

## SPECIAL REPORT DESIGN

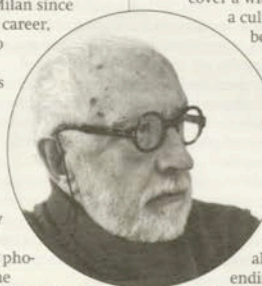
# The designer as revolutionary

Andrea Branzi wrote the rules and set the standards for industrial design. Interview by Pier Paolo Peruccio and Elena Formia

**A**ndrea Branzi, the Italian architect, designer and theorist, graduated in architecture from Florence in 1966, and has lived and worked in Milan since 1973. During his career, he has received three Compasso d'Oro awards for industrial design, one of which was for his lifetime achievement in 1987.

From 1964 to 1974 he was a member of Archizoom Associati, one of the first internationally renowned avant-garde architectural groups, whose projects are now archived at the University of Parma, while his thesis and his photographic archive are kept at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. He co-founded the Domus Academy, the first postgraduate school for design, in 1983, is the author of numerous books on the history and theory of design and has curated many exhibitions in Italy and abroad. He is a professor of design at the Politecnico di Milano.

Over the years his work has balanced itself between research, experimentation and the analysis of emerging phenomena in design. His practice, which was initially rooted firmly within the realm of radical theory and architecture, as exemplified by his most famous early project "No-Stop-City", 1969, has expanded and evolved over the years to cover a broad range of interests and activities, from industrial design and urban planning to architecture, philosophy and art. He has created objects for some of Italy's most prestigious design companies, such as Alessi, as well as realising his own projects, such as the irreverent furniture set "Animali Domestici", 1985, and installed his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York for the 1972 exhibition, "Italy: the New Domestic Landscape". He is also part of Studio Alchimia, a Milan-based group of experimental designers and architects, and his work will be the subject of a retrospective at Harvard University in 2014. *The Art Newspaper* met Branzi in his Milan studio.



**The Art Newspaper:** What are your hopes for the Harvard show?

**Andrea Branzi:** The aim of the exhibition is to cover a wide range of projects, and achieve a cultural significance that goes beyond my own work by developing a theme that I have defined as "new dramaturgy".

**What does "new dramaturgy" mean; how does it apply to design?**

It represents a turning point in contemporary Italian design. Throughout the 20th century, the role of design has always been to guarantee a "happy ending" in a future dictated by order and reason, by means of a self-referential language that is indifferent to the tragedies of history. Today there is no guaranteed "happy ending": a new religious war has broken out and, after the failure of communism, we are witnessing the failure of capitalism too. "New dramaturgy" is about the evolution of design from being a simple professional activity to being an anthropological reflection on the great themes that have always interested man – life, death, fate, eros, the sacred. The project [at Harvard University] will be a time for reflection, as well as an event that addresses great historical themes that have not traditionally had anything to do with industrial design.

The concept of development is struggling to move in a direction that is not one of either mere "growth" or pure "survival". The concept of progress has lost its bearings in a world of ever-changing options. Ancient political categories are no longer applicable, social clashes have been replaced with religious war. Events are no longer ordered by a lucid memory but lost to a liberating amnesia that doesn't distinguish past from present, antique from contemporary.

**What do you think are the main characteristics of Italian design?**

The idea of Italian design is more than just the simple production of consumer goods within



Andrea Branzi, "Louis XXI" porcelain made in collaboration with Sèvres Porcelain, France

the country's geographical bounds – it is a cultural category. Italian design has latent anthropological roots that other countries don't have.

**Is the relation between the environment and design as important as the relationship between technology and design?**

Environmentalism was born from the avant-garde cultural movement in America and is now in the hands of environmental technologists. I think it's a problem that environmentalists believe the happiness of man depends on the square metres of grass available to them, and that our habitat should be based solely around energy consumption. Post-environmentalism will come of age when environmentalists re-establish contact with the avant-garde, with innovation, experimentation and aesthetic concerns. Only then will it become an important historical movement.

**What's your opinion of the way in which design is now taught in institutions around Europe?**

British art schools are traditionally places of vibrant youthful energy. I co-founded and directed the Domus Academy at the beginning of the 1980s as a design school to create self-taught designers. The focus does not rest on learning a project, like the famous Hochschule für Gestaltung (school of design) in Ulm, but rather on fostering in students the ability to approach their surroundings inventively and with a critical eye. The Domus Academy was the first school of its kind that did not conform to the Ulm school of design blueprint or the "methodology myth". Any kind of methodology is fine as long as it works. It's the same with craft – it can produce masterpieces as well as disasters.

**Perhaps your best known work, even abroad, is your project "No-Stop-City", which you did alongside the Archizoom Associati group. What is your conception of radical culture?**

Actually I've recently finished an autobiographical book titled *Una Generazione Esagerata* (an excessive generation) that addresses a range of issues from radical architecture to the current globalisa-

tion crisis. Excessiveness, or exaggeration, is a cultural category that accentuates and highlights things that one wouldn't usually see. This forcing or straining of reality is typical of creative culture, of art and intellectual practice. Archizoom was the first group that tried to situate itself within the kind of realism that Pop culture represented. Pier Vittorio Aureli explains our political links with working class culture, especially in Florence, in his book *The Project of Autonomy*, 2008. Our vision of Pop Art was an amalgamation of consumerism and socialist realism. The radical movement was not monolithic, which is why I think it has always been rather difficult to historicise it. The movement did not follow linear strategies and contained conflict at its very heart. It had neither a common manifesto nor a language of its own. Its most important aspect, however, was that the movement recognised that urban planning, architecture and design are not friends – they are in constant conflict with each other, each one striving to promote its own view of the world.

**The phenomenon of craft and of limited production prototypes brings the world of design closer to art, especially with regards to what goes on at the fringes of art fairs.**

Today art is one of the most advanced forms of wealth production because it produces value that is based on non-existent investments. The businessman, in contrast to the artist, needs a factory, machines, investments, sales. The only type of economy that design is similar to is the system of micro-finance devised by [the Bangladeshi economist and banker] Muhammad Yunus, who changed the lives of 170 million people by lending them as little as one dollar, or even half a dollar. This is proof that, in the face of the failure of overarching strategies, bottom-up action can bring about significant change. Design is the same in respect to architecture: it allows us to achieve quality in our environment through the small objects that make up our habitat. We live in an object-based habitat, not an architectural one.

• Andrea Branzi is represented by Carpenters Workshop Gallery, London/Paris, and by Friedman Benda, New York  
• Additional research by Ermanno Rivetti

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