exile, May 5, 1941. Angelo DEL BOCA, *Il Negus, vita e morte dell'ultimo re dei re*, Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> The details of Eritrea's association with Ethiopia were established by the UN General Assembly Resolution 390A (V) of December 2, 1950. Eritrea and Ethiopia were linked through a loose federal structure. Eritrea was to have its own administrative and judicial structure and control over its domestic affairs. From the start of the federation, however, Haile Selassie attempted to undercut Eritrea's independent status, a policy that alienated many Eritreans. Bereket SELASSIE, *Eritrea and the United Nations and Other Essays*, Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> Many of these buildings are included in an article present in Mezzedimi's personal archive and titled "Imperial Gifts to Eritrea." The article is drafted in English (for an international audience), Amharic (the Ethiopian official language) and Italian (for the important Italian community). Showing to some extent the inner contradictions of Haile Selassie's politics, the document is not translated into Arabic, the main language spoken in Eritrea.



144 | challenged his previous attachment to rationalism, expressing an unprecedented freedom that resulted in a entirely personal language. The radically different topographic conditions and the public importance of each project did not allow for a process of standardization, but called instead for a search for an architectural expression adapted to specific functional and climatic conditions.

Religious buildings are the greatest example of this approach. Religion has been a key element in the millennial history of Ethiopia, and the importance of the Coptic church, and of its relationship to and conflicts with Muslim minorities, should not be underestimated. Haile Selassie, being the emperor, was also the head of the Coptic church<sup>26</sup> and had to mediate his decisions through a complex system of relationships, negotiations, and concessions.<sup>27</sup> Mezzedimi, utterly charmed by Haile Selassie and unable to see the inherent contradictions in his political decisions, stated, “within the framework of a wise ecumenical policy, I understand that [Haile Selassie] has always respected other faiths, while maintaining the freedom of religion throughout the country, even when the different populations harbored among them an armed peace. In the early years of Ethiopian presence in Eritrea, among the works that we can label as ‘regime gifts,’ he promoted and donated three mosques including two important ones in Massawa and Agordat. Basically [Haile Selassie] had, regarding worship, a complacent and prodigal attitude.”<sup>28</sup>

Among Mezzedimi’s first religious buildings, the mosque in Massawa was constructed in 1952 with a traditional spatial configuration based on the Ottoman typology: a central dome supported by coupled pillars. The dome was positioned on three gigantic steps, each one with semicircular windows closed with wooden grids. Although some innovations were tested, particularly the use of modern construction materials, the final shaping of the building shows a traditional flavor.<sup>29</sup> Three years later Mezzedimi had the chance to build another mosque in Agordat, intended for 1,500 worshipers and with the highest minaret on the Horn of Africa. The architect made use of his experience with the Massawa mosque, re-proposing the central dome (this time with a Moorish shape) but placing it on an octagonal tholobate with horizontally striped windows covered with wooden grids. The ground floor of the building shows an interesting modern evolution and is shaped like an enormous pattern of columns, with the diaphragm between internal and external spaces acting as a luminous element that fills the spaces between bold lancet arches. The arches lose

26 During his childhood, in Harar, Haile Selassie (then Tafari Makonnen) was raised by the Catholic bishop André Jarousseau. Throughout his life Haile Selassie was accused of secretly being a converted Catholic even though Jarousseau himself strongly opposed these insinuations. Angelo DEL BOCA, *Il Negus, op. cit.* (note 23), p. 25.

27 A complete overview of the complex relationships between the imperial power and the Coptic church transcends the scope of this paper. For additional information, see Richard PANKHURST, *Ethiopians. A History*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998; Harold MARCUS, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 114. Gizachew TIRUNEH, *The Rise and Fall of the Solomonic Dynasty*, Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publisher, 2015.

28 Arturo MEZZEDIMI, “Hailé Selassié I: una testimonianza per la rivalutazione,” *Studi Piacentini*, no. 12, 1992, p. 187-188.

29 Daniela RUGGERI, “Moschea Massaua 1952-1953,” in Benno ALBRECHT, Filippo DE DOMINICIS and Jacopo GALLI, *Arturo Mezzedimi, op. cit.* (note 11), p. 126-131.

Figure 5: Anonymous, Coptic Church in Debra Sina, 1955.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



their original constructive function and are intended as a matrix of concrete components that assume a three-dimensional structural value. The Agordat building was described in the *Quotidiano Eritreo* as follows: “although of considerable size, 52 x 40 meters, the mosque is a nimble building and has two dominant themes: the octagon and the arch. His hundred or more columns are faceted. But what makes the temple lines harmonious is the pattern of the arches that appears anywhere [...] arches that seem more agile because pierced. [...] Depending on your location the viewer sees these arches, now on the run, now cross, now as a tunnel, now like the branches of a forest. The functional concept of the mosque is absolutely new [...] it is raised from the ground to the height of a man, so the mass of the faithful, who will be covered but not closed, will be far from the eyes of the profane.”<sup>30</sup>

Mezzedimi also had the chance to construct numerous churches, from his homage to Antonio Sant’Elia in the temple of Giyorgis Bete in Adi Ugri to the pinnacle structure of the La Salle Chapel in Asmara, from the reinterpretation of traditional stonework in the Cemetery Chapel in Asmara to the classicist revival of St. Stephanos in Assab. One of the most interesting buildings, however, is the small Coptic church in the village of Debra Sina, a remote monastery on the mountain outskirts of Addis Ababa. Here Mezzedimi faced, both physically and conceptually, one of the wonders of Ethiopian millennial culture, the astonishing rock-hewn churches that historians date back as far as the 2nd century AD and that are scattered throughout the nation. The zone of Lalibela, on the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, is the most renowned, but rock-hewn churches can be found in the Tigray region, near Aksum, in the zone east of Keren near Goba, and in the Bale region more than 1,600 kilometers south of Lalibela.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Debra Sina the church, intended as a chapel for a yearly pilgrimage, is a small volume carved inside a spherical rock. The new building designed by Mezzedimi is a pure cube in front of the existing chapel, built, due to

30 “Fra tre mesi sarà inaugurata la moschea di Agordat,” *Il Quotidiano Eritreo*, April 25, 1957.

31 For a discussion on the reasons for the construction of rock-hewn churches and their architectural features see Richard PANKHURST, *Ethiopians. A History*, op. cit. (note 27), p. 54-59. Ruth PLANT, *Architecture of the Tigre, Ethiopia*, London: Ravens Educational and Development Studies, 1985.

