

## **Mediterranean Architecture**

Organized by the Faculty of Engineering on February 15-18, 2004 at Misr International University, one of Egypt's leading private universities, the Department of Architecture and Dean Salah Zaky Said targeted a diverse audience of architects and professionals. The varied responses and interpretations of the conference's title proved that this provocative subject allowed for multilayered discussions. The dialogue between academics, students, and professionals from different backgrounds identified meanings with respect to the Mediterranean basin's architecture. The following themes were discussed: the social impact on Mediterranean architecture, technology and crafts, urbanism and development, landscape and environment, trends in current architecture, and heritage conservation.

The conference started with the keynote speech delivered by Suha Ozkan (secretary of the Aga Khan Award), who traced the landmark works of contemporary architecture in the Mediterranean basin. The solutions presented addressed issues not only of regional aesthetics, but also of climatic and cultural relevance. The second keynote speaker was Italian academic and architect Attilio Petruccioli (dean, School of Architecture, University of Bari, Italy), who brought up themes of typology and specificity in architecture. A rich discussion followed, with one of the session chairmen, Aga Khan Award recipient Abdel Halim Ibrahim (architect and professional, University of Cairo, Egypt), questioning and provoking the audience with respect to the meaning of the built form and material in this region.

The presentation of papers started with the theme of "Social Impact on Mediterranean Architecture." Papers explored ideas of cultural identity in

architecture, vernacular approaches of particular areas of the basin, and even questioned the term Mediterranean architecture itself as being authentic or mythical. Although revolving around a framework of architectural examples, the discussion broadened to include the implications of culture, modernity, and education. By beginning with this theme, the tone was set for the conference to explore ideas beyond the physical evidence of architecture.

In a parallel session, “Technology and Crafts,” several levels of specificity were addressed from the particulars of regional architectural devices, craftsmanship, and ornamentation to the possibilities of innovations with respect to understanding historical models and creating relevant contemporary responses. Although heavily technical, the broad range of issues explored allowed for general understandings and interpretations of technique as related to time and place.

Following this, the third theme, “Urbanism and Development,” focused on important investigations with respect to the form of Mediterranean cities. Specifically, researchers explored issues ranging from historical tissue in particular regions to typologies and anti-seismic approaches to the current phenomena of satellite cities and urban sprawl evidenced in the region’s major cities. Thus, by addressing the issue historically and also from a contemporary point of view, a holistic discussion ensued in which, much like the nature of the Mediterranean itself, layers of both time periods were superimposed so that the quality of the urban settlement could be clarified.

On the following day, Harry Fuller (landscape architect, America) presented the keynote speech. He explained in detail his team’s investigations during their design of the site for the new American University in Cairo campus on Cairo’s outskirts. More ephemeral than architecture itself, the subtleties of landscape choice and design brought the issues of climate, context, and cultural meanings to the forefront.

Appropriately, the day’s first session revolved around the theme of “Landscape and Environment.” The presenters discussed issues ranging from specific historical landscapes to such environmental architectural devices as the courtyard to determining the design’s optimal orientation.

In a parallel session, the theme “Trends in Current Architecture” was explored. Starting with the theoretical expectations concerning particular investigations of contemporary designs in the Mediterranean basin, the session moved on to an enlightening rediscovery of the works of pioneers (e.g., Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolph Loos, and August Perret) in various turn-of-the-century Egyptian cities. Thus, the impulses of the past were traced back and grounded the debate on both architectural and social influences.

In the final keynote speech of the conference, Saudi architect and Aga Khan Award winner Ali Shuaiby talked about the approaches used in his designs and the successful approaches used in other contemporary designs in the region. The final session investigated the theme of “Heritage and Conservation.” Papers questioned superficial approaches to conservation, the evolution of museum forms, the preservation and rehabilitation of particular cities, and issues of contemporary design on historical sites.

In total, the multilayered quality of experiencing the Mediterranean basin as a whole was represented in the variety of viewpoints and ideas expressed. Although each paper investigated a specific area of the basin, seeds of a general sense of the possibilities were found in the extreme differences. The dichotomies explored included the struggle between history and modernity, as well as that between tradition and innovation. No particular end of either dichotomy can be understood individually, and, like the richness of the Mediterranean cultures, layering and diversity are the keys to understanding – be it in architectural terms or otherwise.

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