

Interview with Prof. Edward Denison

“Decentring Euro-centrism in Heritage Studies”



Interview conducted by: **Habtom Tesfamichael**.

Today’s guest is Edward Denison, a professor of Architecture in Global Modernity at University College London (UCL). Prof. Denison actively engaged in discussions surrounding the nomination of Asmara to the World Heritage List, and his work critically examines the Eurocentric perspectives that often dominate the field of heritage studies. He presented a paper at the 2025 International Conference of Eritrean Studies (ICES) held in Asmara from 4 to 6 January.

What inspired you to study the architecture of Asmara?

My first encounter with Asmara was in 1997 when I visited as a tourist. I was immediately captivated by the city’s architectural beauty and the harmonious relationship between the built environment and social life. This unique atmosphere, so different from anything I had experienced, left a profound impression on me. I was driven to understand the origins of this remarkable city – its history, the forces that shaped its creation, and the broader context of Eritrean history. However, my initial visit was brief as I traveled overland from Cape Town to Alexandria. After departing Massawa by boat, I vowed to return to Asmara. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the border war soon after prevented my return until 2001. In 2001, I returned with my then partner, now my wife, and joined the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project. This involved extensive research within the municipal archives, providing invaluable insights into Asmara’s history, particularly from the 1930s to the 1970s. Over six months of dedicated archival work deepened my understanding of the city’s past. This experience and the numerous projects I’ve undertaken since then have fueled my fascination with Asmara and continue to drive my work here. My

presentation built upon the work of the Asmara Heritage Project, led by Medhanie Teklemariam, where we continued archival research and documentation, culminating in the successful nomination of Asmara to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2017.

While the details of that nomination have been extensively documented in previous publications, I focused on a broader perspective -- expanding our understanding of Eritrea's encounter with modernity beyond the Italian colonial period. Edward Denison What inspired you to study the architecture of Asmara? My first encounter with Asmara was in 1997 when I visited as a tourist. I was immediately captivated by the city's architectural beauty and the harmonious relationship between the built environment and social life. This unique atmosphere, so different from anything I had experienced, left a profound impression on me. I was driven to understand the origins of this remarkable city – its history, the forces that shaped its creation, and the broader context of Eritrean history. However, my initial visit was brief as I traveled overland from Cape Town to Alexandria. After departing Massawa by boat, I vowed to return to Asmara. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the border war soon after prevented my return until 2001. In 2001, I returned with my then partner, now my wife, and joined the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project. This involved extensive research within the municipal archives, providing invaluable insights into Asmara's history, particularly from the 1930s to the 1970s. Over six months of dedicated archival work deepened my understanding of the city's past. This experience and the numerous projects I've undertaken since then have fueled my fascination with Asmara and continue to drive my work here. My presentation built upon the work of the Asmara Heritage Project, led by Medhanie Teklemariam, where we continued archival research and documentation, culminating in the successful nomination of Asmara to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2017. The prevailing narrative often portrays Asmara as an exclusively Italian creation, but I argue for a more nuanced view that recognizes the city's distinct Eritrean identity. I examined the city's experiences after the Italian colonial period, mainly focusing on the impact of Kagnew Station and the presence of American military installations during the Cold War. These sites played a significant role in shaping Asmara's history and involvement in Cold War geopolitics. The Americans, who were stationed in Asmara for 25 years, introduced advanced technology and infrastructure, including listening stations used to monitor the Soviet space program. They even planned to build a nuclear station in Asmara though this project was never

realized. These events demonstrate that Asmara's encounter with modernity extended far beyond the Italian colonial period. While the UNESCO nomination is a significant achievement, it tends to emphasize the European influence on Asmara, overlooking its equally important Eritrean history. Regarding the ICES, it was an exceptional experience. The diverse range of subjects and disciplines, all centered around Eritrea, provided a unique opportunity to engage with colleagues worldwide and within Eritrea. This interdisciplinary exchange significantly enhanced my understanding of Eritrea and its intellectual community. I have been fortunate to attend all three ICES held in Eritrea, and each one has been an invaluable experience.

Your paper at the ICES 2025 was on decentering the general perception of modern cultural heritage. Can you tell us more about it, particularly in the context of Asmara?

