

Towards a weak architecture: Andrea Branzi and Gianni Vattimo

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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 Positivist-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.*⁶

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 deals 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

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; BIANCHI, Marina; ASPESI, 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

3 This term is the title of Branzi's book *Weak and Diffuse Modernity: The World of Projects at the beginning of the 21st Century* (2006) but begins to show up much sooner. In a lengthy 1997 interview, he stated: 'This is the real second modernity: indeterminate, weak, incomplete' (BURKHARDT, François; MOROZZI, Cristina: *Andrea Branzi*, Editions Dis-Voir, Paris, 1997, p. 37).

4 LYOTARD, Jean François: *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1979

5 LYOTARD, Jean François: *The Postmodern Explained*, Power Publications, Sydney, 1992, p. 18 (first ed.: *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 1986)

6 Ibidem, p. 19

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

8 Ibidem

9 Ibidem

10 BRANZI, Andrea (et al.): 'Symbiotic metropolis Agronica', en: MANZINI, Ezio; SUSANI, Marco (eds.): *The Solid Side: The search for Consistency in a Changing World*, V+K Publishing, Holanda, 1995

11 Branzi interviewed in: BURKHARDT, François; MOROZZI, Cristina: *Andrea Branzi*, Editions Dis-Voir, Paris, 1997, p. 78

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 Quarta Metropoli: Design e Cultura Ambientale*, Domus Academy, Milán, 1990

13 VATTIMO, Gianni; ROVATTI, Pier Aldo, et al.: *Il pensiero debole*, Feltrinelli, Milán, 1983

14 VATTIMO, Gianni: *Filosofia al presente*, Garzanti, Milán, 1990, p. 26

15 Branzi interviewed en: BURKHARDT, François; MOROZZI, Cristina: *Andrea Branzi*, Editions Dis-Voir, Paris, 1997, p. 81

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

17 BRANZI, Andrea: 'Prime note per un Master-Plan', *Lotus International* n° 107, 2000, p. 111

18 VATTIMO, Gianni: *The Transparent Society*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992, p. 5

19 Ibidem, p. 9

20 BRANZI, Andrea: 'We Are the Primitives', en: MARGOLIN, Victor (ed.): *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 39 (first ed.: 'I primitivi siamo noi', *Modo*, n° 80, junio 1985)

21 Ibidem, p. 37

22 BRANZI, Andrea (et al.): 'Symbiotic metropolis Agronica', en: MANZINI, Ezio; SUSANI, Marco (eds.): *The Solid Side: The search for Consistency in a Changing World*, V+K Publishing, Holanda, 1995, p. 103

23 Ibidem, p. 110

24 SOLÀ-MORALES, Ignasi de: 'Weak Architecture', in: *Differences: Topographies of Contemporary Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1997, p. 69 (first ed.: 'Arquitectura débil', *Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanisme* n° 175, 1987)

25 This is my translation from the original Spanish text (*sobrevuela el hipotético fondo de las cosas*) that conveys the idea, not only of separation between background and figure, but also of the lightness and mobility of the latter. A nuance that is lost in the English translation quoted above. See: 'Arquitectura débil', *Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanisme* n° 175, 1987

26 MARTÍNEZ CAPDEVILA, Pablo: 'La ciudad Interior. Infinitud y concavidad en la No-Stop City (1970-1971)', *Cuadernos de Proyectos Arquitectónicos* n°4, 2013

27 ARCHIZOOM: 'Città, catena di montaggio del sociale. Ideologia e teoria della metropoli', *Casabella* n° 350-51, julio-agosto 1970. p. 50

28 ARCHIZOOM Associati: 'No-Stop City. Residential Parkings, Climatic Universal System', *Domus* n° 496, marzo 1971, p. 55

29 VATTIMO, Gianni: *Il Pensiero Filosofico. Lezione 11: Postmodernità?* (TV Program). RAI-Nettuno

30 Gianni Vattimo has been actively involved in politics, being a member of the European Parliament twice, and has shifted towards openly Marxist positions. In 2004, actually, he joined the PDCI (Party of Italian Communists). This evolution is clearly reflected in books like *Ecce comu* (2007) or *Comunismo hermenéutico* (2012).

31 Branzi interviewed by Alessandro Deserti in: BRANZI, Andrea: *Oggetti e territori* (lecture), festival *XiaX - To design today*, Facoltà di Architettura di Ferrara, march 2012, in: http://www.materialdesign.it/post-it-journal/raccontare-andrea-branzi-in-formato-video-oggetti-e-territorio_13_362.htm/ (abril 2014)

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.⁷

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 distillate 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*'.⁸ 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 ...⁹

Weak models and cyclical temporality

The first definition of Branzi's 'models of weak urbanization' appears in the text of his 1995 project *Agronica*,¹⁰ 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 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 systematically 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'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 Greeks 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 metahistorical 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 which does not describe an edifice but a relational space, occasional and mutable, integrated with other logics such as those of agriculture.¹¹

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 reprogramming of functional containers. The great absentee, in this dispersion of partial and cyclical temporalities, 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'.¹² 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 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.

