

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

1

Tourism Heritage in Asmara

Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

*Associate Professor and Head Department of Geography,
Adi-Keih College of Business and Social Studies,
Eritrea, N.E. Africa*

Abstract

The tourism industry is the world's largest and most complicated industry and this complexity is because of having a strong bond with social, cultural, political and environmental issues. This research paper mainly concentrated on tourism development in Asmara as related with different factor affecting tourism development, like geographic aspects, socio-cultural aspects, infrastructure and transportation. Few constraints exist as a barrier for sustainable development which has direct relation with policies and strategies. In these research paper different types of data acquiring and data analysing methods were used. Those data were collected though both primary and secondary methods to acquire information related to this study. The primary data were collected through interviews with the informants from Ministry of Tourism and informants from Ministry of Public Works as well as my personal observation. Secondary data were collected from archival records and brochures from “ministry tourism promotion” division, some books related to the study were used and different documents from ministry of public works especially from “Asmara Heritage Project” division. In addition to these sources various dossiers were used which includes statistical data related to the research Different senior researches were also used from previous years as a reference. The generated data analysed using tables, graphs, maps and different forms of figures to present clear idea about the research and general idea about the research area.

Key words: *Heritage, Tourism, Sustainable, Asmara project*

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

Introduction

The location of Eritrea and characteristics of the country's nature environment, history and social, cultural and economic patterns strongly influence the development of tourism. The economic development policy adopted by the government in 1998 identifies opportunities and constraints for economic growth. It states that "Eritrea's overall development strategy aims at facilitating the establishment of a dynamic private sector-led market economy." The policy also indicates that Eritrea has significant potential for developing tourism and efforts are being undertaken to develop this sector.

Eritrea was once the potential tourist destination in the horn of Africa. However, due to the destructive policies of numerous colonizers and 30 years of devastating war for independence which left the country in ruins, it is solely and completely blamed for the economic and social downturn of the country (MTIT, 1993).

Asmara, Eritrea's capital is situated on the eastern edge of Eritrea's highland plateau. It has alluring historical and architectural establishments and hospitable society. Asmara enjoys a great climate, clean and picturesque streets, attractive palm trees, and a reputation as one of the safest, calm and alluring capital cities in Africa (Frey, and Still, 1998).

Asmara was built as the capital of the Italian colony of Eritrea in 1890-1940 and has a mixed Italian and Eritrean cosmopolitan feel and atmosphere to it. Following the Italian occupation the British administered Eritrea from 1941-1952 made Asmara the city of administration. However, the British stay did not change the Italian feeling of Asmara, till the Ethiopian occupation that brought sever defacing and utter neglect to the one elegant city of Asmara. Asmara is known for its clean street and safe, attractive and peaceful places which a lot of tourists fall (Houdek and Cholo,1995).

Sometimes Asmara called as "*AFRICAN ROME*"/*PICOLA ROMA* because of the spectacular buildings built during the Italian colonial period. The architecture design is known as *Art Deco*.(Ministry tourism broacher). Asmara is an outstanding example of an historic urban landscape in an African setting embodying an early encounter with modernity in the twentieth century through an exceptional urban planning process encompassing a whole city and combining local natural and cultural conditions. Asmara was founded on the site where an agglomeration of four ancient villages, 'Arbate Asmara', (Yishak,

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

1993) had existed. Arbate Asmara was relocated to northeast towards the escarpment to make room for the urban centre, which adopted the name Asmara. Asmara was a regional seat of power for local tribal chiefs long before the Italians arrived in the highlands in 1889, having been based in the Red Sea port of Massawa, the first capital of their embryonic empire, since 1885.

Objectives and methodology

The objective of the study is to understand tourism as a system and develop integration mechanism like Asmara city. Know and develop the city of Asmara as a prime centre of tourist and further investigate some factors which can be needed to see their basic influences on city development. Asmara is the main town of Eritrea as such it is important to understand the significance of the city to contribute tourist in other small towns. Finally it is essential to encourage the Ministry of tourism to implement the strategies in national development plan from the year 2000 which states clearly the importance of tourism in the national plan. In these research paper different types of data acquiring and data analysing methods were used. Those data were collected though both primary and secondary methods to acquire information related to this study (MOT).

