

Asmara urban history and development

BELULA TECLE-MISGHINA¹

Abstract: This dissertation is a synthetic outcome of my doctoral thesis which focused on the urban history, development and continuous transformation of the city of Asmara in Eritrea, a country situated in the North Eastern point of Africa (Fig.1a). Asmara is defined by a strong Italian architectural expression. The thesis had been written with the aim to trace the story of the urban city of Asmara by retracing the different layers that have characterized the city in its history in order to determine its present pattern/configuration. The purpose was to trace, where possible, the origin of the present urban morphology, to identify the problems generated by both planned and unplanned urban space. The book in the first part discusses the urban development knowledge of Asmara before 1941, in a historical and logical discourse, using an analytical framework comprising the following components: population, geography and history of the place. However, the main focus of this study is the second part which connects the colonial development of the city with the contemporary form, from 1941 to 2005. During this period, various governments and administrations allowed for urban development, however, in an unplanned and non-integrated way. Published or documented evidence of the process of development of this period, could not be found during the research.

Keywords: urban history, Asmara city planning, comparative urban form.

To understand the city of Asmara it is necessary to have some fundamental knowledge of the geo-historical context of Eritrea, whose territories largely coincides with the northern part of the Ethiopian highland (Fig.1b), can be divided into three morphologically distinct zones characterized by different climatic conditions, one of these is of the Asmara area, which could be compared to the European spring.

It is a territory located on a watershed between north and east and is also bounded by the Red Sea; an important position that has assisted with the connections between many civilizations and religions, that have taken place during different historical periods along the Nile

1. Belula Tacle-Misghina: PhD in Architectural Design and Theory, Sapienza University of Rome; email: belu.tec@hotmail.it.

River (Nubian, Egyptian and Greek-Roman) and in the middle East. This geographical position has also favoured the flourishing of the Axum Kingdom whose trade routes to and from North Africa and the Red Sea, largely occurred on Eritrean territories which were part of the Axum Kingdom. Along one of the routes was the site of the present city of Asmara (Fig.1c), an area that was populated since the first millennium B.C. in the form of agro-forestry-pastoral populations organized in settlements. Some of these settlements later developed into urbanized areas, and one of these is the village Arbatè Asmera, hence the name Asmara, which generated (at the beginning of 1500 A.D.) from the union of four villages.

Arbatè Asmera along with Campo Cintato, the first Italian military settlement on the site, and the Fort Baldissera, are the cornerstones of the historical city of Asmara (Fig.2). Since 1889, the year of Eritrean occupation by the Italians, the site had an almost exclusively military character until 1898-1899, the time in which Asmara lost its military status and became the capital of the Eritrean colony. This was promptly followed by the development of infrastructure and urban planning which was aided by the new civilian administration.

The first urban planning scheme was that of 1893 (Fig.3a). However that which had been approved in 1902 organised the city with the first planned settlement, structured on the lines of territorial connection, organically designed, and built along a reticular pattern.

The plan of 1902 was succeeded by the Piano di Massima of 1913 (Fig.3b), drawn up by the Arch. Oduardo Cavagnari, which together with its variants, is the first real complex plan that attempted to give the city a more organic system by introducing many of those urban

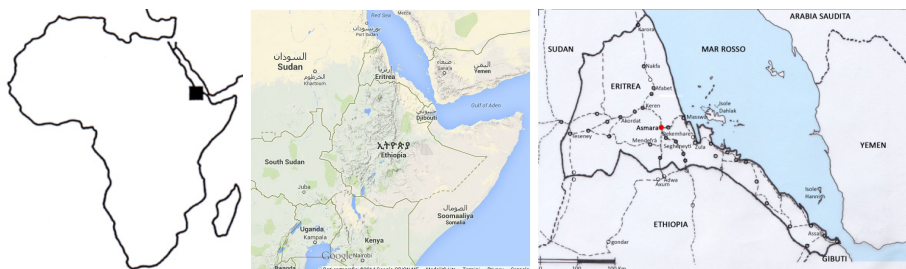


Fig.1. The Geo-historical Context: a) the location of Eritrea in Africa; b) the Ethiopian highlands and Eritrea (from Google maps); c) the location of Asmara in Eritrea (Author 2014)