146 | the lack of infrastructural connections, entirely in stone carved from the nearby mountains. The modern building does not show any material discontinuity with the surroundings; it is the treatment of the material that differentiates the built structure from its context: the polish of the stone blocks gives the new church a perfectly smooth surface that contrasts with the hewn stone of the chapel, imperfect and wrinkled. The different treatment is used to distinguish the two volumes without creating a clear break: the two chapels are, in this way, dimensionally comparable, establishing a close relationship between the ancient sphere and the modern cube.<sup>32</sup>

With this building Mezzedimi shows a deep understanding of and appreciation for his adoptive country's traditional architecture. In Debra Sina, the new building is shaped spatially as a completion of the existing building. Reading the two elements as a single sequence of spaces, it is possible to identify the exonarthex, with two misaligned entrance doors, the main hypostyle hall with a square plan, and finally the old chapel, which can be accessed through a filter space. The sequence is the same as in Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum and the temple in Yeha: in this building the tripartite scheme is developed through a short narthex (*quene mahlēṭ*), followed by a hypostyle room (*queddest*) in front of a deep altar (*maqdas*).<sup>33</sup> Mezzedimi's extensive travels allowed him to get to know his adoptive nation and were also an opportunity to deepen his study of traditional sacred buildings. He closely observed the many examples scattered throughout the immense imperial territory.<sup>34</sup> The sum of Mezzedimi's projects in the Eritrean territory shows that the only possible rule regarding his architectural choices is the absence of fixed rules. Uniqueness becomes the rule. His production of sacred buildings, in particular, is marked by only a few repeated elements, while their diversity is constant, dictated from time to time by the urban context, environmental conditions, or specific ceremonial needs.

## Africa Hall, the Pan-African Dream

In 1958 Mezzedimi was called urgently to the imperial Ghebbi in Addis Ababa by Haile Selassie, who exposed his latest request; the construction, within a year, of the African headquarters of the United Nations in Addis Ababa: the Africa Hall. Mezzedimi immediately understood the tremendous scope of his task and decided to abandon his beloved Asmara and move definitively, with his staff, to Addis Ababa. Haile Selassie's decision to host the United Nations was likely triggered by the enthusiast reports brought by his son Sahle Selassie<sup>35</sup> of the first "All-African Peoples' Conference" organized in Accra by Ghana's first

32 Daniela RUGGERI, "Chiesa Copta Debra Sina 1954-1955," in Benno ALBRECHT, Filippo DE DOMINICIS and Jacopo GALLI, *Arturo Mezzedimi, op. cit.* (note 11), p. 132-137.

33 The terms illustrating Debra Sina church are taken from the descriptions presented in Mario DI SALVO, *Chiese d'Etiopia: il monastero di Narga Sellase*, Milan: Skira, 1999.

34 A picture in Mezzedimi's archive shows a young Arturo in front of the obelisks in Aksum with a group of friends. As testified by interviews with different relatives, the wealth of the family and the security of the zone throughout the 1940s and 1950s allowed Mezzedimi to explore the Ethiopian and Eritrean territory.

35 Prince Sahle Selassie (1931-1962) was the youngest child of Emperor Haile Selassie and Empress Menen Asfaw. He was considered to be the possible heir of the crown (the process of passage of power in the Ethiopian dynasty is

Figure 6: Anonymous, Africa Hall in Addis Ababa, 1963.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



president and Pan-African leader Kwame Nkrumah.<sup>36</sup> The Ethiopian imperial dynasty had for centuries lived in a semi-isolated condition favored by the geographical features of its territory, minimizing any direct contact with other African cultures: “Ethiopia is supposedly located in the wrong place, Ethiopia is in Africa but not of Africa.”<sup>37</sup> Haile Selassie, however, understood the key historical moment that African independence movements were playing in the global scenario of decolonization and wanted Ethiopia, being in a strong position as the only African state without a long colonial occupation, to play an active role in this historical process.

Paradoxically Pan-Africanism, a movement born in the cosmopolitan circuits of the black diaspora and intended as a tool for global liberation of the “wretched of the earth,”<sup>38</sup> needed as a representative the elder heir of a biblical dynasty.<sup>39</sup> Nkrumah saw in Haile Selassie the icon of his regional and cosmopolitan political project. Ethiopian resistance to fascist Italy led Jomo Kenyatta to affirm, “Ethiopians are the sole remaining pride of African and Negro

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a complex system that does not grant to the sons of the Emperor the right to rule) and was often chosen by Haile Selassie to represent him outside the country.

36 Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972) led Ghana to independence from Britain in 1957 and served as its first prime minister and president. An influential advocate of Pan-Africanism, he was a founding member of the Organization of African Unity. Ama BINEY, *The Political and Social Thought of Kwame Nkrumah*, New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. Henry Templer ALEXANDER, *African Tightrope: My Two years as Nkrumah’s Chief of Staff*, London: Pall Mall Press, 1965. Henry BRETTON, *The Rise and Fall of Kwame Nkrumah: A Study of Personal Rule in Africa*, New York, NY: Praeger, 1966.

37 Teshale TIBEBU, “Ethiopia the ‘Anomaly’ and ‘Paradox’ Of Africa,” *Journal of Black Studies*, no. 26, 1996, p. 428.

38 The “wretched of the earth” is the popular definition, coined by Franz Fanon, of protagonists in the struggle for African decolonization. Frantz FANON, *Les Damnés de la terre*, Paris: F. Maspero, 1961.

39 The former ruling Imperial House of the Ethiopian Empire, known as the House of Solomon, claims a patrilineal descent from Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba. Tradition asserts that the Queen gave birth to Menelik I after her biblically described visit to Solomon in Jerusalem. The dynasty, a bastion of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, is considered to have ruled Ethiopia from the tenth century BC.

