

MISCELLANEA

The Symbol of Colonial Power through Urban Art: The Case of Mogadishu

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical and symbolic significance of urban structures in Mogadishu, focusing on Italian colonial and religious art. Beginning with a contextualization of Italian colonialism in Somalia, the authors analyze the impact of structural interventions, particularly the construction of the Cathedral in 1928, reflecting Italy's attempt to Europeanize the city. The study employs three lenses—religious, architectonic-spatial, and political—to unravel the complexities of colonial urban art. The Cathedral, a focal point of the analysis, exemplifies the multifaceted strategy of legitimizing Italian presence through religious symbolism, spatial transformation, and political assertion. The paper critically examines how colonial architecture displaced local populations, reshaped the urban landscape, and reinforced power dynamics. It also underscores the lack of acknowledgment and debate in Italy regarding its colonial past, urging a reconsideration of colonial monuments as heritage or reminders of a contentious history. The authors emphasize the need for Italy to confront its colonial legacy, advocate for education on this topic, and challenge the perpetuation of colonial-era commemorations.

KEYWORDS

Mogadishu; Art; Religion; Colonialism; Architecture

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Introduction

Mogadishu is the most beautiful city on the African continent for some, and in the Horn of Africa for others.¹ It is certainly an ancient and beautiful city, or at least, it has long been so, after having undergone many phases and changes. Today, after several years and a civil war that destroyed much of the city, together with the advent of Al Shabaab, a reconstruction of the city is partially ongoing, even though the country's government is still unstable. On the other hand, the structures and architecture of the city, although limitedly researched, are partially remaining and witnessing the recent history of Somalia and its capital city. Much of the recent Mogadishu, before the disruption of the abovementioned events damaged it, was standing on the shoulders of the new and nationalized architecture of the city. Indeed, structural intervention have been realized under the period of Italian colonialism to Europeanize the city. The colonial sites have later been appropriated and nationalized by the Somali government at independence.²

This paper starts from these points to analyze the symbolic meaning and role of urban structures in Mogadishu, specifically looking at colonial and religious art in the city. Since the Somali situation is quite complex, erroneous simplifications must be specifically avoided. Therefore, these authors decided to focus on the Cathedral of Mogadishu, built in 1928 by the Italians. This choice was motivated by the historical symbolism of the Cathedral, both as a long-standing monument and a deeply critical one. To elaborate a clear analysis, this essay focuses on the role of urban colonial art overall, situating the analysis on Mogadishu through a historical contextualization of Italian colonialism in Somalia and its reception. In our exploration of urban art in Mogadishu, our aim is to illuminate the myriad contradictions inherent in colonialism, with a particular emphasis on the teleology of spaces and how they evolve into arenas of power and submission. Monuments, and specifically the abovementioned Cathedral, will be scrutinized, delving into its historical narrative and missionary purpose while situating it within the broader context of similar structures. By adopting a multidimensional approach to the Cathedral's significance, this paper endeavors to demonstrate how colonial urban art not only served as a mechanism for displacing the local population but also facilitated the expropriation of space, leading to a diminishing centrality for the indigenous culture and local social life. To achieve this, we have chosen to employ three distinct lenses: religious, architectonic-spatial, and political. Overall, many think that colonialism shaped identities and formed modern Africa. Contrary to the Western idea that one may have, that is often

1 Pier Maria Mazzola, "Mogadiscio ritrovata," *Africarivista.it* (2021, February 1), Available at <https://www.africarivista.it/mogadiscio-ritrovata/179979/>.