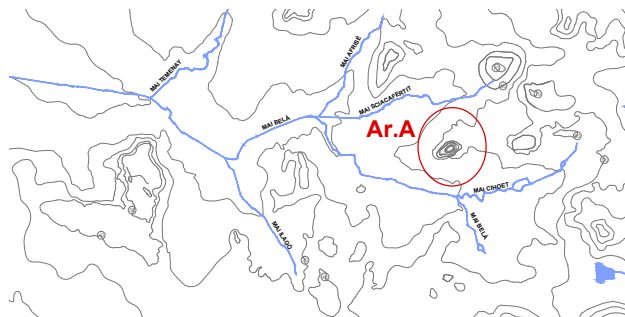
elements used in the design of contemporary European cities. Such in the form of avenues, diagonals, squares, gardens, markets, separation of the districts on the basis of social class, reticular system, etc. as evident in the drawings of 1932 and 1937. From about 1916 up until the time of the invasion war of Ethiopia in 1936, for which Asmara constituted a base of attack, unplanned sporadic development started to occur and no urban planning was carried out, other than the height of some buildings having been raised in accordance with the existing planning regulations. In 1937, however, attempts to curb this unplanned urbanism occurred in the form of a new planning scheme.

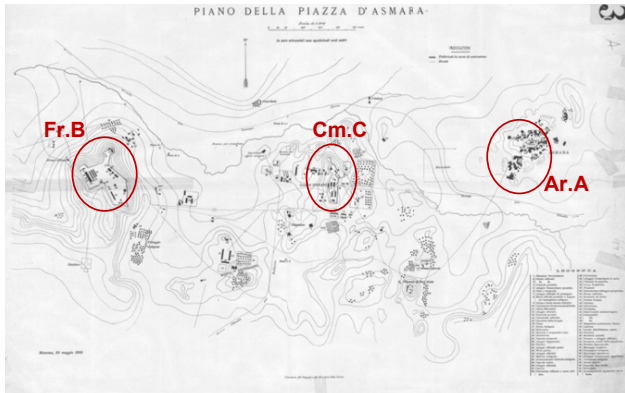
The 1938/39 urban planning scheme, which was based on a new colonial urbanism ideology, resulted in the design of a new town plan (last held under the Italian colonial administration) by the Roman architect Vittorio Cafiero (Fig.3c). Cafiero, with his plan, wanted to stimulate the tertiary economy such as services, commercial, etc., which started in the early 1900s. Furthermore, he developed a stabilization plan which was intended to absorb the population of that time. It was a plan made of re-connections and new urban patterns that were combined with each other without being part of a great overall design, it could be considered modern as it has no illusion of being able to define a city within a single geometric shape.

The main objectives of Cafiero were to:

- redevelop the central area of the city;
- improve and regulate the zoning by clearly distinguishing and isolating the various areas;
- reorganize the existing road network, through a system of main ridges and an outer ring tangent to the three territorial roads.

Fig. 2. a) The cornerstones of the historical city of Asmara: Arbatè Asmera (Ar.A) and its position around 1320 (Author 2009)





b) Map of Asmara 1895 - Piano della Piazza di Asmara (Author adapted from Cartographic collection of IsIAO)



c) Asmara 2014 (Author adapted from Google map)

Fig. 2. The cornerstones of the historical city of Asmara: Arbatè Asmera (Ar.A), Campo Cintato (Cm.C) e Forte Baldissera (Fr.B)

