

# A lightning bolt. The activity of Bruno Zevi in post-war Italy

## Como un rayo. La actividad de Bruno Zevi en la Italia de posguerra

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### Abstract

This essay focuses on Bruno Zevi's working period immediately after Second World War, coming back to Italy after his stay in London and in the USA. He starts right away his impressive attempt of popularizing contemporary architecture through "Metron", the first magazine to be printed in Italy after the war, from 1945 to 1954. In this crucial phase he founded the APAO (Association for Organic Architecture), he contributed to the editing of the *Manuale dell'Architetto* (an handbook with all the new construction and ready-assembly techniques), he published *Verso un'architettura organica* (1945), *Saper vedere l'architettura* (1948) and *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (1950), he curated the first Frank Lloyd Wright exhibit in Italy and he greatly contributed to the spreading of modern architecture and urbanism all around the country. Zevi also paying special attention to social issues, raised the question of inner spaces where man lives and where the collective theme is expressed, and stressed the need of shaping the building in the name of human use and enjoyment.

### Keywords

Space, history of architecture, organic architecture, Reconstruction, Frank Lloyd Wright.

### Resumen

Este artículo se centra en el período de trabajo de Bruno Zevi que se lleva a cabo después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, cuando regresa a Italia después de su estancia en Londres y en Estados Unidos. Inmediatamente comienza su impresionante intento de popularizar la arquitectura contemporánea a través de "Metron", la primera revista que se publicó en Italia después de la guerra, de 1945 a 1954. En esta fase crucial fundó la APAO (Asociación para la Arquitectura Orgánica), contribuyó a la edición del *Manuale dell'Architetto* (un manual con todas las nuevas técnicas de construcción y montaje), publicó *Verso un'architettura organica* (1945), *Saper vedere l'architettura* (1948) y *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (1950), fue comisario de la primera exposición de Frank Lloyd Wright en Italia y contribuyó en gran medida a la difusión de la arquitectura moderna y el urbanismo en todo el país. Zevi también prestó especial atención a las cuestiones sociales, planteó el tema de los espacios interiores donde vive el hombre y donde se expresa su desarrollo colectivo, y subrayó la necesidad de dar forma al edificio en nombre del uso y el disfrute humanos.

### Palabras clave

Espacio, historia de la arquitectura, arquitectura orgánica, Reconstrucción, Frank Lloyd Wright.

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## Introduction

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1944, the Allied Forces entered Rome. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, Bruno Zevi returned to his hometown after five years of exile, due to racial laws and after travelling to London and to the United States.

Zevi was 26 years old, young and brilliant, burning with a passion fueled on the one hand by his love for architecture, on the other by his anger for the *damaged life*<sup>1</sup>, the horror to which men of his generation had just witnessed in astonishment.

Theodor Adorno, also exiled in the United States during the war, wrote that the “splinter in the eye” is the best magnifying glass.

That is why Zevi, in that very moment, was a lightning in the sky. What he managed to perform, write, organize immediately after the war, is truly remarkable. The impressive scope of his action was the result of a relentless political and critical activity, already matured in the years of exile<sup>2</sup>.

Among the closest collaborations, was the one with Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, an art critic who attended the Art History Specialization School in Rome before the war. Ragghianti was already well-known: just one year after graduation, his essays on Carracci was published in the “Critica” magazine by Benedetto Croce. Around his figure, a circle of scholars gathered together, including Giulio Carlo Argan, Cesare Brandi, Antonello Trombadori and indeed Zevi. With the last one, Ragghianti shared the distress of not fitting at all in an academic environment submitted to the fascist regime.

Thus began the conspiracy, first during the meetings at the Aragno coffee house in Rome, then abroad. In 1939 Zevi and Ragghianti met in London and they established contacts with Carlo Rosselli and Gaetano Salvemini, members of the anti-fascist group “Giustizia e Libertà”. Then, from 1940, Zevi moved to the United States, where he studied first at Columbia and then at Harvard with Walter Gropius<sup>3</sup>. Here he published two editions of “Quaderni”, following Rosselli’s theories on liberal socialism. The last dossier was printed in 1944, when the fight had finally moved to Italy. In 1943 Ragghianti contributed to the formation of the “Partito d’Azione” and he led the partisan groups in Tuscany. Meanwhile Zevi transmitted radio broadcasts for “Giustizia e Libertà”, initially in New York for NBC and then “somewhere in Europe”<sup>4</sup>.

Zevi’s international relations network, his commitment to the anti-fascist fight and his productiveness during the war converged into the explosion of activities when he returned to Rome.

## The APAO and the *Manuale dell’Architetto*

Zevi was a member of the USIS, United States Information Service at the American Embassy in Rome, and his cultural contacts with the United States were of primary importance for the Reconstruction in Italy. After the war he returned to America to gather information about new construction techniques, materials and prefabrication processes<sup>5</sup>. His intent was to procure a scientific update as fast as possible, since Italians had been excluded from the international circuit since 1940. He wanted to publish a compendium of building technologies on American models, revisited by Italian architects. Thus the *Manuale dell’Architetto*<sup>6</sup> was edited. The group of authors included Mario Ridolfi and Pier Luigi Nervi and partners for the publication were the Italian National Research Council and the Unrra-Casas, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration of Washington. This handbook dealt with the most disparate aspects: heating and hygienic systems, size of living spaces, sustainability and analysis of specific typologies. A model for the book, mentioned by Zevi himself, was the *Architectural Graphic Standard* by George Charles Ramsey

1 Reference is made to Theodor Adorno (1951), *Minima Moralia: Reflections from damaged life* (London: Verso, 1978).

2 In his 1993 biography, Zevi wrote that “L’Architettura – cronache e storia”, the Association for Organic Architecture (APAO), the National Institute of Urban Planning and the In/arch, his professional works, his teaching job at the University, all represent surrogates of an unexpressed political impulse: «every move is strictly examined and judged by those living and palpable shadows, by the piles of dead» («Ogni mossa è severamente ispezionata e vagliata da quelle ombre viventi e palpabili, dai cumuli di morti», translated by the author) in Bruno Zevi, *Zevi su Zevi* (Rome: Marsilio, 1993), 46.

