DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/LC2015.2015.760>**Bruno Zevi on Le Corbusier: another way to an “organic architecture”**

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Abstract: *Bruno Zevi was an enthusiastic promoter of Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture and theories. However, the critical enquiry and propaganda of the Italian architect and historian about so-called “organic architecture” reveals a major cultural debt to Le Corbusier. In 1945, Zevi published “Verso un’architettura organica” [Towards an organic architecture], the first version of his history of architecture. The title is clearly a polemical reference to Le Corbusier’s book “Vers une architecture” (1923). In 1977, together with other architects, Zevi promoted the Machu Picchu Charter, a document to “update” the Athens Charter (1933). The places held significance: Athens was the birthplace of western civilization and architectural rationalism. Machu Picchu symbolised the contribution of an alternative way of viewing the world. Are those merely examples of Zevi’s provocations? The relationship between Zevi and Le Corbusier is problematic and ambivalent. Zevi adopts the educational and communicative methods of Le Corbusier and his critical writing style, but his interpretation of the French-Swiss architect also demonstrates an attempt to delineate a new concept of “organic architecture”, related to his researches on a historiographic redefinition of the Modern Movement.*

Resumen: *Bruno Zevi fue un entusiasta promotor de la arquitectura y las teorías de Frank Lloyd Wright. Sin embargo, la investigación crítica y la propaganda del arquitecto italiano e historiador sobre la llamada “arquitectura orgánica” revela una importante deuda cultural para Le Corbusier. En 1945, Zevi publicó “Verso un’architettura organica” [Hacia una arquitectura orgánica], la primera versión de su historia de la arquitectura. El título es claramente una referencia polémica al libro de Le Corbusier “Vers une architecture” (1923). En 1977, junto a otros arquitectos, Zevi promovió la Carta Machu Picchu, un documento para “actualizar” la Carta de Atenas (1933). Los lugares celebrados importancia: Atenas fue la cuna de la civilización occidental y el racionalismo arquitectónico. Machu Picchu simbolizaba la contribución de una forma alternativa de ver el mundo. Son esos meros ejemplos de las provocaciones de Zevi? La relación entre Zevi y Le Corbusier es problemática y bivalente. Zevi adopta los métodos educativos y comunicativos de Le Corbusier y su estilo crítico escrito, pero su interpretación del arquitecto franco-suizo también demuestra un intento de delinear un nuevo concepto de “arquitectura orgánica”, en relación con sus investigaciones en una redefinición historiográfico de la Movimiento Moderno.*

Keywords: *Bruno Zevi; Le Corbusier’s legacy; modern language invariants; five points; organic architecture.*

Palabras clave: *Bruno Zevi; El legado de Le Corbusier; invariantes de lenguas modernas; cinco puntos; arquitectura orgánica.*

1. Introduction

In his autobiography entitled *Zevi su Zevi* (1993) [Zevi on Zevi], the well-known Italian historian and critic of architecture hastily informs his readers of his “*Understanding with Le Corbusier*”¹: “*I was at lunch next to Mrs Giedion, when he came in with that absent-minded, bored attitude of his. I didn’t know what to do. As a passionate supporter of Wright, they thought I was anti-Le Corbusier; should I greet him? How would he react?*”

¹ Zevi, Bruno, *Zevi su Zevi. Architettura come profezia*, Venezia: Marsilio, 1993, p. 211 [author’s translation from Italian] The edition of this book, from which the extract is taken, is the result of a review and extension of an autobiography Zevi had previously published with a small publisher under the title of *Zevi su Bruno Zevi*, Milano: Magma, 1977. In the first Milan edition, the short paragraph dedicated to two anecdotes concerning Le Corbusier, quoted here almost in full, was missing, whereas in the revised edition of 1993 it appeared in a section entitled “*lost sheets*.”

It was he who came towards me. He shook my hand: «You're Zevi. They all say you're against me. But I know it's not true» [...] Villa Savoye is a unicum; its rationalism vibrates with poetry. The Chapel in Ronchamp is also a unicum, the only informal architecture in history. Informal lies between expressionist and organic, and culminates in space, light and in the path inside the roof [sic], but above all in the quality of the sound, in the prodigious acoustic function. In his later years, when he came to Venice to design the new hospital, Le Corbusier was irritable to such an extent as was in keeping with an intellectual of high calibre. He could not bear the light, given the state of his eyes; he could not bear long speeches; basically he could not bear students. He saw some written protests in the entrance hall of the University of Architecture [Istituto Universitario di Architettura]. He asked me to translate them and commented: «They're idiots. They know nothing».²

In his description of Le Corbusier, Bruno Zevi appears to subconsciously draw himself. In fact, for those who ever met Zevi, the anecdote could easily recall his own rather shameless, provocative attitude.

The idea of handling the relationship with the person, taking him by surprise - both face to face and in writing - the ability to ascribe the events to his own historic-critical view and the knowledge of using extremely direct, cutting judgements are, without doubt, some of the traits that Le Corbusier and Zevi had in common. Was this merely a temperamental similarity, or was there something deeper linking the two figures?

As is well-known in the community of scholars of architecture, Zevi's role was to diffuse the ideas and architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and to modernise the Italian architectural panorama after the Second World War, with the introduction of new figures and themes.

The period in which he had most influence was between 1945 and the early 70s, when Zevi was also unanimously considered a figure whose authority stretched far beyond Italy: that is to say, before his views were gradually put aside when younger historians, such as Manfredo Tafuri or Paolo Portoghesi, appeared on the scene.

Zevi's connection with the masters of the so-called Modern Movement, with some of whom he had a direct relationship, has always been rather complex. On the one hand, Zevi was the spokesperson for the social and moral statements inherent in the modernist project. On the other, he never spared ferocious criticism of Gropius, Mies van der Rohe or Aalto when, in his opinion, their architectural production showed obvious signs of creative decline. However, his relationship with Le Corbusier reveals a position of open criticism, aiming to positively record the changes in direction of the Swiss-French architect and to catch the pedagogic/popular meaning of his books and actions undertaken (especially when Le Corbusier's post war work was also seen as a criticism of the International Style). In other words, when faced with Le Corbusier, Zevi reviews his judgement and exploits in favour of his historic narrative the turning point represented by works which no longer closely adhered to the logic of functionalism, such as the Chapel in Ronchamp (1950-55), the Philips Pavilion (1958) and the

² *Ibid*, p. 211. The place where they met, which Zevi mentions in the first part of the anecdote, is not clarified. The meeting certainly took place before the construction of the Chapel of Ronchamp, up to which point in time Zevi regularly refers to architectural events as "anti-Lecorbusierian". In 1949, Zevi reached the peak of his intense criticism of rationalism and Giedion's critical historic view, when he wrote a note addressed to the 1949 CIAM congress in Bergamo, in which both Le Corbusier and Giedion took part (see note 17). With all probability, the episode Zevi remembers must have taken place during the days of the congress *De divina Proportione*, held during the 9th Triennale in Milan in 1951. Numerous eminent figures took part in the Milan meeting, including Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Pier Luigi Nervi, Max Bill, Lucio Fontana, Georges Vantongerloo, Rudolf Wittkower, Matila Ghyka, James Ackerman, Gillo Dorfless, Bruno Zevi, Sigfried Giedion, and Le Corbusier. The conference proceedings have only recently been published and edited by Fulvio Irace and Anna Chiara Cimoli, (Eds.) *La divina proporzione. Triennale 1951*, Milano: Electa, 2007

“*Mannerist projects*”³ for Chandigarh (1951-65), Maisons Jaoul (1954-56) and the Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Mass. (1961-64). The opportunities to expand on these convictions are scattered not only in numerous articles and essays, but also in the updates of Zevi’s history of architecture. Within those pages, Zevi redefined the concept of organic architecture, which changed from being associated primarily with Wright to becoming synonymous with post-rationalism at first and then to almost being replaced by the idea of the “zero degree” of architectural writing.

