

Mediterranean: A Certain Genius of Inhabiting

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ABSTRACT

Embracing a geographic reality that connects the East to the West, and the North to the South, the Mediterranean basin is a melting pot of landscape diversity, which embodies equally distinct cultures, languages, behaviours, creeds, and many other identity traits, intercrossed in a shared History. But above all plurality, is it possible to identify a unity in the approach to the act of inhabiting, of architecting – in an etymological sense of building, of creating Man's place – landscape and, consequently and intrinsically, housing, through processes that, albeit formally apart, are very close in essence? Through the analysis of different authors, with different approaches – from Braudel's historiography to the traveling impressionism of Matvejevitch, through Orlando Ribeiro's passionate but thorough scrutiny – we will try to reveal a transversal inhabitation genius, not confined to a determined loci, in search of that which translates a wider ethos: the Mediterranean.

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1. Introduction: The Mediterranean

What is the Mediterranean? This question, geographically unusual as it may seem, because of its apparently immediate answer, embodies a complexity that unveils on the direct proportion of the deepening of the reflection around it. Orlando Ribeiro conceptualized the Mediterranean as follows: "as a natural unit it is essentially defined by position, climate, the unfolding of its orography", adding that "as a human individuality, the resemblance that its ways of life present from one end to the other, for only once, and by a few centuries alone, can we talk about a political organization that encompassed the whole: the Roman Empire" (2011, p. 37).

It then appears as more than mere geographic boundaries, something that, from earthly elements, can sublime itself into an essence that cannot be confined or explained only through physical or abstract administrative frontiers. Fernand Braudel also adopted a cautious approach in defining the boundaries of the Mediterranean, comparing it to a "luminous beam, whose intensity fades without being possible to definitely establishing the line between shadow and light" (1995, p. 193).

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It is then less baffling Predrag Matvejevitich's conclusion, immediately upon opening his *Mediterranean Breviary*, about the state of the art of setting the Mediterranean's frontiers: "we aren't exactly sure how far it extends" (2019, p. 19). A doubt that ranges from Classic Antiquity. Albeit the obvious circumscription of the mediterraneus within its margins and the narrow opening guarded by the Pillars of Hercules (Mons Calpe to the North and Mons Abila to the South) something else was foreseeable. In Anaximander's map – or that which is thought to be its faithful representation, predecessor of even Ptolemy's "Geography" – the Mediterranean, center of the known world, materializes the author's cosmogonic conception of apeiron (Brotton, 2013, pp. 25 – 26).

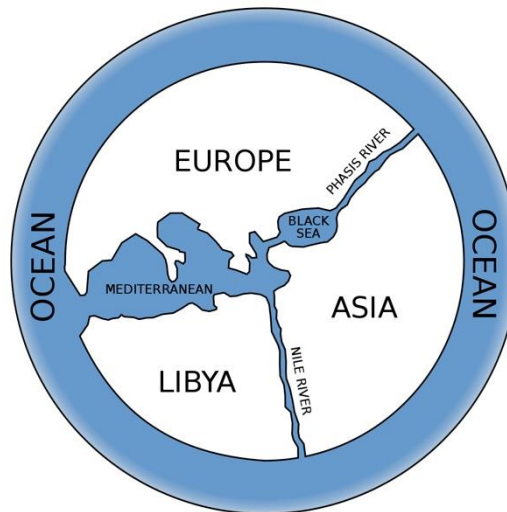


Figure 1. Representation of Anaximander's map
(https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:Anaximander_world_map-en.svg)

Presenting a diffuse concept of ethology, this idea postulates the existence of an overseeing identity, original, from where all the micro identities stem. This is to say that in the Mediterranean coexists a duality that makes it simultaneously divergent and convergent, a polysemic point of concentration and dissemination of fundamental values that are embodied and expressed in different manners, while, nonetheless, forming a heterogeneous cultural unity. This later evolves to the roman concept of *orbis terrarium* (the limits of the terrestrial horizon). Even knowing the world beyond their World, the romans abridged the concept of civilization to the Mediterranean, in a deliberate form of chauvinism, conceived to unitarily state an authentic Mediterranean culture. In order to understand it, four fundamental factors must be considered: climate, orography, movement and people.

1.1. Climate

The Mediterranean climate, which is exerts a relatively homogeneous influence throughout the Mediterranean basin, is fundamentally characterized by its dryness, thermal intensity and longevity of its summers, and the amenity of the winters. Precipitation, more uncertain than scarce, concentrates in short periods (mainly during autumn and spring), a climatic originality that originates violent rainfalls, in a torrential regime.