The primary data were collected through face to face interviews with the informants from MOT (Ministry of Tourism) as well as Engineers from MOPW (Ministry of Public Works) Interview though telephone was also used at time were the informants were not available personally and my personal observation was involved for acquiring data. And the secondary data were collected from archival records and brochure of “ministry tourism promotion” division, some books related to the study were used, and different documents from ministry of public works especially from “Asmara Heritage Project” division. In addition to these sources various dossiers were used which includes statistical data related to the research Different senior researches were also used from previous years as a reference. The generated data analysed using tables, graphs, maps and different forms of figures to present clear idea about the research and general idea about the research area.

Location of the study area

Eritrea is found in the horn of East Africa which lies between 12°22'N-18° 02'N and 36° 26'22sE - 43°13'E (EMI, 2015). The city (Asmara) is situated 15°20'N 38°56'E on the central plateau of the Eritrean highlands, at the edge of the eastern escarpment, a landform which descends rapidly from 2300m above

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

sea level (Houdek and Oriolo , (1995). Its altitude above sea level is between 2300 - 2450m or 7,628ft. Asmara is strategically established at the centre of the country. (www.goggle.wikipedia, encyclopaedia).

At about 2,400m above sea level, the plateau on which Asmara is located provides a perfect environment for settled communities. Its relatively rich soil, sufficient rainfall and comparatively flat land suitable for tillage have enabled it to support a large population for centuries (Frey and Stillhard 1998). Abundant forests once carpeted the region, sustaining a wide range of flora and fauna and affording plenty of adequate shelter. The temperate climate also ensured pleasant living conditions particularly agreeable to Europeans compared with the lowland dry areas of Eritrea and a reliable supply of water (Dossier for Asmara heritage project)

Importance of Tourism in Asmara

With a population still below half a million, Asmara, a capital city remains manageable and is easily traversed on foot or by bicycle.(2014) The city centre maintains a good mixture of private residences, small businesses and public offices. Thanks to the human scale of the city, the streets of Asmara are pleasure for pedestrians to relaxed walking Greenfield (1988). The modern city was built as part of the colonial plan for the benefit of Italian settlers. The task assigned to the Italian colonial architects and town planners was two-fold; firstly, to create a familiar and comfortable European setting for Italian emigrants; secondly, to impose control and racial division over the inhabitants of the city. Many residents of the capital can recall a time when Eritreans were forbidden to walk on the main streets reserved for Italians and other white foreigners. As a result, Asmara's central avenue is still commonly referred to with the word *combushtato*, came from an Italian word *Campo Cintato* meaning a closed camp or district (Ministry of Tourism (1993). Racial segregation was always of major concern to the colonial town planners. Nowadays, it is rare to hear complaints about Italian colonization in Asmara. Many elderly people take pride in being able to speak Italian and the Italian influence continues to accent everyday life in the city. To continue with the buildings, Asmara has one of the largest pools of rational buildings in Africa, perhaps even the world.

A recent survey has indicated some 400 rationalist buildings exist in Asmara. Rationalistic style includes the style where functional and aesthetic coherence is achieved by a rational (reasoned) approach to a building and town design in contrast to that of expressional styles, which were highly romantic art.

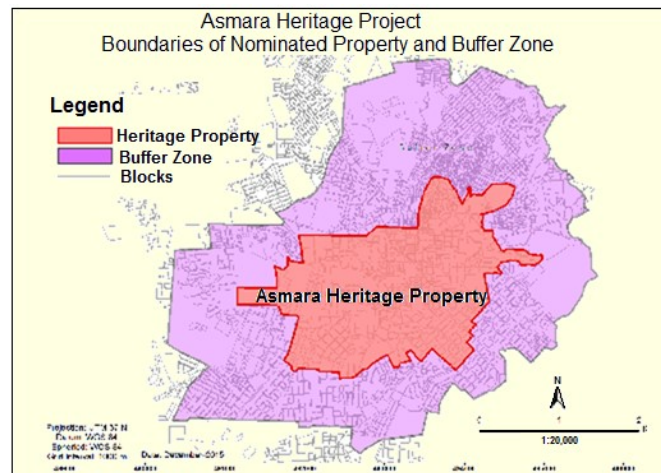
© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

Today's architects and engineers appreciate Oduardo Cavagnari and Guido Ferrazza designed buildings that gave Asmara a highly distinctive architectural character Ministry of Tourism (1996).

