

# Bruno Zevi and the zero degree of architectural writing

Research seminar organized by Wouter Van Acker and Lyna Bourouiba as part of the FNRS funded Research Project "The 'zero degree of architectural writing' in Bruno Zevi's historiographical and critical work: overcoming the antagonism between 'high and 'low' architecture".

*hortence* - Research Centre for architectural history, theory and criticism of the Faculty of Architecture La Cambre Horta of the Université libre de Bruxelles

Date: 25 March 2021

Place: Academia Belgica, Via Omero, 8, 00196 Rome

In 1997, three years before his death, the Italian architect, historian and critic Bruno Zevi organized a major event in Modena entitled "Landscape and the zero degree of architectural language", which entailed a conference, an architectural competition and a publication.<sup>11</sup> Although this event took place late in his career, already in 1973 he considered the idea of "zero degree" the only pathway for architects to overcome the ideological and stylistic deadlock of the discipline<sup>2</sup>. The theory of a "zero degree of writing", also known as "neutral", "white" or "amodal" writing, Zevi borrowed from Roland Barthes, who first developed it at length in his 1953 book *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*.<sup>3</sup> This new form of writing was supposed to be devoid of all external meanings, free from the weight of language and style, and would transcend the historically embedded conflict between popular and literary language. Since the 1960s the term "zero degree" has continued to attract research and debate both by academics and practitioners. While interpretations have varied depending on temporal and geographical context, the concept has continued, in the wake of Bruno Zevi, to fascinate architects until the present day.

This research seminar intends to explore Bruno Zevi's appropriation and translation to the field of architecture of Barthes' idea of "the zero degree of writing", and its shifting meaning and use during the crisis of modernism, late modernism and postmodernism. Converging on the endpoint of the Manifesto of Modena of 1997, we hope to bring together a group of historians and witnesses willing to give a talk that retraces one of the historical lines or paths that crossed at this event. The seminar aims to address the various ways in which the 'degree zero' was used to re-read the history of modern architecture, Zevi's restyling of this notion over more than twenty years, the paths of his friends and colleagues whom he invited to speak at the conference (such as the historian Peter Blundell Jones and architects such as Kiyonori Kikutake or James Wines), or architects (such as Massimo Locci and Marcello Guido) who participated in the competition, organized in parallel to the event, calling for designs epitomizing a "zero degree of architectural writing".

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<sup>1</sup> Zevi B., «Paesaggistica e Linguaggio Grado Zero dell'Architettura». *L'architettura. Cronache e storia*, n°503-506, sept.-dec 1997 ; Venise : Canal & Stamperia Editrice, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Zevi B., *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura. Guida al codice anticlassico*, Turin, Giulio Einaudi, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes R., *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, Paris, Ed. Du Seuil, 1972 (1953).

# Programme

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- 9:00** Welcome of the participants at the Academia Belgica
- 9:15** Introduction: How to understand Bruno Zevi's Degree Zero of architectural writing?  
**9:30** Bruno Zevi's Degree Zero and Counter-History of Expressionism  
*Wouter Van Acker*

## From the witnesses

- 10:00** "Zero degree", not a language reduction but a language extension  
*Alessandra Muntoni*
- 10:20** The concept of Landscape and Architecture at Modena and later  
*Antonino Saggio*
- 10:40** Discussion
- 11:00** Coffee break

## As a testament or a text-ament?

- 11:15** The Zero Degree as a Negation of Time  
*Andrew Leach*
- 11:35** Text-ament  
*Pippo Ciorra*
- 11:55** Discussion
- 12:15** Lunch break

## As a legacy

- 14:00** Zevian founding values for teaching History of Architecture in the 21st century  
*Paola Ardizzola*
- 14:20** Discussion

## Not only in Bruno Zevi's mind

- 14:30** Bruno Zevi, Kazuo Shinohara and Hiromi Fujii's adoptions of Barthes's Degree Zero  
*Lyna Bourouiba*
- 14:50** White writing and contemporary architecture  
*Jacques Lucan*
- 15:10** Discussion
- 15:30** Coffee break
- 15:45** Round table

## Abstracts

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### **Zevian founding values for teaching History of Architecture in the 21st century**

