

EMILIO AMBASZ

Precursor of
Architecture and Design

EMERGING NATURE

Essays by

Barry Bergdoll

Peter Buchanan

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Interviews with

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*Ambasz refuses to consider
technology as a thematic concern,
reformulating the greenhouse
typology by adding innovative
twists to its iconography and
even turning its supposed function
on its head.*

Fulvio Irace

ARGENTINIAN AESOP

Fulvio Irace¹

Emilio Ambasz's architecture, informed by a fascination for foundation myths' eternal narrative, introduced its eccentric imprint of poetic storytelling into the 1970s architectural landscape. Building on the fabulist aphoristic inventiveness of his "working fables," this singular Argentinian Aesop's first architectural design concepts are actually visual illustrations to accompany a design didactic rooted in an exhortation to rethink the ethical motives underpinning the act of construction, with a view to restoring landscapes disrupted by global transformation and societal changes. As Ambasz puts it, "I opted to be a fabulist rather than an ideologist because fables retain the ring of immutability long after ideologies have wilted. The invention of fables is central to my working methods; it is not just a literary accessory. Sometimes the fable conveys an overarching design concept and the descriptive literary part is purely technical, and sometimes the imagery becomes the illustration. In any case, the subtext of a fable is a ritual and it is to the support of rituals that most of my work is addressed."²

In expressing a utopia that bends technology to attain its own goals, "Emile" Ambasz's "narrated" design concept ironically assumes the *conte philosophique's* didactic intonation. Echoing accounts of eighteenth-century travelers, ethnologists, and explorers or the writings of the great Enlightenment moralists, the landscape of an idealized Arcadia—be it an open landscape or constructed urban nature—provides the setting for a human drama; miniature timeless rituals are reproduced in the micronarrative of each design concept, and the main characters and bit players become archetypal recurring figures, as in a fairy tale reinterpreted by Propp.

Set between preindustrial human values and the logic governing serialized production, the ideal inhabitants of Ambasz's fables step into the role of figures seeking to push beyond the constraints imposed by the products and progress of their culture, while realizing that it is precisely the legacy of such phenomena from the past that must be deployed in creating a new culture. The context is formed not by history, but rather by the absolute space described by Martínez Estrada in which each individual "is alone, like an abstract being that will begin anew the story of the species—or conclude it."³

As the last historical subjects and progenitors of a new anthropology, humans are thus compelled to draw on myth's indemonstrability or the simplification of fable in order to resolve the ambivalence that the human condition entails. "In choosing to be a fabulist rather than an ideologist," writes Michael Sorkin,⁴ "he has grasped something fundamental: that fables preserve their immutable character long after ideologies have faded away. For Ambasz, irony is the most productive critical faculty. It does not attempt to adduce something definitive, only to find a good response."

Fable versus Ideology

Building a bridge between Europe and America, Ambasz's architecture thus quietly debuted in an ambience marked by both technological utopia's last glimmers and the first signs that the discipline was being reduced to merely its decisive archetypes and figures. Nevertheless, Ambasz's choice of metaphor as the frame for his design concepts is in stark contrast to the ideological strategy that was for example crucial to Aldo Rossi or Carlo Aymonino's reformulations of urban theories in Italy, and also informed the progressive consolidation of a school devoted to the cult of typological permanence and its indifferent constancy on the ground. Reaffirming the autonomy of architecture — with its familiar corollaries of independence from function, the establishment of primary elements such as monuments and the value attributed to these in terms of collective memory, etc. — gave unexpected contemporary relevance to the prescriptive knowledge stratified in the literature, treatises, codes, and theories, denying the break with history deployed by modernity to legitimate the twentieth century's *tabula rasa* tactic. At the same time however, this approach rejects attempts to create a cross-hybridization between architectural codes and their purportedly invalid counterparts in fields like urban planning, sociology, or psychology.

The young Argentinian was familiar with the practices described above thanks to his contacts with the Italian architectural scene while preparing the famous exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* for the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972. That was also the year that the "Five Architects" of New York became a group, at the instigation of Arthur Drexler,⁵ subsequently affirming a "poetics of nostalgia" which set a sophisticated interpretation of the modern movement's intellectual and formal legacy at the heart of their own experiments with architectural idioms.

The reading of the Italian situation Ambasz presented focused essentially on the contraposition of the apocalyptic and the integrated in industrial design practice; reacting against a purely formal interpretation, he underscored the emblematic and allusive value of Italian design's participation in social discourse. Although he took on

board the notion of a “negative utopia”⁶ adopted by some strands of the radical avant-garde as a tool for analyzing the present, he moderated its scope through the prism of a more balanced relationship with the functional component of elitist professionalism, highlighting in particular the crucial role played by politics and aesthetics as complementary elements in an organic design vision aimed at reestablishing the discipline. This diagnosis was fairly close to conceptions of the “poetics of the pragmatic,” his personal take on which soon appeared in statements on his subsequent design concepts. “Thus, design ultimately transcends both object-making and conflict to encompass all the processes whereby man gives meaning and order to his surroundings and his daily patterns of life. [...] Without claiming to solve everything, design can nevertheless move man toward an authentic realization of himself.”⁷ The exhibition catalog that accompanied *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, grounded in an interweaving of history, criticism, and projects, can thus be seen as Ambasz’s first attempt — except for his early research texts on Buenos Aires — to construct an image of the architect as a fabulist, moving between words and things.

Restoring the image to the evocative status it assumes in myth also implies reinstating the theoretical and utopian dimensions of the overarching design concept as a tool for transformation, over and above the constraints of actual built structures. It entails highlighting the idea of invention through the notion of the prototype as an anticipation of a potential future, hinting at a greater openness to new symbolic representational systems, reflecting the contemporary world’s contradictions and aspirations.