Fortunately, the city survived not only the Second World War, but also the longest war of independence in Africa, as well as another subsequent war with Ethiopia (1998-2000). But as this is the fact, the situation is changing fast as the demand for buildings is increasing. The new styles of construction have invariably ignored the old, but a new initiative to preserve the building culture is now underway in Asmara and some 400 buildings are to be preserved in Asmara. (Ministry tourism head office Asmara).

Asmara has always been a multicultural city. Arabic and Tigre, Eritrea's two other lingua francas in addition to Tigrinya, are spoken by many people in the city, along with Amharic and Italian. Today Asmara is first and foremost the showcase of Eritrean independence. Many street names have been changed to reflect the history of the struggle and parks planted with trees to honour the memories of the martyrs of the revolution. Nationalist murals (wall paintings) decorate public spaces around the city, representing life in the battle zones or cultural scenes from around the country.

Asmara UNESCO Nomination



Map 1- Asmara Heritage Property

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

Asmara was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2017, becoming the first modernist city anywhere to be listed in its entirety. Asmara a newly listed Eritrean capital features outstanding examples of experimental building design from the early 20th century. Standing as a startling collection of futuristic Italian architecture from the 1930s, perched on a desert mountaintop high above the Red Sea, the Eritrean capital of Asmara has been listed as a UNESCO world heritage site. Announced as one of a series of new “inscriptions”, which are expected to include German caves with ice-age art and the English Lake District, Asmara is the first modernist city in the world to be listed in its entirety. First planned in the 1910s by the Italian architect-engineer Odoardo Cavagnari, Asmara was lavishly furnished with new buildings in 1935, when the sleepy colonial town was transformed into Africa’s most modern metropolis. As the “little Rome” at the centre of Italy’s planned African empire, it became a playground for Italian architects to experiment.

“It has an unparalleled collection of buildings that show the variety of styles of the period,” said Edward Denison, a lecturer at UCL’s Bartlett School of Architecture, who has been working as an adviser to the Asmara Heritage Project, helping to put together the 1,300-page bid document, the result of two decades of research. “You get a sense that the architects were getting away with things here that they certainly wouldn’t have been able to do in Rome.” From the daring cantilevered wings of the *Fiat Tagliero* service station, modelled on a soaring aeroplane, to the sumptuous surrounds of the *Impero cinema*.

The city is full of buildings that combine Italian futurist motifs with local methods of construction. *Fiat Tagliero’s* garage, a petrol station with 60ft concrete wings mimicking an aeroplane taking off. Behind the sharp cubic facades stand walls of large laterite stone blocks, carefully rendered to look like modernist concrete constructions, finished in shades of ochre, brown, pale blue and green, much more colourful than their European counterparts. Some buildings, such as the *Orthodox cathedral (St. Merry church)*, have a bold hybrid style, with African “monkey head” details of wooden dowels poking through the facade, originally used to bind horizontal layers of wood together between the blocks of stone. Orthodox cathedral in Asmara. (Asmara heritage project dossier)

Elsewhere, there are stunning villas, stylish shops and heroic factory complexes, sampling from modernism’s broad palette, including novecento, rationalism and futurism, most of which remain in an unusually well-preserved state. “While other countries like Libya and Somalia were understandably keen

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

to trash their colonial heritage,” said Denison, “Eritrea was subject to a decade of British rule and 40 years of Ethiopian rule, so the process was more gradual.” When independence finally came in the 1990s, a sudden rash of modern buildings made many realise the value of their colonial heritage. A moratorium on building in the city was established in 2001, which is now planned to be lifted with the introduction of a new conservation management plan, updating the regulations for the first time since the 1930s. (Ministry tourism head office)

Asmara Architecture

During Mussolini's time, Italy invested a lot of capital and manpower in embellishing Eritrea's capital. Asmara was even dubbed Piccola Roma, although it of course never attained the historical importance of Italy's capital Gebremed and Omar (2007). Still, the Italians made Asmara a gem among African capitals, and this can be appreciated to present days. After the Italian period, also other western architects experimented with styles and it is thus possible to walk for hours in Asmara admiring curious and beautiful buildings.