Pensiero debole and positive nihilism

Together with other young Italian thinkers, Vattimo developed his early 80s approaches into the 'weak thought'.¹³ 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 nihilistic man because the fundamentals, ultimate ends and absolute certainties have faded. This implies a 'weakening of being' in the line pointed by Heidegger, for whom the 'being' is not, but rather occurs, happens, and involves a temporal understanding of the self that emphasizes its transience and its expiration. A process that causes a change in the sense of truth: it is no longer possible to pursue for a complete, stable, metaphysical truth, we can only rely on a hermeneutical truth, i.e. interpretative, partial, and provisional.

A prominent feature of the weakening of being described by Vattimo is that it rests on an explicitly positive interpretation of the postmetaphysical situation inaugurated by Nietzsche and Heidegger, thinkers that have often been interpreted in the opposite direction, as notaries of a certain existential helplessness. For Vattimo, nihilism is an inevitable horizon and we must interpret it positively, without nostalgia for lost

certainties, without craving to replace those certainties with new ones, freeing ourselves from the need for security and 'magic' consolation that both religion and metaphysics were meant to provide: *Today we are not uneasy because we are nihilists, but rather because we are still too little nihilistic, because we don't know how to live to the end the experience of the dissolution of the being.*¹⁴

Branzi also seems determined to identify the opportunities enclosed in a situation of 'stable uncertainty' that would be 'an extraordinary stroke of luck, on the basis of which we can open a new cultural period of great freedom and wealth'.¹⁵ In fact, in his descriptions of a crisis of architecture that leads to its disappearance as we know it, there is a striking and absolute absence of drama, of nostalgia.

*... the design has entered a long period of experimentation and research, without end and without an end, which thus functions through a continuous process of updating regarding the broader social and cultural structures [...] City without architecture, then, and architecture without city. Regarding the serious historical delays of modern architecture, it seems to me that this situation enables to live to the fullest the epistemological crisis that modern architecture has always avoided.*¹⁶

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 practice 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 Strijp Phillips in Eindhoven (2000), presented as a 'territory for the new economy' and based on a remarkably uncritical overview of the new conditions:

*The new economy gives us a world driven by fuzzy microsystems, by the uncontrollable interaction of masses of network operators, working in territories without borders and without project, neither local or general. They define the completely de-dramatized and continually reversible and reformable regime of postindustrial capitalism.*¹⁷

What is proposed here is an open and evolutionary urbanism aimed at minimizing the obstacles and regulatory constraints that slow the appropriation and valorization of the territory and, more generally, at securing the renewal and self-regulation processes that ensure the survival of postfordist economy.

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 views*¹⁸, the consolidation of ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic 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*.¹⁹ An approach that is very close to the ideas expressed by Branzi in his 1985 text 'I Primitivi 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, intimately 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.*²⁰

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

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.*²¹ Society would have become retribalized, namely, formed as 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 portrayed 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*,²² 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 excluded, by definition, any other horizon. While 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 the 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 invariably depicted as objects devoid of facades, 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.*²³ 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 Branzi speaks of the epistemological foundations 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 ontologically attenuated 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 presuming to impose itself, to be central, to 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 the repetition of established stereotypes, but as a discreet folding back to a perhaps secondary function, a pulling back to a function that projects beyond the hypothetical ground of things.*²⁴

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 unrealistic flatness and homogeneity of 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 schizophrenic polarization 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 globalized capitalism free of obstacles, containments 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*.²⁵ 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, floats over the ground without being anchored nor 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-embracing container can still be read as an extension *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 retribalized 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 weak models is that the concave—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 'dissolution by hypertrophy'²⁶ 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 and symbolic configuration of the habitat, 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.*²⁷ A program intended to *freeing mankind from architecture inasmuch as it is a formal structure' but aimed also, reflexively, at the discipline itself: 'Freed from the armour of its own character, architecture must become an open structure, accessible to intellectual mass production as the only force symbolizing the collective landscape.*²⁸ 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.*²⁹

The work of Archizoom was in many ways 'postmodern' 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 been in the air for almost a century. In fact, several 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 communism'.³⁰ A role that is, therefore, more unifying or reaffirming than triggering. Branzi himself seems to suggest so when talking about another thinker that he has integrated, more recently, into his discourse: *Zygmunt 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.*³¹ In other words, what is incorporated is what was already latent, what, somehow, was already there.

Hence, the interaction between context, theoretical discourse and praxis 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 undoubtedly useful and enlightening, but that, most likely, would have followed its obstinate course anyway.



POSTMODERNITY
WEAK THOUGHT
DISSOLUTION
AGRONICA
NO-STOP CITY