

MEDNET.EU.12
FACOLTÀ DI ARCHITETTURA DI GENOVA
28-29 GIUGNO 2012

A Mediterranean identity?
The activity of the Mediterranean Cities Program
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This article intends to emphasize the role and significance of the public space through the revision of intimacy, identity and void. To re-visit these terms implying José Luis Pardo, Neil Leach and Roland Barthes' perspectives will help achieve a better comprehension of the public space as the common ground for a Mediterranean identity.

Key words: Mediterranean Cities Program, Mediterranean cities, public space, intimacy, identity, void, density, compact city, sprawl, gated communities.

The **Mediterranean Cities Program** is a post-grad program that began its activity in 2009 thanks to an agreement between the **Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya** and the **Fundació Mies van der Rohe**. Its activity became public for the very first time in 2010 when the program held its first international workshop: the **Istanbul International Workshop 2010**. Since then, and throughout the last three years, the program has been able to involve a number of universities based in the Mediterranean Basin –close to 15- through which an extended academic network has been created. A second workshop took place in **Barcelona** in 2011, and a third one is about to take place in the city of **Genova** next June 2012. For this third edition, the program will also hold a congress on the Mediterranean Cities, immediately after the workshop ends.

Since its birth the **Mediterranean Cities Program** has had clear academic objectives that have been always related to the design of the public space. In the program it has been considered that **Mediterranean cities share a high quality public space**, mainly due to **density and climate**. These two circumstances have favored a real **common ground** for the Mediterranean cities. The pedagogical core of the program is to understand, analyze and review through design, research and critique how this urban quality of the public space can be achieved not only by designing new urban fragments, but also when working in the frame of the existing city.

The series of venues: **Istanbul**, a failed attempt for **Beirut**, **Barcelona** and now **Genova**, have helped to construct an idea of a **Mediterranean identity** that would mainly stem from the nature of their public space. This text will try to define the **Mediterranean public space** as the *common ground* for the **Mediterranean Cities** by observing three different ideas: *intimacy*, through the help of the Spanish philosopher José Luis Pardo; *identity*, through the words of the British architect Neil Leach; and thirdly *void*, from a reading of the French philosopher Roland Barthes.

The Spanish philosopher **José Luis Pardo** tried to define the distinction between privacy and intimacy¹ in reference to publicity. What Pardo states is that through the media privacy has been presented as intimacy. Therefore, the need of intimacy, such as media exhibitions of the private life, informs of the **actual disappearance of intimacy**.

According to Pardo, **intimacy has to do with the art of living**, where living as art cannot be separated from the public sphere. Interestingly, Pardo does not conceive intimacy without a **robust participation into the public realm**. On the contrary, privacy remains as the non-public counterpart of publicity as they both deal with the economic side of life, subject to contracts or agreements, where intimacy does not appear to be necessary, being able to run aside or simply not existing at all.

Therefore, life can be lived without intimacy. The actual lack of it will be partially solved by the business of the private life, where consumers, lacking intimacy themselves, will avidly look for it. However, consuming fake intimacy, which it is actually privacy, will lead the audience to live the anxiety of a next purchase: because privacy has the ability of presenting itself as intimacy on TV and will engender a short and unsatisfying effect.

If there can be **intimacy in our urban lives** -meaning the **possibility for the art of living**- it can only occur in the **overlapping areas of the encounter of the self and the public realm**.

Besides the political system a Mediterranean country might have, the national GDP (Gross Domestic Product), or the cohabitation of different religious forces Mediterranean cities have a physical and touchable place for the public realm: **the public space**. Through a healthy existence of the public space, the cities located in the Mediterranean basin can celebrate a urban landscape where **intimacy** will still happen.

¹ José Luis Pardo, *La Intimidad*, Pre-Textos, Valencia, first edition: December 1996, re-edition: January 2004.

The second idea these words try to raise is **identity**. In his book², the architect and critic Neil Leach gives a new understanding for **identity and belonging** in the architectural field. Leach explains how national identity is the construction of a collective fantasy. He also reviews the whole notion of identity by which it is not ontologically given anymore, but rather defined as **performative**. This new paradigm understands identity not as a stable condition, but as a **becoming**.

These are interesting ideas for political thinking eroding ancestrally given static identities through movement. Said movement implies the repetition of actions which inform habits and therefore new forms of identities. This new conception re-allows identity as a term for the architectural discourse having lost its previous conservative comprehension to which it has been traditionally associated. The physical landscape for Mediterranean cities identity is the urban life; that is where habits elaborate an **ever changing definition of identity** together with a never ending process of becoming.