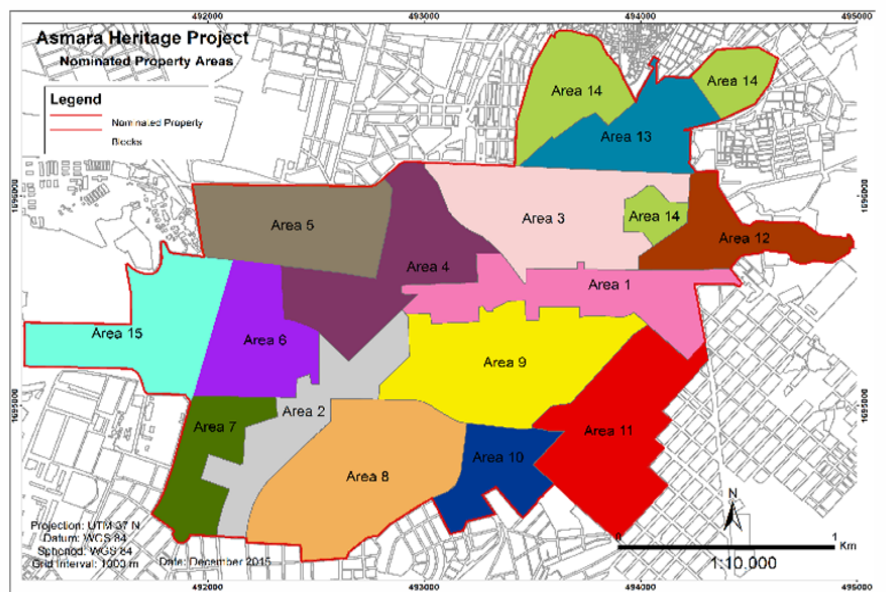
Map 2- Asmara's historic buildings

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

Apart from the architecture, the city was also consciously planned and this planning still makes for an orderly city rarely seen elsewhere in this continent. It also makes visiting architectural highlights easy. One area was where Italian businessmen and well-off people lived. It is the area where many villas are now used as embassies, hotels, or schools. This part of Asmara has quiet corners, squares, trees and flowers, and it is a true pleasure walking around it and appreciating the beauty of it all UNESCO (2017). Best of all, it is possible to stay in these villas as some of them are now being used as hotels or guesthouses.

Then there is the Liberation Avenue area, which is the place of many official buildings, larger and more formal than those in the residential area. Here, you can find the Cathedral, clearly following the example of Northern Italy's church building of the middle Ages, the Opera House, the Ministry of Education, the Cinema Impero, and some other noteworthy buildings International bibliography of Asmara (2011). Then there are other houses and constructions scattered all over town which are worth to be seen.

Places of Interest



Map 3, Area of interest for the heritage property

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

Table Area of interest

Areas	Number of buildings surveyed	Areas	Number of buildings surveyed
1	204	8	319
2	204	9	445
3	1205	10	108
4	274	11	594
5	169	12	127
6	156	13	210
7	214	14	45

Table 4.1 areas of interest (source MOT Asmara)

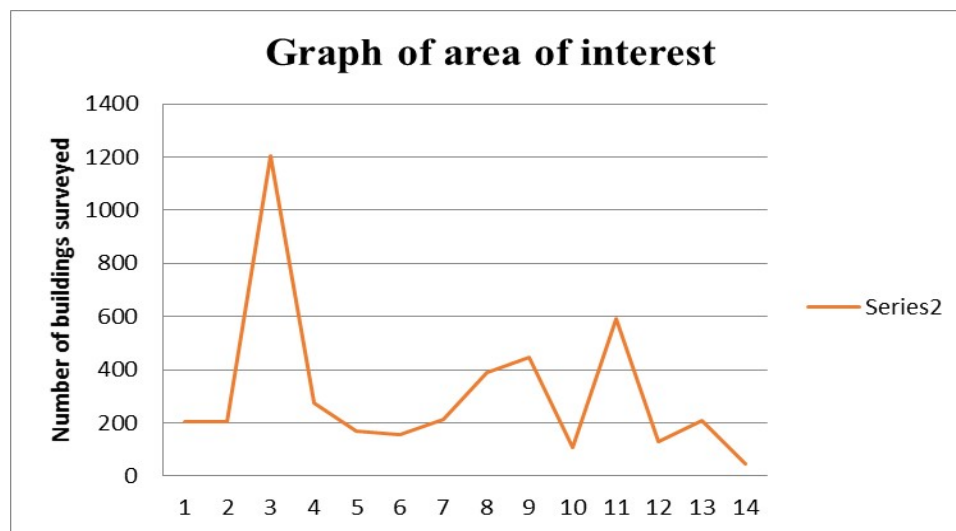


Figure1, Area of interest

The state Palace (Denden St.) is Eritrea’s official reception for foreign guests. The building was once the palace of the first civilian colonial governor, Ferdinando Martini. Haile Selassie also used it as his