2 Mohamed Iman, "Colonial Amnesia and the Material Remains of Italian Colonialism in Mogadishu," *Interventions* (2023): 1-23.

not the case. In this specific case, these authors started thinking about this article as two good white progressives would probably do: trying to look at this issue with eyes ready to criticize everything (fairly enough) and point out all discrepancies and long-term scars left by Italian colonialism in Somalia. Nevertheless, reality often surprises, and so happens here. Indeed, colonialism is mostly evident in its hidden scars and less in its actual forms. On the evident side, Mogadishu decided to forget about Italian colonialism as much as Italy did: Fuller's concept of "colonial amnesia",³ applied to Italy, has been re-employed by Mohamed to enlighten the post-colonial renovation process realized in Somalia at independence. Through the analysis of primary and secondary sources and archival research, this paper applies the lenses of historical analysis and looks at the interactions between architecture, colonialism, space and the readaptation of these together with the continuation of history.

Mogadishu and the Italian occupation of Somalia

The history of Somalia is strongly connected to that of its people, considered one of the largest homogeneous groups in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ The country, which was long a fundamental commercial center on the coast, had a privileged position within the dynamics of exchange in the Indian Ocean with Mogadishu and other maritime cities that quickly became fundamental exchange points. This configuration of things favored the spread of Islamic religion together with Arabic commerce, where the religious dimension became a strong fundament for the Somali, who share common traditions and language, as well as culture, and are generally regarded as basing their unity on these homogeneities rather than on the state.⁵ Noteworthy, religion walks along trade, and this favored a wide expansion of Islam in the country, becoming a strong cultural element for the Somalis. Overall, the history of the country until the first half of the 19th century is largely characterized by the advancement of Somali people from the North of the country towards the interior parts, while the coastal areas experienced a stronger connection to the Arab Peninsula, which resulted in the establishment of several Muslim emporia.⁶ The Somali capital, like almost all of the Swahili coast, lost its centrality in trade within the Indian Ocean when it became a territory of conquest by the Portuguese and then by the British.⁷ The first Italian explorers in 1891,

3 Mia Fuller, "Italy's Colonial Futures: Colonial Inertia and Postcolonial Capital in Asmara," *California Italian Studies* 2 (2011).

4 Castagno A. Alphonso and Anne Winslow, *Somalia: International Conciliation*, No.522, March 1959, (Literary Licensing, LLC, 2013), 1-68.

5 Hussein M. Adam, "Somalia: Militarism, Warlordism or Democracy?," *Review of African Political Economy* 19, n.54 (1992): 11-26.

6 Ioan M. Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia: Nation And State In The Horn Of Africa*, Revised, Updated, (Routledge, 2019).

7 Edward A. Alpers, "On Becoming a British Lake: Piracy, Slaving, and British Imperialism in the Indian Ocean During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2013), 45-58.

Robecchi-Brichetti, described in their reports the loss of centrality that the city had suffered within the coast following the arrival of Europeans in the Ocean.⁸ Looking at the recent years in the country's history, the Italian colonial phase unfortunately stands out, representing a peculiar case. European colonialism arrived in Somalia as the country assumed an increasingly strategic position with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The British, French, and Italians all intervened in the country soon after the Berlin Congress. The invasion was fought by Somalis, who united religiously around the figure of Sayid Mohamed, showing strong unity and leading to a resistance deeply characterized by fundamental protection against infidels.⁹ The British established a protectorate in the Northern part of the country, officially known as British Somaliland, while the Italians occupied the rest of the country. Their presence essentially lasted from 1892 to 1947, when the Treaty of Paris was signed, ending Italian colonial rule overall, after its defeat in the context of World War II.

The Italians arrived in Somalia at the end of the 19th century, initially with exploration trips with the aim of studying and learning about the territory, which was described as vast and sparsely populated, rich in agricultural and commercial potential¹⁰. Before the Italian occupation, the cities of Mogadishu, Brava, Berca, and Chisimaio were controlled by the Sultanate of Zanzibar. Italy was favored by Great Britain in negotiations with the Sultan as Germany also had expansionist ambitions on Somali territory. This led to the signing of a convention between Italy and Zanzibar in 1896, in which the Italian government obtained the right to administer politically and legally, the cities of Benadir in the name of the Sultan, in addition to collecting taxes and customs duties, in exchange for an annual rent of 160,000 rupees. Unlike Eritrea, initially, control of Somalia was entrusted to a private company, the Filonardi Company, following the English colonial model.¹¹ However, the Company did not have the desired effect and was accused of representing an economic loss to the state. Therefore, in 1905, the colony effectively came under the direct control of the Italian state, and the new legal order was completed with the law of 5 April 1908, which gave rise to "Italian Somalia". It is important to underline this shift, as it represented a significant transformation from an indirect rule of government, based on economic and commercial control, to a model of direct rule.¹²