3 For deepening Zevi’s activity in New York refer to Roberto Dulio, *Introduzione a Bruno Zevi* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008), 13-23.

4 Zevi, *Zevi su Zevi* 44.

5 On 2 November 1945, Ragghianti, Undersecretary for Education and Fine Arts, sent a letter to the Embassy stating: «Mr. Bruno Zevi, member of the United States Information Service in the American Embassy in Rome, Italy, has been working in the last few months as the American advisor for town-planning and building reconstruction in Italy, in my Ministry. His technical qualities and his organizing ability have been highly appreciated by the Italian Government [...]. Mr. Zevi is now going back to the United States, to collect data on town-planning and housing. His mission, organized by the American Embassy, is going to be very useful to our Government and it is a basic step in the cultural relations between the United States and Italy in the important field of town-planning and housing» (This letter is conserved in the Bruno Zevi Foundation Archive, Rome).

6 Consiglio nazionale delle ricerche, *Manuale dell’architetto* (CNR – USIS: 1946)



[Fig. 1] Consiglio nazionale delle ricerche, *Manuale dell'architetto*, (CNR – USIS, 1946).

and Harold Reeve Sleeper. But fundamentally, all the technical studies developed by Mario Ridolfi during the previous years converged in the manual, probably mediated by the collaboration with Wolfgang Frankl, who influenced the structure of the book referring to German manuals<sup>7</sup>.

Meanwhile, with Cino Calcaprina and Silvio Radiconcini, Zevi planned to establish the APAO, Association for Organic Architecture. He called together Luigi Piccinato, in charge of urban planning, and Enrico Calandra, the only anti-fascist professor of the architectural school led by Marcello Piacentini. On July 15, 1945, the APAO was founded and a school of organic architecture was organized, with professional updating courses and teachers such as Luigi Piccinato, Mario Ridolfi, Pier Luigi Nervi and Aldo Della Rocca.

The APAO declaration of principles was emblematic and it summarised Zevi's beliefs on architecture, disrupting a country which was still conservative both in architectural theory and practice.

First of all, the fundamental assumption was clarified: the genesis of modern architecture is deeply-rooted in functionalism, not in the neoclassical stylisation trends, not even in the provincialism of minor styles. Then, the concept of organic architecture was explained: a social, technical and artistic activity, oriented to create an environment suitable for the birth of a new democratic society. Organic architecture was modelled according to the human scale, allowing for the development of the spiritual, psychological and material needs of the interconnected man. Organic architecture was therefore the antithesis of monumental architecture, which served the State myths. Furthermore, the need for a dialogue between urban planning and architectural projects was assessed, underlining the right of architectural freedom within the limits of planning strategies.

General principles were also listed, to be interpreted as values of political and social order and not as aesthetic or formal rules:

1. Political freedom and social justice as inseparable elements for the construction of a democratic society;
2. The need for a constitution (Italian Republic Constitution was approved two years later, on December 22, 1947) assuring citizens freedom of speech, press, association, worship; equality of race, religion and gender; and the exercise of political sovereignty through universal suffrage;
3. The guarantee, alongside individual liberties, of full social liberties. Thus, the end of monopolies and the liberation of labor force. An impulse towards international cooperation of peoples, against nationalist and autarchic myths as the primary cause of fascism.

What was outstanding, besides the obvious condemnation of the rhetorical architecture of the regime, was the emphasis assigned on a greater theme: the social theme. Organic architecture was chiefly a social practice, and subsequently a technical and artistic exercise. The APAO took the field pushed by the wind of the "Partito d'Azione"<sup>8</sup>. This accent on the ethical and political commitment was undoubtedly a crucial feature of the Italian version of organicism.

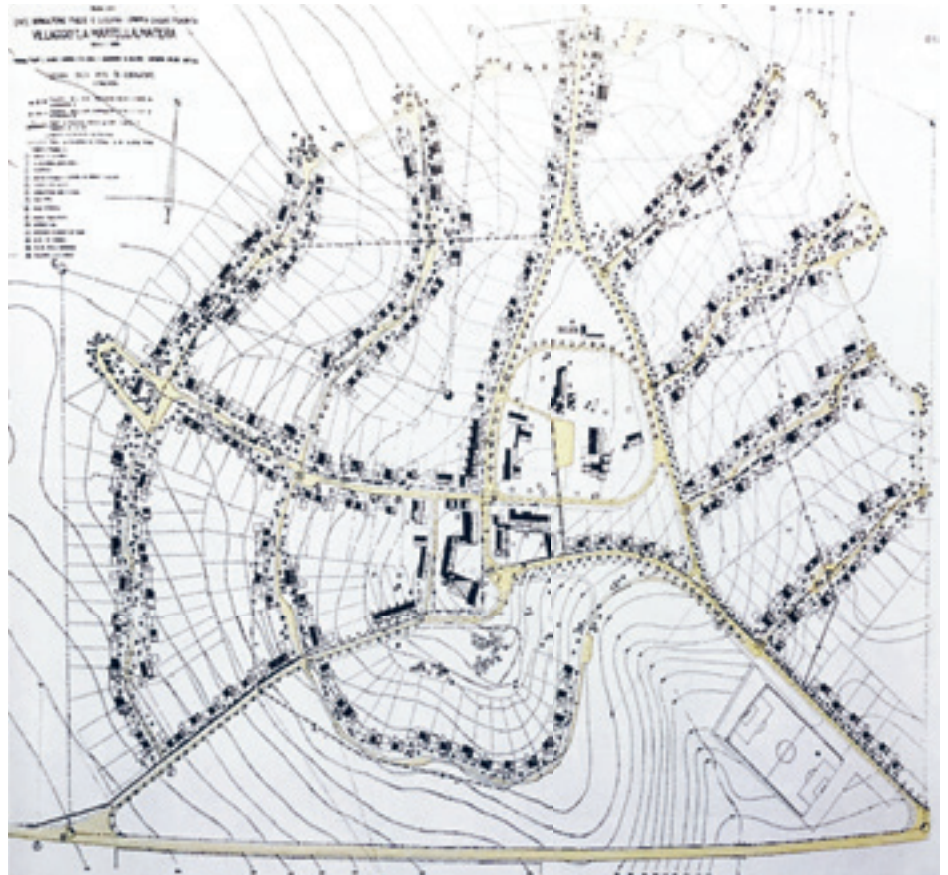
In fact, the APAO had a quite generic program in terms of specific objectives, and a more precise agenda for political purposes: one of the most evident principles was the identification between organic architecture and democracy. Beyond the political commitment, when the first concrete tasks were presented, the weaknesses of a nonspecific definition of organic architecture came to light. It was certainly easier for Zevi to describe what organic architecture was *not*: «there is nothing vague or