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

Asmara's residence (National Tourism development plan1999). Old Italian cannons decorate the palace grounds. Work on this impressive neo-classical structure started in 1905 and completed in 1906.



Figure, 2 State Palace Asmara

Government Residence (Denden St.) today known as 'bietemengsti', is situated at the heart of central government in Asmara. The building was built around 1915 by OduardoCavagnari, and housed government offices from the start of Italian occupation in Asmara. Originally it was the headquarters of the troop command. Significant modifications were applied to the building in the 1930s and 1960s.



Figure 3, Ministry of Education Building

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

Ministry of Education (Harnet Av.) once housed the Casa Del Fascio—the Fascist Party Headquarters. The original building of 1928 by unknown architect was a small single-storey building in a mildly Romanesque style (of architecture which prevailed in Europe c.900-1200, with massive vaulting and round arches).

In 1940, the building was extended to include an extremely large modern façade by Bruno Sclafani. The Façade of this impressive building features a horizontal letter F, formed by a great and important tower which was conceived later during the climax of Fascist rule in Eritrea. The design was truly great and important, reflecting the increasing political stand of the Italian government at that time.



Figure 4 Selam Hotel building

Selam Hotel built as Albergo CIAAO (*Compagnia Immobiliare Alberghi Africa Orientale*). Designed by Rinaldo Borgnino in 1937, it is the first example of Rationalist architecture in Eritrea. This building and

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

its original interior is more important than anything else, not only because of its historic significance; it was there that Eritrea was officially declared an independent state.

Hamasien Hotel built in 1919 by Paolo Reviglio, is one of Asmara's more eccentric (strange) structures. It has a pyramid roof on the top of a tall tower (Asmara's early landmarks).



Figure 5 Hamasien Hotel building

Keren Hotel has only recently been fully redecorated and renamed to its original title Albergo Italia, having been called Keren Hotel for many decades. It is Asmara's oldest hotel, built by unknown architect in 1889. The dining room has maintained a century of graceful with its original light, iron columns and ornamental mouldings (architectural features). The Albergo is perhaps the most elaborate examples of stucco plaster work in Eritrea.

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum



Figure 6 Keren Hotel Building

Conclusion and recommendation

Tourist arrivals to Eritrea increased substantially from 1992 to 1997. However, because of the border conflict, arrivals sharply decreased in 1998 and remained depressed until now. Asmara is a perfectly situated city with high potential for tourism development. But very little attention/effort has been given to tourism sector by the government and any other non-governmental organization related to tourism development. Financial investment is required for developing tourism in both the public and private sectors. Some private investment resources are available in Eritrea for small-scale projects but, for larger-scale projects, foreign investment, or joint venture investment is necessary.

The Government has legislated investment Proclamation No. 59/1994, and intends to improve the facilitating mechanisms for both domestic and foreign investment initiatives. Public investment in tourism is especially needed for transportation and tourist attractions. Transportation development programmes are well under way. To develop archaeological/historic sites and development of museums, international assistance will be necessary the government will seek donor assistance to implement these projects.

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

The city has various tourism aspects to be considered for tourism development, like tourist attraction and tourist marketing. Those two aspects needed to be developed for sustainable development.

Recommendation

Human Resource development

The educational and vocational training policies of Eritrea and the current situation of human resources for tourism needed to be implemented. The government is responsible for policy, planning and coordinating development, establishing and administering facility standards, some training, some marketing and promotion, statistical compilation and research and other tourism management matters (Mcintosh, 1990). The government is also responsible for providing transportation and other tourist attracting services. Utility services of water supply, electric power, telecommunications and waste management and financed mostly by the government. In tourism management, the Ministry of Tourism (MOT) plays a catalytic role, mobilising support, collaborating with the private sector, coordinating with government agencies, and building a consensus.

