# Towards a weak architecture: Andrea Branzi and Gianni Vattimo

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1 A process known as ‘riflusso nel privato’ (reflux, or withdrawal, in the private sphere). The book that recorded this phenomenon was published in 1980: **GALLI DELLA LOGgia, Ernesto; BRANZI, Andrea; ASPIEti, Natalia (et al.): Il trionfo del privato, Laterza, Bari, 1980.**

2 GARRIGLI, Aldo (ed.): *Crisi della ragione. Nuovi modelli nel rapporto tra sapere e attività umane*, Einaudi, Turin, 1979


6 Ibidem, p. 19


8 Ibidem

9 Ibidem


12 I refer here to expressions from Branzi such as ‘the hot house’ (la casa calda) or ‘the cold metropolis’ (la metrópolis fría), see: **BRANZI, Andrea**: *La Casa Calda. Esperienze del nuovo design italiano*, Idea Books, Milan, 1984, and BRANZI, Andrea: *La Quarta Metropoli: Design e Cultura Ambientale*, Gedisa, Barcelona, 2007 (first ed.: *La metrópolis fría*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1983)


14 Ibidem


16 BRANZI, Andrea; BOERI, Stefano: ‘Sui sistemi non deterministici’, *Lotus International* n° 107, 2000, p. 124

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**Foreword**

This paper puts forward an analysis of the relation between the thought of the philosopher Gianni Vattimo (Turin, 1936) and the work of the architect Andrea Branzi (Florence, 1938). Branzi was a founding member of Archizoom Associati (1966-1974) and one of the leading figures and ideologists of Italian Radical Architecture. After the dissolution of the group, he moves to Milan to devote himself to design, gradually abandons the political framework and Marxist ideology that had marked his radical years, and incorporates very early to his discourse the philosophical postmodernity as formulated by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979, and soon after, by Gianni Vattimo. It should be pointed out that this philosophical trend was particularly intense in Italy and closely linked to the fast and sudden depoliticization process that occurred at the end of the seventies,¹ after a decade, the ‘Years of Lead’, of huge social and political tensions. In fact, the same year that *The Postmodern Condition* by Lyotard was published, another book with a similar approach was released, the *Crisis of Reason* ² by philosopher Aldo Gargani, which is considered the foundational book of Italian postmodernity. The influence of Vattimo and his *Pensiero Debole* in Branzi’s work has been manifest and lasting from the moment of its formulation in the eponymous 1983 book, as evidenced by the recurrent use of the term ‘weak’ in many of his writings, the designation of its territorial projects as ‘models of weak urbanization’ or his later proposal of a ‘weak and diffuse modernity.’³

**Vattimo and postmodernity**

As is well known, Lyotard had defined the postmodern condition⁴ as the decay of metanarratives, i.e. the structures of thought that seek to explain and give meaning to the whole history and existence, and that present human becoming as a process of gradual emancipation. These metanarratives have a legitimizing function but, unlike myths, they do not seek the source of legitimacy in the past but in a future to be accomplished, that is, in an idea to be realized. This idea (of ‘freedom’, ‘enlightenment’, ‘socialism’, etc.) has legitimating value because it is universal. It guides every human reality. It gives modernity its characteristics mode: the project….⁵ All grand narratives that characterized modernity had been disproved, invalidated: Auschwitz ends with the Postwar. Enlightened metanarrative, the crimes of real socialism end with the Marxist metanarrative, Hiroshima with the postwar one, etc. The resulting scenario would be based on a plurality of ‘language games’: the exhaustion of modernity … does not stop countless other stories (minor and not so minor) from continuing to weave the fabric of everyday life.

From 1980 Vattimo wrote a series of papers (later collected in the book *The End of Modernity*) trying to give more consistency to these ideas by linking them to the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger. He claims, in fact, that it can be argued that philosophical postmodernity is born in Nietzsche’s work in the period between 1874’s Second *Untimely Meditation* and 1878’s *Human, All Too Human*, that is, almost exactly a century before Lyotard’s text. Concepts of later thinkers (Wittgenstein, Benjamin, the Frankfurt School, Rorty, McLuhan, Gadamer…) are incorporated as well, so that, somehow, he raises the hypothesis that postmodernity was not something new, transitory or meaningless but, rather, a latent current that, from the late nineteenth century, runs through much of Western thought, and that, at least since then, is almost organically linked to modernity itself.

