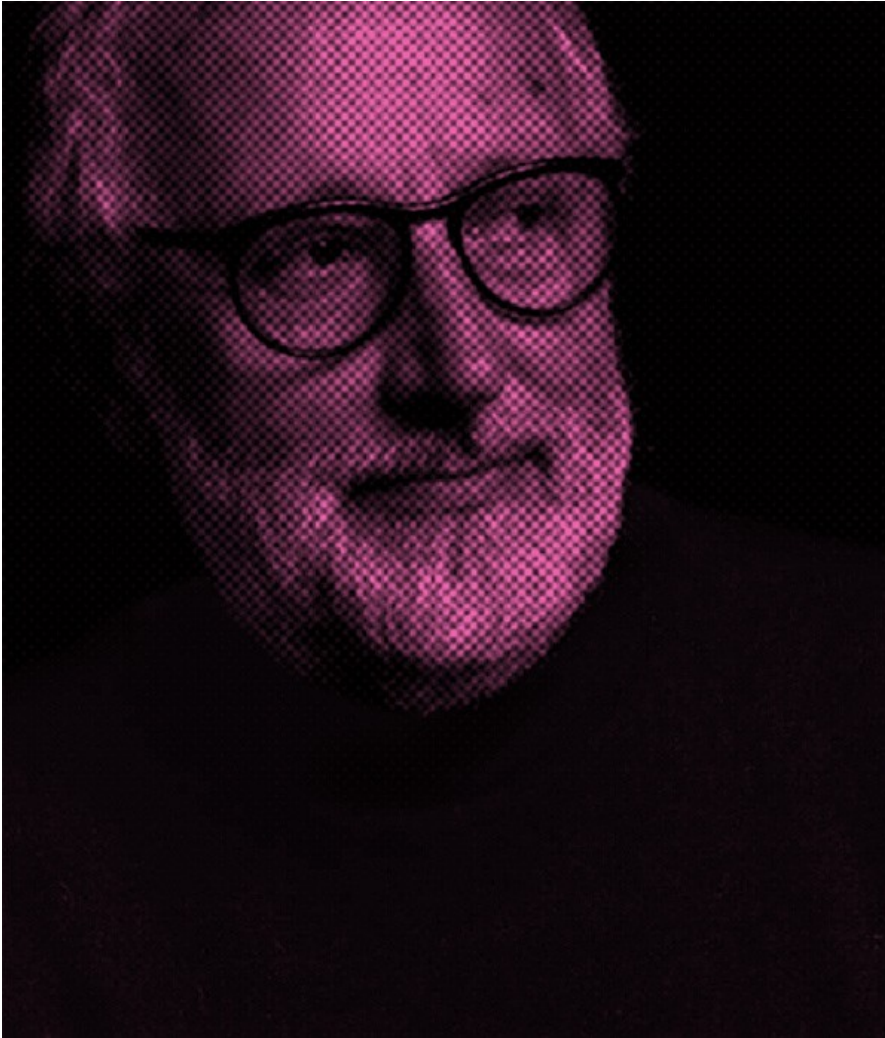


# Andrea Branzi: The rabbi's strategy.

## First Part



Andrea Branzi, 2007.

Architect and designer Andrea Branzi (Florence, 1938) lives and works in Milan. Since the beginning of his career, he has participated in the main movements to which Italian design owes its fame. Between 1964 and 1974 he was a member of Archizoom Associati, the first avant-garde group to gain international notice and whose projects can now be seen at the Centre for Studies and Communication Archive at the University of Parma and at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris; in 1981 he was one of the founding members of the Memphis group. Since 1967 he has worked in

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**industrial and experimental design, architecture, urban design, academia and cultural promotion.**