Despite its attraction to utopia, Ambasz’s architecture escapes any compulsion to follow the route of technological visions, a seemingly compulsory way station for the international avant-garde, who have adduced the most varied arguments to underpin their phantasmagoric inflections of such visions, which have spanned the broadest conceivable spectrum, inspired not just by idolatry of the machine, but also by Situationist anarchy or cosmic futurology. Technology however does not assume the kind of redemptive value proclaimed by the avant-garde for Ambasz, who views it merely as an instrument at the service of design imagination: it is an image per se, but rather a structure that enables creation of emotional images. At the Center for Applied Computer Research, it is the configuration of precise canalization and drainage systems that makes the “floating” buildings possible, and underpins the ingenious system that recycles water from the air-conditioning to create the liquid “carpet” that flows slowly and continuously by the steps at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Michigan. This strategy pays tribute to Amancio Williams with his eccentric, isolated views, his antihistoricist approach to

“create and invent exemplary prototypes”⁸ such as the Bridge House at Mar del Plata and his deft concealment of his program’s “poetic core” under the mantle of the functional paraphernalia of the underlying design concept.

Elucidating the methodology of his inventive practice, Ambasz explains: “An architecture in a dynamic consonance with nature, made by man, in a state of constant becoming involves specialized tasks. The first is empirical: to establish a cartography of the products and production techniques that populate the man-made garden. The second is normative: to develop a program of individual needs and wishes in the context of a far-reaching program of social necessity, to guide utilization of the empirical cartography. The third is synthetic: giving form to new structures that will allow man to reconcile his fears and desires with the limits imposed by the empirical realm and the pressure of the normative sphere. [...] The sphere in which the architect operates may change, but the transcendent task remains the same: to give a poetic form to the pragmatic.”⁹

Committed to the twenty-four-hour frame that defines everyday life, the Argentinian’s “domestic utopia” serves as the metaphor for a transformation more intimately related to anthropological structures than to any architectonic foreshadowing of a renewed form of living space; it thus verges on a poetics of the archaic, whose “frugal vocabulary” refers back, more or less directly, to Luis Barragán’s architectural ideas, addressed in one of the first critical essays devoted to the Mexican architect and explored in an invaluable exhibition curated by Ambasz for MoMA in New York.¹⁰

Between Borges and Barragán

Amancio Williams, Luis Barragán, Borges: even against the heterogeneous backdrop of 1970s New York, the erratic idiosyncrasy of Ambasz’s points of reference set him apart, as did the trajectories he followed in conceiving his design approach. Although he had affinities with Peter Eisenman’s teaching and was among the founders of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies—the American institution most receptive to European neo-avant-garde ideas in this period—his elitist, enigmatic air created a distance between Ambasz and his contemporaries. Among the generation of young Latin Americans who had emigrated to the East Coast, such as Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti or Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsonas, he stood out due to his instinctive rejection of critical intellectualism profoundly colored by Structuralist theories on language and possible applications of such insights to the urban context. Ambasz was born in Buenos Aires—the South American capital most open to the influence of international modernism in the interwar era—and studied at Princeton University (New Jersey, USA), where he completed a

bachelor's and a master's degree in architecture in just two years. Unlike his American and Argentinian peers, he seemed right from the outset to have little interest in moving into university teaching or the kind of research that seemed to him to entail simply sophisticated but abstract exercises of intellectual rigor. One of his first important works, the 1975 Casa de Retiro Espiritual (House of Spiritual Retreat) in the countryside near Seville, conveys a clear sense of how idiosyncratic his stance was; Ambasz set up an almost didactic comparison with the East Coast elite's design experiments by presenting a solution to a typological theme that had attracted renewed interest from figures such as Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, John Hejduk, and Michael Graves, who would be key players in later endeavors to reinvigorate architecture. These experiments included, for example, Meier's elegant exercises from the second half of the 1960s engaging with the legacy of European modernism, culminating in the famous 1974 Douglas House in Harbor Spring, Michigan. Meier's ethereal domestic architecture, a refined exegesis of Le Corbusier's theories on breaking architecture down into its component parts, provides a subtle link to the selective reappraisal of European rationalism's hallmarks, a few years before the postmodernist deluge. Carefully reformulating the dialectic between volume and structure, Meier's work aims to recreate the aura of the *esprit machiniste*, as is apparent too in his adoption of white as the sole tonality, subsequently the incontrovertible cipher of his oeuvre. It comes as no surprise that "Whites" was the defining title chosen by this group of 1970s architects — such as Eisenman, Gwathmey Siegel, Seligmann — who shared a great interest in the European rationalist tradition's explorations of architectural language and its confidence "in the capacity of forms and space to mediate between individual and environment, individual and society."¹¹

Consequently, as has been noted, this "heroic" season took a turn into the limbo of severe formal reduction, shielding the architect's quest from any anguished search for identity that did not overlap with the exclusive, aseptic focus of linguistic experimentation. This could be dubbed "test-tube" architecture, reinvigorating the tenor of modern tradition beyond the banal consumerism of developers' policy, deftly avoiding any questioning of the troubled nature of the architectonic structure, which remained impeccably sealed in its immaculate white shell.

For almost all these architects, this is generally viewed as just a transitory phase, which they would bluntly reject shortly afterwards or drastically recalibrate in the most extreme form of radical criticism directed at modernity's theoretical postulates. Think for example of Peter Eisenman, an advocate of architecture as Conceptual art, who was deeply engaged in processes of abstraction and self-reflection that aimed to progressively undermine the foundations of the

entire theoretical dispositive underpinning the traditional idea of the design concept. As a hermetic experimental architect, the "first" Eisenman identified the single-family home as his almost exclusive experimental field: through his decade-long series of houses, from House I in Princeton (1967–1968) to House XI in Palo Alto (1978), Eisenman constructed a space to reflect on the syntax of his design vision as a solipsistic form of self-representation. Striving to cut rationalist theory's umbilical link between form and function, he analyzed the concepts of centrality and planarity, focusing on relations between individual elements and the structural grid, and disrupting the idea of space and its perception. His idea of the house, which avoids any kind of anthropological twist, is articulated in a set of rules on formation and transformation that placed architecture on a purely intellectual plane, distancing it from the significance of human presence vis-à-vis the form and use of space, as if such considerations were improper or irrelevant. Describing House III in Lakeville, for example: "In this sense, when the owner first enters 'his house' he is an intruder; he must begin to regain possession—to occupy a foreign container. In the process of taking possession the owner begins to destroy, albeit in a positive sense, the initial unity and completeness of the architectural structure."¹²

Real "machines in the garden," Miller House (House III) in Lakeville (1968–1971), like Douglas House (1971–1974) by Meier or Benacerraf House by Graves in Princeton (1969–1970) represent in different ways the return to an idea of art as a "liberation from the eternal essence of the human being" as Tafuri observed¹³: an evocation of suspended tonalities in which silence becomes a synonym for programmatic elision of human sounds.