7 For deepening Ridolfi's technical studies refer to Federico Bellini, *Mario Ridolfi* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1993).

8 Bruno Zevi, *Il manifesto di Modena. Paesaggistica e grado zero della scrittura architettonica* (Venezia: Saggi Canal, 1998), 43.



[Fig. 2] L. Agati, F. Gorio, P. M. Lugli, L. Quaroni, M. Valori, villaggio "La Martella", Matera, 1951-53, in Carlo Olmo, ed., *Costruire la città dell'uomo. Adriano Olivetti e l'urbanistica* (Torino: Edizioni di Comunità, 2001), 197.



- 9 «Non v'è niente di vago, di sentimentalistico nella tendenza organica. Essa non implica il colore locale, né richiami al passato, né l'improvvisazione istintiva, né l'edilizia rustica o indigena, né la campagna, né Capri, né provincialismi di sorta» (translated by the author): Bruno Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (Milano: Einaudi, 1950), 332.
- 10 «l'architettura organica è un'architettura funzionale rispetto non solo alla tecnica e allo scopo dell'edificio, ma anche alla psicologia dei fruitori. Tutto il resto è commento, va e studia» (translated by the author): Bruno Zevi, *L'architettura organica di fronte ai suoi critici* (Report to the First National Congress of APAO, 1947, Rome) in Zevi, *Zevi su Zevi*, 57.
- 11 Dulio, *Introduzione a Bruno Zevi*, 58.
- 12 «Manierismo organico? Sembra assurdo: manierismo dell'anti-manierismo. In effetti, si tratta di un paradosso. Ma considerate come, in ogni epoca, vicino ai rari poeti, sorgano larghe schiere di imitatori che creano il tessuto artistico, l'insieme di affinità e consensi atti a facilitare l'emergere del genio. Anche oggi, i costruttori, gli architetti minori hanno bisogno di un metodo, e persino di copiare» (translated by the author) in Bruno Zevi, *L'architettura organica di fronte ai suoi critici*, 57.
- 13 The "Sassi" were districts of the Italian city of Matera in Basilicata, well-known for their ancient cave dwellings, still inhabited after Second World War in unsanitary and dangerous conditions.

sentimental about organic tendency, it does not imply local color, nor references to the past, nor instinctive improvisation, neither the rustic or indigenous buildings, nor the countryside, nor Capri, nor provincialisms of any sort»<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, organic architecture was defined as *opposed to*: geometrism, artificial standards, white boxes and rationalist cylinders. Where was a real definition? Where was the proposal for a new spatiality?

A very subtle, clear and essential question circulated about what it was meant to be organic, and consequently about how to design it. There were still few examples to refer to, in order to promote its diffusion. At the first APAO National Congress, in 1947, Zevi tried to respond to his critics. His statement, in the unmistakable Zevi's style, was peremptory: «Organic architecture is a functional architecture, respecting not only the techniques and purposes of the building, but also the psychology of users. Everything else is gratuitous comment, you can go and update yourself»<sup>10</sup>.

It is true that the strong initial political conception in the APAO was replaced by a simpler cultural orientation over time<sup>11</sup>. The values of collaboration and solidarity rose up as if they could acquire an autonomous validity, becoming themselves the reason for being associated. The initial impetus was emptied out, the architectural results were often, in spite of the intentions, essentially formalistic. Nevertheless, Zevi defended its principles tirelessly: «organic mannerism? It seems absurd: mannerism of anti-Mannerism. In fact, it is a paradox. But consider how, in every age, around the rare poets, large groups of imitators arise, creating the artistic network, setting affinities and consents to facilitate the emergence of the genius. Even today, builders and minor architects need a method, they need even to copy»<sup>12</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the first urban scale projects carried out in Italy after the war were essentially the result of a democratic commitment - for example the INA Casa Tiburtino district by Ludovico Quaroni, Mario Ridolfi and collaborators, and the La Martella village in Matera, designed also by Quaroni and collaborators to give new houses to the "Sassi" inhabitants<sup>13</sup> - even if, in those projects, we can read an

14 As a matter of fact in 1935, still as a high school student, Zevi had participated to the XIII international architectural congress in Rome. On that occasion John Lloyd Wright, son of the architect, had presented to Mussolini the Broadacre city project developed from 1932, proposing it as a model for the founding cities of fascism. It is easy to understand how and why, after World War II, Wright's urban vision took on a completely different meaning, becoming a model of democracy for the new areas to be reconstructed. Wright's concept of architecture was now irreconcilable with that proposal to Mussolini, and Zevi himself will never mention the 1935 episode, aiming to expound Wright's architecture as an absolute example of justice and freedom: Dulio, *Introduzione a Bruno Zevi*, 24.