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*Paola Ardizzola*

Bruno Zevi's strenuous construction of new categories of judgment for de-codifying the history of architecture, according to innovative semantic values still has a strong pedagogical impact. His reading method aims to minimise the contemplative attitude in favour of the involvement and actualization of architectural history far from a historicist approach, which prevents from reading the past as an irreplaceable occasion to understand and translate the current architecture values. In his vision of history as "methodology of architectural doing" he draws not a philological portrait of the past, but a breeding ground for extracting its "forgotten subversive components". Zevi emphasizes how the architecture of the past is the expression of solutions extremely modern when conceived, thus worth be analysed in order to understand the process and ideas they subtended, absolutely still valid in contemporaneity. With his methodology, Zevi focuses on how it is essential to learn history of architecture by investigating what the masters of the past wanted to achieve rather than just the final building outcome in its components. It is a complex and engaging method because related to "how to look at architecture" in a different perspective, evaluating with same categories both contemporary and ancient architecture. This powerful means of architectural history reinterpretation casts light on new aspects and contradictions in the history of so-called official architecture. The talk focuses on two main aspects: the strong interaction suggested by Zevi between the architectural design education and history of architecture, and the actualization of the Zevian lesson in the contemporary pedagogy of History of Architecture.

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### **Bruno Zevi, Kazuo Shinohara and Hiromi Fujii's adoptions of Barthes's degree zero**

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*Lyna Bourouiba*

In June 1981, at the fourth meeting of the CICA in Warsaw, sixteen years before the Manifesto of Modena, Bruno Zevi exposed - not for the first time - the fundamental and liberating, but also illusory, dimensions that he attributed to the Barthesian idea of "writing degree zero" transposed to architecture. A few months earlier, Zevi had travelled to Japan for the first time to present the 1978 exhibition *Roma Interrotta* in Tokyo, where he gave a lecture to a small audience. In the room was the Japanese architect Kazuo Shinohara, who was also pursuing a form of zero-degree architecture, or rather a "zero-degree machine", the foundations of which he set out in 1983 in the French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. At the same time, another Japanese architect, Hiromi Fujii, who trained in Milan and then London, has also been exploring an architectural translation of Barthes's book through fictitious and constructed projects since the 1960s.

This paper aims to retrace the ways in which the Barthesian idea of "writing degree zero" was invested in the architectural milieu during the 1980s, and since the end of the 1960s, from a triptych composed of three architectural figures: Bruno Zevi, Kazuo Shinohara and Hiromi Fujii. The aim is both to present a comparative study of their respective approaches and also to explore the hypothesis of fruitful intellectual exchanges between these three protagonists, first in 1981 and then in 1983, the dates corresponding to Bruno Zevi's two trips to Tokyo.

## **Text-ament**

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*Pippo Ciorra*

On June 3, 1999, Pierluigi Nicolin, chief editor of Lotus International, asks Bruno Zevi for a contribution for the next issue of the journal, that was supposed to address “the architecture experimentations linked to the development of the New Sciences and and the collapse of *classical* rationalistic paradigms”. Zevi accepted Nicolin’s invitation and wrote a “text-ament” promptly published in the new issue (n. 204, 2000) and re-printed recently in a precious little publication (Extra-9, Lotus) with the title *L’ultimo manifesto*. The title is already an interpretation: the text is submitted (via fax) to Lotus in September 1999. Bruno Zevi dies on January 9 2000. For Zevi, feeling close to the end, the article is an opportunity to clarify a few aspects of his legacy. Among them the fierce statement about the impossibility of a (“zevian”) architecture language. A strong advocate of the central role of language in building a virtuous link between architecture and society at the end of his life Zevi takes a strange (and somehow contradictory) step away from his own theory. Officially - according to his note - to free himself from the retroactive affiliation of his own clumsy followers. More profoundly, perhaps, to bring to some conclusion an investigation on the relations between space, architecture and semantics that started with the three exhibitions he curated between the 1956 and 1978 on Biagio Rossetti, Michelangelo, Brunelleschi. It would be interesting to propose, in the end, that Zevi came to the ‘zero degree’ by discovering the tools of curatorship.

