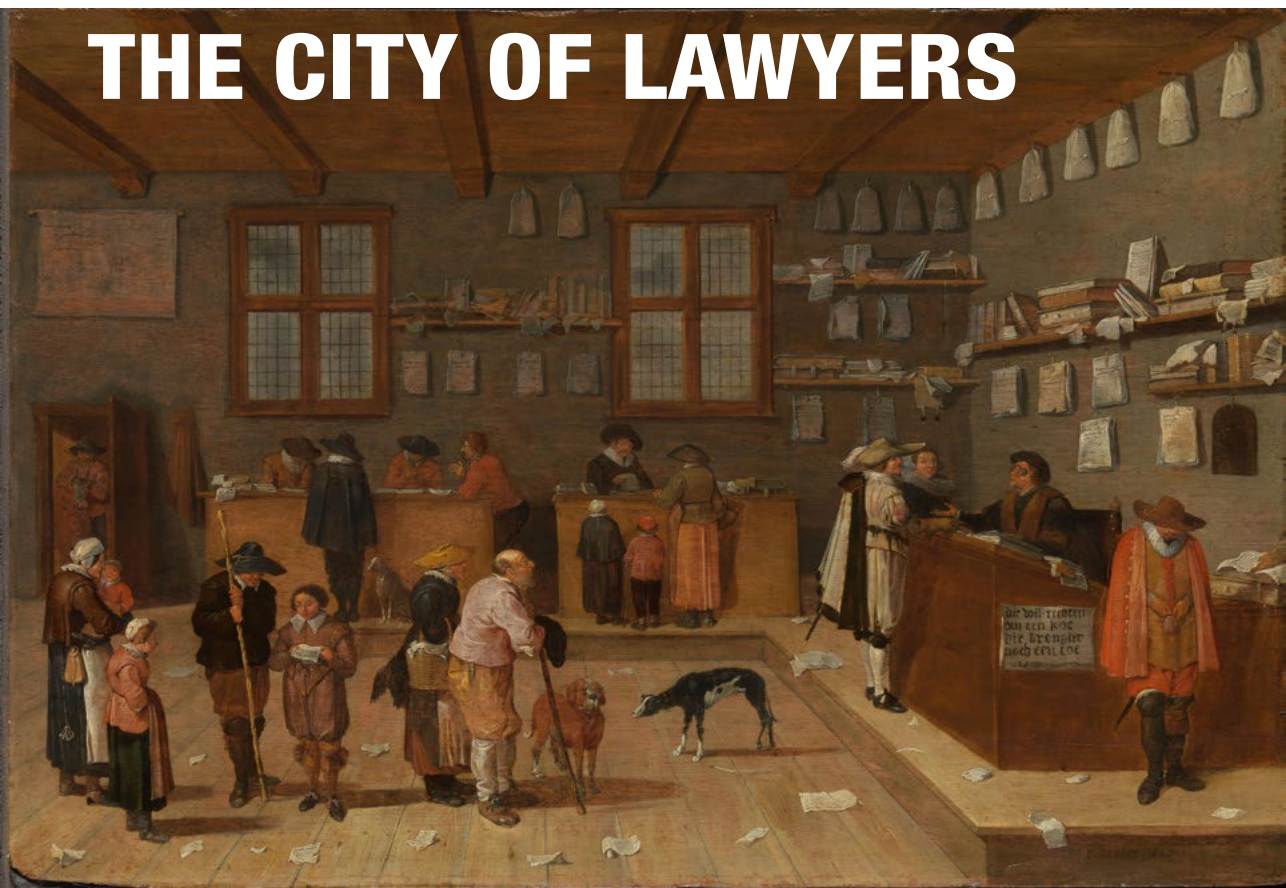


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SU

LA CITTÀ DEI GIURISTI THE CITY OF LAWYERS



In copertina: Pieter de Bloot, *Wil rechten om een koe die brengter noch een toe*
[*La spesa non vale l'impresa*], 1628. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

INSIGHTS

7

LA CITTÀ DEI GIURISTI

THE CITY OF LAWYERS

a cura di

Marco Folin
Sara Menzinger

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ITALIAN COLONIALISM AND THE MAKING OF URBAN SPACE: THE CASE OF ASMARA

CATERINA LUCERI

Abstract

This article explores the link between colonialism and urban space through a historical-legal lens. Focusing on Asmara, capital of colonial Eritrea, it examines the city's 1913/14 and 1939 urban plans to reveal mechanisms of exclusion and racial segregation. Zoning emerges as a key tool of colonial control, producing displacement and loss among local communities.

