

ZEVI ' S
ARCHITECTS

HISTORY AND
COUNTER-HISTORY OF
ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE
1944-2000

EDITED BY PIPPO CIORRA, JEAN-LOUIS COHEN

MA **XXI**

Quodlibet

FONDAZIONE
PIPPINO
ZEVI

CONTENTS			
		Zvi Hecker on Bruno Zevi	105
Giovanna Melandri President Fondazione MAXXI	5	Zevi and Rome, 1944-68 Alessandra Muntoni	107
Margherita Guccione Director MAXXI Architettura	7	Bruno Zevi in Venice, 1948-63: "The Enchantment of Those Fifteen Years Is Immeasurable"	125
Adachiara Zevi President Fondazione Bruno Zevi	11	Elena Tinacci	
Storymakers Pippo Ciorra	21	Peter Eisenman on Bruno Zevi	139
Zevi <i>under</i> Zevi Jean-Louis Cohen	33	Organic Architecture as an Open Work Alicia Imperiale	141
Zevi: Chronicles and History Roberto Dulio	47	The Ruins of Education Giulia Menziatti	159
Frank Gehry on Bruno Zevi	59	Zevi an Italian Architect at the End of the 20th Century Massimo Locci	165
Wright, Asplund, Neutra: in Zevi's Words Maristella Casciato	61	Bruno Zevi Architect: A Critic at the Drafting Table Luca Guido	177
Zevi and Olivetti: Strategies for Urban Reconstruction (1945-46) Marida Talamona	79	The "Universale di architettura" series Antonino Saggio	189
The Story of a Historical Trilogy: Myth, Chronicles and <i>Storia</i> Daria Ricchi	97		

PROJECTS			
	15	Franco Albini, Franca Helg BBPR Michele Capobianco, Riccardo D'Alisi, Massimo Pica Ciamarra Iginio Cappai, Pietro Mainardis Luigi Cosenza Luigi Carlo Daneri	
	41	Giancarlo De Carlo Mario De Renzi Marcello D'Olivo Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini Mario Fiorentino, Giuseppe Perugini, Nello Aprile, Cino Calcaprina, Aldo Cardelli Ignazio Gardella	
	73	Federico Gorio Marcello Guido Giovanni Michelucci Carlo Mollino Eugenio Montuori, Annibale Vitelloszi, Leo Calini, Massimo Castellazzi, Vasco Fadigati, Achille Pintonello Riccardo Morandi	
	91	Luigi Moretti, Adalberto Libera, Vittorio Cafiero, Amedeo Luccichenti, Vincenzo Monaco Sergio Musmeci Pier Luigi Nervi Francesco Palpacelli Studio Passarelli Luigi Pellegrin	
	119	Giuseppe Perugini Renzo Piano Ludovico Quaroni, Luigi Agati, Federico Gorio, Piero Maria Lugli, Michele Valori Leonardo Ricci Mario Ridolfi, Wolfgang Frankl with Mario Fiorentino Aldo Loris Rossi	
	153	Maurizio Sacripanti Piero Sartogo, Carlo Fegiz, Domenico Gimigliano Leonardo Savioli, Leonardo Ricci, Giuseppe Giorgio Gori, Enzo Gori Carlo Scarpa Paolo Soleri Studio Transit	
	163	Vittoriano Viganò Enzo Zacchirolì	

THE “UNIVERSALE DI ARCHITETTURA” SERIES

ANTONINO SAGGIO

You'll tell me about the “SEVEN WORDS” that, in my opinion, are SIX and 1/2. There's always 1/2 a word extra.