15 Zevi, in the wake of the Crociani theory, opposed poetry, the sublime work of architecture, to literature, the common and traditional architectural vocabulary. He was enchanted by the clear statement of modernity represented by some unique projects. His way of thinking was unconditional: «There were no possible compromises or transversal solutions, between two opposing fronts: on the one hand, the Academy with the "Novecento" movement, the "pseudo-Novecento" and the "neo-Novecento", inclusive of the "Metafisica"; on the other, modernity affirmed even during fascism, with the Florence station by Giovanni Michelucci, the Casa del Fascio of Como and the plan for Sabaudia, thanks to anti-fascist architects, like Luigi Piccinato, or *anti-fascist architects in black shirts* like Giuseppe Terragni» («Non c'erano compromessi possibili né soluzioni trasversali, tra gli opposti fronti: da un lato, l'accademia con il Novecento, lo pseudo-Novecento e il neo-Novecento, comprensivo della Metafisica; dall'altro, la modernità affermatasi perfino durante il fascismo, con la stazione di Firenze di Giovanni Michelucci, la Casa del Fascio di Como e Sabaudia, per merito di architetti antifascisti, come Luigi Piccinato, o *architetti antifascisti in camicia nera*, come Giuseppe Terragni» translated by the author): Bruno Zevi "Architettura ed arte a confronto", in Anna Maria Di Stefano, coord., *Forma 1 1947-1951* (Rome: Gangemi, 1997), 45.

16 «Il verdetto è automatico, la diagnosi chiarissima: infranto il rapporto tra economia e cultura, l'architettura è in stato di paralisi» (translated by the author): Bruno Zevi, "Inaugural speech" (lecture for the foundation of the In/Arch at the Ridotto del Teatro Eliseo, Rome, 1959).

17 Marcello Fabbri, *Ideologie degli urbanisti nel Dopoguerra* (Bari: De Donato, 1975), 52.

18 Geno Pampaloni, "Dall'utopia alle riforme, l'esperienza interrotta", in Marcello Fabbri and Antonella Greco, coord., *La Comunità concreta: progetto e immagine* (Rome: Quaderni della Fondazione Olivetti, 1988), 52.

adherence to the language proclaimed in Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre city and announced in Italy by Zevi in that very moment<sup>14</sup>.

Architecture critics describes these projects as expressions of architectural Neorealism, borrowing the term from Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica movies. Italian film industry undoubtedly reached extraordinary results in those years. But if an objective representation of reality can be produced through the cinematographic instrument, architecture cannot be a pure mean of representation. In architecture, realism must be of a moral kind: a commitment to be *inside* reality during the design process.

In Zevi's critical approach as well, there was a certain kind of diffidence regarding the so-called Neorealist projects. The aesthetic of Zevi was far from the popular and traditional vocabulary proposed by those plans and previously supported by Giuseppe Pagano amongst all<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, according to him, being *inside* reality consisted first and foremost in accounting for a bond between culture and economy. During the inaugural speech for the foundation of the In/Arch (National Institute for Architecture) it was stated clearly: «the verdict is automatic, the diagnosis is clear: if the relationship between economy and culture is broken, architecture is in a state of paralysis»<sup>16</sup>.

Social growth and architectural development must go hand in hand, and the Capital must bring them<sup>17</sup>.

A decisive meeting was at this point the one with Adriano Olivetti and his utopian vision of "personalist socialism"<sup>18</sup>, the concept for a new society which looked at socialist and liberalist organisations but went beyond both models, never neglecting the primary foundations of associations: individual freedom and the manifestation of all differences of people, expressed through participation.

The Olivetti project covered the entire span of cultural production: urban planning and architectural achievements corresponded to the formation of a new democratic society "educated with Art"<sup>19</sup>. The matter was a total re-foundation of the country, a change in the social, cultural, architectural and artistic fields, carried out with a political campaign. The Comunità movement was instituted in 1947, and flanked by the vast cultural production of the Olivetti publishing house, the Comunità Editions founded in 1946.

## Bruno Zevi and "Metron"

The relationship between Adriano Olivetti and Bruno Zevi was not an easy one. Zevi contested the "community fabianism" of Olivetti and contrasted it with his unrestrained pragmatism. But he still appreciated Olivetti's open-mindedness and breadth of vision. Olivetti surrounded himself with diverse collaborators and friends, appreciating their resistance to uniformity of thought and their variety of contributions.

In after war Italy, the need for free zones of debate to establish a new democratic culture was resolved in the flowering of numerous magazines. Editorial offices became headquarters for cultural initiatives not fitted within the conservative Academia.

One essential result of the meeting between Olivetti and Zevi was the circulation of the magazine "Metron". First published by Sandron editions, it was the first journal to be printed in 1945, immediately after the war. Once again Zevi, as a lightning in the sky, beat the others to the punch. The following year, "Metron" was flanked by "Casabella - Costruzioni" curated by Franco Albini and Giancarlo Piretti, and by



[Fig. 3, 4 y 5] *Metron* 46 (October 1952), *Metron* 48 (1953), *Metron* 51 (May – June 1954).

“Domus” curated by Ernesto Nathan Rogers. Finally, in 1950, “Metron” became part of Adriano Olivetti’s Comunità Editions.

As a matter of fact, Zevi’s name appeared for the first time only on the tenth issue of the magazine, but his role was immediately proactive. Even in 1946, when Zevi took the reins of the editorial staff, he would not want to assume a role of absolute leadership. The city planning section was directed by Luigi Piccinato, the architectural section by Mario Ridolfi. In 1948 the staff was extended to Radiconcini and finally Zevi.

The first twenty-four numbers, in small format, rough paper, and with few illustrations, were organised quickly but carefully to update the Italian culture, secluded from the international circuit by fascism. It was an inexpensive magazine, made for everyone. The attempt was to intervene in the debate on Reconstruction themes with a widespread tool, informing about architectural and urban, as well as social and political developments in other countries. Zevi supplied most of the material concerning prefabrication and urban planning in England and America, collected thanks to his role within the United States Information Service at the American Embassy.