La Casa de Retiro Espiritual (The House of Spiritual Retreat)

The surreal note that runs through Emilio Ambasz's architecture in those years is immediately apparent in this design set in the countryside outside Seville, split into the dialectic structure of the upper "mask" and the belowground dwelling: steeped in auratic mysticism, it can nonetheless be read as a tacit manifesto advocating elimination of architecture by exhuming its relics. The facade, as a metonymic "surrogate" for architecture, is at once a signal and a ruin: a proclamation that architecture is on the verge of disappearing or a residual trace of its destruction. In the 1972 MoMA exhibition, Gaetano Pesce imagined a habitat that would express the idea of architecture "in the age of great contaminations."¹⁴ The proposal played with the layout for an existential space whose principal physical traits evoked reclusion and isolation: its open, multifaceted symbolism suggested the notion of the house as a ritual locus or a refuge from life, an uneasy domestic landscape or a symbol of eternal life. The indeterminacy

of the allusions was however at odds with the clarity of the compositional layout, which drew on the square and rectangle as its fundamental forms. The imposing geometry, based on rotation of quadrilateral forms, produced symmetrically articulated volumes that evolved out of the primitive mark of the cross traced into the ground. While an echo of this can perhaps already be identified in the design for the belowground chapel in the Borrego Springs project – even in the modified iconography of the cross, in this case more evocative of natural religion than of a tombstone – it is in Ambasz's design concept for Seville that reflections on the house as refuge take center stage. A square form dug into the ground specifies the intervention's bounds, and divided diagonally into two triangles that correspond to two sections of the house: one more intimate and on a domestic scale, the patio; the other – a set of steps – is more monumental and tied into the facade's representative order. On the one hand the house thus exists as a volume in space, while on the other hand it is a tangible expression of a space within which life unfolds. This contrast references the distinction between *Baukunst* and *Architektur* that Loos introduced in his famous 1910 essay, which Ambasz taps into on an almost literal note to clarify his conception of the house as the primordial haven, defining the underlying design concept as a pact of reconciliation between humans and nature. Against the backdrop of the recurrent "machine in the garden" phenomenology, the Casa de Retiro Espiritual opts not to foreground analysis of architectural language, remaining indifferent toward mathematical furor that might seek to couch the design concept as a theorem to be demonstrated. Is it just a coincidence that the roots of this design suggest instead the "emotional architecture" of Barragán, a master practitioner of the discipline who assumed an eccentric stance toward the principal trajectories in architecture pursued around the world? In any event, Ambasz deeply admired his work, which he analyzed in detail while researching the MoMA show in New York. For the Mexican architect, the peerless creator of a "stage architecture" who "emphasized living in patios, behind walls,"¹⁵ the house was the locus of his *pièce de résistance*: his house in Tacubaya (1947), a glorious composition of "voids" behind the explicit modesty of an unremarkable facade, demonstrates how "rudimentary elements" can give rise to an eloquent expression of a powerful "visual drama."¹⁶ Mexican tradition, stripped of any historical imprint, is thus drastically reduced to its spatial underpinnings: a journey back to the immaculate purity of the archetype takes on the cadences of a fresh start, imbuing the new architecture with the "aura of inexorability that classical myths once possessed."¹⁷

The two thin walls that meet at an angle to form the Casa de Retiro Espiritual's facade can therefore be read almost as fortifications: minimalistic oversize structures, their function only becomes

visible when viewed from the building's lower level. Two steep stairs define a triangle that culminates in the very high mirador or outlook platform, configuring the entire facade as an observation post open to the landscape; its base, in contrast, puts the finishing touch to the patio's square form, emphasizing the centripetal role played by the void within the overall composition. In this sense Ambasz's reading of the Tacubaya House can also be applied to the configuration here — "The garden is enclosed by high walls on three sides; the fourth side is defined by the rear facade of the house"¹⁸ — as can his interpretation of the El Pedregal residential complex, with the garden as the "soul of the house" and the rooms as "retreats meant just for sleeping, the storage of belongings and shelter from hostile weather."¹⁹ A true "program of metaphysical imperatives,"²⁰ La Casa de Retiro Espiritual's architecture of landscapes dramatizes the metaphysics of the everyday evoked by lines from Borges: "Patio, channel of sky./ The patio is the window/through which God watches souls./ The patio is the slope/ down which sky flows into the house."²¹

In contrast to the eighteenth-century myth of the primitive hut, architecture is no longer to be assimilated into nature's rationality, but reinstated in its vocation of providing an artificial refuge, drawing on the most elemental gestures of adaptation to the surrounding environment. Ambasz has repeatedly underscored that "In my architecture I am interested in the rituals and ceremonies for the twenty-four hours of the day. I am not interested in rituals and ceremonies for very long voyages, voyages that can take forty or fifty years. [...] And what a tragedy to discover that for the sake of such long-term dreams we have sacrificed our daily lives. No, I am interested only in daily rituals: the ritual of sitting in a courtyard, slightly protected from your neighbor's view and the strong wind, gazing up at the stars; [...]. Dealing with these types of situations attracts me. The ritual is not in the house; I don't make it. And yet the house provides a backdrop."²²