Interpretational passages supported by devising the theory of the “invariants of the modern language” (1973) and accompanied by demonstrative actions such as the Machu Picchu Charter (1977), which bring to mind the pedagogical and communicative method adopted by Le Corbusier in his Five Points (1926) and in the Athens Charter (1933).

2. Zevi on Le Corbusier

Towards the end of the Second World War, at the age of twenty-seven, Zevi published the manuscript prepared in London⁴ between 1943 and 1944, entitled *Verso un’architettura organica*⁵ (1945) [Towards an organic architecture]. Following a series of amendments and supplements, this book subsequently became his *Storia dell’Architettura Moderna* (1950) [History of Modern Architecture], regularly updated until the author’s death. The reference to Le Corbusier’s *Vers une architecture* (1923) appears a foregone conclusion. However, it is useful to point out that it constitutes a method of choice he repeated throughout later years. Zevi’s various headings were borrowed from other books. For example *Saper vedere l’architettura* (1948) was inspired by *Saper vedere* (1933) by art critic, Matteo Marangoni, while his *Linguaggio Moderno dell’Architettura* (1973) was inspired by well-known essayist John Summerson’s *The Classical Language of Architecture* (1964), whereas *Zevi su Bruno Zevi* (1977) came from Roland Barthe’s autobiography titled *Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975).

Verso un’architettura organica offers Zevi the opportunity to speak of Le Corbusier for the first time and to compare his work with contemporary American events. The meaning of the book, as he declared in the preface, was to investigate “[...] a type of architecture which has been given the name of organic”⁶, a word which had the advantage, according to the author, of not ending “in -istic, showing it was not a programme or a dream of architecture, rather a concrete trend of buildings and architects [...]”⁷, proposing, therefore, “[...] an internal discourse, an intimate criticism of modern architecture in the early period.”⁸ A promise, which Zevi maintained over the following pages, accusing “a genius such as Le Corbusier”⁹ of being one of the main people responsible for a widespread “architectural decadence”¹⁰ and for the prescriptive dogmatism of architecture in the years prior to the Second World War. He highlights the normative features of modern architecture, its parallel crisis

³ Zevi, Bruno, *Storia dell’architettura moderna. Da William Morris ad Alvar Aalto: la ricerca spazio temporale*, vol. 1, Torino: Einaudi, 2001, p. 109 (first edition in 1950; main updates and reprints in 1975, 1994, 2001) [author’s translation from Italian]

⁴ Zevi, Bruno: *Zevi su Zevi*, p. 44

⁵ Zevi, Bruno, *Verso un’architettura organica. Saggio sullo sviluppo del pensiero architettonico negli ultimi cinquant’anni*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1945. A few year later he also published the English edition: *Towards an organic architecture*, London: Faber & Faber, 1950

⁶ Zevi, Bruno, *Verso un’architettura organica*, p. 12 [author’s translation from Italian]

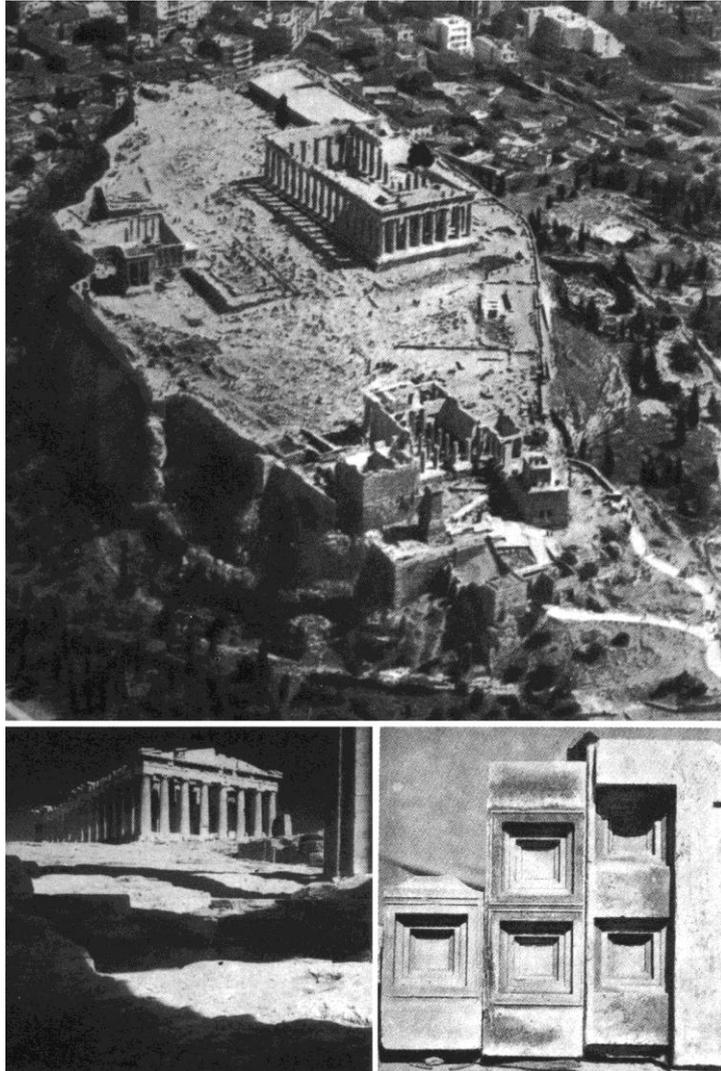
⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

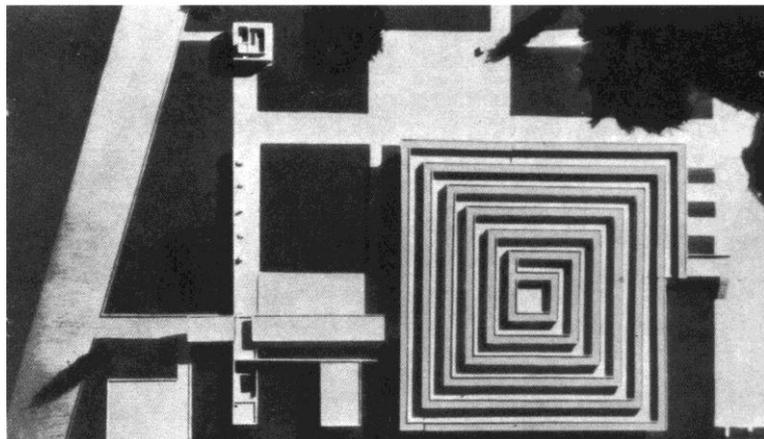
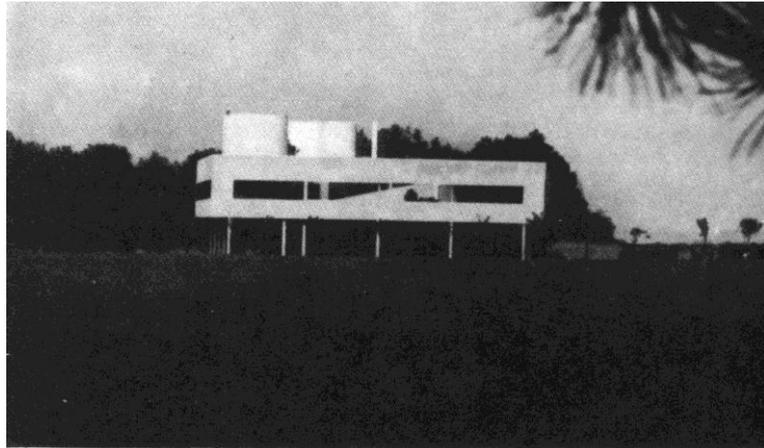
⁹ *Ibid.* p. 42

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

with the birth of European non-democratic regimes, and the inability of the Modern Movement to truly blend functional ideas and form. There are no detailed references to Le Corbusier's works, merely vague hints at the master's alleged approach to architecture.



