

# MEDITERRANEAN CITY

DEBATE PANEL: PIPO CIORRA, BENEDETTO GRAVAGNUOLO,  
KEVIN MITCHELL, JOSEPH RYKWERT, LUCIANO SEMERANI.

THE FOLLOWING SECTION IS A TRANSCRIPT OF THE DEBATE THAT FOLLOWED THE PRESENTATIONS AT THE SYMPOSIUM. IT HAS BEEN TRANSLITERATED FROM AUDIO TAPES AND EDITED FOR CLARITY.

## Question

*In discussing the Mediterranean City between myth and reality, we heard some stories about myth, and some about reality, where does the in-between stand?*

## P. Ciorra

In the presentation of Luciano Semerani, I could see an intimate attempt to answer this question. Semerani clearly says that Myth can survive in the reality of our world of Mediterranean architecture. I must say that I always hated this concept of Mediterranean, it is one of those tools in the history of architecture used to keep together Gropius and the Miro House by Sert in the islands, it's been misused to keep together Modernity and Tradition, to keep together things that are impossible to keep together. I feel a little uneasy towards this concept, and especially the term.

My personal position was clear. There are two different questions: I think the question on the discussion of Myth and Reality finds a perfect answer in Semerani's presentation: Architecture is architecture, to us as moderns; Rolling Stones are as classical as Webern.

At the same time there is a discussion about the Mediterranean city, not about the Mediterranean poetic approach to architecture. In that sense there is a real question: is the Mediterranean myth of any use to us in imagining, doing strategies, studying tools and instruments? My personal answer is generally no, the condition and the specificity of the Mediterranean city is dissolved and melting into a different condition which will be specific again but will be different from anything that we have in our discipline until now...

I have been to the Solidere area in Beirut this morning. The Solidere area is going to be colonized in the name of foundation by the colonizing water with

a new piece of city, and the failure of this strategy is already obvious in the models and the images of what is happening there. This idea of building volumes in the light, building masses, colonizing space by solid elements is a losing strategy. May be the Barcelona example is more interesting in this sense. May be we have to consider voids as more important than solids. May be we have to take a little distance from mythopoetic aspects of considering the Mediterranean City, and collect some dust and dirt and see what we can do in this condition.

## B. Gravagnuolo

It is true what you said. We spoke in very different ways about the reality. I listened carefully to the first presentation by Joseph Rykwert on the origins of the city and the mythology of origins. Then I listened to the intellectual devastation by our friend Pipo Ciorra, who made the apology of the real, i.e. he took reality and said: we should not be nostalgic, we should open our eyes to reality and understand that the reality of today is not mythological and can not be.

I tried in my intervention to make a discourse on the mythology at the origin of my city, Naples, and the possibility today of finding again something of the history and memory of that city. So I say, reality is now the labyrinth, not chaos. Chaos cannot be understood, the labyrinth is more complex, but we can go through it by following the red thread of Ariadne, i.e. with an idea, as Ariadne is reason.

I think Luciano Semerani is correct when he says that Greek mythology can become actual again, but not as a question of style. Winckelmann was wrong to turn Classicism into a dead language. This is not a question of Classicism as a language, as a style, a form. We must accept the idea of Metamorphosis, i.e. that mythology today is not the same as in the XIX Century or in the Middle Ages or in Greek or Roman time. It is the mythology

of our epoch. We can be classical in our epoch or not classical, but the question remains the same: to find again in our reality the red thread of Ariadne, the red thread of Classicism.

### **P. Ciorra**

Only one thing Benedetto: I do not believe in this counter position between those who believe in myth and harmony as the defenders of the city basis, and those who want to get their hands dirty as the instruments of super capitalism. Most of the time, myth and classicism, as you can see in Beirut, are instruments of developers, and I want to remind you of Brialto, or the project of Aldo Rossi which you showed, which is wonderful, but which is the wrong approach of using myth, to colonize, to apply the rules of super capitalism. I think taking notice of the real being of the city, of the real things that make the city today does not mean to approve them, but it means that we have to learn new tools and new instruments, to put a virus into it that would defend people's rights to public space, to find quality in the city. What we can never do, is to counter-pose an ideal model of a mythical space to the real one, because the real one will always win, and the mythical will be used to create neighborhoods that can not survive.

### **J. Rykwert**

I thought everybody would be talking about it so I never mentioned the matter, but we are all here, and this includes all of us perhaps, except Kevin Mitchell, who comes from the West Coast, we are all provincials, we live in the provinces of the great empire whose capital is on Manhattan Island, and which plants, like the Venetian empire used to put the two columns with St Georges on one and St. Marc's lion on the other; it plants Kentucky Fried Chicken and Mc Donalds, and all these other appurtenances of the empire, the great commercial empire, because, as Roberto Calasso said: "When the United States decided it was an empire, it realized it was a limited company".

