

**Bruno Zevi: Historiographical Redefinition as
Methodology of the Contemporary Architectural Practice**

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1 ABSTRACT

The critical and anti-historical reading that Bruno Zevi, one of the greatest Italian theorists, does of the "official architecture" is a useful means to redefine the boundaries - and also the limits – of the Modern Movement.

Casting new light on architectural geographies too often neglected by the official historiography, Zevi corroborates the principle of the disorder and the imperfect as a powerful design tool that has established itself at various stages of the architectural history. According to this meaning, to what extent has influenced the historiographical process the architectural practice? Which is the legacy of the battle of Rationalism versus Expressionism for the architecture of the third millennium? Overcome the academic rules - proportion, assonance, perspective, the idea of the "finished" artistic object - today it prevails a line of architecture which is openly instability, disharmony, insecurity and conflict. "The architect does not pursue anymore superstructural values: he speaks in prose, accumulates semanticised words, avoids any kind of synthesis, and achieves a full, persuasive poem, intrinsic to things" Zevi states. Referring to the zero grade of the architecture, definition borrowed from Roland Barthes, he asserts the aspiration of non expressing oneself in the formal perfection of the harmony, symmetry, geometrization but rather in the uneasiness, disorder, and in the imperfect.

The historian goes for the compactness of the historicist view of architecture to reveal, in its crumbling, that wealth of elements object of inspiration and continuity in the history of architecture. Thus from Zevi idea that the architecture of the past is always present architecture which has to deal with the contemporary, it follows that each true interpretation of the past must be spurred by a profound sense of commitment to the milieu of the contemporary art. In this sense, the history can be taken into consideration as a modern methodology of making architecture.

2 BRUNO ZEVI: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REDEFINITION AS METHODOLOGY OF THE CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE

Bruno Zevi, was born in 1918 and died in 2000, is one of the most important Italian theorists of architecture. His anti-historical and critical reading of the classical historiography has highlighted whether a different architectural geography, emphasizing that architecture which was improperly defined as minor or peripheral, or the limitations of an architectural practice "subordinated" to those classicist patterns, that will firstly lead to the International Style and to the Post-Modern afterwards. In a critical battle faced with extreme lucidity over an entire life time devoted to architecture, he was always accentuating that these are annulling not only the characteristics that relate the idea itself to the place, but also the very idea of architecture as space suited to accommodate the social function that is designed for, in a pantomime "of façade" that displays the monotony of the repetition and denies the design "from inside out". His reading method aims to minimize the contemplative attitude in order to encourage the involvement and the actualization of the history of architecture, far from a historicist view that prevents from reading the past as irreplaceable moment to understand and face the contemporary season of the architecture. In the view of the history as "methodology of architectural practice" he identifies not a philological portrait of the past, but a breeding ground from which to "extract the forgotten subversive components". It is a complex and engaging method as it does not concern just, to use the title of one of his famous books, "how to look at architecture", meaning the historicized architecture, but establishes some new categories of judgement with which learning to judge even our own house, the contemporary architecture, the city that surrounds us, in an actualization that becomes immediate. Determined supporter of the organic architecture, in 1945 he founds APAO, the Association for Organic Architecture, keeping in mind that the organicism, which has in Frank Lloyd Wright the most complete performer, has a diachronic pattern which can be widely found in architecture, from the origins up to the Modern Movement. Its uniqueness lies in the concept of space, which tends to think first the voids, the inner cavities and then to devise areas and volumes structured on them. This logic supports the emphasis on the social spaces of both micro and macro scale - the house, the city - where the man lives and where the collective theme is mainly expressed; in this way "the spatial inventiveness", according to Zevi's definition, focuses the attention on contents rather than containing, in a planning that takes primarily in consideration the human fruition. The social spaces for living are indeed the central and innovative theme of the urban Charter of Machu Picchu of 1977, promoted by Bruno Zevi forty-four years after the Charter of Athens by Le Corbusier: it is not at random the choice of the place, because, compared with Athens,

"Machu Picchu symbolizes the cultural contribution of another world. Athens implied the rationality of Plato and Aristotle, the Enlightenment. The Machu Picchu represents everything that escapes the categorical thinking of the Enlightenment and is not classifiable as to its logic"¹.