Keywords

Colonialism; Cities; Urban planning; Zoning; Racial segregation

Introduction

This contribution is part of the initial stages of a research project still in development, which aims to explore the relationship between colonialism and the city through a historical-legal and transdisciplinary perspective¹. Despite the extensive historiography on Italian colonialism, the role of the city as a legal, political, and symbolic device of colonial domination remains largely underestimated [King 2007]. The reflections that have brought to light the spatial articulations of colonial violence have often developed separately within the fields of the history of colonial law and the history of urban planning and architecture, even though they frequently draw upon the same documentary corpus. This fragmentation has limited a full understanding of how urban space was constructed, regulated, and represented as an instrument of power, control, and hierarchization [Nuzzo 2020]. Through urban planning policies, the colonial space was hierarchized to reflect racial and social differences. These modes of planning affected not only the spatial dimension but also the administrative system that emerged – one freed from any constraints imposed by the rule of law. It also enabled the establishment of a policy of total segregation and differentiation, excluding the indigenous population

¹ Il presente contributo si inserisce tra le attività di ricerca del progetto PRIN PNRR 2022 HiLArI – Histories, Laws & Architectures for Inclusion (Codice progetto: P2022MEAY9_001 – CUP: F53D23012060001), ammesso a finanziamento con Decreto Direttoriale MUR n. 1375 del 1° settembre 2023, Missione 4 – Istruzione e Ricerca, Componente 2 – Dalla Ricerca all’Impresa, Investimento 1.1 – “Fondo per il Programma Nazionale di Ricerca”, finanziato dall’Unione Europea – NextGenerationEU.

from political rights and condemning them to an inferior legal status. The colonial space thus appears, up to this point, as an “empty space,” within which the colonizers imposed a functional framework capable of neutralizing otherness and erasing local identity.

The chosen case study – the city of Asmara, the capital of Eritrea during Italian colonial rule – is particularly useful to this perspective [Barrera 2008]. At the time of the establishment of the colony, Eritrea had only one city, although of modest size: Massawa. Asmara was nothing more than a small village with a few buildings of little significance. Later, in 1888, it became the capital of Italian Eritrea. Governor Ferdinando Martini, in fact, established the seat of government there, giving that relocation the symbolic value of an act of foundation: the city thus became the center of the political and economic life of the colony. The analysis of its foundation and its urban transformation allow us to compare the strategies adopted by the liberal government and the Fascist regime, showing how the urban layout shifted from a primarily administrative and functional logic to an ideological and propagandistic vision, inscribing within the space a precise project of domination and racial segregation.

In this context, space is not only a passive container of legal and political action, but a true field of construction of subjectivity [Filesi 1998]: it is in space, indeed, that law delineates the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion, belonging and “otherness”, citizens and subjects. Since the advent of modernity, space has been configured as the operative site of the «legal language of conquest» [Nuzzo 2004], through which legal categories are produced, and inequality is legitimized as the natural order of things. Therefore, Asmara is not only a subject of study: it represents a privileged point of understanding that helps us to critically examine the relationship between law and the production of space in the colonial context, as well as the material and symbolic legacies that this past continues to project onto the present.

Asmara's urban space: a laboratory of segregation

«Asmara is a place of sorrow» [Lo Sardo 1995, 19]: in this way the Eritrean diplomat Hailé Ogzbachi describes the capital, highlighting how the city's urban planning was far from a painless process for the local population. The foundation and the development of Asmara, indeed, were not a neutral process but they profoundly marked the history and identity of the Eritrean people. The name of the city itself has a symbolic and complex meaning. “Asmara” derives from the word *Semeré* that stands for “united” and, in its complete form can be translated as “they pacified us, they united us”. However, this union turned out to be merely superficial because the city's urban planning under the Italian colonial domain was characterized by a strong zoning and segregation of the native population.

