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## Cultural treasure or painful reminder? Libya's colonial architecture

*Residents of Tripoli and Benghazi are divided about what should be done with their Italian colonial heritage.*



An official Italian colonial building - once used as the university - in the old town of Benghazi as it appeared in 2007 before civil war and the ensuing regeneration projects took hold [Eric Lafforgue/Art in All of Us/Corbis via Getty Images]

By **Naima Morelli**

13 Jul 2024



**Benghazi, Libya** – It happened in the middle of the night, as most destructive operations carried out without the consent of the local population are. In March 2023, an area of Benghazi's historical centre including several buildings of Italian colonial heritage, was razed to the ground.

So unexpected was the operation conducted by the Libyan military, that even Benghazi's mayor was taken by surprise.

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The raid on the historic city centre was carried out to clear the debris left behind by past and ongoing conflicts, and to clear the way for a new, modern centre. The reconstruction has not been carried out in an organic way, and now, while some buildings have been reconstructed or substituted by modern ones, others, like the Berenice Theatre, are still rubble.

Benghazi was badly damaged by bombing during the second world war, rebuilt and then destroyed again during the 2014 – 2018 civil war.

The damage from the wars and the drive to regenerate in more recent years have effectively obliterated a large part of modern Libyan history. One of the most significant examples of this lost history was the Berenice Theatre. Built in 1928, it represented one of the very few places of entertainment, art and gathering for the citizens of the city throughout the following decades.

Having suffered heavy damage during World War II, it was rebuilt in the post-war period and remained operating until the 1980s, when it was finally closed. However, during the 2023 reconstruction project, the theatre was completely demolished with no plans to rebuild it. All that remains is rubble.

Its heyday is remembered fondly by many. “As often recalled by locals, in 1969 the theatre hosted a famous performance by singer Umm Kulthum,” recalls artist and architect Sarri Elfaitouri. “The Berenice Theatre until this day holds an intimate place in the hearts of the locals and is considered an essential landmark in the collective memory of the city.”

The erasure of colonial-era architecture, leaving large voids in what many have come to consider as their own intimate heritage – part of their own history – can be seen playing out across Libya. The country’s capital, Tripoli, is going through a similar restoration and modernisation process, albeit a more gradual one and without any incidents of overnight bulldozing. Instead, many heritage and colonial-era buildings in the old medina have been, or are in the process of being, restored.

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However, Tripoli’s restoration has not been without controversies of its own. To many, it seems to be only a surface-level operation, lacking in expertise to ensure the buildings are preserved authentically.





The Berenice Theatre in Benghazi as it appeared in 2007. The much-loved landmark was torn down during a renovation project in 2023 and there are no plans to rebuild it. All that remains on this site is rubble [Eric Lafforgue/Art in All of Us/Corbis via Getty Images]

## A heritage obliterated?

Hiba Shalabi, a curator, artist, and activist who campaigns to protect Tripoli's heritage, says she has felt a strong feeling of beauty and belonging towards Tripoli's old city – particularly its squares – since she was a child.

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Shalabi was particularly fond of the Italian colonial statues of animals such as gazelles and cheetahs. She recalls in particular, two cheetahs in Zawiyat al-Dahmani garden, near Municipal Square, also known as Algeria Square, and the surrounding buildings. “My late father used to take me and my brother to play around them a lot, climbing on top of them, imagining riding them. Sometimes we would find other children playing nearby.”

But, in November 2014, the statues suddenly disappeared and while the official reason is unclear, it was understood that the Tripoli Municipality and the Antiquities Authority had moved the statues to protect them from vandalism.

Shalabi is saddened by the fact that many of the places she remembers fondly from her childhood have drastically changed and no longer serve as locations for social gatherings. “Some of them have been neglected and their problems have not been addressed. They have never been restored,” she laments.

Happily, some buildings have been turned into museums. This is the case of the Red Palace, which used to be the headquarters of the ruling families in Libya, and now hosts the Department of Antiquities.

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Another historical building, the palace of Ali Pasha Al-Qaramanli, which became the Islamic Museum, has been restored, but according to Shalabi, this has not been done properly and is causing damage to structures beneath it. “The construction has been done with cement, concrete and iron, and the weight of these materials is making the old Roman city underneath sink.”

In fact, under the old city of Tripoli are the remains of two [Roman and Phoenician cities](#) but, says Shalabi, in their eagerness for renewal, the Libyan authorities are not concerned by the value of heritage.

As a result, Shalabi believes that the features of the old city are slowly being obliterated: “This is far from being a restoration,” she says. “All that is happening in Tripoli is a cosmetic change to the old historical monuments in the old city that cancels all its historical and archaeological features and replaces them with modern ones.