By 'decentering,' I mean that the current international framework for heritage is fundamentally Eurocentric. This Eurocentric bias strongly influences how we define and value heritage. I propose that we challenge this perspective and consider how cultural heritage is valued in other regions, such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These regions have their unique cultural conditions and expressions that may be equally, if not more, valuable than those defined by European standards. This is particularly evident in modern architectural heritage, where 'modernist architecture' often implies a specific European aesthetic. While some buildings in Asmara may exhibit European influences, their true essence is using African materials, skills, and labor. This connection can be traced back centuries, even to the ancient city of Adulis. The ruins of Adulis demonstrate a continuity of construction techniques and skills evident in 20th-century Asmara, highlighting the distinctiveness of Eritrean architecture. Critiquing this Eurocentric perspective means recognizing that the evaluation of modern architectural heritage often occurs through a European lens. Whether in China, South Africa, or other regions, the criteria for assessing and valuing heritage are frequently rooted in European aesthetics and values. This approach fails to acknowledge the unique historical and cultural contexts within which these buildings were created. It overlooks the intricate relationships between local communities, global influences, and architectural expression. This Eurocentric bias is evident in the disproportionate representation of European cultural heritage sites on the World Heritage List. With five times more European sites

than African sites, the list reflects this inherent bias. While Africa is a continent of 54 countries possessing a rich and diverse cultural heritage, its representation on the World Heritage List is grossly inadequate. This disparity clearly demonstrates the pervasive influence of Eurocentric perspectives.

What are the main characteristics that make Asmara a key cultural heritage?

While we often focus on aspects of Asmara's architectural and urban planning, which were undoubtedly crucial to its recognition as a World Heritage site, I believe the city's true significance lies in the expression of an indigenous condition within its built environment. This unique character stems from the harmonious integration of local Eritrean labor, materials, and skills with the external influence of Italian colonialism. The Italians relied heavily on Eritrean labor to construct many buildings that still exist today. This interplay between local expertise and external influence created a unique architectural expression. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Asmara. In many colonial contexts, across Asia and even in the peripheries of Europe, local conditions have been manifested through architectural forms that deviate from traditional Western European styles. For me, Asmara's true distinction lies in this unique expression of its indigenous character. While its urban planning and architecture are undoubtedly remarkable, it's unfortunate that the city is still often viewed through a European lens, primarily as an "Italian city." In my opinion, this perspective fails to recognize the city's unique and authentic Eritrean identity.

Asmara has now been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. How does this impact the city?

Nominating a site for UNESCO World Heritage status requires significant effort from the state party. However, regardless of the designation, the most crucial aspect is the commitment of the state party— in this case, the State of Eritrea— to protect the site. Asmara, an urban site, entails implementing comprehensive heritage laws, revising building regulations, and conducting in-depth research to develop a robust conservation management plan. All of these measures are essential for Asmara's long-term protection. The UNESCO World Heritage designation itself can be considered a bonus. It elevates Asmara to an internationally recognized platform, which can enhance the city's profile and generate pride among its residents. With over 1220 World Heritage sites worldwide, this recognition can bring tangible benefits in tourism, restoration efforts, and international support for the site's conservation. What were the main challenges faced in enlisting Asmara in the World Heritage Site List? The

nomination process was a significant undertaking requiring substantial financial resources. While the establishment of the Asmara Heritage Project by the Eritrean government, providing a dedicated office space, was a crucial first step, further funding was essential to support the extensive research and documentation required. We received valuable support from various organizations, including Norway, the British Embassy, and the European Union. However, despite these logistical and financial challenges, the exceptional dedication and collaborative spirit of the Asmara Heritage Project team made the process remarkably smooth. With 36 members working diligently, the team overcame obstacles with remarkable professionalism. Having worked on numerous heritage nominations across Africa, Latin America, Europe, and China, I can confidently say that the Asmara Heritage Project team was truly outstanding. Minor procedural challenges arose during the UNESCO evaluation process. While we initially submitted the nomination based on criteria two, three, and four, UNESCO approved the nomination based on criteria two and four. They did not accept our argument for criterion three, which, in my view, was crucial for acknowledging the significant contribution of Eritrean labor and skills to the construction of Asmara. We are currently working to refine our argument and present it in a way that more effectively conveys its importance and secures UNESCO's recognition. This process has also presented an intellectual challenge, requiring us to further refine our understanding and articulation of Eritrean contributions to the built environment.

Has Asmara been preserved by chance or by design?