This approach characterized Italian colonialism in the country and

8 Alberto Arecchi, "Robecchi-Brichetti e l'immagine di Mogadiscio," *Atti del Convegno su Luigi Robecchi-Brichetti e la Somalia*, (Pavia: Camera di Commercio Industria Artigianato e Agricoltura, 1979), 74-77.

9 Ahmed Ali M Khayre, "Somalia: an Overview of the Historical and Current Situation," (April 27, 2016): Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2771125>.

10 Ali M. Ahad, "I peccati storici del colonialismo in Somalia," *Democrazia & Diritto* (2013).

11 Marco Pandolfo, "L'incontro con la seconda colonia, la Somalia," in *La Somalia coloniale: una storia ai margini della memoria italiana*, (Diacronie: Studi di Storia Contemporanea, 2013).

12 Ibid.

experienced a specific escalation with the new phase that commenced with the advent of the fascist regime in Italy. This regime brought its imperial aspirations to the continent, symbolically represented by the short period proclaimed as Italian East Africa (1936-41). Indeed, after the regime took power in 1922, the following year saw the appointment of Governor Cesare Maria De Vecchi to Somalia. Upon his arrival, he found only a portion of Somalia under the effective control of Italian power. The new governor subsequently initiated a policy of violence without attempting to understand the local reality. Specifically, the northern area of the country was indirectly governed by the sultan. In 1928, the year when the Cathedral was inaugurated, the governor's objectives, marked by constant use of repression and violence, led to the Italian military force gaining control of Somalia. This was the situation until 1947, with the Paris Treaty, when Italy formally lost every colony.¹³

Fast-forwarding to the end of formal Italian colonialism over Somalia, of critical importance is the widely unknown later return to Somalia of the Italians. Indeed, in 1949 the United Nations (UN) commissioned Italy to guide that process over a period of ten years, from 1950 to 1960. This period has passed in history as the AFIS and represents a unique case in the history of the continent, as the only UN protectorate given to a colonizing country over its former colony.¹⁴ Justified on the basis of what the European narrative describes as a tentative attempt to facilitate the process of democratization of Somalia, it largely failed in its intention.¹⁵

Noteworthy, the matter of the UN Trusteeship is deeply critical and would need further evaluation, as it was mainly characterized as a second segment of the Italian colonization of Somalia. While this is not the place for such analysis, it should be remembered that the AFIS management has crucial responsibility in the economic deconstruction of Somalia, as well as its political struggles.¹⁶ Indeed, the AFIS was specifically characterized by a similar colonial administration in the country, in many cases the very same one, inheriting the administering fascist authorities who had already managed colonial Somalia. Consequently, they maintained the same structures and approaches undertaken during the previous colonial rule of Somalia.

To conclude this brief historical overview, it should be said that in the years that followed independence, Somalia experienced a period of peaceful democracy, characterized by clan allegiances and a coalition government between the Somali Youth League (SYL, Southern-based) and the Somali

13 Ibid.

14 The acronym AFIS stands for Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia, literally 'Italian Trust Administration'.

15 M. Reviglio Della Veneria, *The United Nations, Italy and Somalia: a 'sui generis' relation 1948-1969*, Master's thesis. (2015).

16 Alessandro Aruffo, *Dossier Somalia. Breve storia dal mandato italiano all'intervento Onu 1948-1993*, (Roma: DataneWS, 1994).