1. *Top*: Bird's eye view of the Acropolis of Athens; *Bottom*: The living rock at the base of the Parthenon; The square coffers of the Parthenon (The pictures, their placement and captions are taken from the book by Bruno Zevi, *Architettura e storiografia*)



2. *Top:* The «pure» volume of Villa Savoye in Poissy (1929); *Middle:* Skycrapers in the Antwerp artificial landscape (1933); *Bottom:* Le Corbusier's taste for square in the Museum of Unlimited Growth (1939) (The pictures, their placement and captions are taken from the book by Bruno Zevi, *Architettura e storiografia*)

Zevi contrasted this interpretation with what he believed to be the positive qualities of organic architecture, which represented “[...] *an effort to set free from the theoretical rigidity of the clichés [of Functionalism] and humanisation*”¹¹, invoking the thoughts of Aalto.¹² The key critical passage, however, is his attempt to extend the term organic beyond the pales of Wright’s domain and to avoid linguistic misunderstandings. Zevi dedicates an entire chapter of his book to this aspect and indirectly reconnects to Walter Curt Behrendt’s theories of modern architecture.¹³

In his direct comparison between Wright and Le Corbusier, Zevi re-dimensioned the skills of the latter, making Le Corbusier’s architecture less important, but specified how he did not “[...] *aim to make comparisons of value. It was merely an approximate means to clarify the distinctions. Thus, by criticising a part of European work and the attitude of some architects, and in setting out the trends in America, I had fresh in my mind the fact that my readers knew the positive qualities of the former*”¹⁴

Positions and method which also appear to be confirmed in the report *L’architettura organica di fronte ai suoi critici* (1947) [Organic architecture face to face with its critics] given at the 1st National Congress of the APAO (Associazioni Per l’Architettura Organica) [Associations for Organic Architecture]¹⁵, in which the term organic is subjected to a definite shift in meaning: “*There is an American functionalist architecture, from which Wright’s organic architecture descends; it is a functionalist architecture which has generated our movement. If you take into account the vitality of the functionalism of Le Corbusier compared to the message of Sullivan, you will get an idea of the horizons open to European organic architecture, beyond Wright’s cultural contribution.*”¹⁶

However, the true objection of the controversy was not Le Corbusier and his architecture, which Zevi used once again as a pretext. Rather, it was the historiographic construction of the Modern Movement given by Sigfried Giedion in his *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941). Zevi’s intention was made clear only in 1949, when he sent a message to the CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne) in Bergamo, addressed mainly to Giedion. The text –translated both in English and French– was distributed to all participants of the congress in the hope of opening up to organic architecture, by reopening the debate on the different traditions of Modernism: “*there is no modern architect living who does not recognize the great versatile ability of Le Corbusier and his followers, but many feel that his approach is only one of the aspects in the present order of things. [...] While it is evident that the members of the CIAM need not all swear by Giedion’s theses [...]. In fact, in Giedion we find a somewhat incomplete history of modern architecture from 1859 to 1914, and a very brief history of it after 1933. Or rather this last part is so brief as to be practically non-existent.*”¹⁷

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.61

¹² His explicit reference in the preceding page is to Alvar Aalto’s article “The Humanising of Architecture”, in *The Architectural Forum*, Dec. 1940, pp. 505-506

¹³ See: Amirante, Roberta and Carreri, Emanuele, *Introduzione all’edizione italiana*, in Behrendt, Walter Curt, *Il costruire moderno. Natura, problemi e forme*, Bologna: Editrice Compositori, 2007 (1st ed. *Modern Building. Its Nature, Problems, and Forms*, New York, 1937)

¹⁴ Zevi, Bruno, *Verso un’architettura organica*, p.141 [author’s translation from Italian]

¹⁵ The Congress was held in Rome on 7 December 1947, at the Accademia d’Arte Drammatica, whereas the report was published in Zevi, Bruno: *Zevi su Zevi*, pp. 55-63

¹⁶ Zevi, Bruno: *Zevi su Zevi*, p. 59 The text of the conference was previously published in the magazine *Metron*, n. 23-24, 1948 [author’s translation from Italian]

¹⁷ Zevi, Bruno, “Messaggio al Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne”, *Metron*, n. 31-32 (1949). Giedion’s reply and Zevi’s subsequent retort were published in *Comunità* No. 5 (1949) and No. 6 (1950)

See: Zevi, Bruno, *Tutto Zevi*, Rome: Mancosu Editore, 2001. The publication *Tutto Zevi* [The complete Zevi], consisting of a book acting as a table of contents and 12 CD-ROMs, represented a sort of database containing the main documents and

Zevi's first essay on Le Corbusier appeared in 1959, as part of the catalogue for the exhibition on Le Corbusier and the technological developments of contemporary architecture, held at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome. The text aimed at analytically investigate Le Corbusier's poetry and architectural trends after World War II, but was not unrelated to Zevi's critical historic construction.

At first, the title of the brief essay appears critical: "*Le Corbusier, poeta senza storia*"¹⁸ [Le Corbusier, a poet without history]. Zevi highlighted the attempt by the modernist architects to present their discoveries as axiomatic conquests and permanent truths of the society in which they lived, in contrast with the historicist spirit of traditional academies: "*Every human achievement has its price: the rationalist generation was missing the sense of history.*"¹⁹ This was the framework within which Zevi presented Le Corbusier's ideas as a sequence of positive contradictions: "*Le Corbusier's entire subject matter lies within these opposite poles, ranging from enchantment to mathematics to lyric poetry: the square layout of the Villa in Poissy and at the opposite end of the scale the fluid, undulating plan of Ronchamp; the Cartesian regulatory plans for Paris, the landscape sensitivity of Algiers, the communal dimension of Saint-Dié and the classicist weave of Chandigarh; the atrophy of building material in the two-dimensional bands of glass and plaster of the Swiss Pavilion, and the «béton brut», the rough brutality of concrete walls of the Unité d'habitation in Marseilles; the «purism», the love of primary geometric and stereometric forms and, at the opposite end, the virtuosity of the paraboloid surfaces enclosing the «empty stomach» of the Philips Pavilion at the Universal Exhibition in Brussels. An overwhelming propagandistic vein is at the service of an essentially solitary spirit.*"²⁰ In his list of Le Corbusier's bravura in architecture, Zevi also underlined Le Corbusier's departure from the five points he had promulgated during the 20s. And this is where Le Corbusier's pragmatism, with its restlessness and second thoughts, joins up with Zevi's historic project: "*les objets à réaction poétique are at first a statement of rigid, suspended prisms, sinuous adjectives of intellectual, programmatic, rationalist texts; in the Ronchamp's Chapel and in the Philips Pavilion they subjugate the entire building in an organic process, in which the distinction between the elements and orders of architecture is wiped out, and the moulding attacks, embraces, possesses and sometimes even destroys the consistency of the architecture in an electronic poem.*"²¹

According to Zevi, Le Corbusier's poetics finally arrives at the organic. Between the 50s and 60s, during his promotion of the post-rationalist and organic approach, Zevi also reflected on the possibility of redefining the relationship between history and modern architecture.²² The clean slate proposed by Purism and Functionalism had, without doubt, put the historic disciplines and traditional historicist teaching of the academies in a difficult position. However, the time had come in which the teaching of architectural history contributed in a

publications from Zevi's archive, selected by Zevi himself before he died. The publication is, however, to be considered as posthumous and spoiled by a series of software and cataloguing restrictions.