Given its location, the Mediterranean exists in the feeble threshold between the desert's barrenness, the Atlantic humidity, and the continental harshness. And even though it disappears in those areas, the Mediterranean fulfils itself in their shared rims.

An example of the importance of climate in the Mediterranean is its relationship with the prosperity, but also decline, of the Roman Empire. Rome's dominance is associated to longstanding favourable climatic conditions in the region, in average terms. On the other side, the end of the Western Roman Empire, in 476 A.D. (the beginning of Odoacer's reign), corresponds to a period of significant cooling of Northern Europe's climate, forcing large masses of population to roam South, searching for more favourable conditions of life, in an "invasion" that would, in time, precipitate the fall of the Roman Empire (Comellas, 2011, p. 154 – 162).

1.2. Orography

Orography is determinant, for "the Mediterranean is reduced to a fringe between mountain and sea" (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 46), usually dominated by limestone, "background of white fleshless mountains, provided of nothing but shreds of reddish soil (...) and one of the reasons for its poorness" (ibid., p. 38). The exiguity of lowlands and even more of flatlands – originating an intricate hydrographic network – causes that both water and fertility, which allow permanence and survival, are achieved through a "sustained effort, in which victory is achieved only by struggle and maintained by uninterrupted vigilance" (ibid., p. 49), including the removal and organization of rocks in farmland, more notably in the pharaonic works of Mediterranean terraces – "more sweat was poured to build dry-stone walls on the slopes (...) than to build the pyramids" (Matvejevitch, 2019, p. 77). In the Mediterranean, one occupies more what is possible, rather than what is desired.

1.3. Movement

Movement in the Mediterranean is a decisive issue for population, economic and cultural dynamics. In such a way, that it can be understood as an ecosystem, defined not only by its variables of state, but also by the relations between them (flows).

"The Mediterranean is united only by the movement of men" (Braudel, 1995, p. 310), a theory which transforms this region in a "space-movement". First of all, through the sea, completing and complementing margins: "it is not the water that connects Mediterranean regions, but the seafaring peoples" (ibid.).

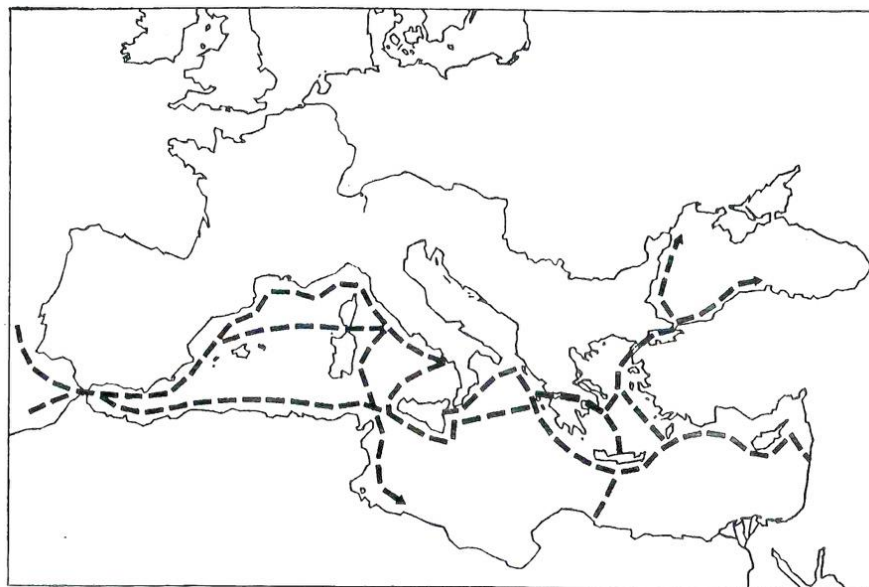


Figure 2. Navigation routes in the Mediterranean (Jabouille, 1996, p. 22)

By land, in addition to trading routes, transhumance and nomadism set the pace to both people and landscapes in the Mediterranean, originating intense exchanges. Migration and the itinerancy of labour and working hands are trademarks of the Mediterranean Man: peasants move to the mountain, mountain dwellers move to the cities, Southerners to the North, Easterners to the West, and Westerners to overseas.

This circulation of people carries knowledge, culture, tools, craftsmanship, practices, sayings – similar gibberish and even profanity, such as the finger gesture, the Latin *digitus impudicus* and the Greek *katapygon*) – and myths.