- As HTTC will offer comprehensive programs at the basic, intermediate and advanced levels. Private as well as government schools should eventually provide some training. Other public sector tertiary level institutions, will collaborate with the HTTC. CBE should improve tourism in business studies and social sciences and develop tourism as a subject for special studies and research it should eventually develop degree programs on tourism management.
- Set human resource strategy for pre-employment and post-employment training and other programs. For pre-employment training, the roles of the various involved institutions are described as (vocational secondary schools will offer courses on hotel, catering and travel).
- Government officials should be trained as well as sector-related specialists, (especially including customs and immigration officials, retail shop and bank personnel, taxi drivers, museum attendants and police personnel, business consultants and architects along with improving public awareness programs. Tourist guides and tourist facility inspectors needed to be trained that includes language training.

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

Improve Tourism Facilitates and Services

Various types of tourist facilities and services require improvement and expansion

- The accommodation rooms currently existing, many of which do not meet minimum standards and will need to be upgraded or phased out.
- Many restaurants, cafés and bars currently exist but more will be needed as tourism expands. Sanitation in some of these enterprises has yet to meet the minimum standards.
- There are few licensed travel agents currently existing and more agencies can be developed as needed. Particularly required is more training of agency staff. Licensing of tour guides will be undertaken in the near future.
- For persons from most of the major tourist market countries, visas should be issued on arrival. At present, visas are required before arrival in Eritrea and this is a deterrent to tourism growth.
- Shopping for crafts and specialty items is generally satisfactory and should expand as tourism grows. Duty free shopping at the airport only requires some increasing variety in the goods on sale.
- There are no extraordinary health threats to tourists in Eritrea, but they must take reasonable precautions. Medical facilities and services are available but cannot handle all major problems.

Improve Infrastructure for Tourism

Infrastructure needed improvements for tourism development, are –

- Airports and air services: With the improvements completed or underway, the Asmara international airport facilities are adequate but more frequent and more direct flights from the major market countries are required.
- Roads: A major road improvement program for the country is important. Currently, the roads important for tourism between Asmara and Massawa and Asmara - Keren all must be improved and be adequate for tourist travel every time after being eroded by rivers during summer. Most other roads serving tourists sites are in poor condition.

© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

- **Railway:** The railway, especially the section over the escarpment between Asmara and Massawa, offers a highly scenic and interesting travel experience for tourists. Dismantled during the Struggle for Independence, the railway repaired once but the railway rehabilitation program needed to be continued, more often.
- **Water supply:** water source for Asmara is not sufficient to serve tourism development in the city. As a result it needs to be developed since it's the basic need of human being.
- **Electric power:** Currently, each city and several towns have their own power generation plants. Therefore, there should be no power problem in the main tourism areas. In remote areas, electric power is supplied by local generation plants. Because of its large amount of sunshine, but still needs improvement. And Eritrea should take advantage of solar power generation.
- **Waste management:** Sewage and solid waste collection, treatment and disposal are not yet well developed in Eritrea in general and particularly some parts of Asmara. Asmara has a combined water drainage and sewage system that has some defects. Development outside the city can presumably connect to septic tanks or utilize package sewage treatment plants.

References

1. Frey L. And Stillhard B. (1998) A base line Survey for sustainable Development of the Deki Lefay Community, Eritrea, Tereiro Switzerland.
2. Gebremed in Nayzghi and Omar Akbar 2007. Asmara Africa Secret Modern City. New York; Merrell
3. Greenfield R. (1988) Eritrea's Fight for Freedom, Asmara , Rora Eritrea Digital Library.
4. Houdek M. and Oriolo L. (1995) Eritrea at Gance, Asmara.
5. International bibliography of Asmara 2011, Gabriella Restaino. ARS. Progetti SPA Rome Italy
6. Ministry of Tourism (1993) First Conference on Development of Tourism in Eritrea, Asmara.
7. Ministry of Tourism (1996) Eritrea Horizons: The magazine of Eritrea's Tourist Industry. Vol. 1 No 1



© Dr. Berhane Keleta Chirum

8. Nomination of Asmara: Africa's Modernist City for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Dossier final spread).
9. YishakYosief, 1993, ZantaKetemaAsmera. Asmara Addis Abba.