The zero degree of architectural writing

Theorizing, drawing, and debating the 'third term'
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Abstract

From the ’60s to the ’90s, architectural practitioners and critics adopted the Barthesian idea of ‘zero degree writing’ to break loose from the antinomies that plagued the crisis of modernity. Following Roland Barthes’ *Le degré zéro de l’écriture* (1953), they translated and reformulated the possibility of a new kind of writing in the field of architecture that could overcome the historically embedded conflict between popular and literary language. They advocated a ‘zero degree’ of architectural writing, providing architects and writers in architecture another way, a ‘third term’, by which they could transcend the duality of genres, such as ‘high’ and ‘low’, which divided positions in the postmodern era.

As the idea of ‘zero degree’ travelled the world of architecture, across Europe, USA, Japan and South America, its translation, in terms of meaning, varied widely, and interpretations even proved incompatible occasionally. Why and how the concept of ‘zero degree’ renewed the debate on architectural language and became associated with the work of particular architects deserves closer scrutiny. This symposium explores the history of the idea of ‘zero degree’ of architectural writing, as it moved across the globe in various media and theatres of debate, and its resonance in the present. It does so from three angles.

First, we propose to differentiate the intellectual positions that Barthes’ idea of ‘zero degree’ was supposed to pin down. Many architectural historians and critics who engaged in the linguistic and semiotic debate on architecture saw fertile ground in the theoretical work of translating, renaming, and rethinking the ‘zero degree’ of architecture, in many instances to push their own intellectual agenda. Second, we intend to review architectural projects and drawings which their authors thought epitomized or exemplified a ‘zero degree’. If the ‘zero degree’ for Barthes is situated on the fringe of dominant currents, the way in which these projects were claimed, demonstrated, or evaluated to be transgressive deserves special attention. Third, we set out to question the nature of the ‘places’ where the ‘zero degree’ was the central issue of debate and focus of reflections. These places could be symposiums, lectures, architectural competitions, or formal and informal meetings, dedicated directly or indirectly to the topic, during which this idea was collectively questioned, rethought, approved, or rejected and thus reenvisaged as a shared way of thinking about architectural issues. Furthermore, we also aim to investigate journeys of this concept across architecture and the visual arts in the three sessions described above. Barthes himself applied his reflections on ‘zero degree’ to artistic disciplines, such as photography and painting, not only in writing but also in practice, and some artists have drawn on his reflections to renew their work.

To summarize, what are the borders between artistic disciplines that the idea of ‘zero degree’ has straddled? What are the permeabilities between architectural practice and theory that ‘zero degree’ writing relied on? What were the different milieus and places of encounter where ‘zero degree’ was forged as an architectural language spoken in many tongues? How can we consider the operativity of the idea of ‘zero degree’ in the field of theory, criticism and practice today? This symposium welcomes contributions interested in these questions and the approaches described above.

For more information on the theme and the sessions please visit zerodegreesymposium.com.
Introduction:

Architecture as language with Roland Barthes

The reference point for the architectural trope of ‘zero degree’ is Roland Barthes’ first book, *Le degré zéro de l’écriture* (1953). In this book he takes on the interpretation of the concept by certain linguists, according to which ‘between the two terms of a polarity (singular-plural, preterite-present) there exists a third term, a neutral term or term-zero’. He thus proposes the idea of a ‘zero degree’ type of writing, also understood as neutral, white or amodal writing. Upon this new form of writing, devoid of all external meaning, free of the weight of language and style, he confers the capacity to transcend conflicts between popular and literary language that are embedded in the history of language (and literature) (Barthes, 1953, 59). Republished and translated in many languages, including English, Italian, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese, *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*, along with many of Barthes’ subsequent publications, was widely read and cited by architects. Architects followed this trend in the visual arts and the humanities that appeared from the 1960s through the 1990s. They sought to apply to buildings the lucid way in which Barthes applied semiology: to reveal systems of meaning in society and culture. Barthes’ concept of a ‘zero degree of writing’, from his early writings to its expansion in the course on ‘the Neutral’ at the Collège de France (1977-1978), generated a long and varied series of architectural interpretations, appropriations, and translations.

At precise moments and in particular public spaces, various architects used Barthes’ concept to rethink modern architecture as a language, with proper semantic and syntactic dimensions. In 1973, at the first French colloquium held in Paris on the semiotics of space, the ‘Syntax’ group established ‘certain analogies between the structure of the narrative and that of the architectural space’, with the aim of ‘taking architecture, and in particular teaching, out of the professional ghetto both in terms of thought (...) and vocabulary’ (Panerai and Castex, 1973, 65). The following year, ‘the Swiss journal *Archithèse* [saw] in architectural semiotics a possibility of renewing criticism on real criteria’ (Jannière, 2009, 126). Many French and foreign architects who attended Barthes’ seminars at the École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1962 to 1977, and then at the Collège de France from 1977 to 1980, continued to conceive their architecture within a semiotic framework (Chaslin, 1985; Colquhoun, 1983). In addition to these more indirect interactions, his expertise was often also directly solicited. In 1970 he was invited to give a lecture at the ETH Zürich and to judge the work of students who had analysed buildings from the perspective of semiotic theories (Reichlin, 1991). He was involved in the exhibition ‘MA. Espace–Temps du Japon’, initiated by Arata Isozaki in 1978 in Paris, and was a jury member for architectural competitions, such as the counter-competition for Les Halles de Paris in 1980. These interactions illustrate the significance of the reception of his work in the field of architecture, even though, except for a short article (Barthes, 1971), he did not write actively on semiotics and architecture.