The Universal Garden

Standing in silent isolation, on terrain that approximates an idealized vision of the Argentinian pampa in the first presentation renderings,²³ the house north of Seville is therefore not a "machine in the garden." Instead of the building being set down within the landscape, it constructs its own landscape in which the sublime and the picturesque are conjoined with a surreal twist that recalls Mary Miss's explorations into the concept of landscape. In her famous 1978 work, *Perimeters/Pavillions/Decoys*,²⁴ a six-meter-high tower, set on the edge of a field, simulates the frame of a building. At its center, a well, almost five meters deep and delimited by a wooden truss, evokes an ambulatory around an underground courtyard, poetically echoing the Heideggerian metaphor of the "sheltering earth."²⁵

As in the American artist's work, the Casa de Retiro Espiritual, beneath the evocative image it creates, conceals the meticulous reality of an artifact that is constructed as a landscape simulation: the empty center of gravity is belowground, the facade rising up like a banner visible from afar. For all the intractable geometrical clarity of its sharp angles, the Casa nonetheless encompasses an irregular organism, emerging in places from the earth berms in the form of sinuous incisions in the turf.

An astronomical observatory, a kind of sundial, offering a vantage point from which to survey the geography of the land, corresponding to a vision of architecture as "one aspect of our quest for cosmological models" and confirming the idea of the design concept as aspiring to reflect the desire "to possess at least an attribute of the universe."²⁶

This discontinuous backdrop, the iconic symbol of the house, is so abstract that it looks like an oversize sculpture marking the site: a landmark that conveys a sense of the landscape not as an entity in its own right but as produced by a process of perception grounded in dynamism and change. It only becomes clear that the facade is a simulacrum when you walk around the corner, and it is only as you move closer to the threshold to the patio that glimpses of an enigmatic iconography appear: the undulations and piercings of the ground, the skylights that allow natural light to penetrate deep into the house and the thin curved membranes that contain the stairs. As the asymmetric center of a reinterpretation of the landscape as garden, it therefore conjures up clear allusions to the "happy, universalizing heterotopia" that Foucault describes as "the smallest parcel of the world" but also as its "totality."²⁷

When the first images of the Casa de Retiro Espiritual began to circulate, Charles Jencks had already launched his seminal manifesto lauding postmodernist historicism²⁸; however, Ambasz's remains at one remove from such contemporary theories, a stance verging on proud isolation, for all his proclaimed attention to the primordial values crystallized in richly evocative recurrent archetypes. The reference points for his intellectual standpoint do not lie within the tradition of debate within his discipline but rather in the American avant-garde's artistic explorations in the 1960s, which Rosalind Krauss celebrated in her famous essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in 1979 — the year that the Casa de Retiro Espiritual was completed.

Ambasz's "collaborations"²⁹ with artists form an important chapter in the evolution of his design methodology, not only because the image is the only doorway that opens access to myth's more profound meanings. His admiration for artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, or Richard Serra reflects their shared project of attentive reading and construction of places, rethinking

the relationship between nature and the environment, as a creative response to awareness of ecological issues highlighted in increasingly alarming terms, from 1970 on, by publications such as the *State of the World* reports.

Defining the patio as the central element in the dwelling and using cuts in the ground as ventilation slits for the interior, the Seville house is a *de facto* precursor of the current focus on environmental sustainability thanks to the way in which it envisages drawing on natural resources and integrating traditional typologies and building techniques while avoiding any hint of nostalgia.

Echoing contemporary Minimalist experiments by Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, or Sol LeWitt, the exploration of primary forms does not however look back to history, but combines geometrical rarefaction with the industrial catalog's realism: the Center for Applied Computer Research in Mexico City (1975) uses water from the network of canals beneath the city's suburbs to create an artificial lake, given definition by sculptural elements in the form of large, inclined solar panels. In a literal interpretation of concepts of flexibility and growth, the rafts bearing the offices form landscape compositions that can be varied as a function of demand and the imperatives of expansion.

From this point on, water, earth, air thus become recurring motifs in Ambasz's landscape architecture and initially seem almost to signify nature's revenge on human artifacts, which are reduced to the status of noble "ruins," for example in the design concepts for the Grand Rapids Art Museum (1983) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and for Union Station (1986) in Kansas City. It is however in the proposal for the Schlumberger Research Laboratories (1982) in Austin, Texas, that the full radical impact of Ambasz's natural vocabulary unfurls, calling into question the practice of dense, concentrated construction by deploying the metaphor of the inhabited garden.

Texan Arcadia

This metaphor already figured in the 1976 design concept for a group of Mexican-American grape growers that Ambasz presented in the "Europe/America" exhibition at the Venice Biennale,³⁰ explaining his approach in the following terms: "Europe is perpetually in search of utopia, the myth of the end. The recurring myth of America is Arcadia, the eternal beginning. Whereas the traditional vision of Arcadia is that of a humanist garden, the American Arcadia has been transformed into man-made nature, a forest of artificial trees and shadows of the mind."³¹

The citizens of Borrego Springs—to some extent a reflection of the "noble citizen" whom Loos contrasted with the rootless citizen's uncertainty—stage the contrast between eternal human needs and

the artificial garden's variable landscape. Rather than being symbols of a Romantic view of organic expression as a means to overcome difference, they can be read as industrious Robinson Crusoes looking for an escape route more in keeping with the new posttechnological era. Similarly, in the Schlumberger complex, management and researchers live and work in a landscape that is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon informal gardens yet devoid of the picturesque iconography this usually entails. Aware of the need to conclude an efficient ecological pact, and indeed a new social pact, they demonstrate how important it is to establish a relationship to the new technology's advantages and future environmental impact that is less mechanical or directly causal. Employees at the Mexico City research center almost constitute the utopia of an ideal community, perhaps closer in its profound aspirations to Ledoux's Enlightenment symbolism than to Yona Friedman's modern-day fascination with technology.