Toward the end of 1977, Professor Zevi came into the classroom to announce his newest creation: “Universale di architettura”! The idea was founded on a series of interrelated concepts that were consolidated in that act of foundation. There were four essential principles:

1. The connection—a recurring one in Zevi's work—between the action of “cultural politics” and that of “civic politics.” Without culture there is no direction toward political action (and vice versa).
2. Interest in high-level cultural dissemination (in addition to the many postwar publications, it is worth remembering the series of pocket books called *Il Balcone*, and the creation in 1976 of the TV channel *Teleroma 56*).
3. His very firm conviction that modern language—as he had described it in 1973—was the basis on which to discern good architecture.
4. The idea that it was possible to identify moments of propulsion both in the past and in the present: “only through modern historical criticism can we demonstrate that Michelangelo and Borromini have more to offer than Gropius or Aalto because, in their linguistic contents, they were braver and more inventive.”¹

¹ B. Zevi, “Dal manierismo al linguaggio,” in B. Zevi, *Zevi su Zevi. Architettura come profezia* (Venice: Marsilio, 1993), 154.

NB

The author has inserted some corrections in this Pdf version to eliminate errors present in the printed book

All of these principles are broadly applied in the “Universale di architettura” series.

THE FIRST “UNIVERSALE DI ARCHITETTURA” 1978-85

When, in mid-1977 Bruno Zevi told the participants in his “Seminars on operative criticism” about the birth of a new series of paperbacks called “Universale di architettura,” the idea for *Il Balcone* had thus been born again, but it had also been greatly expanded. The paperbacks would no longer only contain monographs about architects, but also the architectural experiences of the past, they would be anthologies, new editions, controversial essays, “monographs about monuments, artists, cities, territories, theoretical problems, aspects of design.”²

The first authors would come to Aula B in Valle Giulia to speak to Zevi and his assistants, and students. There were times we discussed Fourier, other times Gramsci, Erskine, Piano, and the Pompidou, which had just been built. Although he could be tough on his assistants and rough with his students, Zevi was at the same time open and curious. He was happy to let people talk, he conversed, but he couldn’t stand to hear banal things, and he often flew off the handle.

Among those of us who were his students many were Communists. We believed in architecture as a social comeback. Giuseppe Pagano, the director of *Casabella* in the 1930s, a left-wing Fascist, and later an anti-Fascist and a martyr at Mauthausen, embodied those values. Pagano pursued a non-language, one that was essential, he advocated proud modesty, and he was certainly not a champion of the “seven invariants”. Zevi was tied to him: he was one of the three Italian names to save in his *Storia dell’architettura moderna* (History of Modern Architecture).³ Zevi would tell us about how when he was a secondary school student he visited, to his great admiration, the construction site of the Faculty of Physics at the Città Universitaria and was enthusiastic about the cantilever that “bit the corner.” In other words, although he was a

Bruno Zevi, *Zevi su Zevi*, Marsilio editore, Venezia 2 1993, p132. In these pages Zevi briefly also remembers the publication of the most important volumes, starting from some new editions of Bettini, Scott, Bruschi, Argan, Kelly Smith and of some of the more original essays, such as those by Benincasa, Mariotti, Di Forti, Racheli, Mariani Travi, The Site, and the handbooks by Sara Rossi and Finelli, by Bentivoglio and Valtieri.

³ B. Zevi, *Storia dell’architettura moderna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1950).

moderate presence in the world of Zevi’s references, Giuseppe Pagano (who would later become a subject of great passion for me) was allowed to be a part of it.

After three years of constant attendance, two hundred pages, and a declaration of honors, Zevi said to me: “So, shall we publish it?”. It was 1979 and it took me five years, but it was my official entrance into the “Universale di architettura” series.⁴ I had managed to publish my book at the age of 29. In 1985 I returned from the United States. The “Universale di architettura” series, after publishing 73 volumes, curated by the editor Silvia Massotti, ended its publication with *Dedalo*.

