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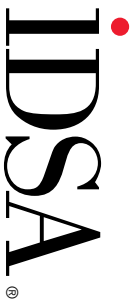
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# INNOVATION®



Fort Standard's Crest Bottle Openers. See p. 49.

Brian Ferry



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The quarterly publication of the Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA), INNOVATION provides in-depth coverage of design issues and long-term trends while communicating the value of design to business and society at large.

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An Interview with Andrea Branzi

# THE EVOLUTION OF DESIGN CULTURE



Rafael Herman

**F**ew people have had a greater impact on the evolution of design culture than the Italian architect, designer and theorist Andrea Branzi. As a brilliant and experimental young designer in the 1960s, he became a spokesman for the radical architecture movement, shifting the focus of design from strict functionalism toward conceptual cultural criticism.



Riccardo Bianchi

Above: Genetic Tales vases designed by Andrea Branzi for Alessi.  
Right: Branzi's Mama O kettle for Alessi.



Aldo Balloph

Branzi's experimental work with collectives like Archizoom and studio Alchymia in the '60s and '70s eventually led to the Memphis group in the '80s, in which he was a central figure along with design greats Ettore Sottsass, Alessandro Mendini and others. Memphis announced the beginning of a new era for design culture, which was largely articulated through Branzi's seminal books

*The Hot House: Italian New Wave Design* (1984) and *Learning from Milan: Design and the Second Modernity* (1988).

In addition to his writing and teaching, Branzi has been something of a Renaissance man; his prolific body of work ranges in scale, literally, from the city to the spoon. His latest book, *Weak and Diffuse Modernity* (2006), demonstrates this range with sharp critical writing alongside tabletop objects for Alessi and urban plans for the city of Eindhoven, all with his historically insightful, humorous and poetic signature. Via email from Milan, he answered questions about the past, present and future of design culture.

Translation by Paolo Cravedi

**Scott Klinker:** Is “theoretical design” another way of saying “design about design”? Has design culture evolved into a space where designers mostly speak to other designers?

**Andrea Branzi:** Designers talk to each other and also to industry, the arts and culture. Design is not a self-engrossed practice that is closed in on itself, but rather is an integral part of society and history. The function of theoretical design is to reflect upon the transformations of the world and of society, upon what new technologies can offer and upon the influence of new cultural trends—similar to the way theoretical physics develops theorems that will find a practical translation in applied physics.

**SK:** Memphis argued for design’s inevitable need to embrace pop culture and fashion. Since then, has the line between design and art been sufficiently redrawn?

**AB:** Memphis was born in a moment in which the mass-market was beginning to break up into fragments; new products had to have the ability to attract their specific user by means of a new language. Since then, design has radically changed, rationalism has fallen into a crisis, and the international style has disappeared. The relationship with art, therefore, was not the only reason design changed; from that moment on, design ceased to be just an industrial product and became part of social culture just like music, fashion and cinema.

**SK:** Memphis was mostly a collection of prototypes. What was the final impact on industry?

**AB:** Memphis did not work for the industry, but instead for the anticipated changes in the market and society. At first, the industry did not understand the underlying reasons for our work, but during the '90s it had to accept that the market demanded new languages and new ways of using the living spaces.

**SK:** What companies really benefited from this?

**AB:** Only a few companies understood right away that a revolution was happening; among them was certainly Alessi, which deeply transformed its philosophy by morphing into a manufacturer of aesthetic objects which were still conceived for domestic use but also to be given as gifts and to make your environment alive and vibrant.

**SK:** Avant-garde design in the '60s, similar to other arts, seemed to be driven by a spirit of opposition—to the limits of society. Is design culture partly about opposition?

**AB:** Our ideas from the radical movement of the New Italian Design (where Memphis was born) have never been *against* the industry; on the contrary, we marked the *delay* of the industry in relation to its own possibilities.

**SK:** In the '70s you formed the Global Tools group with the political goal of enabling “mass creativity.” Has the creative revolution you imagined materialized? Is today’s network society similar to your vision of mass creativity?

**AB:** Global Tools never went beyond the conceptual stage.



Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist. Photography: Jon Lam

Tree 9 by Andrea Branzi

It never became a real organization. Some of our goals shifted to Domus Academy instead, which subsequently was able to attract students from all over the world. Those students proved that the concept of a creative society was not a utopian dream but rather a prophetic intuition.

**SK:** In your latest book *Weak and Diffuse Modernity* you have described an “economy of innovation” where free-agent “researchers” practice like artists. Has design culture finally expanded beyond the designers?

**AB:** Today everything that is produced *is* design, because the aesthetic and emotional components are a fundamental requirement to enter the market; nobody buys products that have no emotion, no personality, no charm. Society keeps evolving, and design needs to be experimental and to pursue new cultural dimensions.

**SK:** What conditions of the network society are especially empowering for building design culture?

**AB:** The freedom to search for new products, new technologies, new music, new narratives, new fashion, new services, demonstrating that our society is expressed through a continuous innovation.

—Scott Klinker, IDSA, INNOVATION guest editor  
sklinker@cranbrook.edu

# the exchange

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