The idea of the inhabited landscape is superimposed on the notion of the anthropized environment, integrating the rich visual legacy of landscape art's experimentations in a highly original fashion. The Austin technology cluster emphasizes above all that the whole is more significant than the individual interventions, drawing into the light the structure of a landscape that showcases "the strata of the Earth" like a "jumbled museum." In the process, it reinvigorates the insights of Robert Smithson's "Earth Projects" on the unprecedented scale of the final realization of the design concept: "Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art."³²

For the architect, as for the artist, intensive analysis of the language of the rocks discloses a syntax of fissures and ruptures. Whereas Michael Heizer "draws" the colossal furrow of *Double Negative* in the Nevada Desert by displacing and reshaping 240,000 tons of sand and rhyolite, Ambasz cuts irregular meandering "slashes" into the garden's grassy surfaces to bring light and air to the underlying spaces. In a counterpart to Heizer's practice of moving earth, here the soil is raised to shape geometrical berms that integrate the architecture into the soil, cutting energy costs and providing work spaces with generous wide vistas.

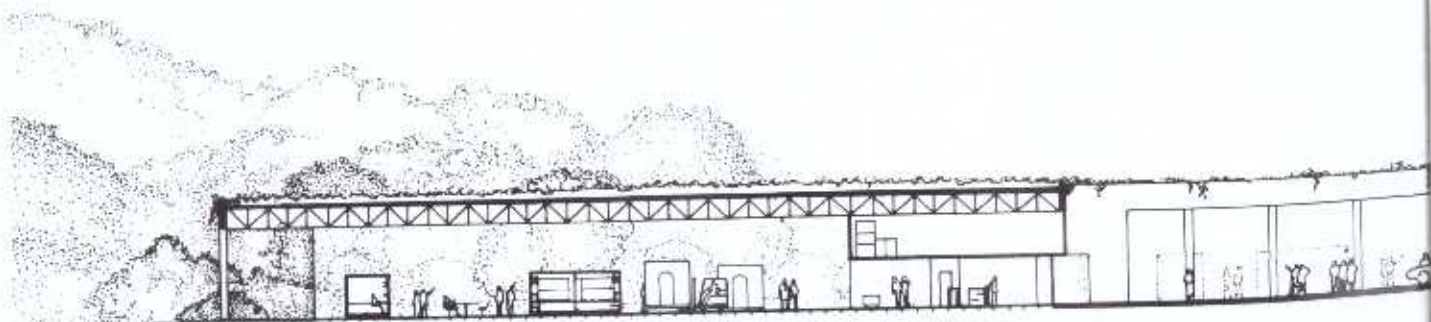
The history of a domestic, eternal return thus unfolds against the backdrop of the relationship between humans and nature, drawing inspiration from dreams of a rational foundation to reconcile architectural discourse and built structures. Ambasz writes "I believe that in our pursuit to master Nature-as-found, we have created a second man-made-Nature, intricately related to the given-Nature. We need to redefine architecture as one aspect of our man-made nature, but to do so we need first to redefine the contemporary meaning of Nature."³³

Green over Gray

"Building new cities by repeating old suburban schemes and, even worse, old mistakes – that is not what I was trying to achieve. What I would like to propose and build is a new 'green' city: a city that, unlike traditional models, is not the realm of the house 'in' the garden but would offer the house 'and' the garden. I have spent the last twenty years of my professional life experimenting with buildings that are able to give as much green as possible back to the community, on the basis of a design strategy that I like to define as 'green over gray.' Year after year, project after project, I have continuously worked on this idea, devising a method that entails first of all creating a 'catalog': a typological set of samples that covers the entire functional range of the various buildings needed for the functioning of a new-style green town."³⁴

Ambasz, a highly imaginative compiler of "catalogs of the inef-fable," therefore works on the materialization of "a recurrent idyll of place, mapping and remapping his private order of signs. [...]"³⁵ Akin to the Surrealist technique of collage, the catalog strategy is however essential to the search for the foundational principles of construction: in the apologue of "Manhattan, Capital of the XXth Century,"³⁶ creating a catalog of domestic places combines memory with designing the future. On the one hand, therefore, we find a taxonomy of fragments of the past that have survived although their context has vanished – Japanese terraces to watch the sunset; Roman baths; patios and courtyards; medieval window seats etc; on the other hand, imagination that looks to the future in identifying places with no historical antecedents that reflect spatial concepts such as flexibility, adaptability, territoriality, privacy. Perhaps this obsession with recombining a clearly identified repertory of signs lies at the origin of Ambasz's highly individual stance, indefatigably proposing a vision of Arcadia that flies in the face of the predominant fetishization of technology in his profession, as James Wines has observed.³⁷

The extraordinarily coherent objectives pursued in Ambasz's projects compel us to view each instance of his architecture as a