148 | in all parts of the world,” while for Daniel Thwaite Ethiopia was the “shrine enclosing the impregnable rock of black resistance against white invasion, a living symbol, an incarnation of African independence.”<sup>40</sup>

Haile Selassie strongly believed in the importance of cosmopolitan international organizations. His tragic 1936 “Appeal to the League of Nations” in Geneva was the first speech by a head of state proclaimed before this body, while in 1961 he gave a speech at the conference of the Non-Aligned Movement and in 1963 at the United Nations. During the 1961 conference he stated, “we (Africans) can serve as the collective conscience of the world,”<sup>41</sup> advocating the newly born, independent postcolonial nations as the holders of a new approach towards modernity: a cosmopolitan vision that granted equal rights to all mankind and stressed the necessity of sharing common resources and technological development.<sup>42</sup> The construction of the Africa Hall was, in a perhaps exaggeratedly optimistic vision, a tool intended to establish Addis Ababa as Africa’s moral capital,<sup>43</sup> embodying Haile Selassie’s modernization dreams for the advancement of his country and of the whole continent, with the final goal of developing “an African modern identity and at the same time a modern Africanity.”<sup>44</sup>

The Negus showed a constant fascination for Addis Ababa, the best of Ethiopia in its most traditional and genuine version, but also for Europe, a very different world of which he sensed not the superiority but the indispensable technical complementarity. The objective of Haile Selassie’s life, largely unsuccessful, “was to harmonize Ethiopian provincialism with European modernism.”<sup>45</sup> Architecture in Africa became one of the tools of this cross-pollination process. The fact that it has long been entrusted to global experts, such as Mezzedimi, emphasizes not only the technical limitations of much of the continent but also its ability to absorb and internalize foreign influences, the prevalence of a cosmopolitan look, and the resilience of local traditions. The history of modern architecture in Africa, in particular in the work of Mezzedimi, should be read not as a mere technical or cultural fact but as a precise political act in favor of the construction of a continent fully expressing its vitality in terms of development. The continent was aptly described by an Italian journalist at the opening of the Africa Hall as having “its feet in the Neolithic age and its head in the nuclear one.”<sup>46</sup>

40 Kenyatta and Thwaite are quoted in S.K.B. ASANTE, *Pan-African Protest: West Africa and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934-1941*, London: Longman, 1977, p. 16-17.

41 Haile SELASSIE, “Speech to the Conference of Non-Aligned Movement,” Belgrade, 1961. Full text: [www.blackking.net/haile%20selassie%2007e.htm](http://www.blackking.net/haile%20selassie%2007e.htm). The full text of Haile SELASSIE, “Appeal to the League of Nations,” Geneva, 1936, can be found at [http://astro.temple.edu/~rimmerma/appeal\\_to\\_the\\_league\\_of\\_nations\\_.htm](http://astro.temple.edu/~rimmerma/appeal_to_the_league_of_nations_.htm). Accessed October 29, 2016, while Haile SELASSIE, “Address to the United Nations,” New York, 1963, can be found at [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Haile\\_Selassie%27s\\_address\\_to\\_the\\_United\\_Nations,\\_1963](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Haile_Selassie%27s_address_to_the_United_Nations,_1963).

42 Sunil AMRITH, “Asian internationalism: Bandung’s echo in a colonial metropolis,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2005, p. 557-569.

43 Enrico MANIA, “Benevenuti nella capitale morale dell’Africa”, *Sestante*, July-August 1965, p. 101-109.

44 Joseph KI-ZERBO, *Repères sur l’Afrique*, Dakar: Panafrica, Silex and Nouvelles du Sud, 2008, p. 44.

45 Angelo DEL BOCA, *Il Negus*, op. cit. (note 23), p. 280.

46 Livio PESCE, “In Africa Finisce l’era dei Tam Tam,” *Epoca*, June 2, 1963.



Figure 7: Anonymous, Assembly Hall of the Africa Hall in Addis Ababa, 1963. Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



Mezzedimi, throughout all of 1958, worked on the design of the Africa Hall and had the chance to visit New York, Paris, Rome, and Strasburg in order to study the headquarters of the main international organizations. The Africa Hall inscribed Mezzedimi in the exclusive club of designers that, within the same time frame, built the centers of global power: Oscar Niemeyer (with Le Corbusier) completed the United Nations building in New York in 1950; Mario Ridolfi and Vittorio Cafiero the FAO building in Rome in 1952; Marcel Breuer, Bernard Zehrfuss, and Pier Luigi Nervi the UNESCO building in Paris in 1958. The process of ideation and development of the building was not easy. In an interview in 1979 Mezzedimi recalls, “seven times the terrain on which I would have to build the building was changed and seven times I was forced to change my design. Finally, the Minister of Public Works, Mangascià Sioum only granted me 91 days to present the complete project for the international tender. So, for 91 days, I worked from 9 am to 4 am.”<sup>47</sup> Haile Selassie personally oversaw construction as it progressed, visiting the final construction site along Jubilee Road, not far from the imperial Ghebbi, almost every night. The final design was heavily influenced by the selection of a design area on a ridge along the monumental axis of Jubilee Road, requiring that the assembly hall be positioned directly on the road and the office building at the rear, as an ideal scenic background. The final design emphasizes the importance of the dome of the assembly hall, visible from all the offices, and of the wide, convex facade in constant visual dialogue with the eucalyptus forest that surrounds and envelops Addis Ababa.<sup>48</sup> The building measures 75,000 cubic meters and includes 260 offices, an assembly hall with 800 seats in simultaneous translation, six rooms for committees from 30 to 60 seats, a library, permanent exhibition rooms, party rooms, a

47 Angelo DEL BOCA, *Il Negus*, *op. cit.* (note 23), p. 321.

48 The planting of eucalyptus was of crucial importance in the history of Addis Ababa. The town’s shortage of wood had been so acute that Menilek, Haile Selassie’s predecessor, in 1900, had actually envisaged abandoning the capital. The eucalyptus trees imported from Australia, however, grew so fast that the Emperor abandoned the plan the following year. Richard PANKHURST, “A History of Early Twentieth Century Ethiopia. The Eucalyptus Tree, and Ethiopia’s First Modern Schools and Hospitals,” *LinkEthiopia*, 2015.

150 | foyer with a bar for the public, galleries for sightseeing, and rooms for banks, airline offices, and tourist companies.<sup>49</sup>

The assembly hall, the heart of the project, whose space was conceived as a large representation of the African continent to the whole world, is shaped with a circular plan open at one side with a curvilinear trapezoid. Volumetrically it is a truncated cone, with two upper galleries dedicated to the public and reporters, and a third isolated gallery for special guests. The circular roof of the assembly hall, supported by small metal pillars that create a suspended effect, is particularly important in terms of aesthetics and climate comfort and is shaped like a gigantic truss whose every inclination is calculated as a function of solar reflection, the placement of artificial lighting, and the need for natural ventilation. Climate comfort became one of the main concerns shaping design decisions, reflecting the technical problem of building a high-occupation room in a tropical climate. Mezzedimi understood the impatience and stress of delegates forced to endure long sessions indoors in a warm and humid climate and decided to remedy this by breaking the strict division between interior and exterior spaces, thereby not clearly limiting the volume of the meeting room. The design established buffer zones through a technique that Mezzedimi defined as “continuous spaces,” dissolving the rigid volume of the hall into “internal areas of different shape and height, always continuous and never interrupted.”<sup>50</sup> Addis Ababa’s eternal spring could be a problem, but it also provided an opportunity to shape a building “in visual and physical continuity between external and internal spaces, which constituted an exciting volumetric approach by imposing an intense and evocative modeling, suitable for the very special character of the building.”<sup>51</sup> In a 1963 issue of *Domus* the building is described as follows: “an Italian architect, Arturo Mezzedimi, has built this building in Addis Ababa, the Africa Hall. This design works well in the climate and in the environment, and represents with honor and authenticity the Italian school, even the Italian civilization, the Africa Hall is free from vulgarity, has taste and neatness and a quiet elegance.”<sup>52</sup>