National League (SNL, Northern-based). This period of peace was interrupted by the assassination of President Cabdirashiid Cali Sharmaarke, in October 1969, who had become president after the elections at the beginning of the year: a government crisis followed and was interrupted by a coup staged by the military, which led General Mohamed Siad Barre to become head of the government.

In this context, Mogadishu underwent a structural symbolic nationalization process, characterized by the appropriation of colonial monuments. Mohamed has described how this process led to changing the meaning of those colonial monuments and symbols in a re-defined way that could serve the memory of the colonized. A progressive reappropriation of such symbols started during the latest part of the AFIS and led to an anticolonial restructuring, or abandonment, of those monuments and spaces that had become central to the colonial administration of the country.¹⁷

The problematics of Italian colonial art

The structures of a city deeply influence the way its inhabitants live within it. That is the case in Mogadishu as well, where the urban architectures of Italian colonialism strongly shaped the city and its population.¹⁸ The origins of Mogadishu are not entirely clear, although some estimates trace its foundation to the tenth or twelfth centuries. The city was an active commercial center on the Oriental Coast of the continent way before the Italian arrival. Relevantly enough, Mogadishu's port was participating in regional and inter-regional politics and commerce, respectively with Eastern Africa the Arabian Peninsula, and the Indian Ocean.¹⁹ Highlighting this element is fundamental in order to put into perspective the matters addressed in this paper, and proceed in understanding the issues it addresses and the perspectives it wishes to share with its readers.

The aim of this research is not only to invite a serious debate on the politicization of urban art but also to build a narrative that can show colonialism on art in the occupied country. For some years, in fact, all over the world statues, mausoleums, and iconic monuments representing figures or themes recalling colonialism were deeply criticized and became primary objectives of the so-called cancel culture and its relative debate. Iconic in this sense what happened in Bristol, where activists of the movement decided to throw into the sea the statue of Edward Colston, a slave trader in the Atlantic,²⁰ or the choice of South Africa to remove the statues of Cecil Rhodes, British explorer, and politician.

17 Iman Mohamed, "Colonial Amnesia and the Material Remains of Italian Colonialism in Mogadishu," *Interventions* (2023): 1-23.

18 Susan Schulman and Anna C Rader, "Mogadishu," *The RUSI Journal* 157, no. 4 (2012): 28-40.

19 Mohamed, "Colonial Amnesia and the Material Remains of Italian Colonialism in Mogadishu," 1-23.

20 Samuel J. Richards, "Historical Revision in Church," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 89, no. 3 (2020): 252-254.

In contrast to the ongoing efforts to raise awareness about the problematic representation of the colonial figure in art, Italy appears to lack an acceptance of responsibility for the role Italians played in perpetuating colonial politics.²¹ Specifically, there is a notable absence of a comprehensive debate on the case of the occupation of Somalia in Italy. This poses a challenge for a country that prides itself on not actively participating in the colonization of Africa yet fails to acknowledge its own history of perpetuating numerous racist policies. Indeed, there is a crucial tendency to generalize Italian colonialism as a Fascist event, and colonialism is not critically discussed in the country. Generally, present the phenomenon superimposing it on that of the fascist regime, for this reason, the role of AFIS is still poorly recognized by the Italian population, although the war and fascism were over for 5 years, in Somalia remained many fascist rulers even in democratic times. The topographical map of Italian colonialism shows how much the Italian territorial space is still impregnated with colonialism. This brief note is useful to highlight to what extent the state's colonialism has yet to be thoroughly critically understood and condemned. In particular, in Italy, there are still several art forms that recall and celebrate the colonial period. Among these is the mausoleum in honor of Rodolfo Graziani in Affile (Rome), an illustrious figure of Italian fascism and guilty of the greatest massacres of Italian colonialism in Ethiopia. Also in Milan, there is the statue of the writer Indro Montanelli who, during the occupation, married a 12-year-old girl, and the list would still be long.²²

The construction of Cathedral in Mogadishu and the redefinition of Urban Space

The process of discussing the role of Italian colonial art has evolved into a broader examination that aims to understand the problematic aspects of constructing monuments through the exertion of power, which resulted in the alienation and displacement of the local population. In doing so, the choice of the Cathedral is motivated by the authors of this paper for three reasons: religious, architectonic-spatial, and political.