The old Italian-built town hall in central Benghazi, seen here in a dilapidated state in 2007, was restored following the civil war and became the building for the National Commercial Bank in 2022 [Eric Lafforgue/Art in All of Us/Corbis via Getty Images]

## Scarred buildings and spaces – stitched back together

For Elfaitouri, who is also the founder of the Tajarrod Architecture and Art Foundation in Benghazi, architecture is deeply tied to Libya's problematic colonial past.

To him, Benghazi is still a city which shaped his understanding of himself and the world around him: "It is a beautiful, paradoxical and powerful city that constantly seeks to reinvent itself," he concludes. "I can now see Benghazi in every city I visit in the world."

The post 2014-18 reconstruction of Benghazi's centre spurred a series of reflections on the role of public space, he says and for him, the concept of sociocultural reform for any society cannot be separated from architecture and public spaces. "With Tajarrod's projects, we encouraged students, teachers, artists, architects and civil society actors to be social and political critics and actively engage in public space through organising and gathering."

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Elfaitouri was studying overseas in North Cyprus when the civil war exploded in 2014. "I didn't run away," he says now. "I travelled just a few months before the civil war started, and lived there for four years visiting Benghazi once a year, until 2018 when I graduated and the war ended simultaneously."



With hindsight, he can see how this gave him the opportunity to observe and reflect on his role in reconstruction when he finally returned, but at the time, he says, “I thought I was helpless while my family and friends were experiencing those tough times.”

Elfaitouri returned to Libya in 2018 to find the disastrous effects of the war. Benghazi’s old centre was badly damaged, having at one time been one of the most intense fronts in the conflict. The city had almost entirely lost its historical architectural characteristics, he says.

He describes the new Benghazi as similar to post-war Beirut, with some areas that were completely flattened, and others partially damaged and scarred with bullets and bomb holes. Nature was making inroads to reclaiming the city – trees and grass had grown over some parts of town.

“I was first struck with mixed feelings when I saw the unimaginable destruction and then how the area’s displaced citizens slowly returned to their destroyed and semi-destroyed homes. They revitalised a life into them, with zero governmental efforts,” he recalls. “Scarred buildings and spaces were gradually stitched [back together] and I felt the presence of a minor social will for revival, when the area was generally very abandoned.”



Albergo Italia hotel in Benghazi, pictured sometime between 1920 and 1930. The building was badly damaged during World War II, and then rebuilt. The replacement building was demolished in the redevelopment project in 2023 [Touring Club Italiano/Marka/Universal Images Group via Getty Images]

Teacher and curator Aisha Bsikri also returned to live in downtown Benghazi after the war, settling back in among the buildings that were still standing.

When she returned, she says, she went through a range of emotions from excitement and relief, to stress and tension. “I was pleased to be home again, I felt so warm and blessed, although at times I was taken by an overwhelming feeling of sadness.”

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Many aspects that she had particularly loved in her neighbourhood, like the familiar facade of her family's neighbours' houses, with doors, windows and balconies full of decorations and beautiful architectural details, were simply gone.

Most shocking, however, was discovering her own family home partly destroyed, full of rubble and debris: "It wasn't the same," she says.

"For at least two years after the war, it was extremely quiet. But, slowly, it got better; the neighbours started coming back home. We started living our old life together again, we started celebrating holidays, taking walks outside. It is not how it used to be of course. There are still no shops open and most places are still empty. But it's slowly coming back."

Elfaitouri similarly recalls the bittersweet moment of homecoming, even though the conditions around him were appalling. "It was also a moment of liberation, where starting from scratch was an existential necessity."

However, he believes that a number of governmental initiatives to restore and renovate some buildings have been undertaken randomly and superficially:

"There is no critical understanding of [the city's] problematic colonial history or a vision for a transformative reconstruction."

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These buildings include the Parliament Dome – the first Arab parliament and one of the architectural and political symbols of Libya's struggle for [liberation and independence](#) – Omar Al Mukhtar Tomb – a special place for Libyans as it once contained the body of the martyr – and the Benghazi Cathedral – a cultural landmark which was turned into a mosque in 1952.

“It was evident in several of their projects – for which the main responsible is the municipality of Benghazi – have been undertaken with a lack of expertise in architectural design, structural engineering and preservation,” says Elfaitouri. He adds that downtown Benghazi has a historically sensitive context but all of those restorations have been undertaken in a “hasty and immature” way, without the involvement of any critical heritage or preservation studies or any experts in the field.