Between May 22 and May 25, 1963, the Africa Hall was officially inaugurated with the first meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Haile Selassie managed to unite under one roof thirty-two heads of state and acted as a mediator between different groups, successfully achieving the final goal of signing the birth certificate of the OAU: four centuries of European dominion in Africa thus came to an end. Among the heads of state present were key political figures of the independence movements such as Senegal’s Léopold Sedar Senghor, Guinea’s Sékou Touré, Mali’s Modibo Keita, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, Algeria’s Ahmed Ben Bella, Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere and Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah;

49 The information is provided in a small book printed on the occasion of the opening by the United Nations. A copy of the book is kept in the personal archive of Arturo Mezzedimi in Rome.

50 Arturo MEZZEDIMI, *Il Palazzo Africa, come è nata l’opera*, Addis Ababa: Ministry of Information of the Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1963, p. 6.

51 *Ibid.* p. 6.

52 “Il Palazzo Africa in Addis Abeba”, *Domus*, vol. 2, no. 399, 1963, p. 59-61.

only one European was allowed to witness this defining moment: the architect Arturo Mezzedimi.<sup>53</sup>

## A Young Maturity

After completing the prestigious project of the Africa Hall Mezzedimi was established as the semi-official architect of the imperial court. If the 1940s were a period of apprenticeship and the 1950s a time of searching for an autonomous design language, the 1960s were years of professional maturity, reached at the impressive age of 40. During this period Mezzedimi had the chance to work on key private and public designs in Addis Ababa, Asmara, and the rest of the country, fully reaching a rhythm of hyper-production. In this abundance of professional opportunities, the concrete risk was a search for vain distinction or arrogant uniformity that could lead to pretentious invention. Mezzedimi managed to avoid this risk. He approached his innumerable tasks with decorum, measured sobriety, and a sense of moderation controlled by education, qualities that characterize all his buildings, even those conceived in the most challenging circumstances and exposed to potential criticism. The search for a right middle way is the essential component of the search for decorum, which is both an ethical and aesthetic ideal, a balance and respect of things, the desire to be fair and comply with the laws of behavior in order to achieve optimum moderation.<sup>54</sup>

Mezzedimi's work embodied Haile Selassie's ideas of modernization and showed all the contradictions not only of 1960s Ethiopia but of the global decolonization process: the cohabitation between the future and the past, the modern and the archaic, the opulent and the indigent. This condition was very present in a country with only two railways, a few highways left by the Italian occupation, and more than thirty airports with daily national, regional, and international flights. The foundation in 1946 of Ethiopian Airlines,<sup>55</sup> with the telling motto "The Wings of Modern Africa," was a clear symbol of the imperial dreams of modernization and at the same time of their limits: the image of a donkey climbing the Ethiopian rifts substituted by a Douglas DC -3 airplane shows a nation that willingly forgot its condition in the present in order to jump directly into a bright, imagined future.<sup>56</sup>

The contradictions inherent to the modernization process were expressed in the development of Addis Ababa with the aim of transforming "an irritating mixture of primitive barbarism,"<sup>57</sup> barely more than a shantytown, into the capital of a cosmopolitan continent. The development of the modern city started from Jubilee Road, an imposing

53 Angelo DEL BOCA, *Il Negus*, *op. cit.* (note 23), p. 280.

54 Benno ALBRECHT, "L'architetto del Black Messiah," in Benno ALBRECHT, Filippo DE DOMINICIS and Jacopo GALLI, *Arturo Mezzedimi*, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 8-19.

55 The extraordinary tale of Ethiopian Airlines is presented in Ben GUTTERY, *Encyclopedia of African Airlines*, Jefferson, JF: McFarland & Company, 1998.

56 Paul HENZE, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*, London: Hurst & Co., 2000.

57 André ARMANDY, *La Désagréable partie de campagne : incursion en Abyssinie*, Paris: Lemerre, 1930, p. 114, quoted in Angelo DEL BOCA, *Il Negus*, *op. cit.* (note 23).

152 | Figure 8: Anonymous, City Hall in Addis Ababa, 1964.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



French-inspired boulevard where Taytu's<sup>58</sup> eucalyptus forest turned into a neat green row surrounded by prestigious public and office buildings. The urban project drafted by Mezzedimi<sup>59</sup> is the final result of a long process started with 1936 plans by Arturo Bianchi, Ignazio Guidi and Cesare Valle and altered in 1954 with Patrick Abercrombie's plan, an operational application of his neighborhood planning theories.<sup>60</sup> Mezzedimi's urban design was realized by the architect who had himself designed numerous buildings shaping Addis Ababa's modern axis: City Hall, the Finfinne Building, the Zauditu Building, and the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. The City Hall<sup>61</sup> was positioned at the end of the road on a slope, and Mezzedimi imagined it, perhaps in memory of and tribute to his native Siena, like a civic palace, a multifunctional space fully dedicated to the community. The complex is made of three buildings, clustered in a close visual and functional relationship, that outline

58 Taytu Betul was an Empress Consort of the Ethiopian Empire (1889–1913) and the third wife of Emperor Menelek II of Ethiopia; she founded Addis Ababa. For a wider view on her figure see Chris POUTRY, *Empress Taytu and Menilek II: Ethiopia, 1883-1910*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1986.

59 Mezzedimi accounts for the Urban Plan of the Jubilee Road area in the list of his works alongside twenty-two plans of various Ethiopian and Eritrean cities drafted between 1966 and 1968. However his personal archive in Rome does not hold any materials regarding urban planning. The cohesion demonstrated in the construction of numerous buildings on the axis makes the official adoption of the urban plan by authorities highly plausible.

60 For a complete account of Addis Ababa's long planning history, including interventions by Le Corbusier and Patrick Abercrombie, among many others, see Corrado DIAMANTINI and Domenico PATASSINI, *Addis Abeba. Villaggio e capitale di un continente*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1993.