So that is the empire in which we live, and therefore in that vast empire which has as one of its postulates that space is infinitely available; yes the western frontier has finally been reached, but actually in between the western frontier and Manhattan there are vast stretches which are empty. Europe is not like that, nor is Asia, nor is China. So in fact, the lead this empire gives is inapplicable to our situation, and this is where it is Kevin, oddly enough, coming from that capital, who reminded us of the importance

of boundaries, which is really sustained as a most important idea in Mediterranean cities, and without which I think we really can't get on. Another thing we must remember: the most capital turning-over industry in our world is tourism, and according to an NGO, which recently published a report, the most corrupt industry is building. The two concepts are not unrelated. This is the reality in which we live, and this is the reality in which we talk about the Mediterranean city, and this is why we in the provinces must sustain this myth in a world which is imposing on us a way of life which not all of us accept with pleasure.

### **L. Semerani**

Last week, I asked one of my students in Venice, what type of house he was a drawing, and he said: a house to sell. This was the end of a school that studied typology and morphology as elements of our academic, scientific research. Well I think we are in an American school, in an American world, and I think that the main problem in our time is to remember the message of an American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. He said that architecture should give pleasure to man. It is not difficult to follow this message. But I think without this, outside of this, there is no art, no architecture, and I think no life. May be I did not speak clearly about Winckelmann. Winckelmann emphasized the pleasure of abstract intelligence, the aesthetic pleasure, to complete the fragments by imagination. He spoke about the torso of the Belvedere, and he said that it is interesting to complete this unfinished sculpture by the imagination. As I said before, an academic approach is to emphasize the structural types: the Souk, the Venetian palace, the Roman Theater. I think those ways of thinking are not completely wrong. A deeper approach to the complexity of the Mediterranean city has to consider also the ugliness. This is what I have to say in Beirut. Beirut is a very bad city now, not only theaters, not only history, not only Phoenician traditions: it is a very big city made of buildings to sell. Those things are for us to have in our approach as elements of our reality, to consider ugliness as part of our reality, and to mix it with pleasure. [...] I think that it is impossible for an architect to speak about a house without an idea of the city, an idea of the lives of people. I used the opposition of Apollonian and Dionysian to clarify the complexity of our selves. I think that polytheism is better than monotheism to clarify the complexity of our selves.

### **J. Rykwert**

Ugliness is not something we need to look for, it is all around us; it is Beauty that is actually rare. And I don't think that beauty and ugliness is Apollo versus Dionysus. They are after all sometimes the same person, if they are not the same person; they rule over the same place at different seasons, so they are alternating, they are very alike in surprising ways, although they seem to be opposites. And the thing to remember about Dionysus, that Heraclites pointed out, is that he is really Hades, that he is really Death, so I am not quite as comfortable with Dionysus perhaps as Luciano. But to turn back to the problem of ugliness and beauty in what we do, I think beauty is a word of which architects are very very shy. You can talk about an old building which is beautiful, or a building 30 or 40 years old as beautiful, at the limit, but to say that you yourself are trying to do something beautiful, you may talk about aesthetics, but we have no way of talking about how to make a beautiful building, it is something that our language as architects has somehow omitted, and that is why in a sense we also don't have a professional ethic.

### **P. Ciorra**

I live in a country where architects have drawn hundreds, thousands of boundaries. And every time that architects have drawn boundaries, people have just crossed one step after it and said: we don't care about these boundaries, we go on. And it's not because of the influence of the American way of life, even though I love Mc Donalds and Hollywood movies. It is not the architect who traces boundaries. If the architect has the capability, the skill to find a way to create a relation with society, then they can agree on the idea of a boundary. I doubt it, because boundaries today are immaterial. What's a boundary? Where is the end of a community, which is spread all over the world but at the same time is very tight? Also the role of the architect today, you can see from the ugliness, ugliness is built everywhere, in Italy you can find 95% of the ugliness is built without the signature of an architect behind it. There is also a discussion around this, in Luciano's talk as well, which is: is our job getting closer to art, and further away from society, from the structure of the society? Are we going to give up our structural role, probably to exchange it by ecology? I am scared of this, I hate nostalgias, I hate nostalgias for order and harmony, for the possible harmony that we will never achieve. Is the architect the one who has the right, the skill and the power to draw those boundaries?