¹⁸ Zevi, Bruno, "Le Corbusier, poeta senza storia" in *Forme e tecniche nell'architettura contemporanea*, preface by Palma Bucarelli, Rome: Editalia, 1959, pp. 13-16 [author's translation from Italian]. This was a catalogue of an exhibition originally set up in Zurich in 1957 and presented in Rome from 20 March to 20 April 1959.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 13

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 14-15

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 16

²² See: Zevi, Bruno, *Architettura e storiografia*, Milano: Libreria editrice politecnica Tamburini, 1950. A book republished in 1974 in a new edition, to which he added the subtitle, *Le matrici antiche del linguaggio moderno* [The ancient matrices of modern language].

propositional manner to the «battle of Modernism». Zevi methodically proposed the foundations for a new historic discipline: operative criticism,²³ or *history as an operative methodology of architectural practice*.²⁴

The architect who remained mostly involved in Zevi's continually redefining of his thoughts was actually Le Corbusier. In fact, in one of his editorials, Zevi decided to turn his previous judgement of the non-historicity of Le Corbusier's language upside down: "Genius [...] summarises and exalts history, it represents it but does not record it, it anticipates it and therefore does not stop it; at a certain point, compared to the events of everyone, it stands as anti-history. Le Corbusier, however, [...] astounds, because he is the only architect in the world who has completely, heroically lowered himself into the lacerations in the world. Take a look at the other masters. Wright's creativity, at least from 1930 onwards, had acquired such a dimension as to make it impossible to relate to history [...] In different ways, Gropius and Mies and Oud refused history [...] Only Le Corbusier has the human grandeur, the vitality and the courage to be available"²⁵, whilst considering the collapse of the functionalist society, the psychological traumas of the war conflict and the uncertainties of reconstruction.

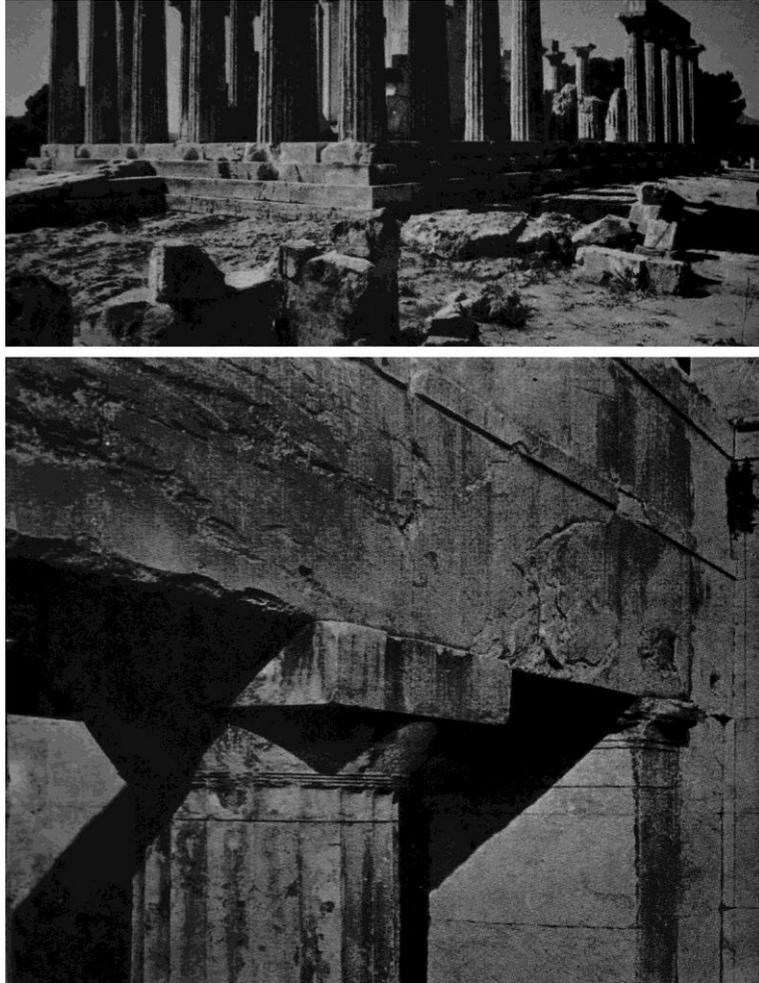
At the death of Le Corbusier in 1965, this new interpretation became even more explicit, even though for many years it was never adequately revealed. After holding a lecture in remembrance of the Swiss-French maestro at the faculty of architecture in Rome, Zevi prepared an essay, which was to appear in a Latin American journal again with the emblematic title of "*El coloquio del Le Corbusier con la historia*."²⁶ If the title appeared to resolve any doubts, the more general idea of an architect, capable of holding a dialogue with architectural questions of the past in a non-historic key, came to constitute the essential nucleus of Zevi's theoretical thinking. An investigation into the past then became a working method for the contemporary architect. It was actually possible to capture the unexpressed artistic values and subversive moments from history. However, the operative historian (i.e. the architect turned militant critic) could gain the contemporary expressive code above all from a comparison of personalities and different periods. At this point, Zevi outlined the idea that architectural language could constitute a critical text and, at the same time, an instrument of historical analysis.

²³ Amongst the numerous articles written by Zevi we should point out a brief selection: Zevi, Bruno, "La historia como instrumento de síntesis de la enseñanza de la arquitectura" and "La estética moderna y la historiografía arquitectónica" in *2 Conferencias*, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1952; "Il rinnovamento della storiografia architettonica" in *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, vol. XXII, Florence: Vallecchi, 1954; "La storia dell'architettura per gli architetti moderni", *L'architettura, cronache e storia*, n.23 Sept. 1957; "Un gesto probante: gli architetti scelgono la critica storica", *L'architettura, cronache e storia*, n.50 Dec. 1959; "La storia dell'architettura: serve a formare gli architetti?" *L'architettura, cronache e storia*, n.66 Apr. 1961; "History as a Method of Teaching Architecture" in Whiffen, Marcus (ed.) *The History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture: Papers from the 1964 AIA-ACSA Teacher Seminar*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1965

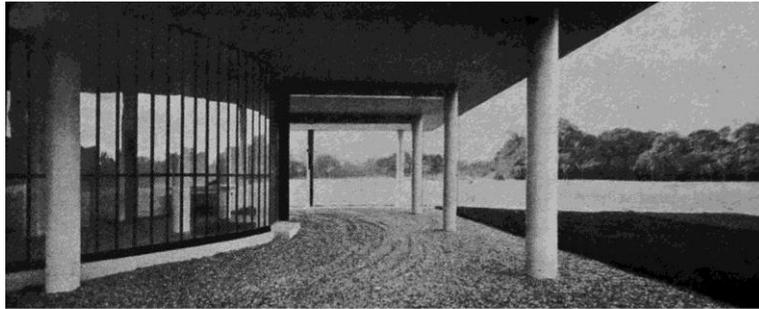
²⁴ See: Zevi, Bruno, "La storia come metodologia del fare architettonico" [History as methodology of architectural practice] inaugural lecture in the auditorium of the University of Rome on 18 December 1963, republished with amendments in *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura. Guida al codice anticlassico*, Torino: Einaudi, 1973, pp. 87-107