61 The City Hall was considered such an important project that a 1:50 model was built to showcase the design to the population and positioned in a dedicated structure near the construction site. Newspaper cuttings held in the Mezzedimi archives describe the project: "Sua maestà l'Imperatore inaugura la nuova sede municipale di Addis Abeba," *Il Quotidiano Eritreo*, February 5, 1965; "Dalla terrazza del Palazzo di città il panorama della capitale dell'Impero," *Il Quotidiano Eritreo*, March 26, 1962; "L'impegno italiano all'estero elemento di progresso sociale," *Sestante*, July 1963.

Figure 9: Anonymous, Tana Palace in Bahir Dar, 1967.

Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



a square dominated by an imposing central tower and bounded by strong colonnades that extend symmetrically along the central axis. The square and tower are the best examples of hybridization between traditional Italian architectural and urban elements and a modern aesthetic, adapted to the African context.

The central tower is the result of cross-pollination between the medieval towers of Tuscan cities, the rationalist *Torri Littorie*, and the Aksum obelisks of Ethiopian tradition. The facade behind the tower consists of an imposing breathing wall, the architectural device that became an icon of modernist adaptation in the tropics, shaped with an elegant hexagonal pattern deformed to modulate the solar radiation in various parts of the building. The City Hall became the manifesto of a capital that “is under the influence of different architectural schools: there is the Latin school with its creativity and inventiveness, represented by architect Arturo Mezzedimi and Henri Chomette<sup>62</sup> who designed the Haile Selassie I theater, the Commercial Bank and other palaces and villas. Then there are the Nordic school with Norconsultant, designer of the chamber of commerce and a high number of other buildings and the study Enav-Tedros,<sup>63</sup> designer of the imposing building of the University Haile Selassie I, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Filoha baths.”<sup>64</sup>

Mezzedimi, the main protagonist of the cosmopolitan architectural scene of the capital, was conscious and concerned of the possible effects of this impressive amount of construction

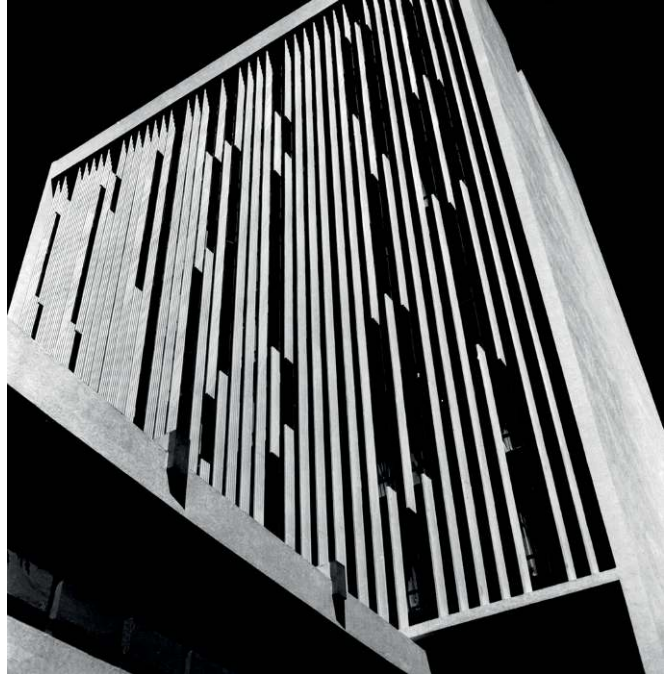
62 Henri Chomette (1921-1995) was a key figure in French architecture in sub-Saharan Africa. His architectural firm Bureau d'Études Henri Chomette (BEHC) was the head office for the city of Addis Ababa between 1953 and 1959. He designed buildings in Ivory Coast, Benin, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Congo. Diala TOURÉ, *Créations architecturales et artistiques en Afrique sub-saharienne (1948-1995): Bureaux d'Études Henri Chomette*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002.

63 Zalman Enav worked extensively in Ethiopia throughout the 1960s, and eventually was appointed on behalf of the Ethiopian government to design a school building project funded by the World Bank. He was in partnership with the Ethiopian architect Michael Tedros. Ayala LEVIN, “Scales of Engagement: Zalman Enav’s Institutional Networking in Ethiopia, 1959-1965,” presented during the conference “Crossing Boundaries. Rethinking European architecture beyond Europe,” Palermo, April 13-16, 2014.

64 Enrico MANIA, “Benevenuti nella capitale morale dell’Africa,” *op. cit.* (note 43), p. 108.



154 | Figure 10: Anonymous, Finfinne Building in Addis Ababa, 1968.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



on the Ethiopian environment and expressed the fear that “this fast development will lead to humans’ oppression on this precious, lush, dominating and characteristic nature; compromising Addis Ababa’s green that more than a mere frame is the city essence.”<sup>65</sup> During a visit to the City Hall’s rooftop the Italian journalist Gian Gaspare Napolitano asked Mezzedimi if he was concerned for the destiny of Menelik’s eucalyptus and was vigorously reproached: “what are you talking about? We will not touch anything that is nice, we just want to put things in the proper order!”<sup>66</sup> This approach, conscious of the implication of design decisions on the environment, was particularly important during the construction of buildings in key landscape conditions such as the Tana Palace in Bahir Dar and the Villa Malkassa in Sodorè.

The construction of two palaces in a rural context was part of a much larger project of the emperor, who wanted to build modern representation spaces in key areas of his territory. Haile Selassie believed so firmly in the necessity of showcasing his nation to foreign observers that he constructed luxurious palaces in remote areas, an operation guided by the conviction (later proved wrong) that the best way to keep his nation united was to seek international recognition not only in Africa but on the global stage. The two palaces were imagined as places to host ambassadors from foreign states or important guests from companies working in the country. The Tana Palace is a lodge overlooking the luxuriant

<sup>65</sup> Arturo MEZZEDIMI, “Aggiornamento Urbanistico di Addis Abeba,” *Sestante*, October 1965.

<sup>66</sup> The interview is kept in Mezzedimi’s archive: Gian Gaspare NAPOLITANO, “Non si tocca ad Addis Abeba la profumata foresta di Menelik,” 1964.