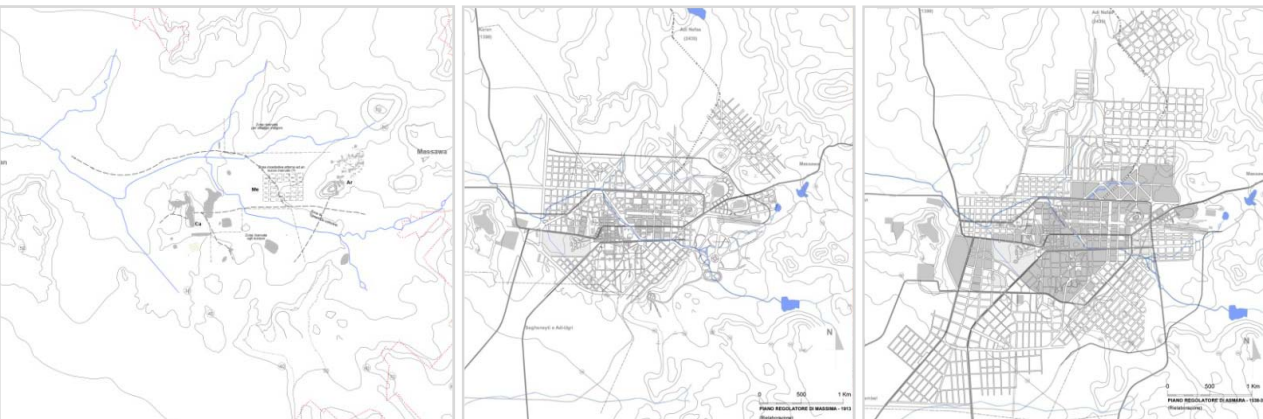


Fig. 3. Tracing the Origins of Asmara: The Colonial Plannings (Author, based on historical planning schemes): a) The First urban planning scheme – Piano regolatore per le costruzioni civili da erigersi all'Asmara, 1893; b) The First Complex Urban Plan – Piano di Massima, 1913; c) The New Town Plan of the thirties – Piano regolatore di Asmara 1938/39

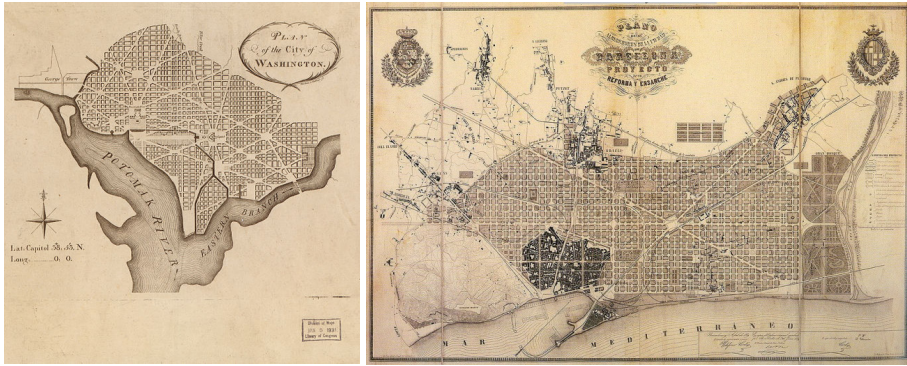


Fig. 4. Western urban planning with the features that define the urban character of Asmara: a. Pierre C. L'Enfant Plan of the City of Washington, 1792 (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>); b. Ildefonso Cerdà, Enlargement map of Barcelona. Map of the neighborhoods of the city of Barcelona and project for its improvements and enlargement, 1859 (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>)