From the issue number twenty-five, an enhanced care on images and graphics was employed. From the issue number thirty-seven, when the magazine began to be part of the Comunità Editions, it was further renewed and enriched. Above all, in the new “Metron” published by Olivetti, articles exploring arguments yet unfamiliar, such as nineteenth century architecture, or other fields of expression such as painting, sculpture, photography and theatre, found a place: «it is not a matter of gratuitous interpolations» writes Zevi in the first issue of the new edition «we are dealing with the necessity of inserting modern architecture into an historical perspective, framing it in terms of a culture. To fulfil this requirement, it is essential to recall the precedents of modern movement, exploring the experiences through which modernity took shape and character, searching for its roots in that “old architecture” still unknown and often despised in its entirety, in the name of abstract and anti-historical prejudices. Similarly, the reconsideration of some experiences carried out by painting and sculpture in those years will enlighten the figurative results to which the modern movement is linked in many ways»<sup>20</sup>.

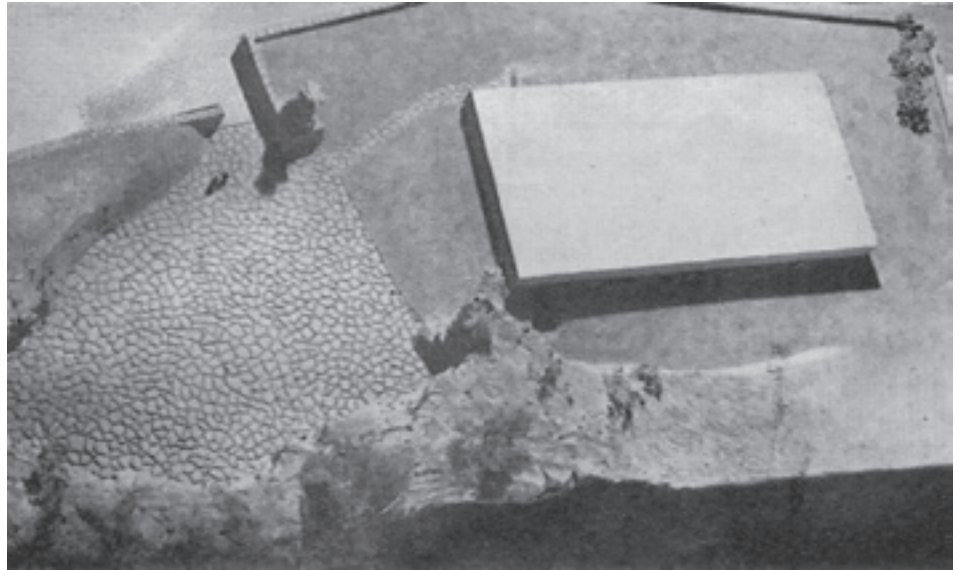
The search for a method and a renewal in a devastated country were sharply reflected on “Metron” pages. First of all, exploring the work of unknown or neglected architects, including Carlo Scarpa and Luigi Pellegrin. Then, with a firm statement

19 Reference is made to Herbert Read (1943), *Education through art* (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1962).

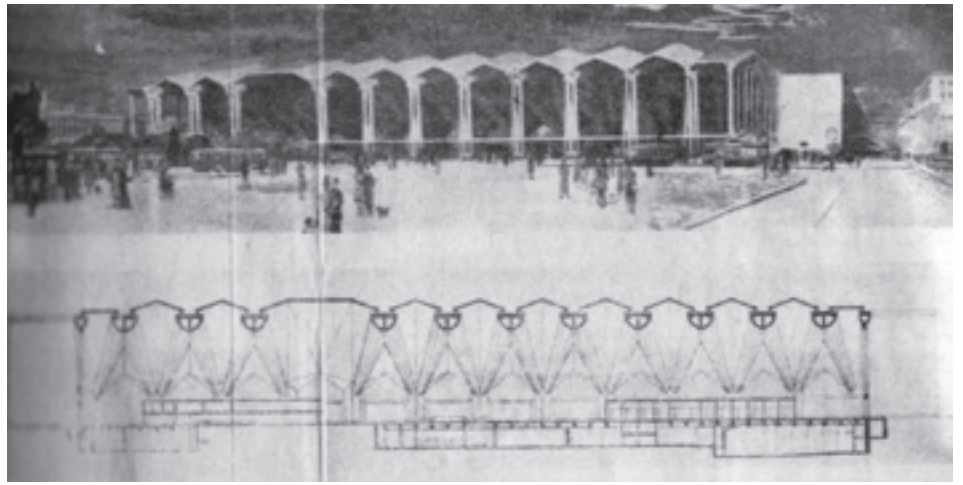
20 «Non si tratta di gratuite interpolazioni [...]. Si tratta di storicizzare l’architettura moderna, di inquadrarla nei termini di una cultura. Per adempiere a questa istanza è appunto necessario risalire ai precedenti del movimento moderno, vedere attraverso quali esperienze esso ha preso corpo e carattere, quali radici ha avuto in quella “vecchia architettura” ancora così mal nota e spesso disprezzata in blocco in nome di astratti ed antistorici pregiudizi. Analogamente la riconsiderazione di alcune esperienze fatte in questi stessi anni dalla pittura e dalla scultura mirerà a gettar luce sulla formazione e sulla problematica figurativa cui il movimento architettonico moderno è legato sotto tanti aspetti» (translated by the author) in Bruno Zevi, “Cari lettori”, *Metron* 37 (June - July 1950): 1.



[Fig. 6] N. Aprile, C. Calcaprina, A. Cardelli and M. Fiorentino, Mausoleum of the Fosse Ardeatine, Rome, 1944-1949, in Editorial staff, "Sistemazione delle Cave Ardeatine", *Metron* 18 (1947): 35-47.