## **“Zero degree”, not a language reduction but a language extension**

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*Alessandra Muntoni*

From Barthes to Zevi: almost a prophetic misunderstanding. Roland Barthes's critical essay *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953), had a overwhelming impact on the critical thought of Bruno Zevi who tried to transfer that one deep content into architecture. However, between Barthes and Zevi there is almost a prophetic misunderstanding, due to the difficult but irresistible transfer between literature and architecture. However, analyzing again reports and projects of *Modena Conference* (1997) and developments of architectural research in the Third Millennium, it must be recognized the originality and the importance for a continuous renewal that architecture is obliged to undertake, in order to be rooted in society and in history. Barthes wrote: "The multiplication of scriptures is a modern act that forces the writer to make a choice, changes form in behavior and gives rise to an ethics of writing" and moreover: "If writing is truly *neutre, blanche, amodale*, Literature is won". Zevi replied: "If architectural writing is truly neutral the Architecture of power, classical, authoritarian, academic, postmodern, is won".

Then, here is the question: understanding the role played by such words as *language, style, writing, speech, form, art*, both in literature and in architecture. It will be discovered that "zero degree in architecture", by Zevi, does not coincide neither with the “less is more” by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe nor with “the pride in modesty” by Giuseppe Pagano both tending to a modernist koiné, nor with the “basic language” strictly linked to communication as Natalia Ginzburg thought, and even less with the “cultural reduction” by Renato De Fusco, even if Zevi had looked at it carefully. Instead – as I will try to explain critically analyzing some architectural and urban works – it is intended as a basic but inclusive dimension, an expanded language, a difficult but essential commitment in proposing good ideas and tools to transform landscape, city and architecture in geographical dimension, to model in the electronical age a livable, biocompatible, metamorphic and socially involved space-time, founded on the whole history of architecture, from caves to the present day.

## **The Zero Degree as a Negation of Time**

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*Andrew Leach*

The means by which the most profound works of architecture might inform acts of architectural and urbanistic composition in any given present is a problem to which Zevi dedicated significant energy. It inflected the practice of his teaching as well as his idea of the mission of the teacher. It shaped the content of his highly public engagements (exhibitions, journalism, television, lectures) as well as the function he understood those engagements to serve in contemporary cultural discourse. It underpinned his extraordinary editorial production. And it inflected the relationships he supported with architects and intellectuals over the course of his lifetime. At its heart was a view that architecture could be made to speak directly, and that between architects (those “rari, autentici spiriti creativi”) conversations could be had over time. Central to this view was that a profound knowledge of history, through which all architectural knowledge could be filtered, equipped the architect with the means to act in the present—as heretics of a sort, advancing architecture by surpassing its most immediate constraints. This paper reflects on the implications of Zevi’s assertion in the Modena Manifesto that this possibility and the premises (and institutions) that supported it had reached their collective endpoint. And on the ideological stance bound up in asserting the need for their restitution to address the needs of the immediate future.

## **White writing and contemporary architecture**

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*Jacques Lucan*

From the early 1980s, and as a reaction to postmodern demonstrations such as the 1980 Venice Biennale, architects reconsidered the question of architectural language from the perspective of a "white writing", seeking to get rid of the iconography of both classical and modern architecture. The term "silence" was used, but wasn't the main objective to revert to the constructive values of architecture?

## **The concept of Landscape and Architecture at Modena and later**

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*Antonino Saggio*

## Bruno Zevi's Degree Zero and Counter-History of Expressionism

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*Wouter Van Acker*

'Degree zero' was a trope through which Bruno Zevi increasingly voiced his position in the architectural debate from the late 1960s until his death. Most explicitly in 'Il «grado zero» della scrittura architettonica' (1981) and *Il manifesto di Modena* (1998), he reformulated Barthes' linguistic myth of the degree zero as the unattainable ideal of finding a way out of the 'paralyzing struggle' in architecture between the classical and the modern. It allowed him to resituate the organicist and linguistic viewpoint he had asserted in his earlier work within the new constellation of directions, such as critical regionalism, neo-classicism and postmodernism that he likened to terms used in Barthes' distinction between official and rebel languages. Within the crisis of architecture's contemporaneity and divergent explorations of architecture's relation to its own history during that period, Zevi's degree zero occupies a singular position that, like his later work more generally, is given little attention in the history of postmodern architecture.

Besides giving a general introduction to the theme and topics to be explored in this research seminar, this paper aims to investigate the role that expressionism as degree zero played in Zevi's history and counter-history. In the work of architects like Erich Mendelsohn, Alvar Aalto and Jørn Utzon, he found an alternative coherence of architectural techniques and values that sidestepped, as a degree zero ought to, the polarities of the architectural debate as it struggled with the modernist legacy. In many of his publications and lectures his fascination with expressionism's simultaneous physical and psychological understanding of perception of architectural space and form was central to the argument. This paper will attempt to trace back how he found in expressionism's power to elicit a visceral response a source of resistance against various forms of postmodern appropriation and a keystone to defend the work of several deconstructivist architects.