²⁵ Zevi, Bruno, "La registrazione veritiera di Le Corbusier", in *L'architettura, cronache e storia*, No. 68 Jan. 1961, p.75 [author's translation from Italian]

²⁶ Zevi, Bruno, "El coloquio de Le Corbusier con la historia", *La Torre*, Universidad de Puerto Rico, n. 52, Jan.-Apr. 1966, pp.167-180; republished in Italian with amendments in Zevi, Bruno, *Pretesti di critica architettonica*, Torino: Einaudi, 1983, 155-163



3. Separation of the volumes from the ground and moulding in Greece and Le Corbusier's architecture. The stylobate of the Temple of Aphaia, Aigina (5th century BC) and capital of the Propyleia, Athens (The pictures, their placement and captions are taken from the book by Bruno Zevi, *Architettura e storiografia*)



4. Separation of the volumes from the ground and moulding in Greece and Le Corbusier's architecture. Villa Savoye *pilotis* and furniture in a building near Porte Molitor, Paris (1933) (The pictures, their placement and captions are taken from the book by Bruno Zevi, *Architettura e storiografia*)

The fundamental difference between this approach and the post-modern hypotheses developed by Paolo Portoghesi or Charles Jencks was that history in the eyes of Zevi became a laboratory where everything continually came under discussion without any precise reference points, in which only the spatiality of the work counted. On the contrary, the growing theories on post-modernism to which Zevi was as an ardent opposer, tended to offer an idea of history as a supermarket and architecture as an assembly of icons and archetypes: by giving up the typical tension of modernism to radicalise the creative/design moment, the past became the place from which architects ended by drawing their formal and, therefore, stylistic repertory.

In the light of this concept of history according to Zevi “*in Le Corbusier cultural and creative pathways blend, there is absolute synchrony between historic conscience and poetic outburst, which is a unique phenomenon in the panorama of the maestri of modern architecture, and therefore assumes a technical and operative value and a linguistic and ethical ensemble. If, despite the difficult years, the nerve-wracking events and alternating fortunes, Le Corbusier unceasingly challenges the system, rejects every conformism, never becomes in any sense of the word an «official of the superstructure» [...] the reason [...] lies in the assiduous, daily, untiring dialogue he has with the past, in the justification he takes from it and which serves to cleanse or enrich, to stimulate or set aside and protect, nevertheless as a point of reference to show enthusiasm, to pause or to recover.*”²⁷ Le Corbusier’s conversation with history, explained Zevi, was divided into three stages: the first corresponded to his period of training, to the trips during which he came into contact with the architectural and urban reality of the past, to his apprenticeship as artisan first and then as architect and to the transformation from Charles Edouard Jeanneret into Le Corbusier. The second stage stretched from the 20s to the Second World War. Here Zevi highlighted how in *Vers une architecture* several chapters are dedicated to the past, but how deep down “*this period of Le Corbusier’s conversation with history is all to be restudied.*”²⁸ Furthermore, he added that his un-historicity could be identified in his rejection of historicism. The third stage was the one in which Le Corbusier took a critical position compared to his previous achievements, aware that “*now the hope of redeeming the world by means of rationality has succumbed.*”²⁹

Zevi did not merely use historic data to support his argument, but used the provocative approach of the militant critic: “*Le Corbusier takes on the stature of Wright’s genius, perhaps less powerful, but more in touch with contemporary life, because it is a continual, ever-new conversation with history.*”³⁰

The organic is ferried more clearly from the world of Wright to post-rationalism, to end up in the “*informal scream of Ronchamp.*”³¹ From a young age, Zevi had specified the non-absolutist character of the organic concept, which envisaged the introduction into architecture of psychological components. Furthermore, organic architecture was the result of an evolutionary idea of architecture, conceived as a growing organism, recording the renewed material and spiritual questions of the designer and of the person living in it. Essentially, Zevi’s organic had an ethical question as its foundation, but no figurative repertory.

The concept of history does not merely act as the background for Zevi’s interpretation, but becomes an integral part of Zevi’s provocative lesson: Le Corbusier’s path re-interpreted as another way to an organic architecture.

²⁷Zevi, Bruno, *Pretesti di critica architettonica*, p.155 [author’s translation from Italian]

²⁸*Ibid.* p. 159

²⁹*Ibid.* p. 161

³⁰*Ibid.* p. 162

³¹*Ibid.*

3. Zevi and Le Corbusier: the Five Points and the Invariants of the Modern Language of Architecture

In the 70s, Zevi systematically perfected his effective communicative approach, insisting on a polemical style of writing, motivated by his work as article writer for the well-known Italian weekly newspaper *L'Espresso*. During this period he published *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura* (1973) [The modern language of architecture], a book in which he developed the theory of the “invariants” of modern architecture, i.e. a series of seven points, or principles, by means of which to critically analyse contemporary architectural production. An approach with the ambition of arousing dissent, and the validity of which “*should be tested on works and on the drawing boards.*”³²

These invariants probably constitute Le Corbusier's most vivid heritage in Zevi's interpretation of architecture. The reason lies in Zevi's reflections on Le Corbusier's five points. Naturally, many other theories and examples were also vivid in the mind of the Roman critic and historian. We can quote at least two, widely verifiable by quotations and deductions taken from other texts:³³ the six points on organic architecture expressed by Wright in 1908 “*In the cause of architecture*”³⁴ and the seventeen points of Theo van Doesburg regarding neoplastic architecture.³⁵

However, within the limits imposed by this essay and for questions we feel are important to illustrate, we will pause mainly on the aspects which highlight a bond with Le Corbusier's ideas. A bond which stands out for its analogies and contrasts developing around the typical themes of the 60s and 70s, concerning architecture as language and the semiotics of the work of art.

Like Le Corbusier's five points, Zevi's seven invariants aim to educate and popularise at the same time. Both cases suggest the keys to interpreting architecture. The main difference is that, whereas Le Corbusier provides instructions to apply to the project, Zevi thinks of how, of a procedure which does not contemplate precise rules such as those of Le Corbusier. We can attempt a rapid comparison. Le Corbusier's famous five principles are: 1) the *pilotis*, or the reinforced concrete structure instead of walls. The pillars “*rise directly from the floor to 3, 4, 5, 6, etc. metres and elevate the ground floor. The rooms are thereby removed from the dampness of the soil [...]*”³⁶ 2) the roof garden. “*The flat roof demands in the first place systematic utilization for domestic purposes: roof terrace, roof garden [...]* In general, roof gardens mean to a city the recovery of all the built-up area”³⁷ 3) the free design of the ground-plan, as a result of adopting a structure in reinforced concrete, each floor can be organised according to the principle of functionality: “*the result of this is absolute freedom in designing the ground-plan*”³⁸ 4) the *fenêtre en longuer*, wide horizontal cuts in the wall, rather than vertical holes. 5) the free design of the façade. “*By projecting the floor beyond the supporting pillars, like a balcony all round the building,*

³²Zevi, Bruno, *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura. Guida al codice anticlassico*, Turin: Einaudi, 1973, p.11 (*The modern language of architecture*, Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1978, 1st English edition) [author's translation from Italian]

³³See: Zevi, Bruno, *Poetica dell'architettura neoplasticista. Il linguaggio della scomposizione quadrimensionale*, Torino: Einaudi, 1974, pp.110-117 (1st ed. 1953)

³⁴See: Wright, Frank Lloyd, “In the cause of architecture”, in *The Architectural Record*, March, 1908

³⁵See: Van Doesburg, Theo, “Tot een beeldende architectuur” [Towards a plastic architecture], in *De Stijl*, VI, n. 6/7, 1924

³⁶Le Corbusier and Jeanneret, Pierre, “Five points towards a new architecture”, in Conrads, Ulrich, *Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971, p. 99. The declaration “Les cinq points de l'architecture nouvelle” by Le Corbusier was originally published in *Almanach de l'Architecture moderne*, Paris, 1926

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 99-100

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 100

the whole façade is extended beyond the supporting construction. It thereby loses its supportive quality [...] The façade may thus be designed freely."³⁹

Zevi's seven invariants are: 1) Listing of functional requirements; 2) Asymmetry and Dissonance; 3) Anti-perspective Three-dimensionality; 4) Four-dimensional decomposition (fluid space planning); 5) Cantilever, shell and membrane structures; 6) Space-in-time 7) Reintegration of building, city and landscape.