[Fig. 7] Project for the Traveler Building of the Termini Station, Rome, 1947, in Giuseppe Samonà, "I progetti per il completamento frontale della stazione di Roma Termini", *Metron* 21 (1947): 8-22.



21 Lewis Mumford, "Una introduzione americana al garden cities of tomorrow", *Metron* 1 (August 1945): 2-12.

22 José Luis Sert, "La scala umana nell'urbanistica", *Metron* 8 (March 1946): 5-19.

23 Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat, "Un problema del dopoguerra: il restauro dei monumenti", *Metron* 2 (September 1945): 44-46.

24 Piero Bottoni, "Sui piani di ricostruzione dei centri danneggiati", *Metron* 8 (March 1946): 62-64. A real mobilization followed this statement, blaming the Ministry of Education poor commitment to stop damages to the national artistic patrimony. Numerous architects subscribed for the appointment of a Commission of Inquiry on Urbanism and Art in Italy. Zevi refers to Roberto Pane's observations on the critical restoration to curb «the rate of reinforced concrete trusses dressed with wood» («l'andazzo delle capriate in cemento armato rivestite in legno», translated by the author); see Bruno Zevi, "Non è colpa degli architetti", *Il Ponte* 2 (February 1954): 242-246. More and more, questions were pressing: who decides the restoration projects? Who designs them? Who runs them? Finally, the administration responded in 1956: a Commission for the artistic patrimony protection was constituted, responsible for proposing a Law for the Artistic Heritage Safeguard, to control the devastations and promote quality restoration interventions. The Commission worked until 1967, publishing a fundamental report: *For the salvation of cultural heritage in Italy*.

25 Giulio Carlo Argan, "Introduzione a Wright", *Metron* 18 (1947): 9-24.

against some central themes of the Italian architectural debate of the time, such as provincialism, historical resignation, academism and populism.

An entirely new focus was dedicated to international results in the field of urban planning, so that the first article on the first issue was signed by Lewis Mumford, and it analysed Ebenezer Howard's theories of *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*<sup>21</sup>. A few issues later, José Luis Sert focused on the human factor as a guiding element of urban and architectural projects, the human scale as a planning module, the city as a living organism<sup>22</sup>.

Naturally, a particular space was dedicated to projects opening the way to modernity in Italy. In the issue number 18 the project for the Mausoleum of the Fosse Ardeatine by Nello Aprile, Cino Calcaprina, Aldo Cardelli and Mario Fiorentino was published, in the issue number 21 the results of the competition for the Traveller Building of the Termini Station were presented, with a particular attention on Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi's project, evaluated with inadequate thoughtfulness by the jury, according to Zevi.

Some other articles denounced the damages perpetrated during the years of Reconstruction, especially in the field of restoration of monuments<sup>23</sup> and in the renovation planning projects for demolished city centres<sup>24</sup>.

Above all, a fundamental article was the one signed by Giulio Carlo Argan in issue number 18<sup>25</sup>. We are facing, wrote Argan, the creation of a new and human reality. Buildings are conceived not to be watched from outside, but to be lived inside. The interior space becomes the foundation and the expression of form, a

26 Frank Lloyd Wright, "La sovranità dell'individuo", *Metron* 41-42 (May – August 1951): 21-31.

27 The correspondence between Raghianti and Zevi regarding the possibility of organizing at Palazzo Strozzi some exhibitions of the architectural works by Wright, Neutra, Sullivan, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier etc. date back to January 1949. The choice for the first exhibition fell again on the American architect, as a consequence of Zevi's request to further clarify organic architecture concepts through the exposition of Wright's original works. In coincidence with the inauguration, Zevi also arranged to award Wright with the *Laurea ad honorem* at the IUAV University in Venice. Zevi kept Wright constantly updated on the exhibit, because he required information on all details, up to the study of the Palazzo Strozzi plan. Six months before the inauguration he proudly wrote to Zevi: «it's the biggest exhibition of architecture, they say ...» (in a letter of December 20th 1950 Zevi translated this message to Raghianti; the letter is conserved in the Raghianti Foundation Archive, Lucca). In September a meeting was organized with Oskar Stonorov, a close collaborator of Wright. But the results were not exactly those intended by the American architect. Zevi ironically describes the episode: «he visits the rooms, he criticizes some details, he asks for changes. When he does not obtain them, he irritates and protests. Then Stonorov swells with pride and explodes all flushed: "Mr. Wright, we agreed and you must respect the pacts. This is your first posthumous exhibition, devoid of your direction. The fact that you are alive, wandering through those rooms, is absolutely indifferent"» («visita le sale espositive, critica alcuni particolari, chiede modifiche. Poiché non le ottiene, s'irrita e protesta. Allora Stonorov si gonfia, diventa tutto rosso, esplose: "Mr. Wright, eravamo d'accordo e lei deve rispettare i patti. Questa è la sua prima mostra postuma, priva della sua regia. Il fatto che lei sia vivo e si aggiri in questi ambienti è affatto indifferente», translated by the author): Zevi, *Zevi su Zevi*, 211.



[Fig. 8] *L'architettura - cronache e storia* 8 (June 1956).

discriminating element between architecture and non-architecture, on the heels of Benedetto Croce's tradition distinguishing amongst poetry and literature. This essay was decisive for Zevi, since it presupposed the excellence of Italian historical-critical acquisitions, and therefore overcame the American theoretical contributions.

There were also essays signed by Wright himself. The American architect reaffirmed the identification between democracy, as faith in the right of man to be free, and architecture, as process to build a world matching with natural needs of man. Wright wrote that the chances for the development of the organic movement in Italy were great, a country of rich traditions in which a "second Renaissance" could arise<sup>26</sup>. This was also the theme of the introductory speech by Wright at his first Italian exhibition 1951, curated by Carlo Ludovico Raghianti and Bruno Zevi at Palazzo Strozzi in 1951<sup>27</sup>.

