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PREFACE

Why distinguish the Mediterranean cities from other cities? Perhaps because they are the first and oldest and the overlay is thicker and richer. We need to think about them and their nature, their gift as a defense against globalized indifference and the threat of a flat inarticulacy.

[Joseph Rykwert, Byblos, April 2000]

The essays included in this publication constitute a selection of papers presented almost twenty years ago at a conference organized by the Department of Architecture and Design at the Lebanese American University on the theme of the “Mediterranean City between Myth and Reality”.

This selection constitutes an important collection of different readings of the Mediterranean City, addressing the question of the validity of this historic model in all its variations throughout history, with archetypes such as Alexandria, Tyre, Byblos, Carthage, Athens, Barcelona or Marseille among others; which has marked the development of civilization for more than two millennia, spreading its influence around the Mediterranean and beyond.

The re-publication of these proceedings comes many years after the date of the conference, yet the issues raised and the opinions expressed still constitute important reflections on the Mediterranean City, at a time when cities face a global challenge that is not only economical or social, but ideological in the sense of putting into question the very notion of the city as a polis, in the old Greek sense of the term as a locus for a political participation.

At the time, three major theoreticians of the city and architecture as a whole, Joseph Rykwert, Luciano Semerani and Benedetto Gravagnuolo; each made a compelling presentation that, in the auratic presence of these authors, takes on a value which can never be recovered in print alone. In addition, two significant essays by Pipo Ciorra and Kevin Mitchell added fuel to the debate on the issues of globalization, boundaries, and the limits of this notion of the traditional city.

Joseph Rykwert eloquently argued for the continued attachment to the ideals of the Mediterranean city, as a last line of defense, perhaps, against the spread of a new colonial form of globalization, a position to a certain extent supported by both Luciano Semerani and Benedetto Gravagnuolo, each of whom projected his own perception of the Mediterranean city, a city of light and shadows, Dionysian pleasures and Apollonian reason for Semerani, a city as an intimate place of surviving mythologies for Gravagnuolo. Kevin Mitchell, on the other hand, recalled the notion of origin in the Greek city, and by this provided another point of reflection on the notion of boundaries, something that the Mediterranean city may still offer, as a model of urbanity in a world drifting towards homogeneity and leveled landscapes.

Pipo Ciorra took an opposite, polemical position arguing instead for the recognition that the Mediterranean city has already been dissolved in the contemporary global culture, a position that is reflected as well by Rem Koolhaas in his various writings. While this counter position may incite us back to a recognition of the reality of the present, as opposed to solely seeking refuge in the myths of the past, it is timely as well to remember Nietzsche’s warnings against the fall into the vulgarization of culture, which is what we are witnessing today all over the world.