¹ B. ZEVI, *Conntroistoria e Storia dell'Architettura*, vol. III *Dialecti architetonici - Architettura della modernità*, Newton &Compton, Roma 1998, p. 137.

With the word Enlightenment Zevi refers to all those academic stereotypes that for centuries the architectural design has submitted itself to: the proportion, the assonance, the perspective, the idea of the "finished" artistic object, etc.; the Italian historian raises against them a reinterpretation of architecture based on the so-called "constants" or "principles" or "anti-rules" or linguistic "invariant" that highlight new and innovative aspects also proving itself as an effective tool for the contemporary design. And it is appropriate to remember them, considering that Zevi extrapolates them as synthesis brought by the complex phenomenon of the modern movement, starting from William Morris:

1. List of contents and functions.
The shape of the building must fulfil the functions to be maintained.
2. Asymmetry and dissonance.
Symmetrical design is synonymous for laziness and anti-sociality. In nature two identical halves don't exist. The dissonance makes possible the identification of individual functions and eliminates the monotony.
3. Anti-perspective three-dimensionality.
The observer's point of view is dynamic, not fixed in advance and still, as in the Renaissance.
4. Four-dimensional decomposition.
The building box is decomposed into plans, which are then reassembled.
5. Projections, structural strains, membranes.
The contribution of structural engineering has to merge with the architecture without disguising itself.
6. Timing spaces.
Fluidity of the various rooms that are compressed, dilated, blew up but reassembled.
7. Continuity between buildings, cities, landscape, territory.
It is "the urban-ecture", a global vision in which an overall urban planning and architecture are fully integrated, indivisible from each other.

These new categories of judgement are functioning as a litmus test in the rereading of the whole historiography, in which, however, should be included new architectural seasons, identified by Zevi in the history of the minor buildings, that are serving a "democratization of history of architecture"; in the history of urbanism, "great bridge between economic and social history and art history"; in the history of the landscape, "the outcome of symbiosis between agricultural modifications and architectural interventions" and in the history of the extra-European architectural experience, which must "break the psychological barrier that closes the history in the European area". The "anti-rules" penalize and condemn all the architecture of perfectionism, theories of "ideal" of the Renaissance, the rigour of the Cartesian rationalists where there is no true expression of the space in that sense. In fact, in the whole Zevian conception the definition of the space is central as the primary element that distinguishes the architecture:

"The authentic architecture, Wright teaches, that of the future, but also of the present and the past, affects, moulds, invents the space liveable, human, the "space *per sé*" to serve the individual and the community. Space is not merely an ingredient of the shaping process of architecture. It is the filter through which all the elements and components derive their architectural legitimacy. A site, a place achieves its identity in terms of architecture only when it comes to the status of space; otherwise it is just a character in search of an author. A plastic form is sculpture; it becomes architecture only if

involved from the space (...). Space is a void, the artistically animated cavity, the negativity of the building transformed in the most poignant and creative action"².

The experience of the space by man, which is its social content, characterizes every single architecture and is given credits of the semantics attributed to it by the person who conceived it.

The concept of counter-history coined by Zevi is the tool for making a strict reading of architecture according to the perspective "from modern to ancient" rather than the contrary, precisely because the making of contemporary architecture needs to do a reading "à rebours" but with the eyes on the modernity, from which may descend targeted critical angles. It is the case, for example, of the hymn to the "Zero Grade" of the prehistory: the caves are architectural spaces inherently different from each other, independent, free from models while, with the beginning of the history, typology will become the dominant type, and only great architectural personalities - and among these Zevi includes Michelangelo, Borromini, of course Wright and a few others - will have the courage to reject it. Playing with one paradox he emphasizes the fact that, from a linguistic profile, modern man, consciously or unconsciously, strives for bringing back the spatiality of prehistoric caves; it is interesting to note in them, before what that there is, all that there is not, or all that is negative, that the superstructure will be accumulated over the centuries to come.

