

Bruno Zevi:

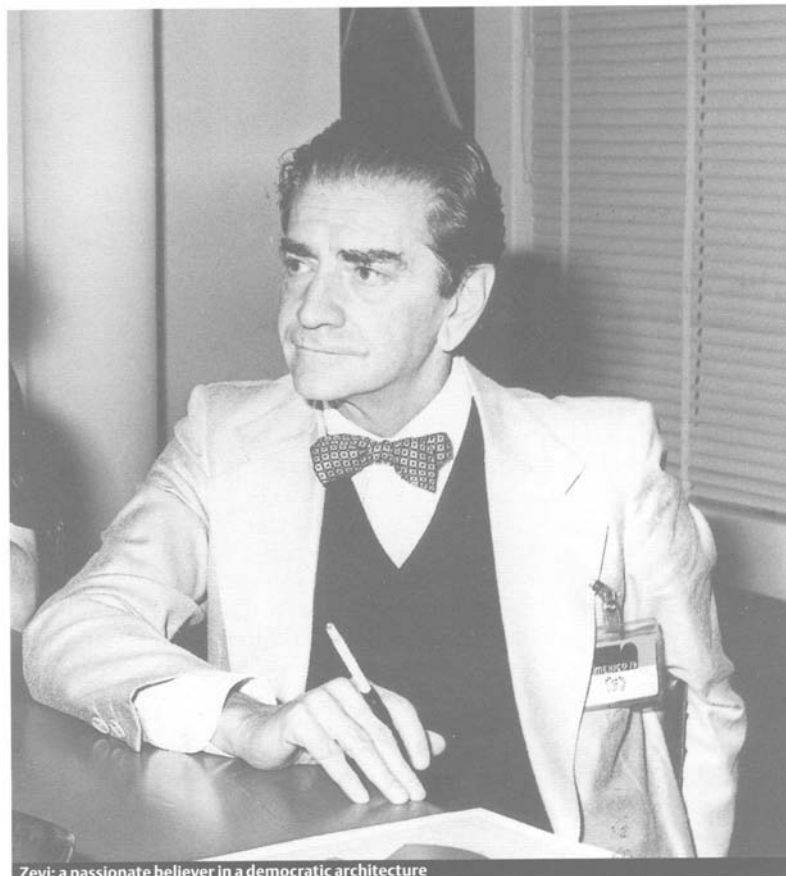
1918–2000

Bruno Zevi was the doyen of Italian architectural historians and critics and the foremost European interpreter of the American 'Organic' tradition in architecture. He introduced the work of Frank Lloyd Wright to Italian colleagues at the end of the Fascist era, offering his work as a palliative to the Neo-Classicism and quasi-Rationalism from which he felt they had suffered for far too long.

Zevi was born in 1918 to a prominent Jewish family close to the Via Nomentana home he was to reside in from his first year. This house became the offices and studio for his magazines, his television station and a venue for extravagant political receptions.

From the time of his architectural studies at Rome University (1936-39) he was actively opposed to Fascism. After graduation he travelled to London, where he enrolled as a third year student at the Architectural Association while working simultaneously with the Italian anti-Fascist resistance. A year later he joined the anti-Fascist group *Giustizia e Libertà* in Paris before moving to the United States, where he led the American branch in Boston while pursuing a Master's degree at Harvard under Walter Gropius. In 1943 he was back in London to aid the fight for the liberation of Italy making clandestine broadcasts and working as an architect for the US Army in Europe.

His stay was not helped by British Intelligence, who demanded he should desist from broadcasting but remain as their 'house guest' in London. Eisenhower, it appears, had sent a message to London demanding the end to the *Giustizia*



Zevi: a passionate believer in a democratic architecture

e *Libertà* activities as sensitive negotiations were going on with the Italians. He refused and in 1944 returned to Rome.

Zevi's battle against Fascism did not end with the war. It lasted well into the 1950s in Rome, directed against the grip that Mussolini's architect Piacentini had on 'official' architecture. Zevi was furious and declared that the 'larger cultural political battle had to take precedence of the fight for organic architecture'. His attitude underlines most clearly a basic

difference between British and Italian public life. In Italy, politics and architecture are taken seriously. They are part of the political agenda and the status of the architect is often enhanced and recognized by election to high public office. In Zevi's case, this meant becoming a member of the Chamber of Deputies, and for a time Director of Urban Design for the first postwar Italian government.

Zevi had other grievances. He declared war on the so-called

'International Style' in architecture popular in the 1940s. He felt it was 'anonymous, impersonal and cold' and had become far too influential in Italian architecture circles. In particular, its European champion Sigfried Giedion's Harvard lectures and book *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) had a perverse effect on architectural thought. Fundamentally, it failed to acknowledge Modernism's parallel tradition which he was to term 'organic' architecture.

Americans, such as Sullivan and Wright, had, he claimed, through their buildings and publications, made a vital contact with the ideas of the European architects. 'As a result of their influence,' he wrote, 'a new architectural movement [had] arisen.' That movement was, and indeed is the 'organic' one.

In 1945 he was to publish his first book on it in Italian and at the same time the Association of Organic Architects was set up in Rome. Earlier, before his expulsion from London in 1943 he had completed the 'chronicle', as he called it, entitled *Towards an Organic Architecture* which significantly acknowledged Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* but set out for Italians his discovery of 'a common direction in contemporary building' based on organic architecture and not on a style ending with an 'ism'. The book was issued in English by Faber in 1950, the same year they brought out Wright's *An Autobiography*.