Not only through trade, but also through tourism, dating back as far as the Classic Antiquity, with many authors sharing their trips around the Mediterranean (Jabouille, 1996, p. 56 – 63). What would they say about the contemporary Mediterranean management of the migratory crisis?

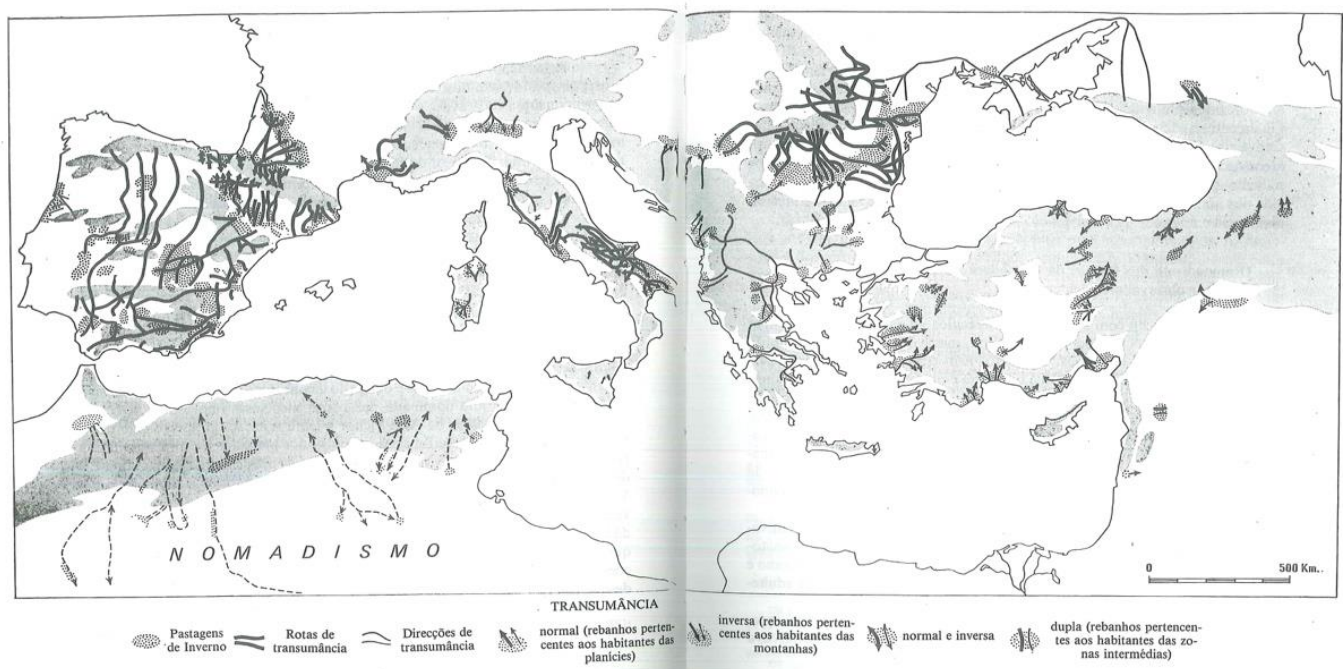


Figure 3. Transhumance and nomadism in the Mediterranean (Braudel, 1995, pp. 114 – 115)

The *pax romana* played a key part in this process, allowing an unparalleled level of cultural dissemination and assimilation. Lucien Febvre, while imagining the surprise that Herodotus might feel watching 1940's peasants, was certain that Pliny, the Elder would not feel any awkwardness (Braudel, 2001, p. 336). In Portugal, the village founded under the roman administration, two thousand years ago, are one of three defining historic moments for the evolution of rural cadaster (Beires, Amaral & Ribeiro, 2013, p. 92). As summed up by Ovid: "*romanae spatium est urbis et orbis idem*".

1.4. People

Orlando Ribeiro saw the mediterranean Man as a “transhumant shepherd, seafarer, (...) mostly, a crude worker of the land” (2011, p. 198), that was predestined to localism by his surrounding environment, but whom the sea condemned to a life of bonding and relating to his next of kin. Accepting Durkheim's theory that “social organization was a model for spatial organization, which is its decal” (Silvano, 2010, p. 14), the mediterranean man is depicted by his landscape.