**He is an associate professor at the III Architecture and Industrial Design Faculty at the Milan Polytechnic.**

Andrea Branzi is without a doubt one of the most representative figures within the complex and multifaceted world of Milanese culture and design as well as being internationally renowned. His work and career have become and still are an essential cultural reference point for many designers, both well-established professionals and young up-and-comers for whom Branzi is a veritable “symbol of the profession.” Throughout his career, Andrea Branzi has always known how to express the spirit of an eclectic and yet profound design culture, capable of combining artistic vocation with social reflection, creative ability with the communication of knowledge. His lengthy curriculum is full of activities that bridge a diverse array of areas, from teaching design at universities, the organisation of international exhibitions, the collaboration with publishers and magazines to set design, videos, urban projects, and the design of shops and commercial spaces. Member of the Archizoom group and the Memphis group, both

at the forefront of international design, he founded the Domus Academy in Milan in the 1980s, which imparts one of the most prestigious international masters degrees in the fashion and design field. It is an authentic cultural laboratory, which has featured and still features the collaboration of the leading names in Milanese design. Currently, Andrea Branzi is an associate professor for architecture and industrial design at the Milan Polytechnic and continues working on different kinds of activities in his studio. He also frequently collaborates with the Milan Triennale in organising exhibitions and events about the new protagonists of Italian design, a world which seems increasingly populated with “minimal” designs that reflect a “fluid” thinking far removed from the global and dominant visions that marked the 20th century. This same world, however, adheres to the idea of a “weak and widespread” modernity that Branzi himself has always supported and which he will also discuss in this interview. It is a culture that shies away from preconceptions and interpretive limitations and seeks its answers through self-reflective works involving their own history and tradition.

Andrea Branzi: Charisma and Andrea Branzi. I have to say that I've never thought about it, at least not in any direct way... How do you want to do this interview? Have you prepared some questions?

**Elisabetta Pasini: Not exactly. What I mean is that I haven't prepared a specific outline for the interview. I think an open conversation would be**

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**much more useful and interesting. In any case, what I'm interested in isn't so much – or not just – the so-called “charismatic personality,” but rather how through a personal project that manages to shake things up in a determined context one can become a point of reference. The most interesting aspect of charisma, and the one that I'm interested in exploring in terms of your professional field, would be precisely the possibility that an individual project could be capable of catalysing the attention and energy of others.**

AB: I'm going to improvise an answer. First of all, I believe that charisma is the opposite of authority. In other words, authority derives from a function, a specialised know-how, from possessing information, whereas charisma probably consists of something else. It has to be rekindled constantly, and it probably has to be backed by the ability to create new value frameworks that differ from those already established rather than by any specific skills. In the architectural field, I have to say that I've met a lot of people with charisma, including Aldo Rossi (1). His was an intellectual charisma, but he also possessed one of the typical traits of someone who acquires charisma on an intellectual level, which consists in always repeating the same project. However, this repetition shouldn't be understood as something negative, but rather in the sense of certain recognisable patterns in time that, in the end, nourish – to put it one way – the credibility of a person, their “ownership” over everything that surrounds them. Thus, charisma isn't really the ability to be creative, to improvise – although that is part of it –, but, more importantly, the ability to stand one's ground, to know how to always return to a specific image... like Mick Jagger, who always plays the same character, but never becomes tiring; on the contrary, we all expect this character from him, we enjoy recognising him. I believe that this is a very important element. And it is also the innate ability of knowing how to find, despite passing situations, trends and eras, a connective thread, which changes, but continues and repeats –as if weaving a fabric – and points in a particular direction. This creates great charisma. Who were the great charismatic figures? The saints?

**EP: Of course there is a religious connotation to charisma; the etymology of the word comes from the Greek *kharis*, which means grace...**

AB: Yes, because in religion there is also repetition, meaning the permanence of a mark, the inability to diffuse it...

**EP: Furthermore, grace is also a gift that is received and that has to be nourished as well as applied in order for it to be recognised as such...**

This is why I think charisma is the opposite of authority, it is something that can be acquired, but also lost...

*Charismatic people sweep others along, but they're never swept along, because they are capable of giving an unexpected order to things*

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EP: Because leadership, which is based on authority, is also a function of organisation, and the leader can be an institutional figure since an organisation has a well-defined hierarchy, with bosses and leaders...

AB: ... who have power but not necessarily charisma. Charisma can be found in people who know how to create a halo, a spiritual aura, around them. Because repetition doesn't mean always repeating the same thing, but repeating something in many different forms, in different times and under different conditions; but this ability to guide events in a particular direction is always present. It is this, I believe, which generates great charisma, great credibility.