So in the "pre-historic informal" of the caves, the Italian historian recognizes those features which have close relationship with the obstinate research of the contemporary space: the voids, the crevices and shelters provide a continuity of individual episodes which, taken in their complexity, offer a multiple and community perspectives. Further more:

"The cave has no façade. Does not feel the need to close itself behind a wall, it opens itself toward the outside. Today the aim is to open the "inside" to the "outside", perhaps shielding it with transparent plates; [the cave] does not distinguish among floors, walls and ceilings. Enhance the continuity that wraps the space, without trying to make a box out of it (...) does not standardize the lights. It captures them, filters them, possess them, it handles them refracting in every direction on the rough boulders (...); triumphs in its thickness. We find cracks, holes, cuts and lacerations, obsessive gradients everywhere. One can walk up or down, but never on a flat surface. Ignoring the straight angles as the dull academic purisms; there is no volume in it. It does not lay on the ground, it belongs to it then and becomes camouflaged. Wright warned: not on the ground but of the ground"³.

Of course, the semantic value of the cave also includes the "non-finished", a concept that Bruno Zevi discovers primarily in the genius of Michelangelo as "defeat of the form" when the great Italian architect, recording the crisis and the subsequent fading of the Renaissance, anticipates and in some projects exceeds the Baroque, developing an architectural language free from any linguistic coding affirmed during the Renaissance. Zevi writes indeed:

² B. Zevi, *Zevi su Zevi – Architettura come profezia*, Marsilio, Venezia 1993, p. 183.

³ B. Zevi, *Contraistoria e Storia dell'Architettura*, vol. II *Personalità e opere generatrici del linguaggio architettonico*, Newton & Compton, Roma 1998, p. 11

"When [Michelangelo] can design a palazzo of its own, such as that of the Conservatori on Capitol Hill, he seems to break down himself into two roles: the Renaissance one that traces the pattern of overlapping flat surfaces, the other that breaks and outrages that tissue. The non-finished bursts out from this situation, furious fits that cannot calm themselves in an institutionalised linguistic system, because they are spurting from the unconscious urgency to smash it"⁴.

The existence of a reality of the form totally independent from the stylistic point of view, without signs, is that "Zero Grade" theorized by Roland Barthes. The French semiologist, in the last chapter of the essay *Mythologies*, states that "at the end, only the Zero Grade can resist the myth". Zevi notes down that perhaps the Zero Grade "released from any bonds in a state of a pre-ordained language" and "no longer in the service of the triumphant ideology" is a myth itself⁵. From that can derive those "authentically spontaneous" buildings that do not take into account any of these rigid compositional characters such as symmetry, the geometry *per se*, the static and controlled conception of the space which imposes a precise perception and fruition, the light canonically designed to enter from all symmetrically identical openings. Thinking of a building according to the Zero Grade leads rather to a inventive concept of space, light, shape, of itineraries to be followed. Zevi writes:

"All the great architects, at one time or another in their search, long for finding the mythological point of birth of the building. (...) Possibly the symbols are unavoidable. But either they are inherent to the place, and relative to the spaces, volumes, specific tools of the architecture, or they are only decorative and artificial, nauseating like in the post-modernist works. John Johansen tried to extract from a "Dictionary of Symbols" those who, in his opinion, are the most significant in architecture: the cave (return to pre-natal state), the house (female storage of wisdom), the forest (mystery, the unknown either of trees, columns or mega structures); the labyrinth (adventure, without awareness of success or failure), the tower (aspiration above the average), and the rocket (escape from the ground). He is confident that these symbols can persuade the architects to neglect their 'personal indulgences, the exotic references and senseless decoration'⁶.