According to Vattimo, the main weakness of Lyotard’s approach that should be solved with the prefix ‘post’ of postmodernity: *The claim, or pure and simple awareness of being a novelty in the history, a new and different figure in the phenomenology of spirit, would, in fact, place the
postmodern in line with the modern, which is dominated by the categories of the new and the overcoming. Things, however, change if, as it seems it should be acknowledged, postmodernity is characterized not only as a novelty compared to the modern, but also as a dissolution of the categories of the new, as experience of the ‘end of history,’ instead of presenting itself as a different stage, more advanced or more repressed, it does not matter, of history itself.

A posthistorical condition that gives postmodernity a sense by presenting it not as a mere ‘after,’ but as a different stage of being and thinking. In order for that, it must be understood that the conception of history as a unitary, coherent and finalist process whose highest values are novelty, overcoming and progress, is a secular distillation of the teleological conception of Judeo-Christian time (creation, sin, redemption, final judgment). Modern mentality, dominated by historical self-consciousness, is thus disclosed as opposite to the ancient mentality, dominated by a cyclical and naturalistic conception of time. Modernity, then, would not be another era of history, but ‘the era of history,’ while postmodernity would be ‘the era of posthistory.’

This situation of ahistorical immobility had been prophetically anticipated in The Gay Science, where Nietzsche introduced, together with the idea of ‘the death of God,’ the idea of ‘eternal recurrence,’ that has ‘... the sense of revealing the essence of modernity as the epoch of the reduction of being to the novum.’ In order to describe this situation in its current terms, Vattimo turns to Arnold Gehlen, who had proposed the term ‘posthistory’ for a new condition in which progress becomes ‘routine’.

Even now in the consumer society, the continuous renewal (of clothing, tools, buildings) is physiologically required to ensure the mere survival of the system; novelty is nothing ‘revolutionary’ or disturbing, but is what allows things to go the same way. There is a kind of background ‘immobility’ of the technical world ...

**Weak models and cyclical temporality**

The first definition of Branzi’s ‘models of weak urbanization’ appears in the text of his 1995 project Agronica, and it is structured around seven points: the separation of technology and form, the separation of function and form, overcoming the traditional urban planning, the understanding of the urban as an intangible condition that matches the market, the split between material and virtual metropolis, hybridization between town and country and the absence of symbolic apparatus. In Branzi’s view, the city would consist of a set of contradictory elements and logics, a complexity that cannot be solved by only managing seeking a state of unstable equilibrium. Agronica is also the hybridization proposal between the rural and the urban in which agriculture is valued as an advanced productive reality, compatible with the urban condition and fully integrated into a unified economic system that lacks any opposition. The result is an open, light and adaptable constructive system that gives rise to diffuse territorial organizations, lacking representative function and consistent with the changing conditions of a society in constant renewal.

In the project, the fields are ruled by a grid of cylindrical pillars that provide support for a wide set of items such as solar panels, antennas, microsystems, pergolas, sunshades or platforms floating above the ground. It is a modular system that seeks maximum constructive lightness and minimizes contact with the ground. Thereby, a sense of adaptability and reversibility is conveyed: the system may appear, expand or be dismantled with almost no impact in the fields. The territory is also colonized by volumes, inspired by industrial systems for vertical storage that host all types of functions. A sort of buildings, freed from architectural, typological or symbolic connotations, which act as generic containers and are not functionally represented, regardless of their content, as open.

The models of weak urbanization are clearly marked by that concept of circular time described by Vattimo, in which compulsive renewal in the short term coexists with a substantial immobility in the long term. In fact, much of Branzi’s interest in agriculture is based, precisely, in the fact that it is due to a type of seasonal and cyclical temporality that is very different from the one traditionally embodied by architecture and urbanism.

... in order to save architecture from the jaws of time, the Greek placed it in an atemporal space: this space is born of history, but does not belong to it. The myth has come all the way down to us, all the way down to modern architecture, which emerges from actuality only to flee into a metaphysical space. Quite to the contrary, I’m interested in introducing the variable time into architecture and considering the ephemeral as a positive value. In Agronica the form of the architecture is variable and indefinite, in the sense that it is the product of an open system, without ending and without an end, which is a relational space, occasional and mutable, integrated with other logics such as those of agriculture.