Asmara's preservation is largely a result of historical happenstance rather than deliberate planning. A defining characteristic of many modern cities is their unfinished nature. The rise of modernism in the early 20th century was abruptly interrupted by World War II, leaving many cities with partially realized grand plans. In the case of Asmara, the period following World War II, under British administration, was primarily focused on a war economy, limiting significant construction activity. While some development occurred during the federation with Ethiopia in the late 1950s and 1960s, construction activity remained relatively subdued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, Asmara entered the 1990s remarkably well-preserved, retaining much of its early 20th-century character, albeit with some notable exceptions like developing areas such as Gejeret, Tiravolo, and Geza Banda. However, the postindependence period witnessed rapid economic growth, accompanied by the construction of high-rise

buildings like Nakfa House and the Blue Building. This marked a shift, as a city that had remained largely intact despite various foreign influences now faced the risk of quickly losing its unique character. We observe this phenomenon in many cities worldwide, where the pursuit of modernity is often equated with constructing high-rise buildings. This is evident in cities like Addis Ababa. However, it's crucial to recognize that the construction of such buildings cannot be necessarily equated to development. Asmara's approach to development is commendable in its long-term vision. By prioritizing the preservation of existing structures, Asmara avoids the pitfalls of rapid and unsustainable urban development, which often leads to the demolition of older buildings and their replacement with costly high-rises that require constant maintenance and ultimately become obsolete, leaving behind an environmentally damaging legacy. How does the Modern Heritage of Africa (MoHoA) seek to reshape the understanding of modern cultural heritage? My research contends that recognizing the true value of modern heritage in Asmara and, by extension, Africa necessitates a fundamental shift in our understanding of it. This requires decentering current conceptual frameworks and adopting a cosmological perspective that acknowledges our existence in a planetary age. This is the core objective of MoHoA, a global collaborative network of practitioners, academics, and the public dedicated to decentering existing heritage theories and practices. One key aspect of MoHoA's agenda is using Africa as a case study to address the pervasive issue of Eurocentrism in heritage discourse. Africa exemplifies how Eurocentric biases have led to the neglect, marginalization, and undervaluation of African cultural heritage. Established in 2020, MoHoA aims to critically examine existing global heritage frameworks and advocate for greater inclusion of African perspectives and contributions to the World Heritage List. Furthermore, MoHoA recognizes the profound impact of the Anthropocene on modern heritage. Modern heritage emerged from a period of significant human impact on the planet, a period that is now causing existential crises, such as climate change, resulting from industrialization, globalization, and urbanization. Paradoxically, modern heritage, a product of modernity itself, is now threatened by the forces that gave rise to it. The widespread demolition of modern buildings in urban centers exemplifies this paradox. The Anthropocene, the current geological epoch characterized by human impact on the planet, underscores the urgent need to recognize this inherent contradiction. Modern heritage must be viewed not only as a product of modernity but also as a victim of unintended

consequences. By acknowledging this dual nature, we can develop more effective strategies for preserving and appreciating modern heritage.

Finally, in what ways do you think the adoption of a cosmological perspective can enhance our appreciation of modern heritage?

Modern heritage signifies a pivotal moment in human history—the emergence of humanity as a planetary species. We transitioned from a period of internationalism in the early 20th century to a globalized world in the late 20th century. This necessitates a shift in perspective, recognizing our interconnectedness as a planetary entity. The impact of modernity has been undeniably global, with climate change serving as a prime example of its planetary-scale consequences. In the 21st century, we are increasingly viewing ourselves as a planet within a cosmos, with the prospect of interplanetary travel to destinations like Mars becoming a tangible reality. To effectively address the challenges of the Anthropocene, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and rising sea levels, we must view modernity and modern heritage within this broader cosmological framework. This requires acknowledging that modern heritage, while a product of modernity, also contributes to the challenges that threaten its existence. By adopting this cosmological perspective, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of modern heritage, recognizing its role within the broader context of human history and its impact on the planet. This understanding is crucial for developing effective strategies to protect and preserve modern heritage for future generations.

Any final remarks or anything that we haven't covered that you would like to add...

I would like to highlight the MoHoA Cape Town document on modern heritage. This document, developed through workshops and conferences, outlines a draft policy framework to decenter the current Eurocentric approach to modern heritage. By advocating for a more inclusive and equitable framework, we can encourage the recognition of diverse expressions of modern heritage, including those from Africa that may not conform to traditional European aesthetics. The broader adoption of this Framework by countries worldwide.

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