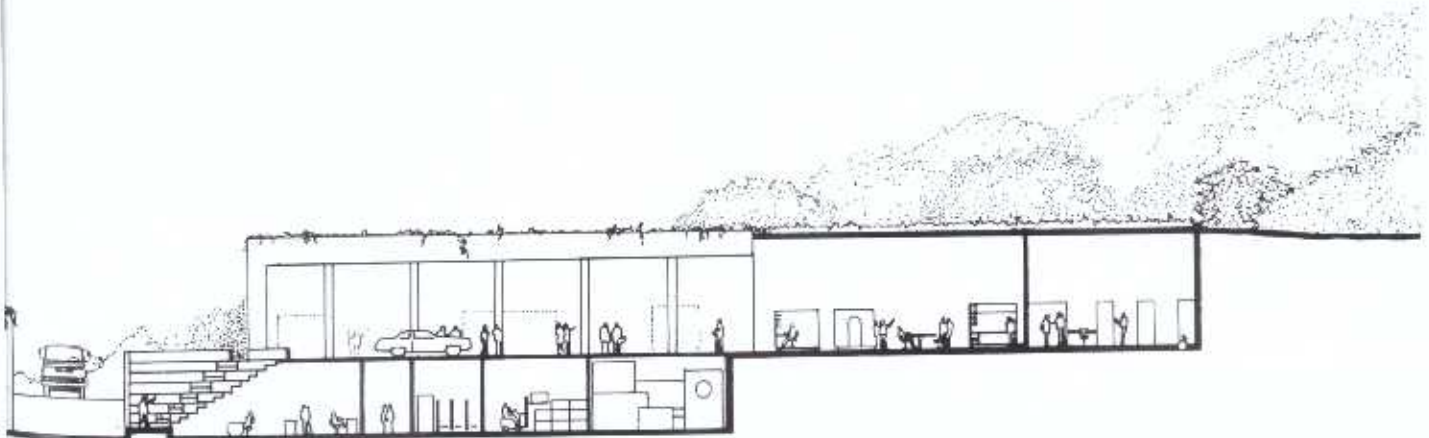


Schlumberger Research Laboratories, Austin, Texas, USA, 1982

further component of his patient research, a figure of a single compositional grammar. In this light, the office complex in the La Venta region, on the outermost periphery of Mexico City, is paradigmatic. Adopting a *modus operandi* focused on introducing new buildings into a neglected forested area while keeping just as much greenery, the design structures the ground in stepped terraces, with tall trees in the nurseries soaring above the office space. The architecture is not inserted within the landscape because it is actually worked out within the landscape, creating a huge variety of solutions that extend in clusters along a winding access road. Each of these terraced configurations takes on a different form, composing an imaginary topography of rectangular, triangular, trapezoidal, or amoeboid forms, offering a striking synthesis of Ambasz's penchant for conceptualizing geometry as a tool to generate syntheses within a highly complex general morphology. As a result, each of his design concepts unleashes a hint of the primordial gesture of cutting into the earth in a kind of ritual pact of refoundation. The Nuova Concordia Resort Housing Development in Castellaneta, Italy, the Winnisook Lodge in the Catskill Mountains, in New York State, or the Worldbridge Trade and Investment Center in Baltimore, Maryland, are true architectonic geologies that allude to a cosmological vision of the territory, like abandoned grassy cumuli or traces of an ancient civilization excavated from the earth, symbolic manifestations of a ceremony of reconciliation with nature, offering as a pledge to nature architecture that is mitigated: in other words, akin to the notion of the ruin.

A Twentieth-century Paxton

If the architect is not "to find himself a gardener in a man-made desert,"³⁶ technology must be transformed to be in tune with natural elements. The San Antonio Botanical Gardens, designed in the same year as the Schlumberger Laboratories, define the terms of an environmental pact that works out ecological values in aesthetic values, giving an optimistic and creative connotation to the lamented "death of the landscape."



Little more than a decade separates the Lucile Halsell Conservatory in Texas from Nicholas Grimshaw's Eden Project in Cornwall and the Great Glasshouse by Norman Foster in the National Botanic Garden of Wales. Grimshaw's geodesic domes and Foster's sophisticated metallic toroid are extreme reformulations of the robust British technological tradition, updating rather than revolutionizing the nineteenth-century greenhouse, by enclosing the spectacle of nature within lightweight translucent "bubbles" set within the contours of the ground.

Ambasz refuses to consider technology as a thematic concern, reformulating the greenhouse typology by adding innovative twists to its iconography and even turning its supposed function on its head. Greenhouses traditionally protect plants from inclement weather, making the most of every ray of sun; in contrast, in San Antonio, plants must be protected from the sun's excesses, so that the soil becomes the element that actually shelters the plants, while the large curtained glass panes, which can be inclined to various angles as the sun moves, simply serve as a canopy.

Rather than alluding to the future, this techno-ecological vision proposes a view of the entire botanical complex as an archaeological site: an evocative open-air panorama of "ruins" in which the vegetation becomes an integral part of the construction and thus in a sense symbolizes nature's victory over the arrogance of human artifact.

In its clear rejection of biological interpretations of environmental issues, this approach, which has continued to develop in Ambasz's subsequent designs, reveals how very different his most recent work is from science-driven strategies that incorporate ecology by simply applying more refined technological components to stereotypical typologies and conventional built volumes.

Renewed focus on ecological issues has produced scientific protocols and fostered environmental policies, but has not yet been as successful in generating convincing architectural responses. Ecological concerns are now high on the agenda both nationally and internationally, underpinned by increasingly robust technical know-how, and the spread of schools with an environmental focus. Widely associated in public opinion with reasonable expectations of improved quality of life, such concerns simultaneously interact with sophisticated demands stemming from a culture of well-being that celebrates the body as reflecting an almost religious conception of the environment. However, the ramifications of all this have only recently and laboriously begun to filter through into construction typologies and to trigger reformulations of the ways that space is shaped and defined. Ambasz's merit lies in having anticipated and fostered the new alliance between humans and nature as a visionary priority, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of nostalgic misinterpretation that would reassert a world of lost forms.

- 1 All text by Fulvio Trace originally written in Italian have been formerly published in English in Fulvio Trace, *Emilio Ambasz: A Technological Arcadia* (Milan: Skira, 2004).
- 2 Emilio Ambasz, "I Ask Myself," in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic: Architecture, Exhibit, Industrial and Graphic Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 25.
- 3 Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, "The Lords of Nothingness," in *X-ray of the Pampa*, trans. Alain Swietlicki (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 7, cited in Emilio Ambasz, "Anthology for a Spatial Buenos Aires (1966)," in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic*, 33 (see note 2).
- 4 Michael Sorkin, "Arcadia versus Utopia," *MoMA*, no. 22 (September 1979): 34.
- 5 Arthur Drexler, *Five Architects* (New York: Wittenborn & Co., 1972).
- 6 Emilio Ambasz, "Summary," in *idem*, ed., *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 422.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Emilio Ambasz, unpublished typescript, 3.
- 9 Emilio Ambasz, "Una relazione sul mio lavoro," in *Europa/America: Architetture urbane alternative suburban*, ed. Franco Raggi (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1978), 196–197.
- 10 Emilio Ambasz, *The Architecture of Luis Barragán* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976).
- 11 Vincent Scully, from *Progressive Architecture*, 55 (July 1974), quoted in Livio Sacchi, *Il disegno dell'architettura americana* (Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1989): 121.
- 12 Peter Eisenman, "To Adolf Loos & Bertolt Brecht," *Progressive Architecture*, 55 (May 1974): 54–55.
- 13 Manfredo Tafuri, "Les bijoux indiscrets," in *Fine Architects NY*, ed. Camillo Gubitosi and Alberto Izzo (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1976), 17.
- 14 Gaetano Pesce, in Ambasz, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, 212–22 (see note 6).
- 15 Ambasz, *The Architecture of Luis Barragán*, 12 (see note 10).
- 16 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 21 Ambasz, "Anthology for a Spatial Buenos Aires (1966)," 37 (see note 3). Translator's note: The quotes are from Borges' poem "Un Patio" (1923) and an earlier variant of this poem.
- 22 Ambasz, "I Ask Myself," 26 (see note 2).
- 23 Martínez Estrada, "The Lords of Nothingness," quoted in Ambasz, "Anthology for a Spatial Buenos Aires (1966)," 33 (see note 3): "It is the pampa, where man is alone, like an abstract being that will begin anew the story of the species — or conclude it."
- 24 Christian Zapatka, ed., *Mary Miss: Making Place* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1997), 53–55.