Again in Orlando Ribeiro's words, now about the algarvians (the southernmost region of Portugal), we have a reading of the mediterranean folks' character: “But the Algarve is not the Garden of Eden. Take a look at how fields and woods are enclosed by sterile limestone outcrops. Take a look at how, everywhere, stone walls, beautiful prickly pear hedges, sparse houses and the intertwining of roads, show how much this is an occupied land. Emigration is a resource and a necessity. The algarvian carries with him his way of accommodating, his open and welcoming appearance, his taste for laughter and talking; with the vivacity that made him famous he is, in geography and temperament, the most meridional of the Portuguese.” (1998, p. 164). Hard working, sacrificed, deeply connected to the land and, in spite all, joyful and bold: this is the mediterranean temper. “Without even talking about swindle. In certain cities, mostly in their seaports, it is more than a simple skill: it is one of the Mediterranean sciences, or even a form of art” (Matvejevitch, 2019, p. 29).

This Mediterranean spirit shares History and blood, in a miscegenation process that crosses Phoenician trading posts, Greek colonies and Roman provinces, up until our days. Imaginary itself, is pooled through a profound memory, inscribed in mythology (the mythological underground rivers are nothing but a mystification of karsts and aquifers), which translates the intense cultural circulation, leaving each margin of the Mediterranean reflecting about its significant and opposite other, just like a single cultural and social ecosystem, in a shared catharsis, because “no single one people gathers all the Mediterranean traits: they are scattered through” (ibid., p. 112).

For the Mediterranean people, time is relative, and so is the separation between the living and the dead. For that which is old and the dead are clearly present today and in the living, as if myth and reality fused.

1.5. The strange Mediterranean familiarity

From his journey through the Mediterranean, Paul Theroux tells us of a transversal feeling to the locals of every country, revealed by a common phrase: “this is not one country – this is many countries” (Theroux, 1996, p. 75). This reveals yet another particularity of the Mediterranean. If the Mediterranean ethos covers whole countries, it ranges only over parts of others, rarely going beyond the first significant elevation of the terrain. “As soon as you cross the first mountain, the connection with the sea is interrupted, and the region transforms (...) in inland” (Matvejevitch, 2019, p. 92), a passage that, although referring to the region of Mostar, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, perfectly describes the peculiar relation between seaside Algarve and inland, where people from the latter, when descending the hills, say “I'm going to the Algarve”, because they do not identify with it. Therefore, nations better understand and fully fulfil themselves in the Mediterranean pooling with foreign countries, rather than inside their own borders. The Mediterranean condition is a more comfortable “skin” than the national condition. It is a homeland within nations, as a strange Mediterranean familiarity, which penetrates even language, given that “it is then observable (...) a cohabitation of two or several languages: vernacular idioms of Mediterranean affiliation and the national language, said literary, of more or less continental origin” (ibid., p. 60). Maybe this is why it is so frequent the lack of understanding between that which we can call the Mediterranean community and the rest of the European Union, cleaving North and South.

2. Inhabiting the Mediterranean

How, then, is the Mediterranean inhabited? How does one architect – as a verb, the exercise of mediation between the needs, possibilities and conditionings, especially environmental ones – that process of inhabiting, in the etymological sense of building, of creating shelter for Man, a basic need, as synthesized by Alejandro de la Sota, “Man needed shelter, he needed to bring some order to his life on earth: he built” (Puente, 2002, p. 134). And how does one achieve that in a space that, more than geographically, is located in an ethos, in a genius of inhabiting that can't be confined to a single or specific loci?

If humanized landscapes, such as the Mediterranean ones, are “those which Man modelled to satisfy his needs” (Caldeira Cabral, 1993, p. 46), and housing is “a product of Man, a fact of culture, and it will be in Man himself and in the laws of his cultural creation that we must seek their reason to be and the decisive explanation of the house which is his work” (Oliveira & Galhano, 2003, p. 14), the inhabiting is explained via the inhabitant, whom, in turn, is explained by his surroundings, which over him exert a deterministic influence. To put it differently, “around architecture there are important things happening. Climate and landscape (...) are all part of these surroundings that give architecture a reason to be” (Serra, 2006, p. 12). How does the Mediterranean express itself in landscape and urban organization, and housing itself?

2.1. The city in the landscape

It is on the mountain, where the Mediterranean “has given (...) its first steps” (Braudel, 1995, p. 62), that we find the original settlements, which immediately express the umbilical relation with the landscape. Avoiding the risks, violence, and insalubrity that the torrential rainfall associates to the plains and lowlands (*aqua, vita et mors*), it is on the slopes – so often deeply and costly modeled for that purpose – that the pioneers of the Mediterranean humanization have settled, in spite of the inconveniency and difficulty in accessing water.