The importance of having introduced Wright's work in Italy manifested itself step-by-step on the architectural achievements of those years. And certainly, looking at some aesthetic results, it is rather improbable to speak of organic mannerism. It was a moment in which foundations for the development of a broader method were laid, and exemplified in different ways by Mario Ridolfi, Ignazio Gardella, Giovanni Michelucci, Giuseppe Samonà and Carlo Scarpa among others. An Italian way: the influence of the American master was not emulated, but translated each time into a unique reflection on the architectural work as an isolated case. In it, all the characteristics of the context, both physical and cultural, converged. For the first time after the war the specificities of the Italian repertoire, stimulated by the comparison with the international results, finally arose.

It must be said that from 1950, when "Metron" began to be published by Olivetti, the vitality characterising the journal in the early years gradually ran out, in comparison with the other two magazines still dedicated to architecture and urbanism, "Comunità" and "Urbanistica", again by Olivetti's Editions. After nine years, Zevi decided to suspend his first journal's publications and to start managing a new one, "L'Architettura – cronache e storia", through which the path indicated by "Metron" was continued with even greater impetus.



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[Fig. 9] Bruno Zevi, *Verso un'architettura organica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1945).

[Fig. 10] Bruno Zevi, *Saper vedere l'architettura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1948).



***Verso un'architettura organica, Saper vedere l'architettura*  
and the *Storia dell'architettura moderna***

In 1945 Zevi published *Verso un'architettura organica*<sup>28</sup>, originally proposed to Faber&Faber Editions but then published in English only in 1950, with the title *Towards an organic architecture*. The book was recommended as an update of Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*<sup>29</sup>, this time resolutely focusing on the figure of Wright at the head of modern architecture in America. *In the Nature of Materials. The building of Frank Lloyd Wright 1887-1941* was issued by Henry Russel Hitchcock in 1942<sup>30</sup>, re-proposing the projects of the American architect to the attention of the critics, perhaps influenced by the position of Lewis Mumford on Wright's work. Undoubtedly, the credit for the rediscovery of the American master in Italy and then in Europe after World War II belonged to Zevi. But, apart from the disclosure of Wright's projects, many critics began to underline the abstractness of the adjective "organic" and the difficulty of understanding what was meant by "organic architecture" as proclaimed by Zevi<sup>31</sup>. The book was the ideal source for the APAO principles declaration. Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto were elected honorary members of the Association. But, as the APAO was more as a politic movement than an architectural school, Zevi's organicism was more a medium for a new social order to be established after fascism than an aesthetic reference for a new architecture.

Afterward, the effort to bring back together critic and history of architecture was attempted in *Saper vedere l'architettura*<sup>32</sup>, published in 1948. Here, Zevi began a difficult reconciliation path between the research of an architectural model related to social needs, and the reference to the work of an individualistic personality such as Wright's<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, his challenge was to combine the depth of analysis acquired before moving away from Italy, with his studies based on Benedetto Croce and Lionello Venturi, and the informative pragmatism learned in the USA.

Venturi was the referent par excellence, with his *Storia della critica d'arte*<sup>34</sup>. But while he considered in the historical development the *taste* as a primary source to analyse artists and critics activities, the intent of Zevi was to investigate what he believed to be the central, qualifying principle for architecture, namely the *space*. For Zevi, the analysis of space and its use was the device for a new critical line. The subtitle leaved no doubt: *Essay on the spatial interpretation of architecture*. The aim was informative, but it maintained the sophistication of art criticism manners and the accuracy of the Roman school of architectural history. The outcome was

28 Bruno Zevi, *Verso un'architettura organica* (Torino: Einaudi 1945).

29 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936)

30 Henry Russel Hitchcock, *In the Nature of Materials. The building of Frank Lloyd Wright 1887-1941* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942)

31 Dulio, *Introduzione a Bruno Zevi*, 42.

32 Bruno Zevi, *Saper vedere l'architettura* (Torino: Einaudi 1948).

33 Dulio, *Introduzione a Bruno Zevi*, 67.

34 Lionello Venturi, *Storia della critica d'arte* (Firenze: Edizioni U, 1945).



[Fig. 11] Bruno Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (Torino: Einaudi, 1950).

revolutionary, the model was inclusive, as a result of omnivorous curiosity of Zevi, and the method could have been widely adopted. The book represented, in 1948 Italy, a gigantic leap in disciplinary renewal.

In his 1947 lecture, Zevi had already been extremely clear: «Wright's and Aalto's secret concerns in their conception of voids and internal cavities and, only subsequently and in relation to this conception, in their interest in volumes and plans. Declaration of independence from the geometric-purist and stereometric-neoplastic composition, other than the decorative ornament [...]. The modern social instance is concretely transposed into architecture just through spatial inventiveness, in bringing attention to the content, rather than to the container, and in shaping the building in the name of human fruition»<sup>35</sup>.

Finally, the fulfilment of Venturi's approach, the attention to the origins of modernity to be investigate looking at the past, and the openness to all other artistic and technical expressions - from painting to sculpture to music to craftsmanship to industrial production - as fundamental clues of taste and style, was matured in Zevi's crucial text, the *Storia dell'Architettura Moderna*, published in December of 1950<sup>36</sup>.

This was, of course, the first extended effort on the subject published in Italy, once again Zevi was ground-breaking. His persistent work of recognition, classification and relocation mapped out a method between taxonomy and collage. After the critical work on the masters of modernity, an element of novelty was indeed the consideration of Italian architectural achievements between the two wars. Architects hitherto neglected, such as Ernesto Basile and Raimondo D'Aronco, marked the beginning of modernity in Italy. Futurism was the fundamental breaking movement. Finally three figures were dignified: Giuseppe Terragni, with Zevi's predilection for the Casa del Fascio of Como, Edoardo Persico, an enlightened anti-fascist theorist, and Giuseppe Pagano, who pursued an idea of modernity as a common, popular language, even if this idea contrasted with the conceptions of Zevi himself, who considered the architectural work as a unique model of poetry. Other figures, not fitting into the economy of Zevi's narrative, were omitted bluntly. For example: «Piacentini's figure is not part of the history of modern architecture, therefore we will avoid talking about him, except regarding its practical action»<sup>37</sup>. Even Gio Ponti was brushed off as belonging to a frivolous and decadent culture<sup>38</sup>.