The residential and urban segregation was reflected in the legal status of the colonized. The colonial discourse created a clear separation between the colonized and the colonizers by constructing both visible and invisible walls between “us” and “them”. The colony was, in fact, an “other” space, relegated to an endless premodernity. Colonial space thus appears as a suspended space. In addition to the existence of different zones within

the city, each characterized by a certain ethnic homogeneity, there were also two distinct normative systems: one for Italians and foreigners, and another for natives and “assimilated”. The latter, considered colonial subjects, lives in a one-dimensional condition that could be defined only in negative terms. Belonging to a race was not only a tool for the systematic division of ethnic groups but also became a useful vehicle for constructing and differentiating the categories of citizenship and subjecthood [Nuzzo 2004/2005].

Italian colonialism in Eritrea [Rosoni 2006] was predominantly an urban experience carried out through interventions in the territories targeted by colonial expansion, and it affected an environment that was regarded as rural and backward. We can talk about “external areas” or underdeveloped countries. Thus, the colonial city was born. We can define it as a “city of services” that often arises near a harbor, an administrative city totally embedded in this system of domain and anything but functional for the development of the surrounding territory. The principal instrument of this urban transformation is represented by the urban plans designed from the early years of the nineteenth century. These projects were not simple architectural schemes but concrete instruments for the control and organization of the urban space.

Asmara was celebrated for its typical Italian atmosphere precisely through the style of its monuments and the character of its residences, «despite its large indigenous quarter» [Greslieri 1993, 30]. The city became a mosaic of contradictions: on one hand, increasingly strict racial segregation; on the other, the desire to create a modern reality characterized by Italian cinemas, theaters, bars, and restaurants. Asmara, during the 30s, in fact, was called “the little Rome” for various reasons such as «its central role in East Africa; its urban development that followed rationalist and modernist principles; and its technological, cultural and symbolical connection with Rome» [Caprotti 2017, 1]. On one side was the European quarter, designed to embody the image of colonial modernity and organized according to a precise zoning plan that reflected the order and efficiency of the Western model [Sinou, Poinso, Sternale 1989]. On the other side stretched the indigenous quarter, characterized by archaic structures such as the so called “*tukulus*”, huts that evoked ancient military fortifications. These dwellings not only segregated the local population but also symbolically referenced the grandeur of Imperial Rome, thereby reinforcing the colonial rhetoric of domination and civilization.

In this context, it is essential to analyze Asmara’s urban plans [Canali 2016, 90-110]. Those of Odoardo Cavagnari (1913) and Vittorio Cafiero (1939) represented attempts to structure and rationalize the city’s layout according to different principles. Both models reflected specific visions of social and political order, proposing solutions aimed at organizing urban space in accordance with the power dynamics and needs of the colonists living in those territories. The comparison between these two plans allows us to understand the different strategies adopted to govern urban development and their impact on the city and its inhabitants.

Comparing models: Cavagnari's and Cafiero's urban plans

Cavagnari's and Cafiero's urban plans, represent two different approaches to urban space management, expressing divergent conceptions of the relationship between architecture, society, and power. While both aimed to organize the city in a functional and hierarchical way, their strategies responded to different logics, shaped by historical contexts and specific objectives. Analyzing these two models allows us to highlight their similarities but, more importantly, their differences in the conception of urban space and in its use as an instrument of control and development. In particular, the comparison between these two phases, allows us to understand how, in both cases, the city was used as an instrument of social and political control moving from a pragmatic model with administrative purposes to a propagandistic and ideological one.