The construction work began when the Fascist regime took power in Italy. After the march on Rome in 1922 and the seizure of power by the fascist regime, Cesare Maria De Vecchi was sent to Mogadishu. It faced a part of Somali territory under government control and part under the control of nomadic populations. De Vecchi immediately regained the portion of the territory not under the control of the regime and inaugurated a policy characterized by violence, lack of scruples, and poor understanding of local reality. In addition to these dynamics, one of the aims of the regime was to subject the Somali population to Italian religious culture and customs.

21 Alessandra Ferrini and Simone Frangi, "La responsabilità di un impero," in *Flash Art* (November, 2017): Available at <https://flash-art.it/article/la-responsabilita-di-un-impero/>.

22 https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/it/map/viva-zerai_519378#6/41.508/11.096

To this end, urban spaces were redefined with the construction of numerous Italian churches and schools where Catholic missionaries taught.²³ Furthermore, in Mogadishu, there were 28 mosques, many of which were destroyed with the arrival of colonialism.²⁴

It is here that the construction of the Cathedral in Mogadishu was planned, mostly to Italianize the Somali capital, where the administration was based. Interestingly, its construction is also closely related to the missionary policies adopted by the kingdom of Italy both during the fascist



FIG. 1

Imagine of the Cathedral belonging to the Iconographic Fund "Carlo Pedrini" and provided by Biblioteca di storia moderna e contemporanea (BSMC).

regime and in the previous one. Indeed, the Italian colonization of Somalia was strongly linked to the Catholic religion, as commonly occurred with European imperialism in the continent and elsewhere. To add an interesting element to this point, it should be noted that in the first twenty years of Italian-state presence in Somalia, from 1904 to 1924, such missionary policies were not particularly successful. It was specifically in 1924 that there was a significant turning point, with the arrival of Father Gabriele Perlo in the colony. From that moment on, missionary efforts took a new direction, with the spread of schools and hospitals run by missionaries throughout the city. Consequently, all Italian schools in Somalia were run by Catholic missionaries.²⁵ The construction of such a massive Cathedral in the heart of Mogadishu should be seen in the foreground of these events. In March 1928 the Cathedral was inaugurated, and Father Gabriele Perlo received episcopal consecration as to add to this massive Christianization process in Somalia. These elements are critical to the understanding of the spatial

23 Marco Pandolfo, "Dal primo difficile dopoguerra alla politica coloniale fascista," *La Somalia coloniale: una storia ai margini della memoria italiana*, (Diacronie: Studi di Storia Contemporanea, 2013).

24 Nuredin Haji Scikei, *Exploring the Old Stone Town of Mogadishu*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 2.

25 "Le missioni cattoliche nell'Africa Orientale," *L'Oltremare*, (December 1927): 27-28.

and religious colonization enacted by Italy in Somalia.

Indeed, to support the missionary goal, Italian colonialism redefined the spaces and built, among other things, religious monuments. The construction of the Cathedral began in December 1923 and lasted for five years.



FIG. 2

Image of The Construction of the Cathedral, belonging to the Iconographic Fund "Carlo Pedrini" and provided by Biblioteca di storia moderna e contemporanea (BSMC).

