Throughout the 1930s, cities in Italy and its African colonies were transformed in response to the fascist regime's imperial ambitions. In the metropole, these changes were largely symbolic gestures that included the erection of monuments and the renaming of streets. In the colonies, however, planners restructured the built environment to embody imperial policy and goals on many levels. The cities of East Africa, and especially those of Ethiopia, bear witness to the use of urban design to reconcile the fascist regime's demands for ideological representation with the practical needs of everyday life.

Italian planners frequently laid out boulevards that joined a significant new building representing the fascist empire to an iconic historical structure representing the Ethiopian empire. Parallel to these roads always began at the older site, symbolically reinforcing the transfer of imperial power. A similar appropriation of historic structures appears in the spaces set aside for "villaggi" (political villages) outside the embattled walls of royal capitals or fortresses, where the assembled masses symbolically re-enacted the seizure of Italy’s African possessions. Italian urban designers carefully used zoning and landscape to further construct social identities by segregating colonial cities according to race, religion, and class. Yet evidence increasingly shows that these spaces were not designed by the well-known architects whose names appear on each city’s master plan, but rather by engineers and “gemiuti” working in municipal and regional planning offices at the direction of military governors and other extraordinary patrons.

The cities illustrated here serve as particularly good examples of Italian colonial urbanism's principles. These cities—Asmara, Jimma and Gonder in Ethiopia, as well as the Eritrean capital of Asmara and the Libyan capital of Tripoli—exhibit a number of shared qualities, including a requirement to represent the Italian regime, a concern with maintaining social hierarchies, a mandate to enforce racial segregation, a sensitivity to topography and climate, an interest in historic preservation, and an accommodation of experimental construction techniques spurred by the restricted availability of conventional building materials. Equally instructive are the differences between the cities, due to their varying historical and geographical contexts. This essay identifies the key aspects of these colonial cities, and shows Italian colonial planning in relation to efforts to organize and control vast territorial holdings. These cities also demonstrate the diversity of Italian architecture in Ethiopia, as state, party, institutional and private interests separately sought an appropriate formal expression for their facilities.

Urban design was a key tool of Italian colonial policy during the occupation of Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941. Italian urbanism throughout the fascist era illustrates the disquieting compatibility between progressive planning practices and authoritarian political regimes. Cities built in Italian-occupied East Africa further demonstrate the extent to which modern urban design could participate in the coercive project of constructing imperial identities, both amongst Italian soldiers and among African colonial subjects. As case studies in the design and construction of Ethiopian cities under Italian colonial rule, here, Jimma, Gonder and Asmara display the themes of identity formation and ideological representation that animated urbanism in Italy’s African empire.