This symposium aims to bring together critical accounts and histories of architectural translations of the theory of writing according to a ‘zero degree’. The appropriation of this idea in architecture lacks the scholarly attention that it has recently received in the (visual) arts: photography (Batchen, 2011), theatre (Scheie, 2006), drawing (Lovatt, 2019) and visual culture (Bishop, Manghani, 2021). The symposium aims to recognize and evaluate the importance that the concept of ‘zero degree’ has had in the field of architectural theory, criticism and practice, from the 1960s to the 1990s, including its reverberations in the present. The goal of the three sessions outlined below is to come to terms with this architectural episode in linguistics and semiotics, from three angles: the adaptations and reasonings that have resulted from acts of translation, the repercussions the concept has had for the work of architects in the last half century, and the spaces where the architectural ‘zero degree’ became an object of transculturation.
Session 1: Translating and theorizing ‘zero degree’

What I really fight for is the ‘Zero Degree’ of architectural writing, a language neither highflown nor vernacular, with no synthesis either a priori or a posteriori.


This first session of the symposium explores different translations of the Barthesian idea of ‘zero degree’ writing as proposed by architectural historians, theorists, and critics. The term ‘zero degree’ surfaced in international architectural journals in the 1960s and has continued to be theorized and reinterpreted until the present day. For Charles Jencks (1985, 27), the term covered a ‘rearguard discipline’ led by Bruno Zevi, Vittorio Gregotti, Aldo van Eyck, and Kenneth Frampton. Martin Steinman associated it with the enigmatic idea of a ‘new presence’ in the architectural production in the north of Switzerland during the 1980s and 1990s (Steinmann, 1994, 24). The term continues to be used to characterize and analyse minimalist projects (De Sola-Morales, 1994; Davidovici, 2018) or to put a name to the absence of rhetoric and the refusal of mannerism in contemporary architecture (Lucan, 2015). Some authors reject such an architectural transposition of the Barthesian ‘zero degree’, attributing it instead to the values of an anonymous architecture (Dawans, 2001), a cracking of prescriptive architectural codes (Avissar, 2013), or even an absence of architecture (Emmerich, 1985).

The concept of ‘zero degree’ is regularly brought into play to qualify the formal and aesthetic attributes of certain productions or to define an intellectual opposition to classicist postmodernism (Jencks, 1977). Few architectural critics, however, have made it the subject of a consistent or continual reflection over time. Bruno Zevi is one of the exceptions. In the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, Zevi wrote a number of texts which paraphrased Barthes’ statements, replacing ‘literature’ or ‘writing’ with ‘architecture’, a tempting exercise that others have also tried to complete (Attali, 2001). Through the concept of ‘zero degree’, he proclaimed a new historiographical and critical project with a liberating and transcendental dimension, as much for himself as for the architects he wrote about. It allowed Zevi to revisit the historical definition of modern architecture, to envisage a method by which to break out of the stylistic impasse that plagued architecture, and to qualify diverse contemporary projects that he deemed transgressive.

Rather than evaluating which translations of Barthes’ text have been the most faithful or comparing transpositions of ‘zero degree’ into an architectural metaphor, this session seeks to discern what these writings actually contributed to architectural theory. To what extent did this exercise of trans-disciplinary translation help the authors to contribute something new to the debate on architectural language or to respond to the perceived crisis in architecture? How has this concept contributed to the reconsidering of certain neglected architectural productions in the past and present? To what extent has it allowed the reconceptualizing of ideas such as novelty, rupture, transcendence, language, autonomy, primitivism, history, and culture?
Session 2:  
Drawing and spatializing ‘zero degree’  

_A major theme of my work, the search for zero degree, established a context in which meaning was eliminated from symbolic space. (...) My new destination is a primary space, a functional space._  

The second session explores intersections between theories and projects that were associated with the idea of a ‘zero degree’. As a result of various crossovers between theory and practice, for some architects ‘zero degree’ was an ideal to which they aspired, although it varied according to the economic, political, and cultural contexts in which they were embedded. While the concept has emerged predominantly in the work of theorists from the European and American scene, many architectural projects that have been labeled ‘zero degree’ were of Sino-American origin.