Undoubtedly, *Space, Time and Architecture* published by Sigfried Giedion in 1941<sup>39</sup> was the main reference. With this essay Zevi continuously confronted himself, furthermore

35 «Il segreto di Wright e di Aalto attiene al loro pensare i vuoti, le cavità interne e, solo in un secondo tempo, in funzione di queste, a interessarsi di volumi e piani. Dichiarazione d'indipendenza, oltre che dagli orpelli decorative, dalla composizione geometrico-purista e stereometrico-neoplastic [...]. La moderna istanza sociale si transla concretamente in architettura proprio nell'inventiva spaziale, nel portare l'attenzione sui contenuti, anziché sul contenente, e nel plasmare l'edificio in nome della fruizione umana» (translated by the author): Zevi, Bruno, *L'architettura organica di fronte ai suoi critici*, in *Zevi, Zevi su Zevi*, 58.

36 Bruno Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (Torino: Einaudi 1950).

37 «La figura di Piacentini non rientra nella storia dell'architettura moderna e perciò eviteremo di parlarne se non per quel che riguarda la sua azione pratica» (translated by the author) in Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, 221. Refer also to Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989), XIX.

38 Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, 279 and Dulio, *Introduzione a Bruno Zevi*, 92.

39 Sigfried Giedion, *Space Time and Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941).

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trying to overcome it. The two authors were linked by the centrality of the concept of space as cornerstone of architecture, while Giedion's insistence on *isms* divided them, especially the relevance attributed to abstract-figurative *isms*, which certainly were an essential component of modernity for Zevi too, but not the only one<sup>40</sup>.

For Giedion, the principles of space and time were transformed by Cubism, introducing simultaneity and interpenetration of planes; by Constructivism, conceiving spaces without human measure; by Neo-plasticism, returning to the essential elements of pure color, plans and their interdependence; by Futurism, pioneering time as a qualifying factor in spatial analysis.

For Zevi, the new conception of space was instead chiefly linked with the revolution of the Einsteinian law of relativity: space, time, matter and energy were interrelated, they influenced each other and, even more important, they were influenced by the user. This was specifically the reason why organic architecture was a democratic architecture.

Naturally, the core of this quarrel was Giedion's consecration of Gropius and Le Corbusier and Zevi's devotion to Frank Lloyd Wright. According to Zevi, Wright was the only architect conceiving spaces simultaneously in all dimensions, not simply adding or juxtaposing surfaces or volumes.

Designing simultaneously the inner space in all dimensions allowed a total emancipation from the pre-constituted forms, a total independence from the geometrical superimpositions. Yet, this conception of interior space, this design of the *void*, was uninterrupted, a centrifugal conquest of space: a free plan not because it was not divided by walls, but because it was produced from inside to outside, and then unfolded into the environment.

## Conclusion

From 1944 to 1950, in only six years, Bruno Zevi contributed substantially to the evolution of architectural culture along with democratic civilisation, in a country hitherto oppressed by dictatorship.

Architecture and democracy, these were undoubtedly the two poles of Zevi's critical and historical discourse.

Of course, the importance of having introduced Wright's work was crucial. But, also according to Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, Zevi's choice of the Wrightian repertoire resided much more in his idea of democracy than in his abstract definition of organic architecture. In his *Storia dell'architettura italiana 1944-1985*, Tafuri defined the essence of the Zevian theory about Wright: «Zevi's insistence on spatial valences must be understood as a metaphor. Space is the crucial feature where an exchange between design and fruition exists, where its oscillation between natural and unnatural conditions allows the reconstitution of "places" in which the environment of democratic society is recognisable»<sup>41</sup>.

The main issue for Bruno Zevi was the transmission of a message to shape, through architecture and urban planning, a new spatial dimension for emancipation, each time different but always coherent with freedom and equality principles. Even if, as this essay aim to highlight, a real definition for the Italian version of organic architecture was hard to find in Zevi's argumentations. Nevertheless, in the last lines of a paragraph in the *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, it is possible to read a fascinating explanation of organicism, open to discussion and pointed towards ethical issues more than aesthetical precepts: «Organic because in the inner spaces of architecture it pursues the material, psychological and spiritual happiness of man, organic because it extends this need from the environment to the house, from

40 Bruno Zevi, "Messaggio al Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne. Della cultura architettonica", *Metron* 31-32 (January – February 1949): 5-30.

41 «l'insistenza zeviana sulle valenze spaziali va colta nel suo valore di metafora. Lo spazio è protagonista laddove esiste scambio fra progettazione e fruizione, dove il suo oscillare fra condizioni naturali e innaturali permette il recupero di "luoghi" dove si fa riconoscibile l'ambiente di una società democratica» (translated by the author): Manfredo Tafuri, *Storia dell'architettura italiana 1944-1985*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), 12.

42 «Organico in quanto negli spazi interni dell'architettura ricerca la felicità materiale, psicologica e spirituale dell'uomo; organico perché estende questa esigenza dall'ambiente isolato alla casa, dalla casa alla città. Organico era perciò un attributo che aveva un'idea sociale, non un'idea figurativa; in altre parole, che andava riferito a un'architettura che vuole essere, prima che umanistica, umana» (translated by the author): Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, 343.



the house to the city. An attribute with a social idea, not a figurative idea. In other words, an attribute referred to an architecture longing to be, before humanistic, human»<sup>42</sup>.

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