

The Mediterranean Medina

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The Mediterranean Medina Conference held in June 2004 provided an international forum for discussing the transformations of the Mediterranean cities and their particular physical characteristics. Their urban structure is the result of different overlapping historical layers and the reuse and modification of previous remains. The peculiar physical characters of the Mediterranean Medina are revealed in the compact urban fabric, in the genuine use of building materials and



architectural pieces, "spolia", of the Roman city found on the site, as well as in the invention of clever techniques of climatic and environmental control. The Medina of the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean regions is also the result of the coexistence and work of different ethnic and religious groups with their heritage of civic and religious institutions, typologies, building materials and techniques. The loss of the complex identity of the Mediterranean City is mainly caused by the lack of maintenance in the historical urban sectors, the emigration of ethnic groups due to dramatic events and the introduction of new building systems and new environmental control techniques. The study of the structure of the Medina should lead to a better understanding and control of its transformations, aiming at the preservation of a precious heritage that is, to this date, still a vital part of the contemporary city.

The conference was held at the Faculty of Architecture of Pescara, on the Adriatic coast, 180 Km east of Rome. An exhibition of models and drawings concerning the Mediterranean Medina was also organized in the Museo Michetti in Francavilla al Mare, a summer resort 10 Km from Pescara. The exhibition included photos and drawings of Libyan and Tunisian medinas as well as a large model of the old city of Tripoli completed by staff at the Faculty of Architecture of Pescara.

The program of the conference included the following thematic sessions:

- The marginal areas echoing the urban Mediterranean identity;
 - The role of the archaeological remains in the formation of the Mediterranean Medina;
 - Urban analysis case studies focusing on the historical traces, the ethnic groups,
 - Mediterranean Building Technologies
 - The Mediterranean courtyard house.

A significant proportion of the delegates and speakers came from the southern Mediterranean

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countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt in addition to those from Europe and the USA. Papers were delivered in three parallel sessions during the three days of the conference.

The Mediterranean courtyard house and the urban analysis case studies themes received the largest proportions of contributions. These dealt with typological and morphological studies, social evolution, environmental performance and transformation processes. Most papers highlighted the significant changes facing the medinas at the beginning of the 21st century and the effects of globalisation.

In the case of the courtyard house theme, for example, the paper of Esher Anton from the University of Mainz in Germany, highlighted the transformations of Moroccan courtyard houses by westerners in the medinas of Essaouira, Marrakech and Fez. Western foreigners are buying and restoring the old courtyard houses in the Moroccan Medinas and using the Internet for renting or selling these houses. The author argues that “*Many of the foreign residents are artists and architects trying to find the ‘the Orient’ and also trying to find ‘themselves’.* The Westerners are usually designing their courtyard houses in the way the orientalist painters composed the orient in the 19th century”. Another interesting contribution came from Di Cristina Benedetto under the title “*A Twentieth Century Kasbah : Courtyard Building in Modern Architecture*”. This paper highlighted the influence of North African Medinas on the work of modern architects such as Aldo Van Eyck in Amsterdam, George Candilis in Casablanca and Le Corbusier. Both Le Corbusier and Aldo Van Eyck had traveled in the Algerian Sahara and this had a strong influence on the design of the orphanage in Amsterdam in 1960 by Aldo Van Eyck and the unbuilt Venice Hospital by le Corbusier. Both architects re-interpreted the intrinsic qualities of the Kasba’s urban fabric, formed by dense clusters of courtyard buildings.

A paper by Elizabeth Fentress under the title “*Volubilis and Setif: Houses and Urban Structure of Early Medinas in the Maghreb*” sheds some light on the early formation of the Islamic house in Morocco and Algeria as revealed by archaeological excavations.

Under the theme urban analysis case studies, the paper “*Design by Accretion: Links Urban Past with Present*” by Khaled Asfour attempts to bridge the gap between those who argue that cities created by history cannot be duplicated by architects and planners and those who believe that it is legitimate to recycle old forms in modern designs. The author argues that it is the process of accretion that architects can adopt to create variety within the built form. This argument was illustrated through the work of Hassan Fathy in his design of the Gurna village in Luxor.

Keynote speeches were delivered by internationally known professors. Renata Holod , Professor of the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania delivered a keynote address on the “*Urbanism and Scenography in the Safavid Iran*”. She later on received an award from Professor Attilio Petruccioli, Director of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Center at the University of Bari, for her major contribution to the understanding of architecture and urbanism in the Islamic world. Professor Renata Holod received her BA in Islamic Studies from the University of Toronto, MA in the History of Art from University of Michigan and Ph.D. in Fine Arts from Harvard University. She has done archaeological and architectural fieldwork in Syria, Iran, Morocco, Central Asia and Turkey, and is currently directing an archaeological survey and settlement study project in Tunisia. As Convenor, Steering Committee, and Master Jury Member of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, she has interacted with architects and clients throughout the world. She has also served as consultant

to Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), Arthur Ericson Architects, Brown Daltus Architects, and Venturi Scott-Brown Architects. She is editor and author of various books :

[Architecture and Community : Building in the Islamic World Today](#)

by [Renata Holod](#) (Editor) (January 1985)

[The Contemporary Mosque : Architects, Clients and Designs Since the 1950s](#)

by [Renata Holod](#), [Hasan-Uddin Khan](#), [Kimberly Mims](#)
(October 1997)

[Modern Turkish Architecture](#) (January 1984)

The conference proceedings are to be published in December 2004. For further information please contact:

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