The approval of Asmara's first general urban plan occurred only between 1913 and 1914 [Casciato 2013]. The project, conceived by the architect Odoardo Cavagnari, was subsequently modified and further differentiated over time, becoming the foundation for urban codification under the Fascist regime. Cavagnari was entrusted with a task of great urgency: to identify new zones for a controlled urban development with the aim of enabling the establishment of many Italians to the colony. The housing issue was of primary importance. Italian colonialism, in fact, represented itself as demographic colonialism, an aspiration that, from Crispi onwards, held a significant place in the Italian colonial context [Labanca 2002]. Especially the fascist period was characterized by this type of colonialism, aimed at redirecting migratory flows from Italy toward the colonies. In 1935, in an interview, it was Mussolini himself that stated that the Italian people should be granted the right to settle and live in those areas. Cavagnari initiated this approach by redefining the city's urban form, constructing axes dedicated to residential and commercial buildings. This form of containment aimed to prevent uncontrolled expansion while simultaneously creating an open space to facilitate future construction. The situation of segregation and exclusion increased. Asmara, however, was already a highly zoned city due to previous regulatory schemes that had divided it in three different residential areas with the prohibition for the indigenous population from living in the "European zone" [Canali 2016].

The initial growth of Asmara was regulated by a master plan, approved in 1902, which included the area east of the "fenced camp" up to the *Mai Belà* stream, which for many years would mark the boundary line of the first residential expansion intended for European citizens. The first nucleus of residential and tertiary expansion developed on a grid layout; it was bounded by two main, parallel arteries: above, Corso del Re, and three blocks below, Viale della Regina. Along Corso del Re, which followed the direction of the ancient road, an ample square opened up (Piazza del Tribunale, later renamed Piazza Roma), which served as the heart of the city's life. The square in question was surrounded by buildings symbolizing political and economic power, such as the courthouse and the headquarters of the central banks. The system of the two squares and the grid suggested that "lesson in civilization" that ultimately marked a position of subordination for the indigenous population.

From 1908 onward, Asmara's growth was regulated by an urban planning provision that divided the city into three zones according to an ethnic distinction. In that same year, in fact, the new governor Giuseppe Salvago Raggi (1907-1915) issued two decrees that introduced an initial articulation of the city on an ethnic basis. Thus began a true planning season for Asmara. By Governorial Decree of 23 October 1908 no. 798, published in the *Bullettino Ufficiale della Colonia Eritrea*, XIII, 43 (24 Oct. 1908), and by Governorial Decree of 19 December 1908 no. 814, published in the *Bullettino Ufficiale della Colonia Eritrea*, XIII, 52 (24 Dec. 1908), Asmara was subjected to extensive zoning. The city was divided into three residential zones: the first zone was reserved exclusively for the dwellings of Italians and citizens of foreign states; the second was a mixed area dedicated to the dwellings of Europeans, Eritreans, and assimilated persons; the third was reserved exclusively for the dwellings of colonial subjects and those assimilated to them.

After 1914, moreover, Eritreans were forced to relinquish any properties located in the area reserved for Europeans, a measure that generated widespread discontent among the local population. We must highlight that the new plan did not address the problem of the indigenous settlement but merely designated a zone in the northeastern area, separated from the European one. However, the colonial government intervened in the process of creating private spaces thus shaping entire neighborhoods with the use of architecture. In fact, on the one hand there are

The differentiated buildings located in the market square, which delineated the architectural boundaries of social space. On the other hand, the various religious buildings are noteworthy, as they marked prominent points on the city map, acting as hinges and boundary markers within the urban structure [Bader 2016, 53].

The urban exclusion was extended to all sectors: houses of different construction, for instance, were used as invisible walls for a broader segregation. The plural colonial society appeared to be governable only through the control of the urban space. Urban planning was used as a tool for the hierarchization of space: its purpose was to divide and define different social classes and races, thereby constructing a social pyramid.