Generally Cafiero's urban actions in the existing city were redeveloping and renovating for the European zone and, on the other hand, destructive to the mixed and native zones. The provisions of the Plan Cafiero were nevertheless partly realized, even after the end of *Italian colonialis*. Urban planning in Asmara, has been closely related to that of the Italian cities, especially the new expansions of the historical capital cities of Italy (Turin, Florence and Rome). As such, many elements of Italian urban planning, and features of Western urban planning define the urban character of Asmara. A hybrid of two morphologies, the rectilinear grid and the large orthogonal axes inclined at 45° , is evident in the great urban design carried out by Pierre L'Enfant for Washington at the end of 1700 A.D. (Fig.4a). The greatest expression of the two morphologies in Europe manifests in the Plan of Barcelona (Fig.4b) by Ildefonso Cerdà (1859). Asmara is, similarly, defined by a hybrid of the two urban morphologies. After the conquest of Ethiopia and the establishment of the Empire Africa Orientale Italiana, for the first time colonial architecture and urbanism became one of the main topics of discussion in the profession, which resulted in it becoming one of the first themes of the National Congress of Urban Planning of 1937. The outcomes of the congress were outlined in the Piano Regolatore Generale dell'Impero Coloniale (General Town Plan Scheme of the Colonial Empire) which determined the town planning of cities (big and small) and those of rural and semi-rural building groupings. The system of Eritrean urban set-

tlements (structured on grid system that has strengthened the identity), defined by Italian colonial planning, can be considered almost unique when compared with that of other Italian colonial settlements where the projects were all, except for the pre-colonial cities of Tripoli and Benghazi, aimed at rural colonization especially after the advent of fascism.

At the end of Italian colonialism in April '41 Eritrea fell under British administration until 1952, during which there were no processes of any urban planning despite the city continuing to grow while absorbing the surrounding settlements. This situation persisted even during the years of Federation (1952-1962) and annexation (1962-74) in Imperial Ethiopia. In the three decades between 1941-1974, however, the city continued to grow (greyed part in the drawing Fig.5), mainly due to industrial development (unprecedented in the area) and correspondingly low agricultural productivity which led to the increasing urbanization of Asmara also by the Ethiopian territories. The reality of this progress is that there is documented evidence from an urban drawing, undated and for unspecified purposes, with a pre-scriptive character while at the same time it illustrates the existing urban form.

In recent decades, in order to see the development of an organic urban plan of the city, reference must be made to the beginning of the 70s in which it was studied and designed as the Master Plan (1972-73) by Arch. Arturo Mezzèdimi, from Siena. The Master Plan (Fig. 6) that had been developed by Mezzèdimi is a new unpublished urban plan which describes and draws the situation of the city in the early half of the 70s by tracing the urban development, social, demographic and economic changes since the end of the Italian colony back to the late 60s and by identifying the directions of development of the city over the following three decades by interpreting and correcting the trend of the time. It is a Master Plan of expansion, reorganization of some neighbourhoods and renovation of the historic city. This master plan covers all aspects of the urban system (a general plan of sewerage, sewage treatment system, of course, a plan of the roads...) and is structured around the following three "pillars": *1st pillar*: The maintenance of executive functions in the historic centre by enhancing the main avenue, with the function of a business centre. The axis of such avenue would terminate in some built or spatial form. *2nd pillar*: A system of roads, that structure the city,