Consistently transposing the principle of environmental remediation into architectonic design, Ambasz has made a hugely original contribution by consolidating a culture of the landscape that moves away from an elitist "art of gardens" restricted to a few exemplary cases and asserts itself as the favored tool in environmental regeneration; many even unhesitatingly identify this as a new paradigm: the design concept as modification. Long before the Dutch tackled the idea of the "hybrid landscape" in the 1990s, Ambasz focused with great precision on the "artificial landscape," not as a simulation of lost innocence but as a working hypothesis to reconstruct a "technological innocence" that can play a key part in reshaping an environment in keeping with the quintessence of the third modern age.

Against the backdrop of highly diverse contemporary engagement with such issues around the world, Ambasz's oeuvre generously anticipates many of the most widespread characteristics of what has been dubbed "green architecture." Working in relative isolation from distracted critical opinion, Ambasz has tackled a host of topics in this realm including exploring the potential of underground space, landscape design's importance as a point of reference for architecture, typological inflections of the "green facade," or the "garden" as an informal landscape in urban and territorial regeneration. His engagement with these questions has led James Wines to dub him the "new messiah of environmental architecture."³⁹

Fortunately the broader context has now been profoundly transformed, and science and economy underscore the design credibility of Ambasz's "soft manifesto." Although when it was first formulated, this manifesto still seemed to be a humanist hypothesis verging on the idealistic, it can now transpose into blueprints based on a clear design concept the precepts of the entropic paradigm formulated with dramatic clarity by James Rifkin, thus highlighting how far removed Ambasz's oeuvre is from the ephemeral splendor of the hyperconsumerist architecture that left its mark on the second half of the twentieth century. In an architectural landscape increasingly characterized by the perverse fascination of iconicity and an excessive pursuit of theories borrowed from philosophy, Ambasz's architecture has pursued a pathway of eccentric solitude, preferring the originality of a constant, obsessive quest to the uniformization imposed by the critic-driven system to mark architecture as recognizable and affiliated to a particular architectural camp. In the face of the arrogant reception reserved for "square pegs that do not fit into round holes," Ambasz has defied shifting fashions. In the process, he has established a *modus operandi* that has allowed him, in the space of just a few years, to put seemingly unrealistic notions into practice. Examples include the most emblematic of his built fables, the Seville House, along with the house in Montana, the Lucile

25 *Ibid.*, 10.

26 Emilio Ambasz, "Replies to Michael Sorkin's Questions," in the present volume, 284.

27 "We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and the water-fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in the space, in this sort of microcosm. [...] The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and it is also the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity." Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," text of a lecture presented to the Architectural Studies Circle in 1987, trans. Robert Hurley, in Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, vol. 2., ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 175-85, here, 181-82.

28 Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977).

29 See Barbaralee Diamonstein, ed., *Collaboration: Artists and Architects* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1981).

30 Raggi, *Europa/America* (see note 9).

31 Emilio Ambasz, "Una relazione sul mio lavoro," in Raggi, *Europa/America*, 106 (see note 9).

32 Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 110.

33 Emilio Ambasz, "Replies to Michael Sorkin's Questions," in the present volume, 286.

34 Emilio Ambasz, "Green Towns," typescript, February 24, 1995, 4-5.

35 Michael Sorkin, "Et in Arcadia Emilio," in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic*, 17 (see note 2).

36 Emilio Ambasz, "Manhattan, capital del XX secolo," *Cosabella*, no. 397 (January 1975): 4.

37 James Wines, ed., *Green Architecture* (Cologne: Taschen, 2000), 69.

38 Ambasz, "Una relazione sul mio lavoro," in Raggi, *Europa/America*, 106 (see note 9).

39 Wines, *Green Architecture*, 69 (see note 37).

Halsell Conservatory in San Antonio, and the cycle of his influential works in Japan. In the past decade the unexpected strand of his fruitful Italian design "tour" (strikingly exemplified in the Ospedale dell'Angelo [Hospital of the Angel] and the Banca degli Occhi [Eye Bank] in Mestre) has been added to the roll call of design concepts that testify to Ambasz's singular vision, whose success is also reflected in the extensive dissemination of his motifs. Although initially his architecture may have seemed simply to foreshadow an intimist utopia that reduces 1960s avant-garde futurological schemes to a poetic dimension, the architect fairly promptly demonstrated that his experiments entail a more mature, professionally aware interpretation of the mission articulated in his overarching design concept, opening up an unexpected window on Adam's eternal dream of returning to his original "house in Paradise."