With the advent of fascism, the situation of segregation deteriorated exponentially. The regime clearly defined the program in the colonies with its aggressive policy of expansion that regarded underdeveloped Africa as a unique opportunity to undertake a civilizing and modernizing mission. To demonstrate the power of the Empire, it focused on the construction of modern, imperial cities grounded in hierarchy and order: the metropolitan government pursued a highly ambitious plan that aimed at organizing the colonies and transforming them into instruments for disseminating its political ideologies. Urban planning

can be understood as a technology of the regime, insofar as Mussolini's architects and urban planners employed the new discipline to promote the totalitarian vision and to stabilize the inherently unstable fascist ideology by embedding it within public urban spaces [Caprotti 2017, 1].

There were two main challenges: on the one hand, to make visible and concrete the differences with the previous government; on the other, to give the city a coherent and homogeneous appearance. It is particularly significant to observe how, initially, the colonists settled in the peripheral areas, a choice that the regime labeled as “shamefully impious”, since in the prevailing perception, the true urban center was represented by the African quarter. The issue was highly complex:

From 18.000 inhabitants in the 1920s, of whom less than one-third were Italians, the population grew to nearly 100.000 by 1936, half of whom had arrived from Italy, while the indigenous population also steadily increased, drawn by the demand for labor. This shift altered all previously established settlement hierarchies and, above all, the division into ethnic quarters: Eritrean increasingly occupied parts of the old city center, while Italians settled in the healthier and less densely populated “villa” districts [Canali 2016, 96].

On May 16, 1936, the architect Piacentini wrote a letter addressed to the Minister of the Colonies, emphasizing the importance of a new master plan for the colony [Lo Sardo 1995, 111]. In particular, the letter emphasized that the purpose of the plan for the entire territory was to coordinate all future initiatives to prevent conflicts with principles of general interest. The plan was not to be understood as a rigid and unchangeable scheme; however, the architect’s letter highlighted a significant element: the building program had to be based on a clear separation between Europeans and indigenous people [Civico 1937].

In 1938, Architect Vittorio Cafiero was sent to Asmara with the task of drafting the new urban plan. Cafiero’s first assignment was to find a rapid solution to the contradictions present in the city, which were incompatible with the ideological framework of fascism, based on the assumption of the superiority of the white race.

In the same year, the *Notiziario Urbanistico Coloniale* [Bader 2016, 95], in a report on Asmara, noted that the indigenous quarter constituted a source of disturbance for the colonists, as it was located in one of the city’s most desirable areas. The matter was so crucial for Cafiero that it led him to advocate for the relocation of the white population from the periphery to the urban center, alongside this reorganization proposing the creation of a quarter specifically designated for African inhabitants. In Cafiero’s view, the issue was of absolute priority. He ensured that the white population could return from the periphery to the city center by opening new areas for African inhabitants. For more effective segregation, he not only designed a wide road to the north of Asmara but also created square residential spaces, interconnected according to the principle of the *Cardo* and *Decumanus*. The rigid division was meant to organize urban space while simultaneously fulfilling the self-imposed mission of civilization.

Cafiero, in fact, was the first to be able to formulate a territorial organization capable of asserting fascist power. Cafiero’s plan (1939) confirmed the subdivision between a European center and an indigenous one. Between them, was established an area called «campo cintato» or *combusc* [Simone 2019], which in certain times, was off-limits to Abyssinians unless they carried a pass proving they worked for an Italian family [Triulzi 2004-2005]. These urban transformations were not merely a reflection of functional

needs, but also responded to specific political and social visions, which translated into different approaches to city planning. It was in this context that the zoning of Asmara developed, whose evolution between the period of the liberal government and the subsequent fascist regime revealed minimal differences in the criteria of organizing the urban space. It's necessary, in fact, to explore the meaning of the term acquired during the fascist period, becoming a paradigm of the regime's colonial policy.

Zoning as a Paradigm of the Regime's colonial policy

As stated before, at the center of the urban planning debate there was the principle of zoning. The "culture of zoning", in fact, is «perfectly observable in these projects of cities, that reflect the will to create "in situ" conditions similar to those of the motherland» [Barrera 2008, 46]. The great interest in the subject is demonstrated above all by what emerged during the Congress of the National Institute of Urban Planning (INU), held in Rome in 1937. Indeed, almost all the speakers proposed making functional division the guiding principle for the development of colonial cities. Already in the introduction to the conference's summary document, it was stated that among the new principles of urbanization, zoning was the fundamental one. This specific approach to land use was characterized by a division into zones which, according to architectural historians Eugenio Lo Sardo and Giuliano Gresleri, reflected an urban planning culture that was the result of a modernization process that the Fascist regime intended to initiate in the colonies starting in 1936 [Massaretti 2014].