### **K. Mitchell**

I do not have the answers, but I waited for this discussion, because I am somehow twice removed from the Mediterranean City. I am once removed because I don't live in a Mediterranean City, I don't originate in a Mediterranean City. I am twice removed because I now live in the Middle East; I am on the other side of the world. I will attempt to draw a connection between these concepts of myth and reality, by saying that what makes myth viable is the fact that it is shared. A myth exists because it is shared by a culture, it is common. We understand the value of myth, we understand it through the re-telling, and therefore it gains value and it is through the sharing that it gains value. That is the situation of myth. The situation of reality is that we have very little to share anymore. I will take the place I live in now, Sharjah, which is probably an extreme example in that case. Not only is there very little shared among the culture as a whole, but you also find a situation that has been accelerated there, a situation in which the grandparents grew up in one world, the grandchildren have another. Even within the nuclear family, do you have these splits, so you can't talk about one reality anymore. You can talk about the reality of the grandparents and the reality of the grandchildren. Those realities are very different. Not only has there been a destruction of the myth, but a destruction of the reality.

### **Question**

*Once upon a time, we had beautiful Mediterranean cities, from North to South. Now we can only see an extension of ugliness. I ask Professor Semerani, where did the gods go, when these architects created simply buildings taking over nature?*

### **L. Semerani**

My idea is based on experience. I don't speak for other architects. I know that when I do a project, a project for a university, I think of the university as a castle; or when I do a project for a house, I think of this house as a living house, a happy house. I try to communicate by images, the materials, the elements of the project, with the language of architecture; I communicate an idea of the world. I give an idea. I try to give an idea. It is impossible for me not to use some images, some metaphor, some elements of the language of architecture, of composition, elements as in music, as in poetry, with ambiguities, with complexities. It is not a political project, not as clear as a philosophical construction; but you know also that even science and philosophy

are not so clear in their goals and methodologies. I think that the architect is a person who contributes to the building of the world, and I think that we have many difficulties, but we have to fight.

### **Question**

*The Mediterranean is infinitely larger than the Adriatic or the Aegean. What is so unique to the Mediterranean basin as a large body of water? Is there a common ethos among all these people? Is there something that connects Mediterranean people?*

### **B. Gravagnuolo**

I have already said that there is not a unique Mediterranean landscape, there are many Mediterranean landscapes. But it is true that there is something that distinguishes the Mediterranean from the Atlantic. But it is not possible to answer with one identity, because it's not true that there is a single Mediterranean identity now. Identity is the history of all the relations and places. Beirut is not the same as Naples or Barcelona. We should not simplify too much the question of a Mediterranean identity.

### **Question**

*This is a question to Joseph Rykwert. In one of your books, *The Idea of a Town*, I believe, you said that the main attributes of a city are the topography and the public monuments. It took me time to understand the idea of monuments. I understood to some extent that these monuments represented the gods who protected the city. So between the idea of protection, supposed or real security, is there a relation between the idea of protection, security, related to the Divine and the idea of beauty?*

### **J. Rykwert**

I think that a city cannot be called beautiful, in the same sense that a single building can be called beautiful. Cities are much more complex entities, they arise over a long period, grow over a long period, transform, change. It's a question connected to what's specific to the Mediterranean. All what I can say is that the Mediterranean came first, and therefore the overlay is thicker. In that sense the city is something which inevitably has to suffer overlays. That is why it is not a work of art in the same sense a picture, a sculpture or a poem is a work of art. It is a collective entity in which a society represents itself. I want to insist on this. So if we don't like our cities, which represent our society, it means that we

have something we have to say about our society. There is a constant flow between the social fabric and the physical fabric, a constant interchange and interplay. That interplay is the sort of thing that Pipo Ciorra has just been talking about; that you may put boundaries but no one will take any notice, because in the social fabric there is no respect for that kind of asocial convention.

We are in a society in which myth is a different sort of thing than it was for our grandparents and our great grandparents. I am not quite sure about how to describe the myth of our society, but it is the myth which is represented in our cities. One of the problems that we all know about, actually you are lucky in the Eastern Mediterranean, is that criminality is not very high. But in very many cities around the Mediterranean and all over the world, criminality is rising, related to urban anomie. Of course, Marx, Durkheim, and others have talked about this, there is nothing new about this phenomenon, and that in itself is related to the question raised. We want of our cities to tell us something about who we are and where we are. Our cities cannot do that if they have no center and no boundary. The city exists in the boundary between the center, which is the institution, which is the public realm, which is where society knows itself to be a society, and the boundary where it says beyond here there is another rule. May be it is the rule of the food producer who cannot quite operate in the same way within the town. But unless the city can offer that, we can accept anomie to rise and to increase, and that will have consequences where perhaps crises will finally force some sort of realization that this is not an infinitely reproducible proposition.