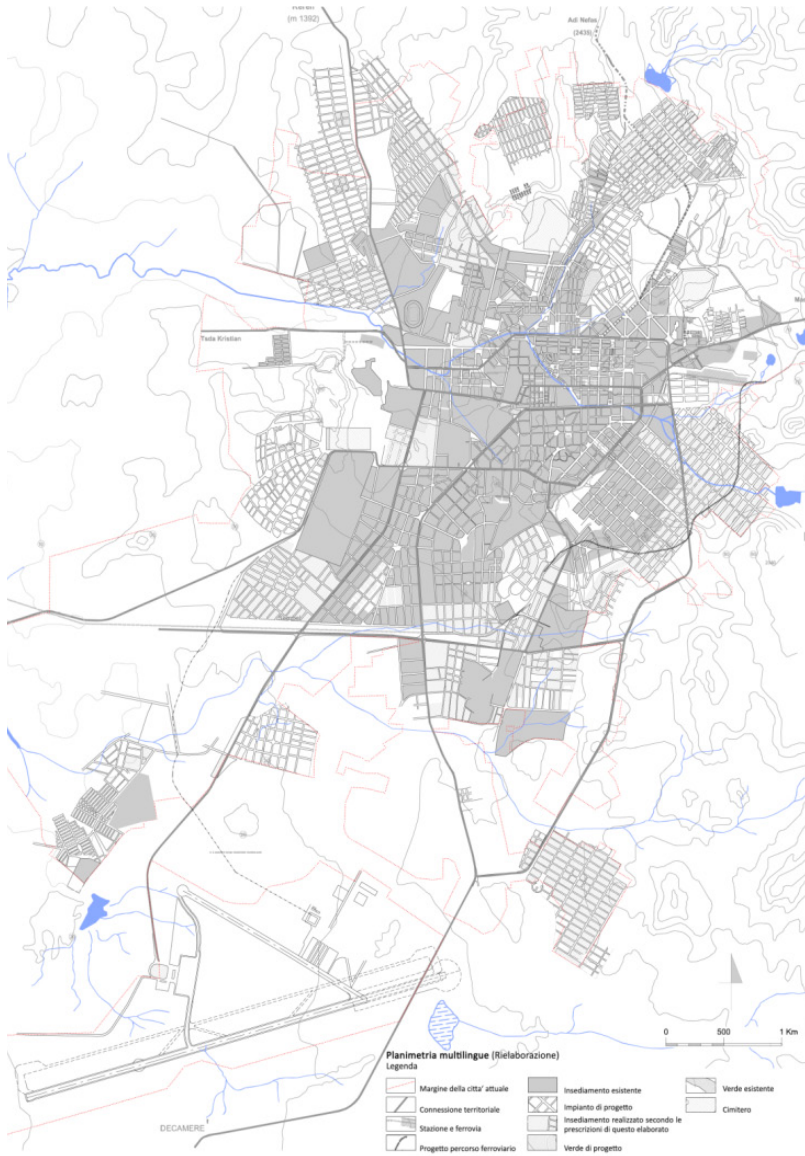


Fig. 5. Asmara's post colonial urban development according to a multilanguage undated plan (Author; based on historical plan)

which is divided into roads for inner-city vehicular flow and as connection of the districts; two concentric ring roads. *3rd pillar*: A system of new 'module quarter', autonomous or semi-autonomous, located in