In the first months after the proclamation of the Empire, the Minister of the Colonies, Alessandro Lessona, started to give detailed and consistent instructions aimed at a systematic separation of the various social groups, seeking to elevate ethnic division to the starting point of colonial urban planning. In this way, urban planning and architecture officially became tools for the imposition of the fascist political ideologies in Asmara. Even compared to the liberal period, segregation policy underwent a marked deterioration. In particular, the Fascist government consolidated racial order through a strict legal framework, based on a clear separation between Italian settlers and indigenous population, reinforcing the concept of Italian racial superiority through a series of norms that regulated every aspect of social, economic and political life, systematically excluding the native population from civil rights and opportunities for advancement within colonial society. Cafiero himself drafted, in those years, a new building regulation to replace the one drawn up by Cavagnari (1913-1914). In addition to zoning and the hierarchization of communication routes, great attention was devoted to urban greenery, which was to function not as a wall but as a marker. In this way, the criterion of ethnic separation between Eritreans and Italians was spatially reinforced through a green belt. Urban planners too were called upon to devote particular attention to the issue of zoning. The twenty-two participants in the INU Congress put this question at the center of their contributions, laying the methodological foundations for an urban planning approach oriented toward the exclusion of the indigenous population. The declared aim was to contribute actively to the construction of a model of urban segregation, elevating

the role of urban planning to that of a political tool. The proceedings of the Congress emphasized, in fact, that the various areas of the city could not be built according to uniform criteria, justifying this stance by invoking the presumed differences in habits and cultures among the populations.

Colonial settlements entail a simultaneous rethinking of property and space. The colonized territory thus becomes an instrument of power and violence. “White” spaces appear inviolable, whereas “indigenous” ones are described as contingent. All these elements make it possible to understand how colonialism is deeply rooted in the territory. A social hierarchy is therefore created: territoriality can “implant” possession while at the same time dispossessing the Others [Blomley, 2023]. In this context, Cafiero’s project represented the formal expression of the state’s utopia, showing the regime’s political ideas utilizing urban planning and architecture.

Conclusions

Asmara represents a unique case in the history of colonial urban planning, as within it the logics of liberal pragmatism intertwine with the propagandistic needs of the fascist regime. If at first the city was conceived as an administrative tool, with the advent of fascism it served as a platform to express the Italian imperialistic ambition, translating into “stone and concrete” the colonial ideology [Gentile 2010]. This development shows that colonial urban planning was not guided solely by practical needs but was profoundly influenced by political strategies and ideological aspirations tied to the historical context in question.

However, it is essential to underline that Italian colonialism, beyond its urbanistic manifestations, represented a chapter of history marked by violence, oppression and forced imposition of an order foreign to the local populations. One of the most tangible effects of colonialism was, in fact, the intervention in the territory and in the state structures of the countries subjected to colonial expansion. The creation of colonial cities was not merely an urban planning operation, but an integral part of a broader process of exploitation, in which the resources of African territories were systematically channeled toward the colonial power. Asmara, like the other colonial cities, became the instrument through which this dynamic materialized, serving as a hub for the redistribution of wealth and the management of control over the indigenous population. It should also not be forgotten that the planning of Asmara was not a painless process for the local population. Its transformation into a colonial city entailed the expropriation of the surrounding villages and the imposition of a rigid spatial segregation.

Ultimately, the transformation of Asmara into a colonial city was not only a process of urban development but also a story of displacement for the local communities. This historical episode stands as evidence of the broader – and often painful – legacy of colonial urbanization in Africa: a legacy made of impressive infrastructures and rationalized urban layouts, but also of deep social and cultural scars that still resonate in the collective memory today.

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