**EP: Do you therefore see charisma as the ability to direct or in some way manipulate people and situations? Or as an action that perhaps isn't completely conscious at first, but that requires a great ability to interpret what happens around you?**

AB: No, that is a result. In my opinion, charisma is borne from people who are very indulgent towards others and very strict with themselves. These people carry their goal within themselves, because they don't want to tell others how to live or behave, but instead they make an effort to be better, which is a very rare quality. That is why it is essential to differentiate between having authority and having charisma, because a fundamental component of charisma is the search within oneself. This is what makes it reiterative; it tends to repeat the same mould, because it works vertically rather than expanding horizontally, which makes it a deeply internal process within oneself, a daily effort to be better. Generally this is something the religious do, although I've never personally met a charismatic religious person; but they are people who constantly test themselves, who are as tolerant towards others as they are tough on themselves. This is – in my opinion – the true anthropological foundation of authority. The boss isn't the person with the most resources, wealth or connections. Authority has a spiritual foundation, which is based upon this kind of reiteration towards oneself, producing unexpected expressions within a determined context. But these expressions are immediately recognisable and reassuring; they are a reference to an aura, a halo. This is what distinguishes charismatic people from uncharismatic ones.

**EP: Then there is a reassuring element to charisma?**

AB: Yes, it has an element of recognition that is capable of providing a sense of security, but that isn't the goal. It can have that effect, but the reason for it is a long process of working on yourself, questioning yourself, knowing how to improve. And, later, knowing how to give answers that others do not expect, because generally the answers correspond to traditional business. Instead, we are suddenly given an answer that possesses an unexpected ability to convince us. Charismatic individuals don't simply possess the ability to innovate; in art, for example, Picasso had charisma, it seemed like the things he made were always different, but in the end they were always variations on the same painting,

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although multiple. The effort to always do different things can result in a dynamic process, but it can also have a scattering effect. The time span of charisma is long and its answers are brilliant, because they lie outside of the context, they are enlightening.

**EP: This a very interesting viewpoint. However, I ask myself how these two aspects can co-exist: the ability to be recognised for a style, a recognisable “stamp”, and the ability to always be different.**

AB: Thanks to the ability to use this “stamp” for many different things; in the end, it is the continuity in the variations that allow the author to use these pieces in constructing a body that endows him or her with great charisma. This is why I maintain that a charismatic person is one who always repeats the same project, not just in the codes he or she uses, but also in the reflective quality and the continuity that is maintained throughout his or her search and in the variations this generates. In the end, all of this fills up a space that gives the author great recognisability, even on a simply intuitive level. Politicians also have this charismatic quality. The great communists had a powerful charisma, because they had an idea and defended it at any price. The same can be said of the great Catholic politicians.

**EP: In short, one needs great faith.**

AB: Yes, even if it is secular. It's about people who are willing to risk everything. Charisma is probably also a kind of strategy, even if it is unconscious, in which a person is so focused on him or herself in order to improve and grow in a very specific environment that problems end up falling to other people. They are characters who think about a situation, who don't adapt to the “market” of everyday problems, and precisely because of this their answers are often brilliant, because they shift the focal point of traditional logic and put others in a difficult position. They won't allow themselves to get involved in common problems or get trapped by common dynamics. They maintain their own ethical and cultural position. They stand out from the rest, and this gives them great charisma. These are people who resolve a situation by leaping ahead...

**EP: This idea of charisma as a strategy strikes me as very interesting, particularly in light of what you defined earlier as a long process of working on oneself.**

AB: Definitely. Someone highly charismatic in the architectural field was Mies van der Rohe (2), who created one single project throughout his life, a few fundamental, recognisable signs. However, he was without a doubt the best interpreter of complexity. His charisma is untouchable; what followed in his wake was ignored, he is an object of true veneration. When you move at those levels of veneration you never miss a step... not like those people who strive to do a ton of things and who end up getting swept along by situations... Charismatic people sweep others along, but they're never swept along, because they are capable of giving an unexpected order to things.