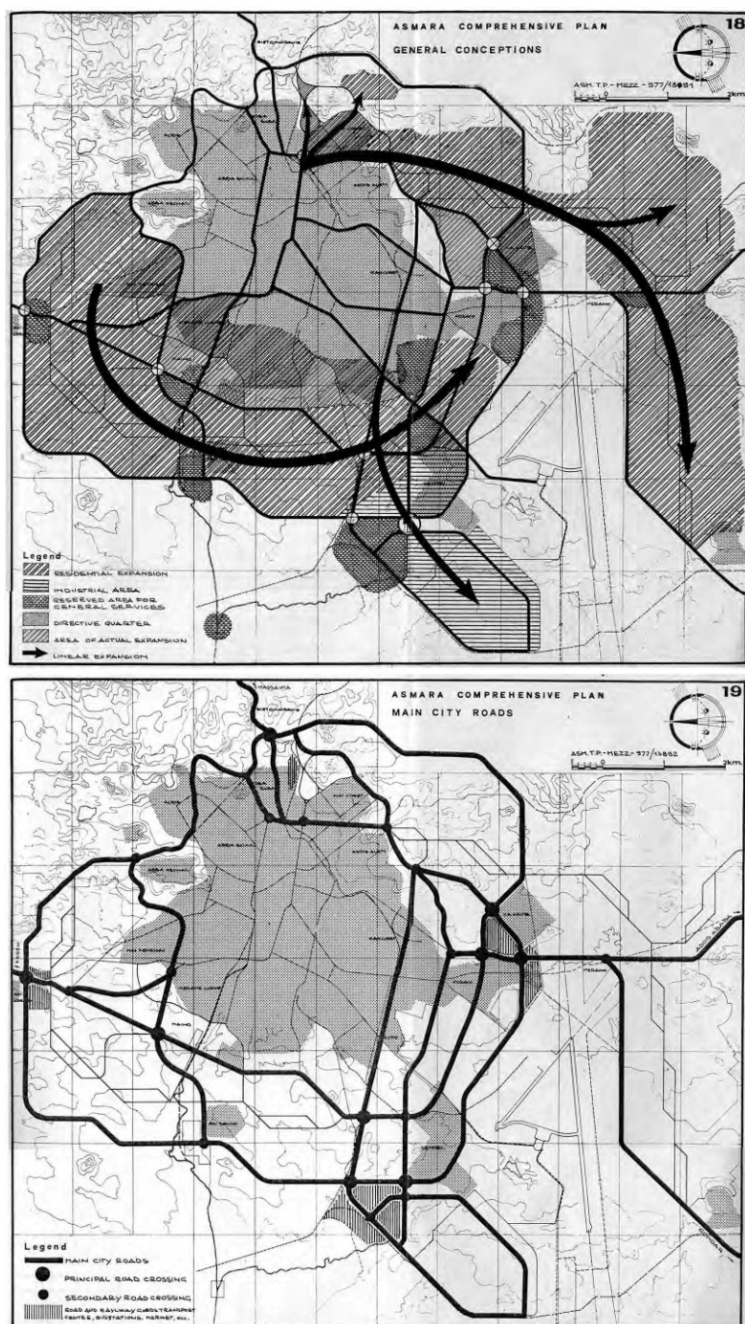


Fig. 6. Asmara's Master Plan of Arch. Arturo Mezzèdini, 1972-73. a) Asmara comprehensive plan: general conceptions (above). b) Asmara comprehensive plan – Main city roads (bottom)

the space bounded by the two main ring roads and crossed by an activated and serviced artery. These 'pillars' represents the hallmark of the Master Plan and shows the close relationship between urban scale and architecture; a link between the general drawings of the city and its architecture that has always been present in the urban culture of Asmara. This Master Plan has never been approved for political reasons, despite the Mezzèdimi Firm having drawn up a Town Plan in 1976 (Fig. 7) that was significantly different from such Master Plan. This was perhaps deliberate in order to meet the demands of the Derg, the new Ethiopian government (1974-1991). During this administration, the city of Asmara still continued to expand without a plan but, compared to the previous expansions, was of poor quality (favoured by the government) that often consisted of barracks which contributed to lowering the quality of many urban areas of a city already in economic decline. The Town Plan of the Mezzèdimi Firm therefore represented the last comprehensive plan for the city of Asmara and in order to start new planning one would have waited until the year 1998 for a meeting of the Planning Committee to outline strategies for the urban development of Asmara Town and its satellite-villages, based on local resources (land availability, water resources, population limit 600.000 inhabitants...). This was the first planning group in Asmara that produced a policy document containing: hypothesis, problems and projections for the development of Asmara and its satellite-villages; guidelines for the development of Asmara Town. To see the outcome of a response to the recommendations of the Committee one would have had to wait until year 2005 for the material production of the first phase (Strategic Urban development plan for Greater Asmara), one of three in order to draw up a new town planning scheme for Asmara (Asmara Infrastructure development study) or GAA (Greater Asmara Area) which includes satellite villages that gradually, reciprocally expand, becoming closer to the city, as its suburbs, which places burdens for services and other facilities on Asmara Proper or Asmara Town. The outcome of this first phase are documents collected under the title "Urban profile and projections report".² It is a very accurate study which was developed according to the guidelines

of '98 by in-depth analyses of the demographic aspects, the natural environment, land use, road network, existing public services, residential settlements and the way of using technical infrastructure with particular focus on water resources and on their distribution as well as facilities for waste disposal and electricity resources. This set of documents is very rich in data which is supported by systematically located maps. It is a very significant step, though, because it is a program aimed at enabling the GAA to begin a process of redevelopment of its urban fabric and the strengthening of its infrastructure: a start to the implementation of integrated urban projects of quality which will, in turn, stimulate the production of construction projects that renew the great architectural traditions of Asmara. At the time of writing the thesis, it had not been possible to obtain information or documentation regarding the progress of the other two phases (2nd phase "Feasibility Study of Priority Projects" and 3rd phase "Detailed Design & Tender") planning activities of the city. As a consequence, the current dissertation is not a fixed end but rather a starting point for ongoing research on the vitality of the urban organism of Asmara, unfolding its social and cultural history.