Zevi's principles appear cryptic unless we understand his argumentations. They were also accused of being symptoms of anti-conformism and madness.⁴⁰ However, they can easily be compared to Le Corbusier's five points and other reflections by him. For example, the first invariant is an invitation to commence the project without any kind of a priori: it holds together Le Corbusier's principles of a free floor plan and free façade, it uses similar arguments. However, Zevi specifies, simply out of protest, that it is also an invitation to free oneself from any dogma, commencing with the five points. The principle of the cantilever, that is to say a courageous structural concept of the building, echoes Le Corbusier's reflections on the pilotis and reinforced concrete. The invariant on the decomposition of the spatial box is an explicit reference to the De Stijl movement. It alludes to spatial fluidity and to how this feature is connected to the way of conceiving planes, lights and colours. The breaking up of the box, decomposed into sheets, is none other than the search for a method to measure out light and expand the boundaries of space by eliminating the perimetric walls. The horizontal window is part of this process, according to Le Corbusier's description: "*together with the intermediate ceilings the supports form rectangular openings in the façade through which light and air enter copiously.*"⁴¹ On the other hand, the question of reintegrating building, city and landscape is quickly confirmed by the garden roof and the *pilotis*, which are principles arising from reflections on town planning, placing reasoning about the city before architecture.

However, how can we not think of the architectural *promenade* compared to the invariants which contemplate the anti-perspective tri-dimensionality and space in time? Furthermore, Zevi himself stresses that Le Corbusier refers to Greek and Roman architectural culture, in other words to the pre-Renaissance spatial values, as he captures modernism and avoids the blinkers of the traditional Beaux-Arts structure.

The pages of *Il Linguaggio moderno dell'architettura* are full of invectives against the design cowardice, the Renaissance rules, the schools of architecture, seen as backward structures and places in which inadequate teaching methods prevail. Concepts expressed with the same *verve* as many fragments in *Vers une architecture*: "*Rome is a bazaar in full swing, and a picturesque one. There you find every sort of horror [...] and the bad taste of the Roman Renaissance. We have to judge this Renaissance by our modern taste, which separates us from it by four great centuries of effort, the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th [...]. The lesson of Rome is for wise men, for those who know and can appreciate, who can resist and can verify. Rome is the damnation of the half-educated. To send architectural students to Rome is to cripple them for life. The Grand Prix de Rome and the Villa Medici [The French Academy in Rome is located in the Villa Medici] are the cancer of French architecture.*"⁴²

We will not develop this any further to avoid forcing any interpretations. However, it is correct to say there is something else.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰See review by Jameson, Conrad, "The Modern Language of Architecture by Bruno Zevi", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 40, n. 1 (Mar., 1981) pp. 80-82

⁴¹Le Corbusier and Jeanneret, Pierre, "Five points towards a new architecture", p. 100

⁴²Le Corbusier, *Towards a new architecture*, New York: Dover Publication, 1986 (1st ed. 1923) pp.172-173

In an issue of *L'architettura* of 1974, Zevi wrote an editorial entitled “Le invarianti di Le Corbusier” [Le Corbusier’s invariants], an impossible tongue-in-cheek interview: “Let us now turn to Le Corbusier: what do you think of the language of the Modern Movement, of the seven invariants? He answers irritated, almost to imply he has no time to lose. He hands us a text and nine sketches: a conference with students of architecture in the thirties. « Les sept invariants? Je m’en fiche!» [The seven invariants? I couldn’t care less]”⁴³ Actually, this was not one of Zevi’s publicity stunts to promote his book on the language of the Modern Movement. The fragments of text he included in the editorial were actually by Le Corbusier, despite the ambiguous context in which Zevi places them. They come from the book *Précisions sur un état présent de l’architecture et de l’urbanisme*,⁴⁴ not yet translated into Italian at the time. Zevi quotes the text of the last of the ten conferences held in Buenos Aires in October 1929, entitled “The World City and some perhaps untimely considerations.” To be precise, the reference is to the second part of the conference, in which Le Corbusier, after having rapidly run through the main topic, introduced an improvised theme: *Si je devais enseigner l’architecture?* [If I had to teach you architecture?]⁴⁵

The similarities between Zevi’s and Le Corbusier’s reasoning and words are extraordinary, to the extent that it makes one think Zevi had Le Corbusier’s text at hand when he drafted the first part of his book.

Let us compare a few phrases. Zevi: “*The Listing of functions implies the decomposition and critical rejection of the classical rules, that is of the «orders», of the a priori, of the hackneyed expressions, of conventions of any original and kind...*”⁴⁶ Le Corbusier: “*I would begin by forbidding the ‘orders’, by putting a stop to this dry rot of the orders, this incredible defiance of intelligence.*”⁴⁷

Zevi: “*A door? Open it anyway, except in the centre of the room. If the door leads away from the median, the space acquires depth [...] Where to illuminate that same room? In any point that is not in the centre, so as not to divide the room into three parts with a lit area between two dark areas at the sides. Let us re-semanticise the window according to the internal space and re-qualify light.*”⁴⁸ Le Corbusier: “*I ask a young student. How do you make a door? How big? Where do you put it? How do you make a window? But, incidentally, what is a window for? [...] In what part of a room do you make a door?... Perhaps you have several solutions. You are right, there are several solutions, and each one gives a separate architectural sensation.*”⁴⁹

Zevi: “*To re-educate them [the architects] we would have to abolish the use of T-squares, set-squares, compasses, drafting machines, all the paraphernalia prepared according to classical grammar and syntax.*”⁵⁰ Le Corbusier: “*By the way, I forbid you to draw an axis on your plans –axes are merely formulated to dazzle the unwary.*”⁵¹

⁴³Zevi, Bruno, “Le invarianti di Le Corbusier”, *L’Architettura, cronache e storia*, n.227, Sept. 1974, p. 282 [author’s translation from Italian]

⁴⁴Le Corbusier, *Précisions sur un état présent de l’architecture et de l’urbanisme*, Paris: Vincent & C.ie, 1960 (1st ed. 1930)

⁴⁵The text was published in English, with amendments and adaptations, under the title “If I had to teach you architecture”, *Focus*, No. 1, London 1938

⁴⁶Zevi, Bruno, *Il linguaggio moderno dell’architettura*, p.11 [author’s translation from Italian]