Through agglomeration, for houses, just like animals, get together to protect themselves from harsh winds and to share shades that allow to endure the blazing heat: “all of the Mediterranean is a land of villages that punctuate, from far to far, the fields where Man does not work or live. Villages of close quartered houses, sometimes more than compact, actually crowded, not seldom hanging from high spots and, therefore, dissociated from the fields.” (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 138).

The urban fabric of seaside settlements always relates – usually adopting an orthogonal shape – to the nearby sea. The two verses from the algarvian poet António Pereira “I am an algarvian / and my street ends in the sea” synthesize not only the Algarve, but the entire relationship that, in the mediterranean coastal edge, is established between cities and the sea.

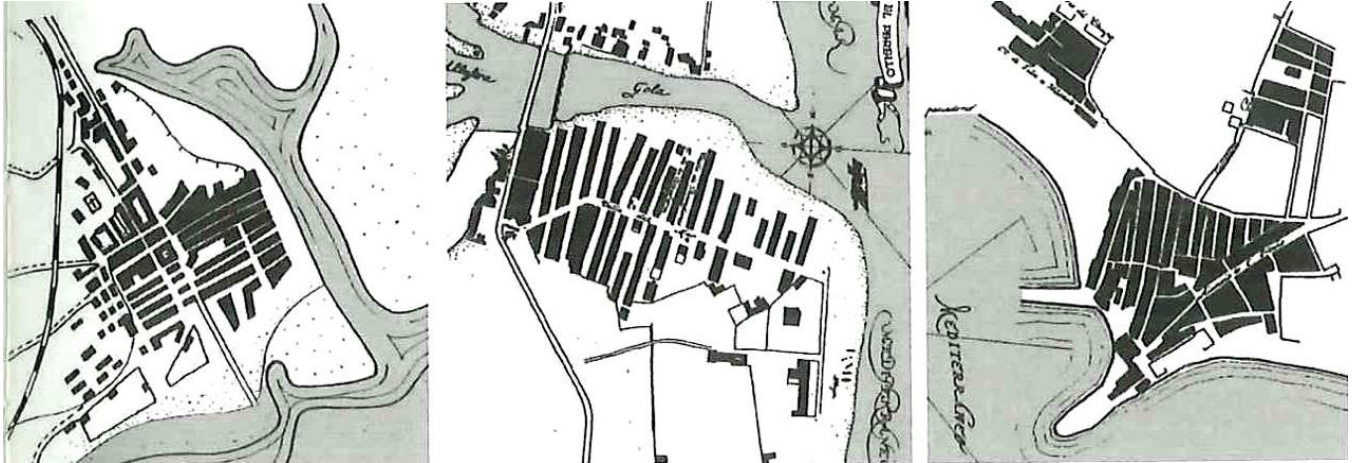


Figure 4. Habitational settlements of Fusetá (PT), El Perelló e Benidorm (ES) (Tostões, 2016, p. 79)

Seaside settlements are always connected to a harbor, which can be bigger or smaller, and to a mountainous counterpart, located in an uncomfortable but high ground, which allows control over the coastal recess.

2.2. The house

The Mediterranean house is identifiable, more than by volume or aesthetics, by the relations established with its surroundings.

Immediately, with the climate. The Mediterranean house always has concerns regarding climatization, which translate into structural adaptations. Its architecture is one of living, and not so much of architectural objects, it is not an end, but a means to give something to those that will inhabit it. That is why exterior openings are few and narrow, with high ceilings to preserve freshness (amplified by inner patios, with water, vegetation, or both), reixa (a form of wood lattice, or equivalent) in doors and/or large windows, an açoteia (flat rooftop) as a way of using the scorching sun to dry fruits or other products of the land.

This is why, throughout the Mediterranean, constructive units and repeated architectural elements and patterns are identifiable, without prejudice of their formal adaptation to specific contexts and available materials, which create a shared identity, with unique local expressions. This is the case of the rounded house (Ribeiro, 2013, pp. 61 – 62), of the vaulted roofs, façades, patios, ovens, chimneys, cisterns, or alcoves, as documented by Mafalda Pacheco (Tostões, 2016, pp. 71 – 97).

