

BOOK REVIEW

Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean – Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities, edited by Jean-François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino, 2012, Oxon, Routledge, 268 pgs., ISBN13: 978-0-415-77633-2

Since the Enlightenment, this book argues, the Mediterranean basin has played an important and ever increasing role in shaping and developing modern architecture. The book exposes both 'vernacular dialogues and contested identities' of this phenomenon through a collection of essays edited by François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino. The 12 essays, written by various architects, debate the implications that the Mediterranean vernacular has within the redefinition of architectural style, discourse and practice in the beginning of the 20th century.

In this sense, both in North and South of Europe the battle was carried between the capacity to maintain an architectural expression loyal to national specificity, local traditions, climate and geography, and the assimilation of a global cultural movement that could enrich the quest for abstraction and meaning. In the North the tension was nurtured by the tendency of adopting forms and images that were "incompatible with the rainy, snowy, and cold northern climate" (Kai K. Gutschow, p. 149) whereas the Southern intellectuals were seeking a revival of Mediterranean classicism and were associating the Modernism with a "phenomenon typical of 'the people of the north'" (Jean-François Lejeune, p. 66). In reality, the latter were not entirely detracted from Modernism because, for example, artists like Gaudí and the Catalan architect Puig i Cadafalch tried to reinvigorate the Catalan arts and architecture using modernism as their catalyst.

The tendency of rediscovering the roots was very pronounced in South, where Greek architects "felt towards the idea of a local/popular/vernacular architecture" (Ioanna Theocharopoulou, p. 111) and started to see the true Hellenism embedded in popular art and architecture. Similarly, starting from the end of First World War onwards, architects in Spain were seeing the vernacular architecture as basis for the new Spanish architecture for the working class (*casas baratas*). A new housing policy was created and vernacular architecture served as a typological model for working class housing, which was standardized and rationalized. It was the same situation in Italy, when after the war, workers were massively moving into cities. From the late 1920s, the "Rationalism" movement emerged as a solution that modern architecture could offer in response to new functional and technical requirements. It arose from "interest in the forms and materiality of vernacular buildings" (Michelangelo Sabatino, p. 42).

In Northern Europe there was a sustained strive for finding local identity. In Germany, the German architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg made an attempt at defining a German modern architecture in his multi-volume *Kulturarbeiten* (Cultural Works), also launching a thirty-year propaganda campaign to create a specific architecture in his country. Even though he was always driving the latest model car and seemed to enjoy the benefits of the modern technology by outfitting his houses with the most modern electric appliances, he looked to frame his ideas on a study and understanding of the simple local garden houses from "around 1800" which he would find full of grace and presence and a "complete reflection of their function" (p. 153). He admired both technology and the straightforwardness of the honest craftsmanship, and stated that the design of

the ordinary house is the one that matters, because it is “the only object on which the average person is artistically engaged” (p. 160).

Never affiliating himself to the International style, the Swedish architect Erik Gunnar Asplund felt a strong identity with Swedish vernacular architecture. This knowledge was crucial in understanding the Mediterranean style when he undertook a trip to France, Italy and Tunisia in 1913-14. His notes and sketches show a leaning in observing the colour, and this is what made his journey unique while his peers were admiring the facades’ whiteness and the purism of the volumes, and put an imprint on his later designs. As a consequence to his trip, he developed a complex design paradigm, in which “the manipulation of surface and colour ... began to emerge as a significant motif” (Francis E. Lyn, p. 218). Erik Gunnar Asplund was not the first one to take this journey. Gottfried Semper visited the Mediterranean lands long before him, in 1880, and later on Le Corbusier, Josef Hoffmann, Louis Kahn, Aldo van Eyck and many others made cultural pilgrimages in the Mediterranean area, being fascinated by the “authorless” houses and anonymous vernacular. They were surprised to find out that the closed off walls from the alleys opened up inside to an effervescent setting capable of naturally fulfilling the everyday needs of its residents.

The influence of the Southern regions were having becomes obvious in the early 1930s when the forum of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) meetings made the Mediterranean region its centre. It continued in the 1950s and 1960s when several European and North American architects expressed interest in the Mediterranean African settlements. It was undeniable that the Mediterranean vernacular was the symbol of refuge and inspiration against the heavy tiredness of academic conventions and historicist practices and a place where architects had “the erroneous expectation of finding solutions for their modern problems” (Tom Avermaete, p. 252). Unfortunately, as time has proven, the Mediterranean influence hasn’t solved modern problems, but was a good point from which to start.

To conclude, the book ‘Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean – Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities’ is a must-read for all modern architecture enthusiasts and a very good reference regarding the wealth of information on history of modern architecture spanning the 1920s to 1960s period.

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