The symbols identified by Johansen adhere to the "Zero Grade" and encourage the planning in the definition of a good architecture devoid of all those pre-established models "classicism, eclecticism, nostalgic folklore, cosmic allegories and totemic symbols" as defined by Zevi which in the complexity of the scenario city-environment-contemporary landscape can lead to think about the concrete quality of architecture, or what Zevi defines, in a succeeded content portmanteau of etymology, "urba-ecture" that is urban + architecture conceived as a unitary element characteristic on the landscape scale.

⁴ B. ZEVI, *Conntroistoria e Storia dell'Architettura*, vol. II *Personalità e opere generatrici del linguaggio architettonico*, Newton & Compton, Roma 1998, p. 236.

⁵ B. ZEVI, *Zevi su Zevi – Architettura come profezia*, Marsilio, Venezia 1993, p. 163.

⁶ *ibid*, p. 171.

In his essay 'The seven myths of architecture', 1984, the historian asks questions that seem to us as a prophecy today. He writes in facts:

"Whether the metropolis we know today are destined to disappear, what kind of community, of city will/ if we have? And what architecture is suited to them? Those are the questions that require prophetic imagination, utopian creativity and new myths. Our culture seems to be based on old myths and on the repetition of old mistakes. Urges the inventing of new risks. Otherwise, as was the case, urban planning and architecture will become compensatory evasion, simple shelters, escapes for the loss of old, real or supposed, mythological values"⁷.

An attempt of answer can be sought once again in the rereading of the historiography of the twentieth century architecture especially. The persistence of West-centric, Euro-centric vision led indeed to the omission, not knowing how to read the architectural literature that can be discovered in some other geography. Thus it is true what Edoardo Persico wrote in *Prophecy of Architecture*:

"I do not say that modern architecture is an attempt to organize modern Europe: it is beyond architecture"⁸.

It is very useful to free oneself, as Zevi suggests, from that compact vision of the historiographical process as is given to us by the various Giedion, to reconsider the contributions that would make truth the architectural periods of Countries considered "peripheral". This useful tool of updated reinterpretation can be educating and simulative for today's planning, considering that it is able to define new aspects and contradictions of the history of so-called official architecture.

For example, starting even only from those consolidated figures, they pluralize themselves in the analysis of events, often overlooked: what impact had the great exhibition of the Bauhaus, which was organized in 1922 in Calcutta? And what is the legacy of Bruno Taut in Turkey, where the famous architect of the *neues bauen* taught and designed far from the stable constructive innovation of Berlin in the '20s-'30s? In the light of a possible revision of the field, of geography, what is Modernism? Maybe we should rethink, deconstruct and relativize the terminology that characterizes it, to make room for a more complex concepts such as duality, displacement, hybridity, alternative modernity, two-way process, peripheral modernism ... perhaps to an extreme point, we should not talk about modernism at all. And here lies the problem: does the terminology help us or it become a prison for us? "Deconstructing" the language can make us achieve something new? Probably it can improve our methodology, relativizing a concept based on otherness behind.

⁷ B. ZEVI, *Zevi su Zevi – Architettura come profezia*, Marsilio, Venezia 1993, p. 166.