THE BIRTH OF “UNIVERSALE DI ARCHITETTURA” 1996-99

A small publisher from Turin, Testo & Immagine, had asked Zevi to write a Preface for a book about the Sassi di Matera. Zevi had made a counter-proposal instead. He took the books that had been published in the “Universale di architettura” series and said: “This is what I want to do!” scattering the *Dedalo* books all over the table. The publisher was taken aback, but he courageously accepted the idea.⁵

⁴ After several attempts, trials, and ideas for articles, a more limited version was born, a typescript with a “package-like” text in the manner of Persico. It was 1983 and the book was published in 1984 when I was a young teacher in America. The book—Carlo Severati noticed this immediately—had a very different structure. It didn’t follow the organization that, borrowed from *Il Balcone*, Zevi suggested that the authors use. While it did have an initial essay, the text did not deal with the most important facts about the figure in question—which were consolidated in Pagano’s case; rather, it emphasized new historiographic aspects: an implicit relationship with Marxist culture, an awkward embrace of the Fascist School of mysticism, a necessarily ambiguous relationship with the power and figure of Mussolini and of the Patron. The second part of the book did not present an album of images, but was rather made up of short chapters where the images were accompanied by texts that chronologically traced over the project, as well as Pagano’s most decisive experiences. For instance, the “Mostra del decennale” at the Valentino, the direction of *Casabella*, the study of rural architecture. In other words, the book *L’opera di Giuseppe Pagano tra politica e architettura* (Bari: Dedalo, 1984) offered a structure that directed the paperback toward a complete change with respect to *Il Balcone*, which in many volumes in the “Universale” series had been reposed. Together with the editor, we managed to change the cover which, instead of having the usual layout, had only one background image divided by an almost imperceptible diagonal white line.

⁵ The anecdote was told to me several times by Viggiano, cf. also his *Introduzione* to volume no. 100 in the series: “My thoughts immediately go to the fall of 1995, when I decided to accept this editorial challenge that Bruno Zevi had suggested with his usual exciting and youthful enthusiasm”, in A. Terragni, *Daniel Libeskind oltre i muri* (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2001), 5.

The new “Universale di architettura” was printed by the small but efficient publisher Testo & Immagine. The Turin publishing house was directed by Roberto Marro, the Roman branch—located in a studio on Via Nomentana 150—by the architect Maria Spina. The publisher was Vittorio Viggiano, an engineer, with whom our working relationship gradually became more personal and cordial.

Based on the idea of widespread distribution in places where newspapers were sold, in color and relatively inexpensive (12,000 lire, slightly more than a collector’s magazine), the series was exactly what Zevi wanted. “Universale di architettura” in the Testo & Immagine version marked a new focus for his ideas, it influenced the ongoing debate and the culture because the print run was so high—the first volumes about 15,000 copies—and it again placed Zevi at the heart of a close-knit network of relations with authors and collaborators. “We have won”—he would say—also referring to the success of architecture in the world, in the wake of the Deconstructivism show in New York. Also encouraged by the success of the series, in September 1997 Zevi organized his last conference, followed by a competition:

“Paesaggistica e linguaggio grado zero dell’architettura,” in Modena.⁶

The series was now formally divided into different sections, each marked by a different color. The prevalent one, in terms of its role and the number of titles, was, of course, “Gli Architetti,” (Architects) devoted in particular to contemporary names, but not just that. This was followed by the section called “I Capolavori,” (Masterpieces) which was in turn followed by “Scritti,” (Writings) “Guide,” (Guides) “Grandi eventi,” (Great Events) and “Varia,” which alternated, every two weeks during a first phase, then four volumes each month.