An Italian colonial building in central Tripoli, Libya, in 2007 [Eric Lafforgue/Art in All of Us/Corbis via Getty Images]

## A cultural divide

But it is not only experts who should be involved in the restoration of landmarks and important buildings, says Elfaitouri. The engagement of local communities is vital to strike a balance between preserving heritage and [challenging the colonial narratives](#) which are often associated with such landmarks.



“At Tajarrod we are dedicated to reshaping the Libyan narrative, acknowledging that it was partly constructed by Western colonial and present political power and, therefore, establish a counter-archive that is ongoing, renewing and resistant to hegemony, nostalgia and denial.”

An example of this was the 2020 project led by Tajarrod, called Tahafut / Incoherence. This was a workshop and a three-day exhibition in Al Khalsa – Silphium – Square called ex-Piazza XXVIII Ottobre in front of el-Manar Palace in Benghazi, the colonial-era building from where Libyan independence was declared in 1951.

“Several Libyan researchers value Italian colonial architecture for the initial social and infrastructural benefits it created for the city and for the ‘respect’ it demonstrated in incorporating local architectural ‘style’,” says Elfaitouri. “I call it an unacknowledged submission to imperialist ideology at worst, and a cultural blindness at best,” he remarks sharply. “As Edward Said said, imperialism still exists.”

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On a broader cultural level, the architect speculates that there has been a division between people who perceive this architecture as part of Libyan identity, uncritically, and others – the majority he believes – who are either indifferent to these buildings or reject their relevance to Libyan society.



War-damaged colonial architecture in central Benghazi, Libya, in 1943 [Ivan Dmitri/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images]

But beyond the public sphere, on a more deeply personal level, many of the Italian colonial-time buildings bear memories of childhood and adolescence for Libyans such as Shalabi and the Italian animal statues. Elfaitouri himself has a particular fondness for downtown Benghazi, he says. As a boy, he says, “the whole Old City felt like my urban home where [I could] freely dwell.

“There is a particular route that my mother, grandmother and grandfather used to walk with me through to Souq al-Dalam and Souq al-Jareed. These were traditional markets composed of a network of intersecting streets in the Old City, where my mother and grandmother would go shopping and buy me my favourite treat, the Bo Ishreen Boreek (minced meat pie),” he recalls.

“The bookshops in el-Istiklal Street and under the Safina building where my father would always take me were also essential destinations for me as a child. We

would leave our apartment building in Tree Square and walk pretty much all around the Old City depending on what we needed to buy.”

Today the Safina building is in ruins, while most of the buildings facing el-Istiklal Street are still standing, but with significant damage from the civil war.



Government buildings in Benghazi between 1920 and 1930 [Touring Club Italiano/Marka/Universal Images Group via Getty Images]

In 2022, to counter the indifference they see among Libyans towards the country’s Italian colonial heritage, Aisha Bsikri and Hiba Shalabi curated an exhibition at Tripoli’s Art House on Italian colonial buildings called “Le Piazze Invisibili”, which focused on colonial-era squares in Libya.

“During the war, I kept wondering what would come of our historical buildings that were right at the centre of the conflict,” Bsikri says. She started taking photographs and writing about these buildings on social media platforms.

“Not all Libyans feel attached to the Italian buildings,” she says. “To many, they are a symbol of colonial violence. And this is an opinion. But for me, I feel like we should keep these buildings. Some took other functions and symbolisms later, like the el-Manar Palace, or perhaps became administrative buildings, or

people started living there, giving them new life. Regardless, they are all part of Libyan history.”

The writer Maryam Salama, who is also from Tripoli, agrees with this approach. She worked with the Project of the Old City, an entity established in 1985 as a scientific cultural institution for the organisation and administration of the Old City of Tripoli, with the task of researching the history of the old locations that the city intended to renovate and preserve, and a guide to those who came to visit the old city for scientific purposes or tourism.

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Salama started working there in 1990: “The word translator accompanied my name from the very day I was in this entity because of my work,” she says. “I translated many documents and papers until the day I left the project in 1995, September 30.

“Each and every piece of art or trace of archaeology, whatever period it belonged to, represents the authentic heritage of my country and bears its identity. And all of us should be as responsible for its protection as we are proud of having been its heirs,” she says, adding that she feels sad when she learns that certain monuments no longer exist.

“For that means my country has already lost a unique page of its book of history.”