Important figures of Japanese architecture, such as Hiromi Fujii in the 1960s, Kazunari Sakamoto in the 1970s and Kazuo Shinohara in the 1980s, all attributed a particular symbolism to the idea of ‘zero degree’ (Yatsuka 1981). During this period, the concept was rather prevalent in the visual arts of post-World War II Japan. Nakahira Takuma, one of the founders of the three-issue photographic journal *Provoke*, states, for example, that one of the motivations for his work was to ‘reach the degree zero of language (with Roland Barthes)’ (Sas, 2011, 183). Kōji Taki, another of the journal’s founders, a critic and a philosopher, but also a photographer of Shinohara’s projects, is credited with introducing structuralism and the work of Barthes into the Japanese discourse on image and architecture. Peter Eisenman befriended some of these architects, including Hiromi Fujii and Arata Isozaki, with whom he shared an interest in the application of linguistic theories to architecture (Daniell, 2018). The name given to the famous journal Eisenman co-founded, *Oppositions*, was also understood by the editors to mean ‘0 positions’, which testifies to Barthes’ influence on his work (Crysler, 2003). Rem Koolhaas took its architectural translation in quite a different direction with his ‘Typical Plan’ – not unlike Lars Lerup’s ‘Plan Degree Zero’ at the end of the 1980s (Lerup, 1989) – and observed his rapid design exercise to be ‘zero-degree architecture, architecture stripped of all traces of uniqueness and specificity’ (Koolhaas, 1995, 335).

For this session, we especially welcome papers that investigate the spatial and visual ways in which architects explored the conceptual potential of the ‘zero degree’. What are the forms of a ‘zero degree’ of architectural writing? What kind of architectural proposals, which compositional devices or relationships to context have resulted from architects dissecting this question themselves? To what extent are these projects actually transgressive, and do they unravel the codes of a normalized discourse as Barthes originally understood it? Proposals addressing these questions regarding both recent history and contemporary architecture are most welcome.
Session 3:
Debating the ‘Third Term’ in the ‘Third Space’

A concept like third space is to begin to see thinking and writings are acts of translation.

The third session addresses ‘zero degree’ as a collective concern by focusing on the moments and spaces in which several people ruminated on the idea. It aims to interrogate the ways in which ‘zero degree’ – the so-called third term or neutral term – has been debated in ‘Third Spaces’. Humanities scholar and critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha, writing in the 1990s, ‘conceives the encounter of two social groups with different cultural traditions and potentials of power as a special kind of negotiation or translation that takes place in a Third Space of enunciation’ (Ikas and Wagner, 2009, 2). A similar concept, ‘contact zones’, as theorised by the literature scholar Mary-Louise Pratt in the same period, denotes spaces where cultural encounters and clashes take place, where power relations are negotiated and where transculturation rather than assimilation may occur (Pratt, 1991). ‘Contact zones’ have also recently been employed in the field of architecture to reframe ‘the history of architectural modernism as a cross-cultural, multi-authored and poly-conceptual matter’ (Avermaete & Nuijsink, 2021, 1).

As proposed by Jorge Mejía Hernández and Cathelijne Nuijsink (2020), and because the idea of the ‘zero degree’ of architectural writing has been the subject of collective and transcultural reflection, several Third Spaces can be identified. The meetings of the International Committee of Architectural Critics (CICA) may be considered to be such a space, where the question of architectural language and the ‘zero degree of writing’ was debated. Shortly after the death of Roland Barthes in 1980, Bruno Zevi, then president of CICA, invited its members to examine the issue in several of its meetings and to go beyond his own individual reflections (Pesci, 1981). Another such space is the exchanges between Barthes, Kazuo Shinohara, and Zevi, then members of the jury for the counter-competition of Les Halles de Paris, on the dilemma between tradition and modernity, so intrinsically linked to the idea of the ‘zero degree’ (Shinohara and Barthes, 1980). The conference and architectural competition ‘Landscape and the Zero Degree of Architectural Language’, organized by Zevi in 1997, was another collaborative space of debate, where architects, historians, and critics were invited to voice their contradictory viewpoints about the matter (Zevi, 1999).

This session questions the ‘third term’ through the lens of ‘Third Spaces’. It challenges the notion of a single author and invites the consideration of how the thinking and writing about a ‘zero degree’ can be spatially situated, collective acts of translation. In view of the subject, which is intrinsically transdisciplinary and transcultural, the term ‘Third Spaces’ implies, just as the ‘third term’ does, the overcoming of a duality to move towards something new in its hybridity. What are these collaborative spaces of debate and creation where the idea of ‘zero degree’ has been discussed, be it formal or informal? What reflections emerged through these spaces of exchange and confrontation between people from different disciplines and cultures (but with common interests) that writings and projects alone did not enable us to envisage?
Bibliography


Barthes, R. 1954. 'La littérature et son langage'. Unpublished text for Antares, late 1954 or early 1955


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**Submission guidelines**

Extended deadline

Abstracts in PDF format (500 words) may be submitted to zerodegree.symposium@gmail.com before 31 March 2022. A short presentation of the author(s) should be added (150 words maximum). The selected contributions will be announced mid to late April 2022. Final versions of the selected papers (4000 words) are expected by 1 October 2022.

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