Nevertheless the enumeration of habits; its transformation and its will of becoming can be read at many levels: politics, economics, education, and digital world, among others. In the everyday life of the Mediterranean cities the manifestation of collective habits is the public space. Acknowledging the **density of population** and the **Mediterranean climate** as main causes, the public space in the Mediterranean world is of the highest quality. Therefore, **the habit of the public space** in the **Mediterranean cities** must be considered an important aspect of its **identity**.

The third idea that this text would like to review is **void**. In a recent article published at **Cercle Review** (<http://cercle.upc.edu/>) the PhD candidate and Mediterranean Cities researcher Mathilde Marengo has re-examined void with Mediterranean eyes and through the words of the French philosopher Roland Barthes³. In his book *The Empire of Signs*, Barthes speaks of the **need of a center for cities** where the center organizes the city at all effects. Barthes' interest though, resides in the city of Tokyo where **the center is a void**: The Imperial Palace. In Tokyo, the palace –which is almost empty, a garden, and an almost invisible Emperor- produces not only a geographical void, but also **semantic emptiness**. Tokyo can redefine itself along the circular movement of people, cars and ideas around the silent walls of the palace.

One wonders if the Central Park in New York City does not play the same role, as the center of the hiper-dense city, where anything can be re-started and re-colonized from its original state: Nature. Following this same idea of the **central void**, it doesn't seem casual that Mediterranean cities do not provide them... or maybe they do. Density along these cities does not seem to allow a meaningful geographically big void organizing the city.

However, **every Mediterranean city has a central void: the sea**. Meaning will not go around it, circularly, as in Tokyo or New York, but nevertheless these **circular semantics** for the Mediterranean cities are as big as the **whole perimeter of the Mediterranean Sea**.

Therefore, this void speaks of the Mediterranean itself, which has been a historically clear idea. Today, under very different geopolitics for the Mediterranean basin, the **Mediterranean** should become again a **meaningful and operational term**. According to the reviewed notion of identity, meaning will deal with performativity and habits. Transformation and capacity for becoming will provide this huge central void with new significances, creating new spaces for intimacy: **the Art of Living in the Mediterranean basin**.

² Neil Leach, *Camouflage*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006.

³ Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes*, Éditions d'Art Albert Skira, Paris, 1970. Re-edition: Éditions du Seuil, 2005.

Since its foundation, the Mediterranean Cities Program has been convinced that the culture of the Mediterranean public space should be preserved and reviewed for the future of the Mediterranean cities. The introduction of outer models -like the **sprawl** or **gated communities**, which are progressively gaining land in the Mediterranean cities- represent **a threat to the richness of the Mediterranean public space**.

Low-density sprawl might have a sense while running over the 37 parallel in the United States. This vast city that crosses the whole country from east to west seems to compensate the **absence of the public space** with the extreme richness of the private sphere. Mediterranean cities will never give place to such wealthy privacy because the sprawl is based in a non-expensive acquisition of land. Its adoption for the densely populated Mediterranean basin becomes then absurd.

Gated communities have been gaining popularity among the Mediterranean Cities. However they represent **the defeat of urban planning**. In the outskirts of Istanbul, for example, the accumulation of series of gated blocks denies the existence of the public space. Therefore gated communities are not only negative for what they represent isolated, but for **the elimination of the public space** they produce. The density of the urban fabric is similar to the traditional Mediterranean city, but its radical separation of the private and the public space undermines **the public realm**.

At the **Mediterranean Cities Program**, the **pedagogy of the public space** considers the **design of the architecture** involved in its definition. The program activities demand the simultaneous presence of disciplines such as **Urban Design** and **Urban Project**, as well as the careful consideration of the **different urban scales involved**. If these aspects are not taken into account, it is very plausible that the result won't succeed, and that will appear far worse than its traditional equivalent.

This **urban and architectural culture** in the Mediterranean cities deserves surviving under the current situation, whatsoever crisis might come. Through the work of the **Mediterranean Cities Program**, young architects along the Mediterranean basin will **share and review** the urban quality of the Mediterranean city. Moreover, it would be of great importance to transmit its benefits, in terms of **social sustainability and urban quality**, to the **public and private agents** that participate in the design of our coastal cities.