Under this approach, the result of the circular time of agriculture—and postmodernity—should be buildings that reflect its passing. In the models of weak urbanization, this appears in various overlapping cycles: of the seasons, of consumer goods obsolescence, of the programming of functional containers. The great absentee, in this dispersion of partial and cyclical temporariness, is precisely the historical time, that unitary and teleological time characteristic of modernity. Strangely, and due to the posthistorical condition described by Vattimo, these buildings are also located in the metahistorical space where Branzi placed modern architecture, albeit in a different way: instead of freezing time, they reflect a current changeability that, lacking any horizon, has no historical sense. This view is, in fact, consistent with a general framework of his discourse that, at least since the eighties, is shaped by two poles which can be named ‘hot’ and ‘cold.’ The first one would be the apparent instability affecting the short-term, but also the small scale, the particular, while the second one would be the background temporality affecting the long-term, but also the large scale and the general. Within this framework, Branzi’s intention seems to be removing architecture from the stability governing the ‘macro’ and transferring it to the instability of the ‘micro.’ A new statute that leads it from transcendence to contingency and dissolves its boundaries with design.

**Pensiero debole and positive nihilism**

Together with other young Italian thinkers, Vattimo developed his early 80s approaches into the ‘weak thought’ his proposal for a philosophy of postmodernity, a condition that would be characterized not only by posthistory, but also by the postmetaphysical, that is, by the destruction of ontology carried out by Nietzsche and Heidegger. In the ‘death of God,’ the end of the strong structures of metaphysics is stated, interpreted as instruments of control and consolation. For Vattimo, the postmodern man is inevitably a nihilist man because the fundamentals, ultimate ends and absolute certainties have faded. This implies a ‘weakening of being’ in the short-term, but also the small scale, the particular, while the second one would be the background stability affecting the long-term, but also the large scale and the general. Within this framework, Branzi’s intention seems to be removing architecture from the stability governing the ‘macro’ and transferring it to the instability of the ‘micro.’ A new statute that leads it from transcendence to contingency and dissolves its boundaries with design.

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What is proposed here is an open and evolutionary urbanism turned at minimum and cyclical temporality, not only of posthistory, but also of the broader social and cultural structures, at the borders without end and without an end, which thus functions through a continuous process of updating regarding the broader social and cultural structures. The design has entered a long period of experimentation without an end and without without an end, which thus enables to live to the fullest the epidemiological crisis that modern architecture has always avoided.

Therefore, we can speak in both cases of a ‘positive nihilism’ clearly shown in the assessment of the consequences of this situation. In the case of Branzi, his models of weak urbanization confirm that he has passed from the Marxism and politics as political militancy of his early radical years, to a more optimistic than resigned acceptance of the economic model and its social consequences. A good example is his proposal for the Strip Philips in Eindhoven (2000), presented as a ‘territory for the new economy’ and based on a remarkably critical overview of the new conditions:

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and the dismantling of a system of values and references that had lasted since the Enlightenment: Progress no longer seems to be valued, instead, the unexpected is valued. The grand unitarian theorems no longer exist, nor do the leading models of the rational theologies. What exists is a modernity without illuminism. Society would have become delocalized, nameless, an aggregate of small groups that build their identity and communicate through the elaboration of language games, a new 'neoprimitive' condition that would be, actually, ... one of the extreme poles of the postmodern condition where subcultures, identities and increasingly differentiated symbolic worlds proliferate and coexist.

The acceptance of postmodern fragmentation is not limited to the verification of the 'Babelian' scenario proposed by Vattimo but extends precisely to what, in the words of Lyotard, gave modernity 'its characteristic mode', i.e., the project. It is very significant that, in the opening of the text of Agronica, it is described as a 'partial or incomplete utopia' that does not pretend to be a model for the entire city, but only for certain parts of it, parts, indeed, which may be in conflict with each other. In so doing, the models of weak urbanization explicitly deny the oneness, wholeness and harmony inherent to classical utopias and renounce the final state of stable perfection they aspired to embody, a state that, according to many other horizons, like the No-Stop City, proposed by Archizoom in 1970, could be read in these terms, and still reflected—at least in its built apparatus—the single, homogeneous and totalizing scene characteristic of modernity, the partial and provisional nature of weak models makes them a direct translation of Lyotard’s ‘small narratives’ and of the fragmented and heterogeneous scenario devoid of historical purpose, of telos, typical of postmodernity.