Figure 11: Anonymous, Zauditu Building in Addis Ababa, 1964.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



nature that embraces Lake Tana. The structure is stilted and raised from the ground; the whole building is shaped with strong organic features that generate sinuous internal spaces and deep external covered terraces, affording guests a perfect view of the surroundings with maximal climate comfort. This concept of a villa as an observatory rather than a house is even stronger at the Villa Malkassa, built in the rolling hills around the thermal city of Sodere, 120 kilometers south of Addis Ababa. Here the core of the house becomes an authentic watchtower, a place of contemplation that can be reached only via a circular ramp that allows the viewer to slowly discover the landscape.<sup>67</sup> The two completed imperial villas, alongside a third one designed but not built in Assab, show the greatest amount of freedom in Mezzedimi's work while maximizing the alienating effect of hypermodern buildings immersed in an uncontaminated landscape and underlining the contradiction of a modernization process that devoted resources to luxury representation spaces while the majority of the Ethiopian population lived well under the poverty line.<sup>68</sup>

The strong modernity expressed by Mezzedimi's design, openly challenging the vision of Africa as a backward, prehistoric continent, was further epitomized in the large private

67 Arturo MEZZEDIMI, "Hailé Selassié I," *op. cit.* (note 28), p. 189.

68 Ethiopia suffered periodical famines during the 1970s and 1980s as a result of droughts that affected most of the countries of the African Sahel. The areas most affected were central Eritrea, Tigray, Welo, and parts of Gonder and Shewa. For a complete account, see Alexander DE WAAL, *Evil Days, 30 years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*, New York, NY and London: Human Rights Watch, 1991; James MCCANN, *People of the Plow: An Agricultural History of Ethiopia*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995; Dessalegn RAHMATO, *Famine and Survival Strategies: A Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1991; Bahru ZEWDE, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Library, 1992, ch. 5-6.

156 | buildings constructed in the capital to host offices of the key economic players in the fast-developing Ethiopia. The Finfinne Building<sup>69</sup> is a twelve-story structure whose main facade juxtaposes a glass wall with the screen of a vertical *brise-soleil*, which develops seamlessly up the full height of the building. The two blind sides, fissured only by a long central cut, frame the *brise-soleil*, tightening the sides and setting the size for the frame. The notion of a frame is a dominant feature of the Zauditu Building,<sup>70</sup> where the continuous box is broken into a strip that tempers the steepness of the design area through a difference in the number of stories from one side to the other. The strip fully embraces the building, becoming a device for protection from direct sunlight, a terrace for the lower floors, and a large rooftop for the top ones. In the ERESKO Building and in the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia climate comfort is reached by protecting the ribbon windows with a small projection of each floor, thereby forming a large shadow. In these buildings Mezzedimi explores all the structural and constructive possibilities of a large-scale office complex and definitively demonstrates his ability to manage large-scale design with a full awareness of all the necessary information and technical features. The importance of Mezzedimi's studio was recognized on a national and international level, as he was awarded structural works for the country such as the drafting of twenty-two urban plans between 1966 and 1968 and the design and construction of twenty-eight schools, financed by the United Nations, between 1967 and 1972.<sup>71</sup>

Flipping through the endless list of Mezzedimi works it is easy to imagine Haile Selassie less alone in “assuming the enormous task of starting his millennial Empire towards a real evolution of civilization.”<sup>72</sup> But the dream of a modernity capable of respecting the identity of African populations was stillborn: Haile Selassie was unseated then killed by the Derg<sup>73</sup> military junta in 1974, and Mezzedimi was forever banned from his beloved adoptive country. The idea of a different modernity, a synthesis between past and future as theorized by Haile Selassie and briefly turned into reality by Mezzedimi, was hastily interrupted. Paradoxically, the final push to end imperial rule came from the generation of youth educated by Haile Selassie within the country's modernization programs: “the

69 Filippo DE DOMINICIS, “Finfinne Building Addis Abeba 1965-1968,” in Benno ALBRECHT, Filippo DE DOMINICIS and Jacopo GALLI, *Arturo Mezzedimi, op. cit.* (note 11), p. 162-173. Numerous paper clippings in Mezzedimi's archive testify to the construction of the building: “Finfinne Building being built at Meskel Square,” *The Ethiopian Herald*, September 2, 1965; “Occupants move to Finfinne,” *The Ethiopian Herald*, July 4, 1968.

70 “The Growing of Addis Ababa,” *The Ethiopian Herald*, September 11, 1965.

71 The work of Mezzedimi as an urban planner is yet to be fully researched. Few documents are kept in the archive, although the plans are carefully listed in the index provided by the author. Schools are listed as well, but only the one in Maraba is documented with a set of photos.

72 Giuliano Cora, Italian ambassador to Ethiopia, in a letter to Benito Mussolini dated April 18, 1928, quoted in Angelo DEL BOCA, *Il Negus, op. cit.* (note 23), p. 75.

73 The Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army, known as Derg, ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987. It took power following the ousting of Haile Selassie and was led by Mengistu Haile Mariam. In 1975, the Derg embraced communism as an ideology; it remained in power until 1987. For further information, see Edmond KELLER, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988; Marina OTTAWAY and David OTTAWAY, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, New York, NY: Africana Publishing Company, 1978.

Emperor shaped, but kept subjugated, a new class of leaders, allowed Eritrean, his irreducible enemies, to be trained in his universities, and sent abroad hundreds of young men, ensuring to see them come back as political opponents.”<sup>74</sup> Haile Selassie ruled a country that knew only the most brutal methods of struggle for power, and his reformist choices, frequently full of contradictions, had to be mediated through timeframes, rhythms, and deadlines that he was the only one to know and manage. In the long run this style of government, effective but difficult to communicate to a population craving freedom and economic stability, gave birth in the new African intelligentsia to the idea that “the man who had begun his career as a statesman fighting with courage and luck against the reactionary forces now, paradoxically, was more and more to be qualified as an advocate of conservatism.”<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusions

Arturo Mezzedimi’s career must be reassessed, first of all in light of the extraordinary rate of production he was able to maintain: the list of the constructed building reaches 281, while the list of designs created by his studio reaches the incredible number of 1,624. Considering that his professional career in Ethiopia lasted for fewer than thirty years, he realized an average of 55 projects per year, a hyperbolic number that represents more than one project a week! The diversity of his production fully places Mezzedimi among the global experts who, in post-war years, searched for different modernities using the Global South as an enormous testing ground. Mezzedimi lacks the global scope of Albert Mayer, Otto Königsberger, Fry&Drew or Michel Ecochard,<sup>76</sup> but the number of buildings produced and the variable cultural, social, and climatic conditions of the Ethiopian mini-universe allowed him to experiment with a wide variety of design and planning solutions. The most interesting circumstance that differentiates Mezzedimi from others is his singular relationship with Haile Selassie: the Italian architect is among the few cases of a foreign expert who received from a head of state the task of shaping the modernization process of his country. In this unique position Mezzedimi partially solved the contradictions inherent in a global expert from the West shaping third-world countries in an ambiguous agreement between former colonizers and the formerly colonized.<sup>77</sup> Haile Selassie gave Mezzedimi the role of constructing the image of a nation and a continent from a cosmopolitan