3. Where's the Mediterranean?

If architecture – both of landscape and buildings – is an expression of civilizational values, is it today, in the national context of Portugal, faithful to the Mediterranean ethos? In face of what has been exposed, is it legitimate to question where has the Mediterranean gone, in the Portuguese context? Is present days' architecture an identity factor or, on the contrary, a mischaracterization one? Certainly not an evolution one, as it results not from a progressive metamorphosis, but from a substitution process, imposed by external values.

3.1. Is Portugal Mediterranean?

Matvejevitch excludes Portugal from his Mediterranean reflections. Braudel claims that "the Portuguese example carries us outside the boundaries of the Mediterranean" (1995, p. 63) – while, nevertheless, he points out several examples from Portugal as corollaries of the Mediterranean ethos.

Orlando Ribeiro (1998) concludes that Portugal is Atlantic by position, but Mediterranean by calling.

This sense of Mediterranean appropriation in Portugal is so deeply rooted, that the messianic belief of Father António Vieira in the Fifth Empire is founded on a direct heritage from Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, domains that grew and expanded from inside the Mediterranean Basin, as maritime and commercial potentates, beyond their military power.

Of Portugal one could then say to be, in a fantastic expression by Ricardo Agarez, a Mediterranean riddle in the Atlantic, even though it has committed a "good treason" to its geographic and ethologic alma mater through the Diaspora, initiating a long process of deviation of the centralizing axis of the Mediterranean (in a westbound course, after changing from Mesopotamia to Greece, and from here to Rome), broadening its horizons with transatlantic and intercontinental journeys.

This geographic opening to the world by Portuguese seafaring forces the Mediterranean to share its global centrality, but it also allows that, through the maritime and overseas expansion, the Mediterranean identity is carried to new boundaries, consolidating, for example, in the açoteias (flat rooftops) of Mozambique or in the "scissor roofing" (typically from Tavira, in the Algarve) that will appear in the Portuguese Indies (Ribeiro, 2013).

3.2. Can the Mediterranean save the world?

Mediterranean heritage is nowadays rapidly eroding. "The disappearing of regional houses (...) is also another aspect of that general movement of leveling that characterizes our time, fatal corollary of industrialization, which sets the erasing of essential affective values and the fascinating diversity of the world – the end of a Humanism that was a philosophy of life." (Oliveira & Galhano, 2003, p. 374), at the same time that "is ongoing, from some time ago, a systematic destruction of traditional systems (...) a phenomenon (...) that promotes deep mischaracterization of the traditional landscape (...), namely of its identification with the Mediterranean imprint" (Duarte Gomes, 2017).

Modern life, obsessed with efficiency and speed (distances are measured in time, not in distances) is sentencing to death the old villages "set peacefully on high grounds, accessible by winding paths, when not by stairs" (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 139), for the primacy of the automobile does not sympathize with roads for people, donkeys and oxen.

The criticism enclosed in Paul Virilio's reflection, that through his "grey ecology" attacks the pollution of Nature-Grandeur that degrades distances and the duration of time, can perfectly fit in a defense of a "Mediterraneanity": "the world has shrunk, has shrunk terribly, we no longer travel, we dislocate" (Virilio, 2000, p. 92). Because the Mediterranean clashes, by lagging, with contemporary world: "educated in respect for very old civilization values, the Mediterranean does not unconditionally sacrifice its reason to live to time, money and efficiency – the three great modern-day idols" (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 30).

When analyzed in depth, this Mediterranean essence, slow and inefficient, but telluric and humanist, supplies effective answers and mechanisms to contemporary challenges, that question models based on infinite growth in a world of finite resources. Its characteristics even connect with modern degrowth principles (Latouche, 2020), of which we can stand out the values of sharing and cooperating, the adaptation of productive apparatus to the conditionings of the environment and the reduction of waste.

To be able to contribute to the healing of this conflict, it is mandatory that landscape and buildings architecture respect the Mediterranean ethos, (re)interpreting and (re)designing it in current time.

Recovering, in landscape and housing models, the principles of the lowest level of energy and the respect for resources and their limits, sparingly exploring them, in similarity to the traditional inhabiting of the Mediterranean. Recovering the respect for the scarcity and importance (value, not price) of the land, something that contrasts with the contemporary carelessness in soil and space management, without understanding them as a strategic reserve of fertility and productive capacity, not increasable by mere will or positive thinking.

Recovering and maybe once again lighting the humanity beacon that Mediterranean culture withstood for so long in Europe – which it founded, educated and raised – and the World, and to which's eclipse the frailty of the European Union is not foreign.

Recovering the fundament of the very success of “Mediterraneanity”.

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