Attenuated architecture

The models of weak urbanization pose a decided weakening of architecture that involves a renunciation to formulate it in terms of canonical architectural object, that is, closed, finished, stable and with an envelope that condenses the representative and symbolic load. A dissolution of architecture that, in Agronica or Eindhoven, is the outcome of transforming the building into something analogous to furniture, that is, into a smaller and lighter object more transformable and ephemeral than traditional buildings, and also of its, at least conceptual, open condition. In fact, the structures that are more alike to architecture are temporarily deployed, objects developed as open thresholds in the landscape. A permeability that is stressed in the texts: A series of infrastructures, new ‘furnishings’ which encompass spaces and functions and which can do without traditional urban vessels form osmotic diaphragm to filter and make habitable sections of space. The habitat would be made up of objects and territories, an environment polarized between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’ where the intermediate scale embodied by architecture has disappeared.

What is clearly asserted through these projects is a statute for architecture that is fully interchangeable with the statute of being in Vattimo: both are transient, fragile, unstable. In fact, it could be argued that when Berardi speaks of the technologico-linguistic formations of architecture, he actually means its ontological foundations, because he refers to an architecture that has lost its specificity, its autonomy, its purity, its identity, in short: its very essence. Hence, it becomes a ‘territorial’ design whose boundaries are blurred, which is hybrid. An activity that is understood as an attenuated and dehiscent architecture and urbanism and, therefore, it is to these disciplines what the ‘weak being’ is to the strong, metaphysical being in Vattimo. It is no coincidence that the loss of identity of the discipline is more clearly displayed in those features that have usually had a stronger and more defining nature: the architectural and urban form. A weakness that involves refusing to define buildings as closed and defined structures and the resulting rejection of an urban planning that operates in the formal ground in favor of an open planning based on the formulation of general principles and mere rules of aggregation and growth.

Figures, background and schizophrenia

In the late eighties, Ignasi de Solà-Morales speculated about how an architecture reflecting the weak thought could be. In his opinion such architecture would always be decorative:

As it is most commonly employed [...] the decorative is the inessential; it is that which presents itself not as substance but as accident, something complementary that will even lend itself, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, to a reading that is not attentive but distracted, and which thus offers itself to us as something that enhances and embellishes reality, making it more tolerable, without provision for the irreducible claim for itself that deference demanded by totality. Decoration, then, or the decorative condition of contemporary art and architecture, not in the sense of vulgarity, of triviality, of that which is 'futile', but a 'process' in its own right, a discreet folding back to a periphrastic secondary function, a pulling back to a function that projects beyond the hypothetical ground of things.

This description is linked to a remarkable aspect of Branzi’s urban proposals: its strong radicalization of the figure-ground dialectic. Something evident in Agronica, where the building itself is not a utopian object, but the field and the ubiquitous grid of pillars seem intended to emphasize its character of perfect background, that is, isotropic, continuous and stable, while the other items form a heterogeneous set that occupies that field in a discontinuous, irregular and transitory way. This scheme articulates polarities between figures and ground, which also happens in the project for Eindhoven, acquires meaning if read in the context of the general framework, strained between the general stability and the instability of the particular, above mentioned. Thereby, while the background would be a conceptual rendering of a globalization free of obstacles, containment and alternatives, the figures would be a concrete representation of the plurality, contingency and transience in which this very capitalism effectively manifests itself. The architecture, or what is left of it, is encompassed in the latter category, light and contingent that, as Solà-Morales explained, is more accident than substance and flies over the hypothetical background of things. The constructions would thus become an epiphenomenon of that permanent ‘stationary renewal’ of the system described by Vattimo. A renewal that, in Branzi’s speech, is shown as analogous to that governing the natural realm and that, somehow, turns the economic system into the veritable object of mimesis, a sort of second nature.

The No-Stop City also showed a remarkable exacerbation of the figures-ground dialectic, in which furniture and objects set up different landscapes that change over time and overlap to a continuous, homogeneous and stable architectural environment, patterned by a grid of pillars and elevators. Both projects share a radically dissociated vision of the habitat in which the provisional is located over the field with the utmost lightness. A presence that, conceptually, flows over the ground without being anchoring, that is, not being able to transform it. In this sense the models of weak urbanization are not so new, but can be seen as an evolution of the No-Stop City that spreads throughout the territory a new kind of diffuse and hybrid urban space that was already contained (both present and repressed) in the interiors of that project.

Weakness avant la lettre

In fact, the No-Stop City was a transitional project between different eras and paradigms and had some features that enable to read it as a ‘weak’ model avant la lettre. While the air-conditioned, homogeneous and all-permeating condition still had not read as ad absurdum of a modern rationality, the heterogeneity, mutability and proliferation of its interiors already announce the postmodern fragmentation above mentioned. Both the presence of individuals with a neoprimitive look and the nomadic existence encouraged by the project can be read in the same terms and clearly recall the retiralized society on which Branzi would write years later; a conception very far indeed from the society of ‘type individuals’ sketched in canonical modern proposals. Not accidentally, the most significant difference between the No-Stop City and the model of weak urbanization—and still modern—background has disappeared, as if it had been dissolved in the air.