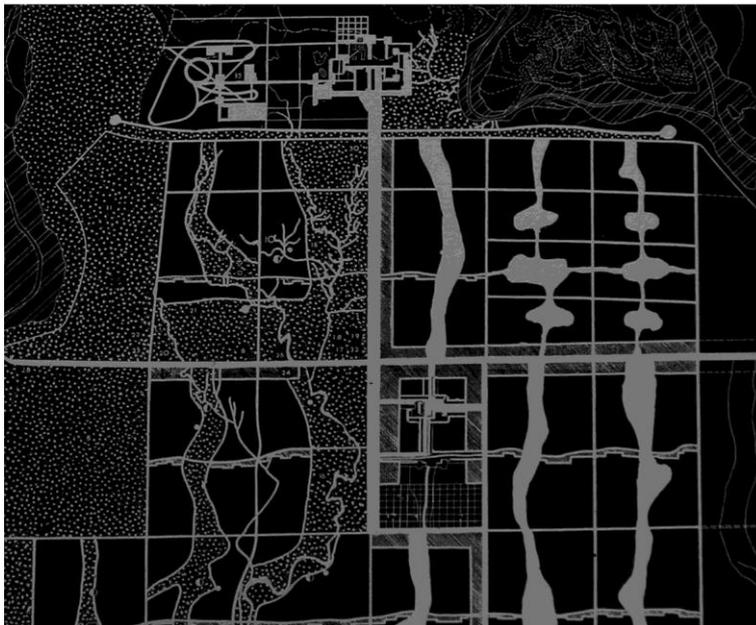
⁴⁷Le Corbusier, “If I had to teach you architecture”, in Sharp, Dennis, (ed.) *The Rationalists. Theory and design in the modern movement*, London: Architectural Press, 1977, pp. 79-80

⁴⁸Zevi, Bruno, *Il linguaggio moderno dell’architettura*, p.20-25 [author’s translation from Italian]

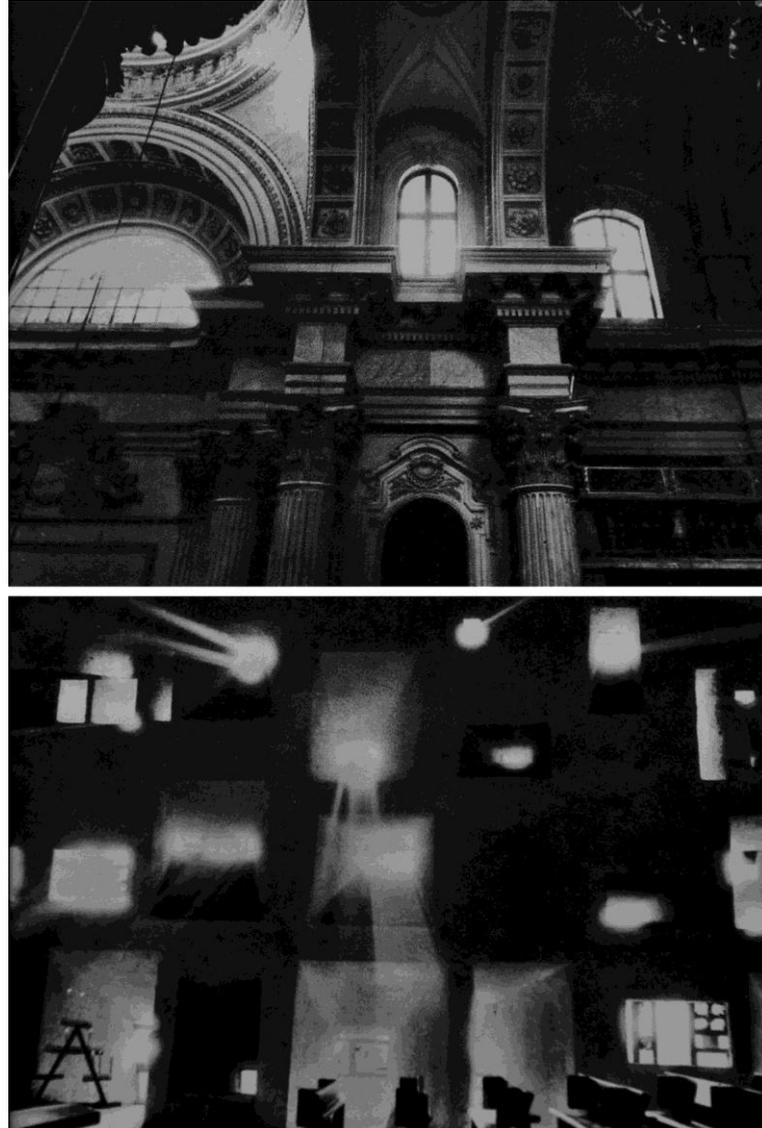
⁴⁹Le Corbusier, “If I had to teach you architecture”, p. 80

⁵⁰Zevi, Bruno, *Il linguaggio moderno dell’architettura*, p.27 [author’s translation from Italian]

⁵¹Le Corbusier, “If I had to teach you architecture”, p. 80



5. Le Corbusier and the Greek city grid. *Top*: Plan of Priene in a drawing by Patrice Bonnet; in the upper section, near the mountain, the Acropolis (at the end of 4th century BC) *Bottom*: Le Corbusier's plan of Chandigar, Punjab Capital City, India; in the upper section, near the mountain, the «Capitol» and the Acropolis in the northern area. (The pictures, their placement and captions are taken from the book by Bruno Zevi, *Architettura e storiografia*)



6. *Top:* Light dissonance comparing the two rooms of the church of Santa Maria in Campitelli by Carlo Rainaldi. On the right, the entrance room, on the left the space flooded by light focused on the altar, under the dome. *Bottom:* The wall adorned of bright holes in the Le Corbusier's Chapelle of Notre-Dame du Haut, Ronchamp (1950-53). The quantitative and qualitative difference of light is a tool to re-integrate architectural spaces and to achieve a space-time vision. This poetic device is chosen in baroque and post-rationalist architecture. (The pictures, their placement and captions are taken from the book by Bruno Zevi, *Architettura e storiografia*)

Zevi: “[...] every distinction between the interior and exterior space, between architecture and town planning crumbles; the fusion of building and town creates urban-architecture.”⁵² Le Corbusier: “It is no longer possible to separate architecture and town-planning – they are one and the same thing.”⁵³

Too many similarities to pass unobserved and too many affinities to be able to mention them all. It is sufficient to grasp the sense of psychological investigation and bibliographic excavation carried out in this part of the text. No comparison is mechanical, and perhaps the differences are the same as the analogies. The general picture should be clear and, in addition, we know that it is impossible to make any simplistic transposition of the concepts discussed. What counts is that even the differences in conceiving architecture by antithesis shows the extent to which Zevi was influenced by Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier’s message, thanks to Zevi, has widened its horizons further.

4. The Athens Charter and the Machu Picchu Charter

“An overwhelming propagandistic vein is at the service of an essentially solitary spirit.”⁵⁴ Zevi had written about Le Corbusier. An observation which was actually autobiographical, but which fits both personalities perfectly. In fact, it was his pedagogical and, at the same time, propagandist temperament which led Zevi to draw up the Machu Picchu Charter (1977) as an open challenge to the Athens Charter (1933), drawn up by Le Corbusier under the aegis of the CIAM.

The basic idea behind Machu Picchu Charter -arousing from the international congress *Reunion de Grandes Maestros de la Arquitectura*, organised by the Universidad Nacional Federico Villarreal in the cities of Lima and Cuzco, from 6 to 13 December 1977- was to update the Athens Charter by recording, in a written reflection, the changes which had hit society, towns and architecture during the four decades following the meeting of the CIAM. The purpose of the congress was to present to the public the most advanced research in the field of architecture and town planning compared to the major global changes. The parallel intention was to produce a conclusive declaration to read out and symbolically sign in the ancient city, symbol of the Inca culture. There were numerous participants. To name but a few, they included Felix Candela, Jorge Glusberg, Charles Eames, Josè Luis Sert, Buckminster Fuller, Gordon Bunshaft, Paul Rudolph, Pier Luigi Nervi, Paolo Soleri, Frei Otto, Gottfried Böhm, Ricardo Legorreta, Kenzo Tange, Kunio Mayekawa, Oscar Niemeyer, and Clorindo Testa.