## List of participants

### Paola Ardizzola

Dr. Paola Ardizzola is Associate Professor at German University in Cairo. She is founder of the Department of Architecture at Antalya International University, Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture, where she served as Executive Dean and Chairperson till 2017. Member of the Scientific Committee for the Celebrations of the Centenary of Bruno Zevi birth in 2018, recipient of the 2010 Bruno Zevi International Prize for her research on Bruno Taut's work in Turkey, she is completing a book on Zvi Hecker's oeuvre as architect and artist. Her field of research focuses mainly on the History and Theory of 20th century Architecture and the Urban Sociology.

Among her past and in printing publications, there are: "The legacy of Bruno Zevi for the XXI century" (editor in chief of the monographic issue together with Olimpia Niglio), *Esempi di Architettura*, vol. 5, n°1, 2018); as book chapters, *At the roots of modernity: the intrinsic Jewish component of modern architecture*, in A. Brämer, K. Keßler, U. Knufinke, M. Przystawik, (eds.), "Jewish Architects – Jewish Architecture?" Schriftenreihe der Bet Tfila – Forschungsstelle, vol. 12. Petersberg: Imhof, 2021; *Activism in the Middle East: Bruno Taut and his house on the Bosphorus*, in Doucet, Isabelle, Gosseye, Janina (eds.), *Activism at Home – Aesthetics of Resistance*. Berlin: Jovis, 2021.

### Pippo Ciorra

Architect, critic, and professor, previously member of the editorial committee of *Casabella* (1996-2012), he is the senior curator of MAXXI Architettura in Rome where he cocurated with Jean-Louis Cohen the *Bruno Zevi. History and Counter-History of Italian Architecture* exhibition in 2018. He teaches design and theory at Scuole di Ateneo Architettura e Design–University of Camerino and is the director of the international Ph.D. program Villard d'Honnecourt (IUAV).

He is the author of many essays and publications. Among his books are *The Japanese House: Architecture and Life after 1945* (with F. Ostende, Marsilio, 2017), *Senza architettura, le ragioni per una crisi* (Laterza, 2011), *Peter Eisenman, Opere e progetti* (Electa, 1993) or *Ludovico Quaroni* (Electa, 1989).

### Andrew Leach

Andrew Leach is Professor of Architecture at the University of Sydney. His work concerns the role of historical knowledge and writing in modern architectural culture. Among his books are *Manfredo Tafuri* (A&S books, 2007—the subject of his Ghent University doctorate), *What is Architectural History?* (Polity, 2010), *The Baroque in Architectural Culture, 1880-1980* (Ashgate, 2015, edited with Maarten Delbeke & John Macarthur), *Rome* (Polity, 2017), *Crisis on Crisis* (Standpunkte, 2017), and *Gold Coast* (Lund Humphries, 2018). He has been a Wallace Fellow at the Villa I Tatti (2018) and the Stuckeman Visiting Professor of Interdisciplinary Design at Penn State University (2019-20). His current writing concerns the post-war historiography of architectural mannerism.

### Jacques Lucan

Architect, historian and critic, co-founder of Seyler & Lucan architectural office in Paris, Professor at the École d'architecture, de la Ville et des Territoires de Marne-la-Vallée since 1998, at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne since 1997 and previously at the École d'architecture de Paris-Belleville (1979-1998). Director of the journal *Matières* (EPFL), member of the scientific and editorial committee of *Casabella* (Milan), previously member of *Lotus International* (Milan, 1991-1997), member of the scientific committee the Milan Triennial (1993-1996), editor-in-chief of *AMC* (Paris, 1978-1988).

Among his books are *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture* (Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2015), *Où va la ville aujourd'hui ? Formes urbaines et mixités* (Éditions de la Villette, 2012) or *Composition non-composition, Architecture et théories, XIXe - XXe siècles* (Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2009 ; EPFL Press/Routledge, 2012).