The cathedral was designed by the architect Count Antonio Vendone di Cortemiglia and was strongly wanted by the governor of Somalia Cesare Maria de Vecchi. Inspired to Norman and Gothic architecture,²⁶ its design included a porch with three arches to give an impression of speed and elegance and two towers to manifest solidity and strength. Inside the cathedral worked famous artists of the regime, such as Pietro Camarini, Gregorio Lazzarini, and Cesare Biscarra. Notably, the latter was responsible for the sculpture of the Madonna della Consolata, after which the cathedral was named.²⁷ The work was mainly carried out by Abyssinian and Mejeerteen prisoners, although historian Iman Mohamed has emphasized how the matter is complex and there is no certainty in this regard.²⁸ It is important to highlight that the structure of the cathedral is very reminiscent of the Norman style present in Cefalù, and this choice is not accidental. Indeed, the Normans had conquered Sicily after defeating the Arabs in 1091: curiously, the regime chose to represent the symbol of the Christian reconquest building the Cathedral in Mogadishu.

The connection between the conquest of Sicily and the colonization of Mogadishu sheds light on the significance of the drive to westernize the urban landscape. To analyze this, it is valuable to explore the construction

26 Mia Fuller, "Italian Colonial Architecture and City Planning in North and East Africa," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2020).

27 "Le missioni cattoliche nell'Africa Orientale," 27-28.

28 Mohamed, "Colonial Amnesia and the Material Remains of Italian Colonialism in Mogadishu," 1-23.

of the Cathedral through three lenses: religious, architectonic-spatial, and political. In terms of the religious dimension, it is essential to recognize Somalia as a predominantly Muslim country deeply steeped in its religious heritage and traditions. Instances of Islamophobia, prevalent in Western societies, particularly Italy, have fostered a perception of Christian religious superiority. In this context, the construction of the Cathedral for the regime represents the triumph over Islam and the imposition of foreign occupation in the heart of the city. The second aspect focuses on the physical and spatial repercussions of erecting the Cathedral. The construction not only displaced the Somali people from their customary living spaces but also transformed the area into a tool for settlers to exert control. This shift signifies the appropriation of power, replacing the indigenous people's decision-making authority over communal spaces with infrastructure catering to the colonizers' needs. The urban landscape, once governed by the local population, underwent a reshaping aligned with the preferences of the colonizers. The last critical aspect concerns the instrumentalization of religion for imperial politics, a tactic not limited to the colonization of Africa but also evident in using religion to rationalize political decisions. Placing a Cathedral at the center of the capital in a predominantly Muslim country should not be solely perceived as meeting the faithful's needs. Instead, it serves as a demonstration of Italian power, highlighting that political decisions and authority firmly reside in their hands. This strategic placement in the city center, traditionally the focal point, reinforces a divisive narrative wherein the Italian (Western) presence occupies the center, relegating the Somali (Others) to the periphery. In summary, the construction of the Cathedral in Mogadishu reflects a multi-faceted strategy employed by Italian societies to legitimize their presence through religious, spatial, and political dimensions, ultimately perpetuating racist policies.

For this reason, the cathedral for the regime was considered an important Catholic temple in the Indian Ocean and the largest cathedral in East Africa.²⁹ Notwithstanding its religious symbolism, the cathedral was part of the physical colonization of Somalia. At this juncture, this element should be specifically considered in its complexity. Indeed, the building has long had a definitive role in the cityscape of Mogadishu, reflecting importance with its symbolic presence³⁰ which was a "demonstration of colonial power as imagined by De Vecchi: it served as an emblem of this new era in which Italy's legitimate and effective power in Somalia Italiana could no longer be questioned, above all by the colonized".³¹

During the fascist regime, the main colonial urban centers underwent a

29 Roland Marchal, "Mogadiscio tra rovine e globalizzazione," *Afriche e Orienti* (1999): 20-21.

30 Rashid Ali, "The Making of a Modern African City," in *Mogadishu: Lost Moderns*, (London: Mosaic Rooms. 2014).

31 Mohamed, "Colonial Amnesia and the Material Remains of Italian Colonialism in Mogadishu," 8-9.

reorganization aimed at creating a clear definition of places and buildings of political control. The symbols of fascist domination were carefully concentrated in focal points, such as urban centers, squares, and places of particular importance, creating a very strong symbolic value in the entire urban system. The architectural styles used were specially chosen to represent the symbols of power, unequivocally highlighting the signs of fascist domination in urban spaces.³²