Why did Zevi suggest Mach Picchu? The answer is contained in the document: “Athens 1933, Machu Picchu 1977. The places are significant. Athens stood for the cradle of the western civilization. Machu Picchu symbolizes the independent cultural contribution in the other world. Athens stood for rationality and enlightenment personified by Aristotle and Plato. Machu Picchu stands for everything which escapes the global illuminist mentality and for everything not classifiable by its logic.”⁵⁵

The Athens Charter dwelt on the five fundamental points of Dwelling, Recreation, Work, Transportation and Legacy of history. A subdivision which finished by characterising the new regulatory town plans with policies of zoning: the separation of the sectors then created a series of problems for the contemporary town, by undermining and decreasing human relationships. Furthermore, consistent with the situation in the 30s, the town

⁵²Zevi, Bruno, *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura*, p.59 [author’s translation from Italian]

⁵³Le Corbusier, “If I had to teach you architecture”, p.79

⁵⁴Zevi, Bruno, “Le Corbusier, poeta senza storia” p. 16 [author’s translation from Italian]

⁵⁵The text of the Machu Picchu Charter was published in Italian, English, Spanish and French in *L'Architettura, cronache e storia*, No. 268, February 1978, pp.546-563 (cit. p.547)

was seen as a different entity from the region that influenced it, even though they were interdependent for economic, social and political questions. Moreover, recommendations concerning the historic parts of the town aimed mainly to protect and conserve the historical heritage.

The Machu Picchu Charter updated the problems faced previously, and stressed that the relationship of interdependence between town and region was now overcome by the fact that the towns had spread to the point of becoming unique entities alongside those of large regional areas. The underlying problem had become the re-integration of functions. It had become necessary to promote public transport and multipurpose, as opposed to separate functions. As regards the historic heritage, the need was now stressed to exploit, as well as preserve architectural property, and the idea was accepted to graft the contemporary on to historic town centres. There was also a reflection on architectural design which in the Athens Charter had no reason to exist, dominated as it was by the ideas of Le Corbusier, since it was considered an acquired and shared element. This point corresponded to the promotion of multiple architectural languages, in other words to Zevi's theories on the language of the Modern Movement and to his theory of the invariants. The Charter was then re-discussed and presented the following year, in 1978, at the congress of the UIA (Union Internationale des Architectes) in Mexico City.

Even though the experience was not such a well-publicised event globally, despite Zevi's efforts to broadcast it, it represents a declared attempt to retrace in a different light one of the most important experiences of Le Corbusier in a secular, non-celebratory manner.

5. Conclusion

Compared to the official story of the Modern Movement narrated by Giedion, in Zevi's *Storia dell'architettura moderna* "[...] the final chapter was not dominated by Le Corbusier, Gropius and Mies, but by Wright."⁵⁶

Zevi's *History* is, without doubt, a vision characterised by the presence of the maestri, but the continual updates still makes it one of today's most complete books due to the thoroughness of its investigation into the Modern Movement - in its numerous aspects - into its epigones and the attempts made to revive it.

This is not a forward-looking history in the strict sense, that is to say a story which presents continual leaps forward. On the contrary, it is an analysis which pauses to look at the moments of rupture, which had not necessarily been reinterpreted as a race towards the future.

What was important for Zevi was not the radicalism of the innovative features present in the architectural creations. On the contrary, he was interested in the ability of the architects to challenge pre-constituted values, as he loved to remember in the final years of his life, quoting the French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard.

Naturally, the books also count for what they did not include, particularly for what concerned his precise historiographic choices. Zevi was intransigent in not admitting the end of the Modernist experience and for this reason the revivalist historicists, typical of post-modernism, find no place, not even in the final editions of his texts. Zevi had learned that "[...] modern architecture is not «a style», but a continual process, a game which continually destroys its own rules and has to be reinvented each day. Thus, when Le Corbusier, in the *Chapelle de Ronchamp* in 1950, contradicted the free floor plan, the pilotis, the garden roof, the horizontal window, all

⁵⁶Zevi, Bruno, "Dal manierismo al linguaggio- Architecture versus Historic Criticism", annual conference of the Royal Institute of British Architects, London 6th December 1983, published in *Zevi su Zevi*, p. 151 [author's translation from Italian] Zevi astutely and polemically provided a clarification in his message to the CIAM in Bergamo (see note 17)

the «principles» which he had diffused in 1921 [sic], and when, in a certain sense, he resuscitated the spirit and forms of Expressionism, this did not constitute a trauma for my History, as the Expressionist poetics already existed in it as a permanent factor of the language of the Modern Movement.”⁵⁷

Not by chance did he speak of zero degree language in architectural writing towards the end of the 90s.⁵⁸

That is the possibility for architects to free themselves from the academies of thought, against which he had dedicated an entire life of battles and research, in exactly the same way as Le Corbusier. This was perhaps the reason why, in June 1997, when Zevi was invited to take part in the *Le Corbusier International* conference,⁵⁹ organised in Paris by the Le Corbusier Foundation, he wrote an autobiographical speech in the strict sense, dedicated to his role as historian and critic of modern architecture. On that same occasion, Zevi highlighted Le Corbusier’s ability in his Ronchamp project to challenge previous architectural research and the extent to which this was significant for subsequent developments in modern architecture.

The studies on the ancient matrices of the language of the Modern Movement did not serve merely to corroborate the theory of the invariants, but also to seek out those moments in history in which pre-established values had been challenged, by actually bearing in mind Le Corbusier’s example. Zevi never dwelt on formal similarities. What he wanted to say out loud was that “[...] *the historiographic revolution is a component of the architectural revolution which cannot be eliminated.*”⁶⁰

The process Zevi intended to put into practice and which he suggested to his readers was fundamentally to place oneself in a destabilising situation, lacking any precise equilibrium. We should probably refer to the Jewish unrest which agitated the minds of the great intellectuals of the twentieth century and which also characterised the final decades of architecture to find a valid explanation both from a psychological and historical viewpoint. Basically, Zevi had never worried too much about scandalising his listeners in exactly the same way as Le Corbusier, about whom he enjoyed speaking to us. This is his Le Corbusier heritage: “*For this heroic availability, his defeats are a perpetual indictment and his bitter «Je m’en fiche!» acquires an ethical value.*”⁶¹

6. Source of images

All pictures, their placement and captions are taken from the book by Zevi, Bruno *Architettura e storiografia. Le matrici antiche del linguaggio moderno*, Torino: Einaudi, 1974

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⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸See: Zevi, Bruno, *Paesaggistica e linguaggio grado zero dell’architettura. Landscape and zero degree of architectural language*, Venice: Canal & Stamperia, 1999 and the magazine *L’architettura, cronache e storia*, No. 503-506, 1997

⁵⁹See: Zevi, Bruno, *Tutto Zevi*, Rome: Mancosu Editore, 2001

⁶⁰Zevi, Bruno, *Architettura e storiografia. Le matrici antiche del linguaggio moderno*, Turin: Einaudi, 1974, p. 36 [author’s translation from Italian]

⁶¹Zevi, Bruno, *Storia dell’architettura moderna*, vol I. p. 110 [author’s translation from Italian]

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