

The Historical Transformation of Civic Architecture: City Council Buildings and Urban Change in Tripoli, Libya 2016

AMO El Allous

Abstract

Architectural and urban studies hold that historical governmental public architecture has since early urbanisation dominated the urban landscape and shaped the public presence and notion of those who work, visit, and live around it. The appreciated visible values of such powerful structures included their monumental forms, practical bureaucratic functions, embellished and practical spaces, and central urban positions, often situated in close proximity to central squares and marketplaces. However, public architecture has recently undertaken dramatic transformations in all these physical aspects, but little research has been conducted on the powerful invisible values, such as the symbolic socio-cultural meanings, that are still attached to and inherent within these historical buildings, particularly in the specific context of developing historical cities.

This thesis uses historical, observational, qualitative and quantitative data, and conducts architectural and urban spatial mapping and analysis to fulfil two main identified gaps in the case of the Libyan capital city of Tripoli and its historical municipal buildings: to understand the historical narrative of the transformational development of the city centre of Tripoli in relation to the city council buildings created by previous historical rulers; and to trace the history and evaluate the present significance of the currently used historical central municipal building of Tripoli, built in 1938 during the Italian occupation.

Very little is known about the present significance of the Libyan civic public architecture in Tripoli to the public users in the city's traditional downtown. The majority of these well-placed central public buildings were designed for and built by the Italian Fascist regime who ruled the city between the 1920's and 1943. Although a considerable amount of literature exists on fascist architecture in Libya and Ethiopia, architects and specialised academic researchers, as well as official municipal studies have not treated monumental civic public buildings in Tripoli with the attention they deserve.

This study presents the architectural, urban and socio-cultural aspects of this historical building in Tripoli city centre and also answers how powerful and actually 'public' and 'civic' this building was at the time of this research fieldwork under the Gaddafi totalitarian regime (2010).

The results interestingly show that this historical fascist-style building is still valued by the Libyan government and the surveyed public in the city centre of Tripoli today. The results also show that even though the building is a place of power whose readopted controlled spaces do not meet the publicness criteria identified in the literature of public realms, it significantly played an unprecedented civic role in the city, unlike in any other open or enclosed public spaces, by allowing the governed public visitors to counter the regime and openly criticise their local governors publically, inside the municipal environment.