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**EP: One of your favourite topics and one which has influenced much of your work is the idea of weak modernity. In the catalogue to the exhibition(3) about young Italian designers you talk about widespread creativity and movements that are spontaneous rather than intentional, which create an aggregate effect around certain objects that then become small icons of this modernity. Do you think this has something to do with charisma being a divergent vision and having the ability to surprise?**

AB. Definitely. To me this exhibition represented an important indication of change with regards to the 20th century and the “made in Italy” tradition, but it isn’t as much of an “orphan” as it seems since above it hovers the spirit of Bruno Munari(4). Munari’s charisma always made him play the same game, always within the same arena, until transforming this game into an enormously sophisticated philosophical system. He also designed very few objects, and – more importantly – his designs came about almost by chance, born from this idea of the endless search, which turned him into a truly great master, the father of Italian design, without ever once making a single product. He designed toys, small objects, machines, odd bits and pieces, fully aware of the fact that he was working on unnecessary things. This is something every intellectual has to face. All artists and all creative people do useless things. The useless is a sacred category; there is no great civilisation that didn’t invest enormous energy into the unnecessary, meaning things that no one had asked for and the usefulness of which no one really understood, like poetry, literature, music, art. The useless is fundamental to human history; all of the traces of the past are connected to unnecessary things. The history of humanity is not a history of technology, but a history of thoughts and people. Bruno Munari has this awareness, this ability to be a bit of a juggler, who isn’t just a designer or just an artist. And, in the end, his “genome” seduced everyone, even table and chair manufacturers; objects which, quite frankly, it takes courage to consider as one’s legacy. A lot of designers think that this profession, design, is dedicated to the production of objects; but this is nonsense, because this leads them to identify their intellectual biography with the number of clients they have and makes them lose control over it... Thus, in the end, we can’t understand their profile, even after we put all of their work together. These designers are not people who solve problems, they create them. Architecture is a complex profession with a strong social component that develops theoretical systems and critical reflections, a part of which is also directed at constructing buildings. Charisma lies in the different consistency of thought that can be perceived throughout a project. If there is no charisma then the architect can be a good professional and have dignity, but will have completely lost control over his work; perhaps he or she manages to give their work certain continuity of style, but at absolutely risible levels. People who have worked on themselves and are capable of facing any kind of problem, because they already know the solution and manage to focus on it immediately, these people have charisma. Some architects fall victim to problems, whereas Pasini, Elisabetta. “The rabbi’s strategy”, *Experimenta*, Sept 13, 2001

charisma comes from a state of serenity, of absolute calm. I don't think neurotics are charismatic, quite on the contrary, I think they're the opposite; they're people who get overwhelmed by events.

**EP: However, amongst the individuals that populate the charismatic imaginary of this century we also find Hitler, who in some way represents the dark side of charisma.**

AB: I think that we have a very mistaken idea of Hitler. First of all, because we constantly see it on TV. The History Channel, for example, shows him almost every day, cloaked in rhetoric, always talking, almost barking in German. But never with subtitles. I find this a rather strange way of presenting things; personally, I'd like to know what he is saying. He's presented to us as a pervert, as a madman, and eventually one comes to think that he probably wasn't... and furthermore, I don't understand how he could have had charisma, with his Chaplinesque quality, his moustache; I don't think Hitler had charisma...

*(1) Aldo Rossi (1931-1997), internationally famous designer and architect. His work expresses a profound debt to the paintings of Giorgio De Chirico, who led him to see the city as something that is built beyond time. He is considered one of the founders of Neo-Rationalism and was one of the main representatives of the Modern Movement in architecture.*

*(2) Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), along with Gropius and Le Corbusier, is considered one of the great pioneers of modern architecture, the creator of a style capable of reflecting contemporaneity. Clarity and simplicity are the key attributes of his architectural style, which is most clearly expressed in the use of "modern" materials like steel, glass and cement, resulting in "rational and minimalist" architectural forms that are endowed with a perfectly balanced aesthetic. His search was always inspired by his famous aphorism "less is more."*

*(3) This refers to the exhibition The Mobile Landscape of New Italian Design, held during the Milan Triennale in March and April of 2007. It was an attempt to analyse the current state of new Italian design, which now expresses different and independent characteristics in comparison to the tradition of the great design masters. Andrea Branzi was one of the project's promoters and wrote the exhibition catalogue and manifesto, which was used to select 55 designers, whose work was shown in the exhibition.*

*(4) The work of Bruno Munari (1907-1998) remains famous in design history, both because of its eclecticism (it covered fields as diverse as industrial design, graphic design, sculpture, painting and film) and for having chosen the world of childhood and play as a source of inspiration.*