In 1929, the regime planned the implementation of the first zoning plan to stimulate further building activities. This involved redefining the two existing neighborhoods, Xamar Weyne and Shangaani, to make room for a tertiary and commercial center. In this process, the indigenous population was not considered: habitations and structures were disrupted, and barracks were built on the outskirts of Mogadishu.³³ The development of a town planning

plan was crucial as it aimed to shape Mogadishu according to the model of a European city. The colonial architectural style emerged during a period of significant transformation in European urbanism. The ideas of prominent figures such as late nineteenth-century French urban planner Hausmann and early twentieth-century architect and urban planner Le Corbusier revolutionized the urban landscape. Hausmann's construction of Parisian boulevards and his innovative approach to urban security redefined the relationship between civil and military engineering.³⁴ Le Corbusier, known for his theories on modern cities, influenced Italian architects through the CIAM (International Congresses of Modern Architecture) organization, leading to the development of Italian Rationalism.³⁵ This movement embraced functionalism, emphasizing that each building should fully embody its intended purpose while drawing inspiration from Roman and Renaissance architecture to symbolize the power of the regime. Following this architectural trend, within the center of Mogadishu, the architectural work, including the destruction of Scingani neighborhoods by the Italians, has given rise to a prominent avenue named Avenue Regina Elena. This work bears a remarkable resemblance to the realization of Corso Umberto I in Naples



FIG 3

Image of The Cathedral taken from the website "Mogadishu: Images from the past" (<https://mogadishuimages.wordpress.com/>) and taken by Rick Davies.

32 Vittoria Capresi, "Eredità e permanenze del colonialismo italiano in Libia. Continuità negli interventi urbani/architettura/simbolo," *Maghreb et sciences sociales* 3, (2012), 207-19.

33 Guido Corni, *La Somalia Italiana*. Vol. II., (Milano: Editoriale arte e storia, 1937), 153-173.

34 Richard Sennett, *Costruire e abitare: etica per la città*, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2018), 40-50.

35 Mark Swenarton, "Rationality and Rationalism: the Theory and Practice of Site Planning in Modern Architecture 1905-1930," *AA Files*, no. 4 (1983): 54-56.

and other architectural projects in European cities.³⁶

These interventions not only presented themselves as embodiments of modernity, a crucial concept for legitimizing the regime in Italy but also served to legitimize imperialist policies in the colonies. Notable examples include the Cathedral, the Bin Queer Palace, the Palazzo Comando Truppe, and the Hotel Croce del Sud, all of which perfectly exemplify the urban style prevalent in Italy during that period. From the town-planning project, one can observe how the street names in the city underwent changes. Examples include Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, Via San Francesco d'Assisi, Lungomare B. Mussolini, Corso Regina Elena, and others.³⁷ These names were chosen to honor prominent politicians of the kingdom of Italy while also intersecting with the names of Italian Catholic saints.

It is noteworthy that even today, St. Francis of Assisi symbolizes the Christian protector of Italy and is depicted in various representations within the cathedral in Mogadishu. By contextualizing these concepts,