Zevi drew the notice of his fellow countrymen to the work of the Dutch De Stijl artists in a perceptive text on neo-Plasticism. He also devoted a number of publications to the work of his friend Erich Mendelsohn, including a massive *Opera Completa* (1970) translated into English only in 1998.

Zevi's views were grounded in a passionate belief in a democratic architecture that was committed to freedom, equality and social justice. He felt that many aspects of contemporary architecture bore little relationship to the kind of world modern man yearned for as it had become shipwrecked in the stylistic waters of Functionalism.

Equally passionate were his attacks on Post-Modernists. Although he went out of his way to accommodate some of their more interesting spatial experiments, Post-Modernists were schizoids. He compared them to Pirandello-like characters in search of an author when they should have been

searching for a language of form and space. Post-Modernism was interested in the creation of a mood rather than in organic ideas. Post-Modernists, he felt, were architects after all, and not politicians, and they should have known better. That their philosophy was eventually overcome by the growing interest in Modernism, ecological and sustainable design indicated to Zevi a strengthening of the organic line.

His publications from the late '70s began to appeal to a new and younger generation. In *L'Architettura* he featured work by architects such as the Belgian Lucien Kroll, the American Bruce Goff and the Kebyar group of Goff followers, the Finn Reima Piéttilä, James Wines, and fellow countrymen Giovanni Michelucci and Paolo Soleri with his American arcologies, as well as those who toiled in the remains of Wright's Taliesin estates.

In 1945 Zevi became co-editor of *Metron*, worked for the US Information Service in Rome and became Director of Town Planning for the first post-war Italian democratic government. In the years following he taught architecture at Venice and Rome becoming, in 1955, architectural correspondent for the news magazine *L'Espresso* (never missing a weekly deadline) and founder editor of *L'Architettura - Cronache e Storia*, a position he never really relinquished, although the journal is now run by his son Luca. His writings for the period 1971-81 were collected together in 24 volumes by Laterza in the early 1980s.

In 1963 Zevi was appointed to the History of Architecture Chair at Rome University, the same year he was made an Honorary Fellow of the RIBA. In the following years he set up practice, spoke at important international conferences and schools of architecture, founded Teleroma, the first independent television station in Rome and organized impressive exhibitions on Michelangelo and Brunelleschi.

To mark the end of his immensely active international career he became more and more interested in politics and architectural criticism. At the Fundación Mirò in Barcelona, in 1969, Zevi was elected the first president of CICA: the International Committee of Architectural Critics with Pierre Vago, Jorge Glusberg, Julius Posener and myself as his fellow directors. CICA demanded that architecture

should be treated seriously as a critical subject by newspapers and journals. It sought a closer collaboration also between architect and consulting critic on buildings and urban projects. At the time architectural criticism had little place in the broadsheets, but through triennial UIA congresses, Zevi banged home his message. It was widely acknowledged and now hardly a day goes by without an article in the press on an architectural topic.

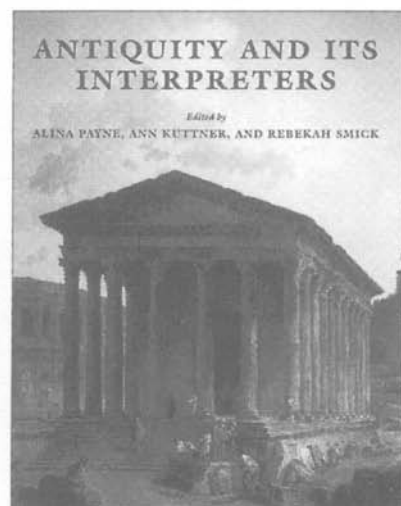
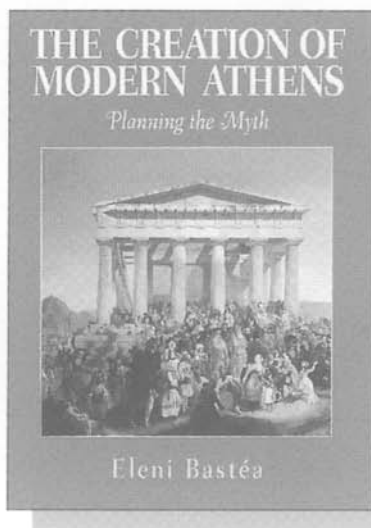
Sadly for Zevi, CICA lost its momentum and he became President Emeritus. Its members, aroused by the news of his death, are seeking to commemorate his name and fulfil some of his hopes for a world transformed by a socially responsible and technically valid architecture. He knew how important political action was for such a goal.

In the 1980s, after resigning from Rome University as a protest for its inefficiency and eclecticism, Zevi immersed himself in national politics. He held an influential place in the Chamber of Deputies as a member of the Radical Party for whom he was also to become President. For him, democracy and architecture were inextricably linked just as they were for his mentor, Frank Lloyd Wright; he has left an indelible mark on the architectural thinking of the twentieth century.

DENNIS SHARP

Bruno Zevi, architect, historian and critic: born Rome, 22 January 1918; Professor, *History of Architecture*, University of Venice 1948-63; Professor, *History of Architecture*, University of Rome 1963-79; married 1940 Tullia Calabi (one son, one daughter); died Rome 9 January 2000.

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