Towards a weak architecture: Andrea Branzi and Gianni Vattimo

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1 A process known as ‘rifusso nel privato’ (refusal, or withdrawal, in the private sphere). The book that recorded this phenomenon was published in 1960: GALLI DELLA LOGgia, Enrico; BIANCHI, Marina: ASPESti, Natalia (et al.): Il trionfo del privato, Laterza, Bari, 1980.

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


6 Ibidem, p. 19

7 VATTIMO, Gianni: El fin de la modernidad. SBiNismo y hermenéutica en la cultura posmoderna, Gedisa, Barcelona, 2007, p. 13 (first ed.: La fine della modernità, Garzanti, Milano, 1985)

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 metropolis fredda), see BRANZI, Andrea: La Casa Calda. Esperienze del nuovo design italiano, Idea Books, Milano, 1984, and BRANZI, Andrea: La Quarte Metropoli. Design e Cultura Ambientale, Domus Academia, Milano, 1990


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

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, 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 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 his territorial projects as ‘models of weak urbanization’ or his later proposal of a ‘weak and diffuse modernity.’

Vattimo and postmodernity

As is well known, Lyotard had defined the postmodern condition 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… All grand narratives that characterized modernity had been disproved, invalidated: Auschwitz ends with the Postivism Enlightened metanarrative, the crimes of real socialism end with the Marxist metanarrative, Hiroshima with the positivist 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, Gadamers…) are incorporated as well, so that, somehow, he raises the hypothesis that postmodernity is 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 phenomenon 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 category of the new, as experience of the "end of history," instead of presenting itself as a different stage, more advanced or more regressed, 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 state 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 naturalist 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.11 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 physically 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,12 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 Branzis's view, the city would consist of a set of contradictory elements and logics, a complexity that cannot be solved but only managed seeking a state of unstable equilibrium. Agronica is a 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, diaphragms, 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 programmatically represented, regardless of their content, as open.

The models of weak urbanization are clearly marked by that concept of circular time described by Vattimo, 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's 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 of 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, an urbanism without end and without an end, with no fixed location, no fixed time, no fixed space, occasional and mutable, integrated with other logics such as those of agriculture.)13

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 functional containers. The great absentee, in this dispersion of partial and cyclical temporarilities, 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 historic 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.'14: 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 instability 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'15; 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 instability 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.

A ‘Babelian’ scenario: postmodern fragmentation

Vattimo also makes a clearly positive assessment of the new situation, at least during the 80s and 90s. For him, what actually happened, due to globalization, the expansion of the mass media and the very logic of the market, was a general explosion and proliferation of Weltanschauungen, of world views16, the consolidation of ethnic, sub-religious, ethnic, sub-cultural minorities that acquire voice and are no longer repressed and cowed into silence by the idea of a single true form of humanity that must be realized irrespective of particularity and individual finitude, transience and contingency.17 An approach that is very close to the thought expressed by Branzi in his 1985 text 'Il Primitivo siamo noi,' which had a major influence in the field of design theory and reflects the influence of the pensiero debole.

The range of choices becomes wider and more fluid. There occurs not only the disintegration of the strong type of identity, but also the development of a new weak identity, which is flexible, open to change, flexible, differentiated, and reflexive. The weak identity considers every choice as temporary and reversible and becomes the object of ‘different biographies,’ at the border, but only at the border, of pathological dissociation.18

The text was marked also by Lyotard and the ‘integral naturalism’ of Pierre Restany and describes a situation characterized by the proliferation of small narratives...
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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 such an essential but as accidental 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 preserving it. 

In the opinion of the architect, the defining feature of the No-Stop City, 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 permeable, 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, reformulating the discipline ‘freed from an amour of its own character, architecture must become an open structure, accessible to intellectual mass production as the only force symbolizing the collective landscape.

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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 undoubtedly useful and enlightening, but that, most likely, would have followed its obstinate course anyway.