Banca d'Italia, Tripoli, pictured in the 1930s, was built in the Italian Moresco style – an Italian interpretation of local, Libyan style. The building was bulldozed by Gaddafi in 1996 [Touring Club Italiano/Marka/Universal Images Group via Getty Images]

## The 'orientalist mind'

Adnan Hussain, professor of architecture at the University of Tripoli, recounts feeling a special affinity with the Banca D'Italia building in Tripoli, a building designed in the Italian Moresco style. It is an Italian interpretation of the local architecture: "Our traditional architecture in Tripoli is modest, very modern, very simple. So this plainness allowed Italian architects to experiment with possibilities, with the imagination of the Arab world."

The building was created by the architect, Roman Armando Brasini, who brought his imagination as a stage designer to his architectural design. Post-independence, the building became the headquarters to the foreign minister. Hussain's father was, in fact, the last foreign minister during the monarchy, be-

fore Muammar Gaddafi, who ruled Libya from 1969 until 2011, came to power. He was strongly anti-colonial but never took particular aim at the country's Italian architecture. Under his rule, buildings were either neglected or reconverted into institutional headquarters. Little attention was paid to their historical significance.

“When my father was the minister, he used to take us on weekends to the office, especially if there was some kind of a national holiday or event. We’d go into the building and watch the parades,” he recalls. “And I remember the building was magnificent. As a young boy, I was mesmerised; I’d call it ‘father’s palace!’” says Hussain with a laugh.

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Promo breve

Hussain recounts that under Gaddafi the Banca D'Italia remained a government building for a while, but when the dictator decided to move the capital to his hometown, he bulldozed it to the ground overnight in 1996.

While Hussain acknowledges the mix of styles in colonial-time architecture as an example of the orientalist mind, he is not as critical, therefore: “It’s all fantasy. It’s 1001 [Arabian] Nights,” he says. “It has obviously a strong ‘exoticist’ quality. And in fact, exoticism could work both ways. It could be something Italians have made up or could be also that they recognise the value in Tripoli’s architecture.

“Of course, architecture is not necessarily neutral,” he adds. “It can be utilised and employed in such a manner to serve certain political agendas. But I feel we need to look beyond the veil of colonialism and see the value of the architecture as architecture.”

Besides organising regular city tours to the downtown area with his students, last year Hussain also organised the Mezran Street Fair devoted to appreciating and animating the heritage area of Tripoli, which received a public response that he says he found heartwarming.

“To me, architecture recounts a fascinating story about ideas. About experimentation. There is no denial of the violence, but there is still a lot worth preserving. A lot that can be studied, and a lot of lessons that can be put into modernity,” he concludes. “Unfortunately if we keep tearing down buildings, all these ideas will disappear, too.”



Mass is held at St Francis Church in Tripoli, Libya, to mark Christmas Eve on December 24, 2021 [Hazem Turkia/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images]

## **Architecture – inseparable from ideology and politics**

Bsikri feels particularly attached to the el-Manar Palace in Benghazi. The building has had various social and symbolic functions throughout its history, most

notably its transition from a palace for the Italian governors to the palace of King Idris, who famously declared Libyan independence in 1951 from it.

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“Because independence was announced from that building, many Libyans are fond of this beautiful and important piece of architecture,” says Bsikri. She says she is fascinated by its design, which incorporates elements of Islamic architecture – such as the minaret and the arches – while also blending in Italian modern architectural style: “I feel it represents our history,” notes Bsikri. “It’s a little bit damaged because of the war in 2014. But it’s still standing.”

To Elfaitouri, this building is both an interesting and problematic architectural piece: “It represents how Italian architecture in Libya is inseparable from its ideology and politics. It was meant to achieve what I believe it succeeded in, which is, having an architectural hegemony that many Libyans identified with as part of Libyan identity. Libyans accepted an orientalist architectural injection in Libyan culture,” he says.

“This being said, el-Manar Palace is still significant for its cultural and ideological aspects that transcend its material and historical existence, which is both unique and alarming.”

Another beloved landmark is St Francis Church in the Old City of Tripoli. Libyan writer Maryam Salama was just a teenager when she first became fascinated by the remarkable architectural characteristics of the church, in the al-Dhahra neighbourhood: “I used to stare at it every time my family and I went to visit my uncle at his apartment because it was so close by,” she says.

Her love for heritage and architecture saw her joining the work on a renovation project for the Old City of Tripoli entailing numerous visits inside the structure.



Her task was to look up the history of the old locations that the project intended to renovate and preserve.

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“I had visited the church of St Francis of Assisi in al-Dhahra several times since I got to know its bishop, the late Giovanni Martinelli, who welcomed me and introduced me to some other Italian friends to whom I owed a serious exploration of our mutual history.”

It may take some time before a passion for Italian colonial architecture takes hold in popular Libyan culture, however. The last time Salama saw the church, it was hidden behind an iron fence for preservation.

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