74 Franco Magnanini, *L’Unità*, March 8, 1966.

75 Angelo DEL BOCA, *Il Negus*, op. cit. (note 23), p. 247.

76 An account of the global experts shaping the postcolonial world transcends the scope of this paper; numerous studies in the last few years have investigated single figures or global transnational implications. See, on the above-mentioned figures, Rachel LEE, *Negotiating Modernities: Otto Koenigsberger’s Works and Network in Exile (1933-1951)*, Dr. Ing. dissertation, Berlin University of Technology, 2014; Iain JACKSON, Jessica HOLLAND, *The Architecture of Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew: Twentieth Century Architecture, Pioneer Modernism and the Tropics*, London: Ashgate, 2014; Tom AVERMAETE, Serhat KARAKAYALI and Marion VON OSTEN, *Colonial Modern: Aesthetics of the Past, Rebellions for the Future*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2010.

77 As an example, Fry&Drew worked for the Colonial Office in Ghana and Nigeria in what can be considered the planned decolonization process undertaken by the British government after World War II. See Jacopo GALLI, *Tropical Toolbox: Fry&Drew e la ricerca di una modernità africana*, PhD dissertation, IUAV University of Venice, 2015.

158 | Figure 12: Anonymous, Arturo Mezzedimi with Haile Selassie at the opening of the Africa Hall, 1963.  
Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



standpoint, and the architect fully understood the importance of his role, knowing that he could not contend with postcolonial Africa by imposing a personal Western vision or a sterile re-proposition of a utopian past but only by putting his own cultural tools in service of a complex project, of which he could barely foresee the future development and full framework.

What is most evident in Mezzedimi's life and architecture is an aspect closely linked to Italian humanist culture: the ability, typically Italian, to expand the boundaries of a small homeland, to reach the entire world, and naturally to feel at home in each part of the world.<sup>78</sup> Mezzedimi lived a life characterized by a transnational spatial polygamy. As a migrant attached to several places at once, he belonged to different worlds through a process of cultural mixing, adaptation, and cross-pollination that anticipated what Ulrich Beck would define as the globalization of biography.<sup>79</sup> It is a cosmopolitan and stoic capacity that fits fully with Mezzedimi's spirit, as reflected in words written nineteen centuries earlier by Lucius Annaeus Seneca: "we must live with this belief, I was not born for one corner of land, my country is the whole universe."<sup>80</sup>

Mezzedimi's career overlapped with the Negus's dreams and ambitions, with his plans and weaknesses. Cautious and gradual, not sufficiently coordinated, Haile Selassie's policies, turned into architectural realities by Mezzedimi, were easily despised by both conservatives and progressives. The architect, however, acknowledged that the modernization program could hardly have been designed differently considering complex global dynamics and Ethiopian underdevelopment. Mezzedimi's designs were intended as a tool of external influence and contamination, a process that, if well assimilated, could have led postcolonial

78 Benno ALBRECHT, "L'architetto del Black Messiah," *op. cit.* (note 53), p. 8-19.

79 Ulrich BECK, *What is Globalization?*, Malden: Polity, 2000, p. 73.

80 Lucius Annaeus SENECA, *Epistulae ad Lucilium*, Fernando Solinas (ed.), Milan: Mondadori, 1995, p. 4-8.



Figure 13: Anonymous, Arturo Mezzedimi illustrates to Haile Selassie the design for a new settlement in Addis Ababa, 1970s. Source: courtesy of Archivio Privato Mezzedimi (Italy, Rome).



Africa towards a progressive development<sup>81</sup> that never came to pass. His architecture did not completely break with the past, and the architect made an accurate scan of modernity, choosing for the future only what he believed was essential. These progressive dreams rapidly faded away, but Mezzedimi's ability to briefly mediate between past and future, between localism and modernity, between resilient traditions and modern techniques remains intact. Using words that Frantz Fanon borrowed from René Depestre, Mezzedimi's ability was to understand that "necessary culture is accompanied by concessions."<sup>82</sup>

In light of his extraordinary career Arturo Mezzedimi deserves a space on the international historiographical stage, a space too long denied him by the remoteness of his main works and by their distance from the chief global circles of cultural power. Reassessing the work of professionals like Mezzedimi allows us to rediscover hidden architectural works that contributed to the construction of an embryonic cosmopolitan world, a world that was denied by global political events but that represents a precious precedent in the global framework of today's *de facto* cosmopolitan society.<sup>83</sup> Mezzedimi's architectural work clearly illustrates a globalization without homogenization,<sup>84</sup> the capacity to adapt global discourses to local environments. His merit was to understand that, in a developing country, the past and the future are fundamentally unstable and troubled by centrifugal currents, and that the only possible way to deal with problems is "to reach people not in a past which no longer exists, but in that overturned movement that it has just outlined and from which, suddenly, everything will be put in debate."<sup>85</sup>

81 Henri DE MONFREID, *Verso le terre ostili dell'Abissinia*, Milan: Editrice Genio, 1935, p. 197.

82 René DEPESTRE, *Face à la nuit*, Paris: Étincelles, 1945 quoted in Frantz FANON, *Les Damnés de la terre*, *op. cit.* (note 38).

83 Today's society as a cosmopolitan society *de facto* is investigated in Ulrich BECK, *La società cosmopolita. Prospettive dell'epoca postnazionale*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003, p. 133-150.

84 The concept of globalization as a process that does not necessarily imply cultural homogenization is presented in Arjun APPADURAI, *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

85 Frantz FANON, *Les Damnés de la terre*, *op. cit.* (note 38).

## 160 | Abstract

The life and career of Arturo Mezzedimi are the rare tale of an immigrant who conquered the main stage of his adoptive motherland. This paper reconstructs the trajectory of a young technical surveyor who became the semi-official architect of Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie. From his apprenticeship in Asmara's Italian bourgeois society to the construction of "Selassie's gifts" to Eritrea, Mezzedimi reached the highest levels of achievement, building the Africa Hall and the United Nations headquarters in Africa, and shaping the modern face of Addis Ababa as the moral capital of a continent. The paper reassesses Mezzedimi as a cosmopolitan global expert with a gift for interpreting Haile Selassie's ambitions to mix European modernity and resilient Ethiopian traditions. This process of cross-pollination led the Italian architect to interpret Ethiopian millennial history and future aspirations while acquiring a self-taught professionalism that allowed him to design and build more than 250 constructions at an impressive pace of hyper-production.