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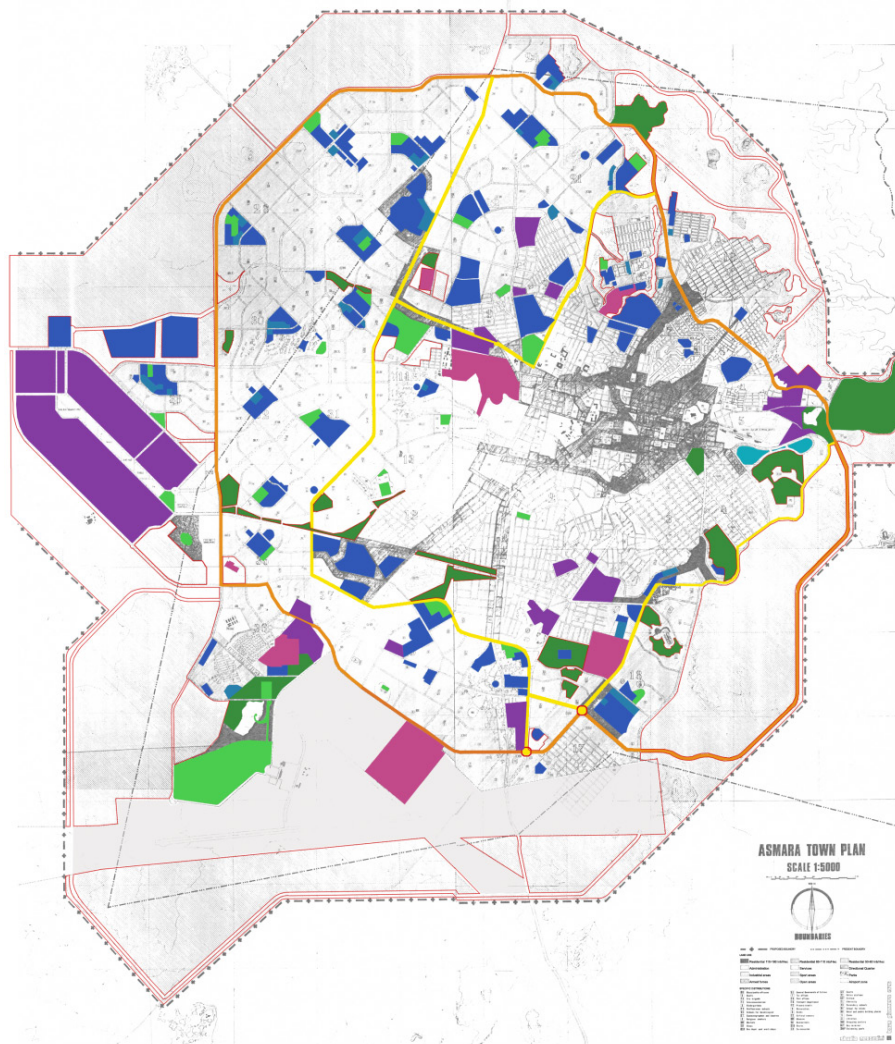
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ASMARA TOWN PLAN (Rielaborazione ipotetica)

Legenda

- | | | |
|-------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ---+---+--- | perimetro esistente | verde sportivo |
| --- | perimetro di progetto | parco |
| --- | circonvallazione esterna | servizi pubblici |
| --- | circonvallazione interna | attrezzature amministrative |
| ● | incroci nodali | quartiere direzionale |
| ■ | aeroporto | caserme (forze armate) |
| □ | spazi aperti | area industriale |

Fig. 7. Asmara: The Mezzèdimi Firm Town Plan, 1976 (Author, based on the town plan drawing)