### Alessandra Muntoni

Architect, as one of the founders of the Metamorph Group (1965), historian and professor in History of Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture of the Sapienza University of Rome, previously at the Faculty of Architecture of the Polytechnic of Bari (1990-1992) and in the PhD program in Theories of Architecture and Planning of School Improvement. She was graduated in 1967 with Bruno Zevi, has been assistant of Prof. Bruno Zevi (1970-1979) and Prof. Enrico Guidoni (1982-1990). Director with G. De Giorgi and M. Pazzaglini of the journal *Metamorfosi, Quaderni di Architettura* (1985-2009), member the

scientific committee of *Architecture and Urban Review*, member of the editorial staff of the journals *School Building*, *History of the City*, *Rome modern and contemporary* and *AR*.

Among her books are *Lineamenti della Storia dell'Architettura contemporanea* (Laterza, 2005), *Architettura nell'era elettronica* (Mancosu, 2005, *Roma tra le due guerre, 1919-1944. Architettura, modelli urbani, linguaggi della modernità* (Kappa, 2005).

In 2018, she directed a special issue of *Metamorphosi* on Bruno Zevi for the centenary of his birth.

#### Antonino Saggio

Architect and Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at Sapienza Università di Roma, he has been for several years coordinator of the Ph.D. School in "Theory and Design" and director of the book series "The IT Revolution In Architecture". He has been a close collaborator of Bruno Zevi in the last decades of his life, as a student at Rome University (1976-1979), as an author in the *Universale di Architettura* (1984, 1996, 1997) and in *L'Architettura cronache and storia* (1988-1993). In 1998 he founded with Zevi *La Rivoluzione Informatica* within the *Universale di Architettura* reaching 38 issues. After the death of Bruno Zevi, he became the editor of *Gli Architetti* within *Universale di Architettura*.

Three main guidelines distinguish his work: the confidence in the concrete possibility of teaching architectural design through making its methods evident and transmissible ; the continuous interrelation between the critical historian moment and the design phase ; the belief of today's catalyzing role of Information Technology in the definition of a proper 'IT Revolution in Architecture.'

Among his books are *Architettura e Modernità. Dal Bauhaus alla rivoluzione informatica* (Carocci, 2010), *Introduzione alla Rivoluzione Informatica in architettura* (Carocci, 2007) or *Giuseppe Terragni, Vita e opera* (Laterza, 1995 ; 2005).

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#### Wouter Van Acker

Engineer-architect, associate professor at the Faculty of Architecture La Cambre Horta (ULB) and co-director of the research group *hortence*, previously lecturer in architectural history and theory at Griffith University, and doctoral and postdoctoral researcher at Ghent University. His research focus is the history of epistemology and aesthetics in architecture in the twentieth century, and in particular the problem of returns and late style in postmodernism. His PhD dissertation (Ghent 2011) explored the architecture of knowledge in the work of Paul Otlet (1868-1944), Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) and Otto Neurath (1882-1945). He has edited a special issue of the journal *Library Trends* on "Information and Space. Analogies and Metaphors", a book on the Ghent Universal Exhibition of 1913, a book on the transnational history of the UIA (Bloomsbury, 2019), and more recently on *Architecture and Ugliness* (Bloomsbury, 2020). His research has been published in academic journals such as *Perspectives on Science, Knowledge Organization*, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, *Stadtsgeschiedenis*, *Fabrications*, *arq*, and contributions to conference proceedings (SAHANZ, EAHN, Conferences of Design History Society, U&U,...). He is Review Editor (post-1800) of the journal *Architectural Histories* since 2017.

#### Lyna Bourouiba

Architect graduated from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris La Villette (ENSAPLV) in 2015, she previously taught architectural and urban design at the East China Normal University in Shanghai (2012-2013). In 2018, she completed with highest distinction a post-master's degree in "Architectural Research" at ENSAPLV, conducted in the AHTTEP research group, where she starts a work on the idea of "degree zero of architectural writing" in the writings of Bruno Zevi. Between 2011 and 2020, she collaborates with various architects and architectural offices in France and Switzerland.

She is currently a Phd student at the Faculty of Architecture La Cambre Horta *hortence*, under the supervision of Wouter Van Acker, as part of the FNRS funded Research Project "The 'zero degree of architectural writing' in Bruno Zevi's historiographical and critical work: overcoming the antagonism between 'high and 'low' architecture". Her research focuses on the architectural translations of the Barthesian idea of "degree zero of writing" as presented in the historiography of modern and postmodern architecture. She recently received a research grant to spend one month in 2021 at the Academia Belgica in Rome.