In fact, that potentially endless container represented a sort of ‘distillation by hypertrophy’ of the architectural object that was turned into a pure background, a condition that also involved the loss of the leading role and centrality of architecture in the functional scheme and a new position of the object, role that was transferred to the artifacts and objects that programmed its interiors. This system of objects also shows the same kind of dissolution posed in Agronica, that is, the conversion of the building into a perishable, transformable and lightweight object. A solution that was deliberate and explicit. In the first publication of the project Archizoom stated: The ultimate goal of modern Architecture is the ‘elimination’ of architecture itself. A program intended to freeing mankind from architecture insomuch as it is a formal structure but aimed also, reflexively, at the dissolution of the discipline. Freed from the armature of its own character, architecture must become an open structure, accessible to intellectual mass production as the only force symbolizing the collective landscape.

The weakening of architecture and its emancipatory consequences are analogous to those that would have, in the later discourse by Vattimo, the dissolution of the central structures, of the strong structures, of the big totalizing ideologies.

The work of Archizoom was in many ways ‘postmoderm’ before Lyotard, something that, on the other hand, is by no means surprising given that one of the features of postmodernity identified by Vattimo in a more clear (and convincing) way is that many of its key concepts had become the air for almost a century. In fact, many of the thinkers who, according to the philosopher, had anticipated postmodernity were among the group influences, such as McLuhan or the Freudo-Marxists. Therefore, although the similarities between the formulations of Vattimo and Branzi might suggest a causal link between them, a broader look at the career of the architect reveals that this relationship is much more intricate and not at all univocal. It is not just a matter of incorporating external concepts to renew a practice and a discourse to which they were alien, but rather, an employment aimed to consolidate previous intuitions, support a weakening agenda for the discipline that precedes the pensiero debole in more than a decade, and underline, by maintaining its validity over time, a certain dimension of his previous work, the dissolution of the discipline, over others traits such as the political or Marxism. In fact, Branzi does not seem to be interested at all in the later Vattimo, the one that, from the turn of the century, has adopted an increasingly antagonistic attitude towards globalization and the neoliberal status quo and proposed a ‘hermeneutic comumminism’.

A role that is, therefore, more unifying or reaffirming than triggering, Branzi himself seems to suggest so when talking about another thing in his more recent work. In his discourse: Zygmun Bauman, as often happens with philosophers, interests us when, in a way, he says things that intuitively we were already predisposed to receive and develop. In other words, what is incorporated is what was already latent, what, somehow, was already there.

Hence, the interaction between contest, theoretical discourse and practice in the work of Branzi can by no means be reduced to linear relations of causality or subsidiarity since it is much more complex. The first two can be interpreted not only as a cause of the progressive weakening of architecture that manifests in his projects, but also as a consequence of a process...
established and developed in his urban proposals that is, somehow, autonomous: the progressive unfolding of logics that were already present in the No-Stop City. It could even be argued that all three (context, discourse and praxis) occupy a subordinate and, to some extent, instrumental position to the main phenomenon: the discipline dissolution. Actually, incorporating Bauman to his discourse seems also clearly aimed at strengthening the fluid dimension of his work. Of course, this does not exclude that the context has influenced Branzi, nor implies his theoretical discourse to be solely addressed to legitimize a predetermined projectual outcome. But the way in which he operates with the context and at a theoretical level seems addressed, also, to allow his background project to develop, to adapt in every moment to contemporary conditions, to legitimize retroactively his original approaches and to maintain their validity over time.

Although this modus operandi is not quite different from that of many other architects, the way in which Branzi integrates Vattimo into his discourse offers valuable lessons. First and foremost, it allows us to confirm to what extent the context is also a work of the architect, something that he selects and elaborates from the environment he has lived in. A construction as elaborated as any other architectural formulation that has the highest importance for the project. Furthermore, it allows us to better understand the career of Andrea Branzi itself, clarifying its sense and identifying its main project, developed over more than forty years: weakening architecture to free us from it, but also to free it from itself. A process for which Vattimo’s ideas have been undoubtably useful and enlightening, but that, most likely, would have followed its obstinate course anyway.