Personally, I answered the invitation “and what have you been up to?” with my second book for “Universale”: *Peter Eisenman. Trivellazioni nel futuro*. Published in June 1996, it was the 7th volume in the new series.⁷

During the period when it was being published, “Universale di architettura” began to cover an alternative publishing role, but one of considerable impact. The publishing world was characterized by the dominant presence of the Electa publishing house and by the close relationship between the “Universale” series and the architecture

6 Cf. *L’architettura. Cronache e storia*, 503-506 (1997).

7 My answer to the question “what are you going to do?” was “Peter Eisenman.” The reason why was obvious. After the publication of a book about Giuseppe Terragni, one about Eisenman would have created a flow of interesting relations for the reader, seeing the well-known proximity between Eisenman’s thinking and some of Terragni’s works.

magazines *Casabella*, *Lotus*, *Rassegna*, published by the same group. Naturally, there were other publishers, for instance, Laterza, or Zanichelli, who were still doing well and publishing monographs about architects (including Zevi, with three books about Mendelsohn, Terragni, and Wright, respectively) and much more. However, the arrival of Zevi’s paperback series unquestionably kindled the enthusiasm of the readers and characterized a dynamic phase of openness and renewal. Among other things, Zevi managed to publish books about figures for whom there were no monographic texts at the time. It may sound odd, but that was when the first monographs about Caccia Dominioni, and Lina Bo Bardi were published, along with ones about authors who had passed away, like Mollino, or “difficult” contemporary names like Birkerts, Ciriani, Behnisch, and Fuksas (in those years they were totally absent from the Italian scene).

To go back to my personal life, after Eisenman, Zevi asked me to edit a monograph about Frank Gehry.

The structure of that book was different from the two previous books. The story of his work was based on a series of action verbs: to assemble, to stretch, to graft, to found, to elongate. Zevi did not object to the fact that it was different from the previous texts; he seemed to understand the methodological significance of that choice. A few months after the publication of the book about Gehry, “Universale di architettura” embraced something completely new, dedicated to “La Rivoluzione informatica” (The Computer-Science Revolution). Practically speaking, after the publisher asked me if I wanted to direct the new series, I instead developed the idea of basing a section of “Universale” on a new and necessary topic. Zevi gave his stamp of approval and—after an exciting game of ping pong via fax—we arrived at the title “La Rivoluzione informatica in architettura.” I was one of the few who had the honor of sharing the front cover with Zevi, and to do so for some six volumes.

Zevi backed my proposals all the way. From the idea in 1996 to ’99 the series grew and it was disseminated, acquiring importance, visibility, and responsibility, until it was translated into English, the only one in the Testo & Immagine series.

While busy working on several fronts, on January 9, 2000, Bruno Zevi died unexpectedly, leaving his readers, friends, family, and, of course, his closest collaborators heartbroken and worried about how to cope.

The owners of *L'architettura. Cronache e storia* decided to hand the publication's management over to someone who was not an architect: Furio Colombo. The series was instead owned by Testo & Immagine, and Vittorio Viggiano, after a few months of meetings and hypotheticals, handed over to me the series of monographs and the continuation of “La Rivoluzione informatica,” while the other sections were given either to architects close to Zevi, or to ones who had written texts for the series itself. At the same time “Spazi arte” and “Design” were born, directed by Adachiara Zevi and an editorial committee that met periodically.

I drafted my editorial program for “Gli Architetti,” which summed up my experience as an author of “Universale di architettura.”⁸ I signed a total of 31 books in the “Gli Architetti” series, 7 of which had already been chosen by Zevi. In selecting the new architects who would be the subject of the monographs, I committed myself to publishing the ones who Zevi had mentioned or published in his magazine or in his books, and who I felt were necessary. I suggesting that monographs be written on the members of Team 10, and this led to books on De Carlo, Van Eyck, Coderch; I had also planned to publish a book about Pancho Guedes, although it never came to fruition. Naturally, there were also books about Soleri, Costant (which was one of the ones that Zevi had already made plans to publish, in addition to books about Cosenza and Sacripanti, respectively). Some books—such as the one about