Index by keyword: *cosmopolitanism, Italians*

Geographical index: *Africa, East Africa, Ethiopia*

Chronological index: *20th century*

Mentionned persons: *Mezzedimi Arturo (1922-2010), Sélassié Hailé (1892-1975)*

## Zusammenfassung

Leben und Werk Arturo Mezzedimis sind Stoff der seltenen Geschichte eines Einwanderers, der es in seiner Wahlheimat zu höchstem Ansehen brachte. Der Artikel zeichnet den Lebensweg eines jungen technischen Gutachters nach, der später zum halboffiziellen Hofarchitekten des letzten Kaisers von Äthiopien, Haile Selassie, avancierte. Von seiner Lehre in den bürgerlichen italienischen Kreisen Asmaras bis zum Bau von „Selassies Geschenken“ an Eritrea erzielte Mezzedimi Höchstleistungen: er baute die Africa Hall und den Sitz der Vereinten Nationen in Afrika und verlieh Addis Abeba als moralischer Hauptstadt eines ganzen Kontinents ihr modernes Antlitz. Der Beitrag bewertet Mezzedimi erstmals als kosmopolitischen, weltweiten Experten, dem es gegeben war, Haile Selassies Ambitionen mit europäischer Moderne und beständigen äthiopischen Traditionen in Einklang zu bringen. Angeregt durch diesen gegenseitigen Befruchtungsprozess interpretierte der italienische Architekt sowohl die tausendjährige Geschichte als auch die Zukunftsziele Äthiopiens und erwarb dabei autodidaktisch eine Professionalität, die ihn dazu befähigte, in einem atemberaubenden Tempo extremer Produktivität über 250 Bauten zu entwerfen und zu errichten.

Schlagwortindex : *Kosmopolitismus, Italiener*

Geographie : *Afrika, Ostafrika, Äthiopien*

Chronologischer Index : *20. Jahrhundert*

Genannte Personen : *Mezzedimi Arturo (1922-2010), Sélassié Hailé (1892-1975)*

## Resumen

La vida y la carrera de Arturo Mezzedimi son el relato inusual de un inmigrante que ocupó la primera fila en su país de adopción. Este artículo traza la trayectoria de un joven ingeniero técnico que se convierte en el arquitecto semioficial del último emperador de Etiopía, Hailé Sélassié. Desde su aprendizaje en el seno de la sociedad burguesa italiana de Asmara a la construcción

de los «regalos de Sélassié» a Eritrea, Mezzedimi conoció un éxito vertiginoso, construyendo el Africa Hall o la sede de Naciones Unidas en África y dando a Addis Abeba un aspecto digno de su estatus de capital moral del continente africano. Este artículo reevalúa la contribución de Mezzedimi, un experto cosmopolita de proyección mundial capaz de dar forma a las ambiciones de Hailé Sélassié aspirando a integrar modernidad europea y milenarias tradiciones etíopes. Este proceso fecundo de intercambios empujó al arquitecto italiano a interpretar el largo pasado histórico de Etiopía y las ambiciones futuras del país, haciendo prueba de una profesionalidad de autodidacta que dio lugar a un arquitecto de una hiperproductividad impresionante, con más de 250 actuaciones.

Índice de palabras clave : *cosmopolitismo, italianos*

Geografía : *África, África del Este, Etiopía*

Periodo : *siglo xx*

Personajes : *Mezzedimi Arturo (1922-2010), Sélassié Hailé (1892-1975)*

## Résumé

La vie et la carrière d'Arturo Mezzedimi offrent un récit rare, celui d'un immigré ayant occupé le devant de la scène de son pays adoptif. Cet article retrace la trajectoire d'un jeune géomètre qui devint l'architecte semi-officiel du dernier empereur d'Éthiopie, Hailé Sélassié. De son apprentissage au sein de la société bourgeoise italienne d'Asmara à la construction des « cadeaux de Sélassié » à l'Érythrée, Mezzedimi a connu un succès vertigineux, construisant le Africa Hall et le siège des Nations Unies en Afrique et donnant à Addis Abeba un aspect digne de son statut de capitale morale du continent africain. Cet article réévalue la contribution de Mezzedimi, un expert cosmopolite d'envergure mondiale capable de donner forme aux ambitions d'Hailé Sélassié visant à combiner la modernité européenne avec les traditions éthiopiennes ancestrales. Ce processus fécond d'échanges poussa l'architecte italien à interpréter l'histoire millénaire de l'Éthiopie et les ambitions futures du pays. Bien qu'autodidacte, son travail est celui d'un professionnel confirmé et d'une productivité impressionnante, puisqu'il est l'auteur de plus de 250 réalisations.

Index de mots-clés : *cosmopolitisme, Italiens*

Index géographique : *Afrique, Afrique de l'Est, Éthiopie*

Index chronologique : *xx<sup>e</sup> siècle*

Personnes citées : *Mezzedimi Arturo (1922-2010), Sélassié Hailé (1892-1975)*

## Riassunto

La vita e la carriera di Arturo Mezzedimi raccontano la singolare storia di un immigrato che si è conquistato un posto di primo piano nel suo paese adottivo. Questo articolo ricostituisce il percorso di un giovane geometra, divenuto architetto semi ufficiale dell'ultimo imperatore etiope Hailé Selassié. Dal tirocinio negli ambienti della borghesia italiana di Asmara alla costruzione dei "doni di Selassié" all'Eritrea, Mezzedimi riuscì in una straordinaria impresa: progettò l'Africa Hall, sede permanente dell'ONU in Africa e conferì ad Addis Abeba il suo volto moderno di capitale morale del continente. L'articolo rivaluta Mezzedimi come l'esperto cosmopolita che seppe interpretare le ambizioni di Hailé Selassié: unire la modernità europea alle affermate tradizioni etiopi. Un processo di contaminazione che portò l'architetto italiano ad interpretare la storia millenaria dell'Etiopia e le aspirazioni future, acquisendo una professionalità da autodidatta che

162 | gli permise di progettare e costruire più di 250 edifici ad un ritmo impressionante.

Parole chiave : *cosmopolitismo, Italiani*

Indice geografico : *Africa, Africa orientale, Etiopia*

Indice cronologico : *XX secolo*

Persone citate : *Mezzedimi Arturo (1922-2010), Sélassié Hailé (1892-1975)*