⁸ E. PERSICO, *Profezia dell'architettura*, conferenza del 21 gennaio 1935 a Torino

In the short and dense writing *Architectural pieces for the third millenium*, Zevi considers the values that the modern movement has bequeathed to the twenty-first century, as a basic lexicon in which to draw in contemporary architectural practice:

The modern movement gives to the twenty-first century the results of a battle that defeated the academic canons, the proportion, the assonance, the rhythm of the "octave", the perspective, the idea of the "finished" and perfectly executed comforting artistic object. The deconstructivists are putting on trial the architects who have intention to produce the pure forms, based on the inviolability of the elementary geometrical figures, not contaminated, emblems of stability, harmony, safety, comfort, order, unity. In their works, from Eisenman to Gehry to Koolhaas and Libeskind, architecture is expressly a factor of instability, disharmony, insecurity, discomfort, disorder and conflict. It rejects the ideologies of the golden_ratio, the immutable "scientific" establishment, eternal and universal, to defend the rights of a "troubled planning" fitting with reality. Impure forms, crooked geometry, not straight angles, diagonals, twisted volumes, concave-convex surfaces, patchwork of etymologies and pattern. The architect does not pursue anymore superstructural abstract values: he speaks in prose, accumulates re-semanticised terms, avoids any kind of synthesis, and achieves a full poetry, persuasive, and intrinsic to things"⁹.

To reach this target, Zevi attributes a fundamental role to Expressionism, which seemed to have ended its season in 1924, won by a triumphant Rationalism, but instead has remained as incorruptible *fil rouge* throughout the whole twentieth century: through the pioneer Gaudi first, then in the historical period of Mendelsohn, Poelzig, Taut and Scharoun, in Alvar Aalto as a response to the International Style, up to what Zevi calls "the blasphemous scream of Rochamp" where Le Corbusier "smashes principles, grammar and syntax of the rationalists, "and then with Saarinen, Michelucci and more others, the Expressionism will lead to that: "action-architecture that also qualifies our work"¹⁰. Frank Lloyd Wright for Zevi is the tutelary deity of modernity, the repository of all the architectural wisdom from which to draw the most meaningful and lasting lesson. Zevi states:

"In the process of disengagement from the doctrine of the International Style many fragments of the Wright's lesson were absorbed. From a richer perception of aesthetic signs to the discovery of popular subcultures, from the hypothesis of an "action architecture" qualified by the uncertainty principle to questions of personalization and pluralism, from numerous and symptomatic Mannerisms to randomness of the taste and to the phenomena of de-urban planning, de-technologism, de-architecture, direct or indirect suggestions of Wright have been assimilated"¹¹.

⁹ B. ZEVI, *Conntroistoria e Storia dell'Architettura*, vol. III *Dialetti architettonici - Architettura della modernità*, Newton &Compton, Roma 1998, p. 138

¹⁰ B. ZEVI, *Paesaggio e grado zero della scrittura architettonica* in "Bruno Zevi per l'architettura", Convegno internazionale di Studi, Roma 14-15 marzo 2002

¹¹ B. ZEVI, *Zevi su Zevi – Architettura come profezia*, Marsilio, Venezia 1993, p. 185

According to Zevi's latest definitions, modernity is the everyday vocation of turning the crisis into a value¹². Values that lead to an architectural lexicon of substance, capable of conceiving narrative spaces that can tell, contain and stimulate social content for which they are designed. Thus the elements of the crisis of the state of being contemporary - the consumption of resources, the overpopulation, the climate change, etc. – according to zevian meaning become values of modern architectural design, stimulating access to a new idea of architecture. "I do not hear the music I write. I write to hear the music that I have not heard" said John Cage. An omen for the architecture of today!

3 CONCLUDING NOTES

Let me conclude with some lines of the poem *Waiting for the Barbarians* by the Greek poet Constantinos Cavafis, that stigmatizes as the arrival of the barbarians, that what is allochthonous, and is in fact a great resource and a source of renewal, of growth, of variation of mindset:

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything going on in the senate?

Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What's the point of senators making laws now?

Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

...

Why don't our distinguished orators turn up as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?

(How serious people's faces have become.)

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come;

And some of our men just in from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

Those people were a kind of solution.

¹² B. Zevi, *La chiesa del duemila*, discorso tenuto all'Università Lateranense in occasione del concorso vinto da R. Maier per la chiesa del Giubileo di Roma, Roma 22 ottobre, 1996

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