8 “The aim of the ‘Gli Architetti’ section is to orient readers toward the creative personalities who deal with design and construction via a ‘modern’ tension aimed at transforming the crisis of the world and of society into architectures pregnant to the time in which they take place. There is no-either from this point of view or from others—difference between a contemporary architect and an architect who lived a long time ago. The perfect knowledge of the sources in these monographs always serves to submit the philological given to the critical one. The instruments that guide writing are eminently formative. The text focuses on categories that are more proper to the making of architecture via analyses that concern the articulation of space, the development of the construction, the organization of uses, the choice of language. Inside these and other categories proper “to what is concrete” about the design, the specific contribution of the individual architect is delineated via an analysis of the main works (almost always illustrated with color photos) and the necessary references to the cultural and disciplinary context in which they are situated.” Cf. “www.arc1.uniroma1.it/saggio/architetti”.

Ricci—were written by young authors and were followed carefully, books that were thought out step-by-step, while others were overseen by prolific and mature authors, such as the one about Musmeci by Nicoletti, Tschumi by Costanzo, Cattaneo by Mariani Travi. Some authors, like Marotta or Galofaro, also wrote for “La Rivoluzione informatica.”

In 2004 the series “Universale di architettura” ended its publications with Testo & Immagine (160 books were produced altogether) and it continued with Marsilio, a member of the RCS group. It seemed like an opportunity to relaunch the series, but only 24 volumes were printed, almost all the “Gli Architetti,” because “La Rivoluzione informatica” transmigrated as an independent series with EdilStampa and continued for a year in English with Birkhäuser. I edited 12 other volumes, which contained discoveries like Predock or significant anticipations like Sanaa or Morphosis. The last one was published in 2010 Toyo Ito was the subject. Unfortunately, this new Marsilio edition never got as far as the newsagent's, and the chance to influence architectural culture according to the cultural basis that Zevi had established gradually petered out. Volumes with beautiful photographs and a short introductory essay periodically come out: the “Universale di architettura” experience is by now distant, even if I have to admit there's some nostalgia for “Universale di architettura” Testo & Immagine. There were those who bought paperbacks such as these, sold together with newspapers, read them quickly, got to know who Behnisch, Mollino, and Lina Bo Bardi were, and maybe even left for Brazil.

TWO AND A HALF POINTS TO CONTINUE

In order to conclude I need to go back to two points in the introduction. The first one concerns the role of cultural dissemination. I believe that the events surrounding “Universale di architettura” show—from the title itself—an Illuminist, encyclopaedic side of Zevi. And his awareness of the role that cultural dissemination had to play if there was to be progress. At the same time, culture evolves and one must be open to what's new. Zevi showed great farsightedness and an open-minded intellectual curiosity, also toward sectors that he did not

know but whose relevance he grasped perfectly. The case of “La Rivoluzione informatica in architettura” is the proof, but the whole “Universale di architettura” experience is studded with examples.

The second point is the central position that Zevi attributed to modern language. The contribution of my work in “Universale di architettura” shifted this central position. Different experiences, a different moment, being an architect and above all a university professor close to the consolidation of the project had compelled me primarily to not reason through the categories of language, but rather through the search for other concepts, other substances, other structures. I once openly discussed this difference and this way of reasoning with Zevi, presenting him with my principles. He answered in these words: “Dear Nino, I received feedback about your conference at IN/ARCH. Very positive. Sorry I wasn’t able to participate. So let me play the honorary president and go soft on you. Your seven concepts are perhaps five actually: vibration and fluidity can be unified even by absorbing dynamic interconnections, which are not a consequence, but rather a cause. Now that I think about it, I would also leave out ‘imprinting.’ You’re left with: therapeutic architecture, fluidity, urbancape, space as system. It sounds excellent to me, a springboard from which other things are born. While seven, an attempt to include everything, risks stabilizing. Of course, I was there. Just like you, always present while I am working. Physical fatigue. It’s seasonal. I suffer from it as well, but I think it’s beneficial. Yours, Bruno Zevi.”⁹

⁹ Letter written by Bruno Zevi to Antonino Saggio, March 27, 1999.

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