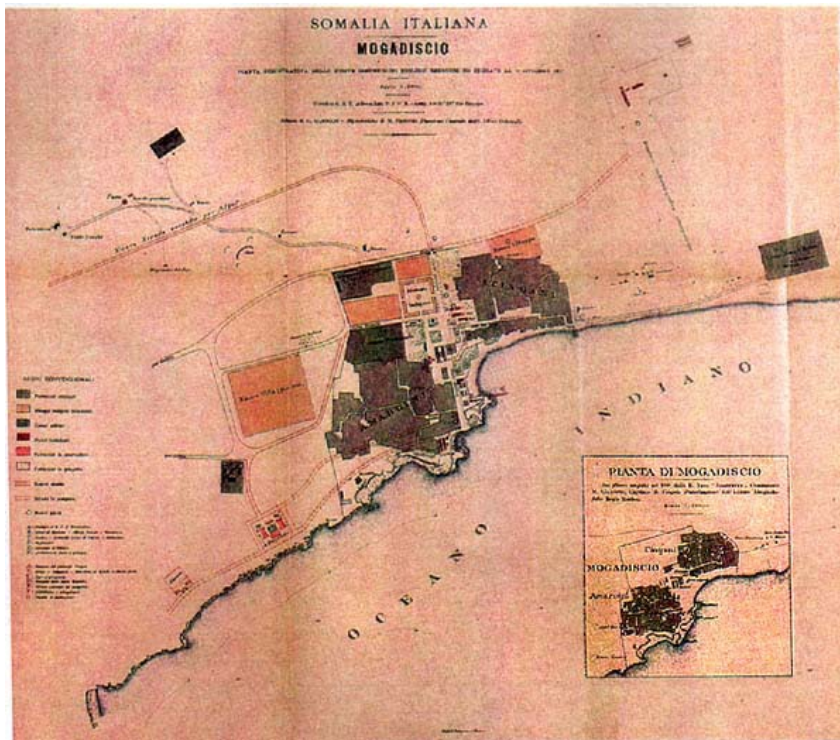


FIG. 3

Map image of Mogadishu during the Fascist occupation, taken from the website "Mogadishu: Images from the past" (<https://mogadishuimages.wordpress.com/>) and taken by Rick Davies.

we gain a deeper understanding of the structure of Italian colonial architecture and the fact that each building was intended as a manifestation and symbol of power. Consequently, every reimagined element of the

36 Emilio Distretti and Alessandro Petti, "The Afterlife of Fascist Colonial Architecture: A Critical Manifesto," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 16, no. 2 (2019): 47-58.

37 In note our English translation: Vittorio Emanuele III Avenue; St. Francis of Assisi Street; Regina Elena Avenue Mussolini Waterfront.

city assumes significance and conveys a political message. Urban art becomes a powerful tool for the promotion of colonial ideas.³⁸

Concluding remarks: it is time to critically evaluate skewed points of view

Evaluating the choice of making urban art specifically religious needs attention. Indeed, Somalia has long been a widely Muslim country. On the contrary, Italy has long been a deeply Catholic country. Thereby, during colonial times, the colonized space was partially divided between Islamic and Christian monuments. Nevertheless, as many may be thinking, Italian colonialism was completely disrespectful and skewed. These authors unfortunately keep reading articles and papers which do not criticize the role that Italy had within colonialism (or do so, but poorly). While the calls for terminating the legitimization of the myth of the “*Italiani brava gente*” have been multiple, such a myth is still broadly common.³⁹

When approaching these themes, we asked ourselves if, in today’s times, colonial monuments should be disrupted or kept as forms of heritage and reminders of what happened. While it is certainly not our place to provide an answer for Somalia, where most of the colonial monuments were disrupted in favor of Somali art and architecture after the end of the AFIS,⁴⁰ we can surely hope to stimulate such debate in our readers’ minds. At this point, the peculiarity of the Somali situation, with the abovementioned post-colonial destruction of colonial art in favor of Somali culture⁴¹ and the civil war that started at the end of the 1980s, should be remembered when thinking about these themes. On the other hand, what two young Italian and Europeans can say in conclusion to this brief analysis is that Italy, as a former colonial power, needs to acknowledge, understand and critically evaluate its role during colonialism. Furthermore, it is about time that this Italian experience is taught in schools and publicly criticized: it is surely time to eradicate the Italian monuments that celebrate the country’s colonialism as a heroic event.

38 Mia Fuller, “Building Power: Italy’s Colonial Architecture and Urbanism, 1923-1940,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 4 (1988): 484.

39 Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?: un mito duro a morire* (Vicenza: BEAT, 2022).

40 Mohamed, “Colonial Amnesia and the Material Remains of Italian Colonialism in Mogadishu,” 1-23.

41 *Ibid.*

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