I understand architecture as the search for a spiritual abode. On the one hand, I am playing with the pragmatic elements that come from my time, such as technology. On the other hand, I am proposing a certain mode of existence that is an alternative, a new one. My work is a search for giving architectural forms to primal things: being born, being in love, and dying. They have to do with existence on an emotional, passionate, and essential level. Perhaps I use very austere elements to express this quest and, therefore, the gesture may be seen as an austere one also. But by doing it in this way, I believe that it may be far more durable. I am interested in the passionate and the emotional when they assume a timeless guise. EA

VISUAL APHORISMS

Fulvio Irace

I opted to be a fabulist rather than an ideologist because fables retain the ring of immutability long after ideologies have wilted.¹

Emilio Ambasz

Ambasz has long identified the “working fables” as vital tools in a *modus operandi* that rejects theory’s peremptory tone, preferring the multivalence of metaphor. Theoretical approaches, rooted essentially in rational reflection, are actually totalitarian and absolute; centered on an organizing principle, they construct a process controlled by logical sequences. With its focus on perfect order, theory loses sight of creative disorder in the short span of life, crystallizing the present in the vision of an abstract future, as if it were engaging in preparatory rites for the long journey toward utopia.

As a poetic expression of a condition that is not directly rational, metaphor is expressed in visual thinking and in literary construction, reinstating the image in its role of evoking myths: myths of refoundation that place architecture once again at the heart of the social vocation described by Vitruvius himself as on a par with primitive man’s discovery of fire.

As a reworking of the Enlightenment myth of the primitive hut in a postindustrial vein, the grape growers’ village in Borrego Springs illustrates how a process comes into being that is animated by the “ritual ethic of growth and renewal.”² Nature no longer appears as a referent of a rational order destined to be translated into stony solidity, but as a benign model of reconciliation, which mitigates community members’ individualistic aspirations by incorporating the ephemeral dimension of the passage of time.

Emilio’s island of folly transforms the eighteenth-century penchant for picturesque aesthetics into the narrative frame of a passage describing a private garden and, in constructing a design image, envisages a miniature theater of memory in which the mechanism of memory is analyzed and forgetfulness suspended.

“Emilio’s Folly,” as well as offering a figurative and allegorical manifesto of its author’s idiosyncrasies, is also a catalog of the metaphors that recur in his architecture: water and the earth, the house

1. Emilio Ambasz, "I Ask Myself,"
in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic: Architecture, Exhibit, Industrial and Graphic Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 25.
2. Michael Sorkin, "Et in Arcadia Ego,"
in *ibid.*, 22.
3. *Ibid.*, 17.

with a Mediterranean patio, subterranean architecture and the descent toward the depths: to use Sorkin's formulation, it is his own personal "Aleph," "a summary offered with the full certification of the unconscious."³

Passing from the canopy at the entrance to the twilight glimmer of the misty cavity offers a didactic description of memory elaborated through cognition's subterranean strata, while simultaneously testifying to the hopes associated with the act of designing, evading paralysis by memory's repetition compulsion.

Cooperative of Mexican-American Grape Growers

Borrego Springs, California, 1979¹

Emilio Ambasz

At the heart of this Cooperative of Mexican-American Grape Growers are nine families who, thanks to government grants and loans, have managed to buy some land in a small valley in southern California. The very hot climate is not ideal for grape-growing, but these farmers, advised by viticulture experts from the University of California, draw on a technique used in hot regions in southern Europe. As is customary in southern Italy, the vines are trained up over a wire grid, suspended on three-meter-high columns made of cement and wood, and set at five-meter intervals. The vines grow around each column and then spread out horizontally, so that their leaves create a thick canopy, which protects the grapes from the sun's ravages and allows the shaded ground below to be used for other crops.

The project is divided into four phases. In the first, the nine founding families move to the site in their caravans and live with their families directly under the vineyard's shady canopy: a passageway opened up in two intersecting walls, relics of an abandoned ranch, forms the entrance, while eight square plots, one for each family, will be arranged in a formal configuration, similar to that found in early Hispano-American villages, paying tribute to the families' cultural heritage. Two lines of hedges flank the access route from the gateway to the homes, forming an axis along which the cooperative will hopefully be able to develop and thrive. A small open-air chapel is dug into the ground, with stepped levels descending to the first water table. The chapel's cross emerges from the water, and will shift in tune with its flowing motion. Every Sunday the parishioners will take a spadeful of earth from one of the two heaps at the entrance to the chapel and will shovel it onto a second mound until all the soil forms one heap; at that point a new cycle begins.

Electricity is supplied by a generator connected to a large wheel with wooden blades, set in a pond. A canal dug across the site carries water to the livestock pen, which will be carefully positioned to ensure any animal odors do not carry to the dwellings.

1 The original text was in English. It appears in Emilio Ambasz, *Architettura & Natura/Design & Artificio; Architecture & Nature/Design & Artificio* (Milan: Elemond-Electa, 1999). This is a slightly amended version approved by Emilio Ambasz.

In the second phase a further sixteen families arrive with their own mobile homes. The organizational principle is different for these dwellings however. They will be set in two new large quadrilaterals, configured to define a triangular plaza for Friday night dances and the market on Saturday where the cooperative's produce will be sold to surrounding villages. Each of these residential quadrilaterals will be divided into nine smaller plots. The central plot in each is a play area for children from the eight families who live around it, while adolescents can spend their free time in the garden on the banks of the pond; this grid, formed by seven-meter-high hedges that create square openings, will be the only example of urban order in the valley's vast expanse. The succession of small private spaces carved out of the hedges' prism-like forms creates isolated nooks and crannies where everyone can enjoy a moment of solitude or meet with friends.

The smallest of the squares facing the triangular plaza is a semi-public space, with an oven and large tables for cooking and sharing midday meals. The tables also function as school benches for classes on Mexican cultural heritage to supplement the children's regular education.

Before the second group of settlers arrives, the cooperative's growing production calls for expanding an underground cellar to be built close to the entrance, providing a cool storage space for the wooden vats. The grapes are collected in a conical silo, a structure with Mexican roots that was traditionally used to store farming produce.

The third phase — imbued with hopes that the divisions into private space for each family will be abandoned, fostering a more community-based lifestyle — is perhaps more a reflection of the architect's wishes than of the settlers' plans.

In the fourth phase we find a metaphor expressing the eternal yearning for all walls to crumble away, allowing humans to live together in peace beneath the shade of the vines, drawing succor from their bountiful grapes.

GREEN FACADE VERTICAL GARDEN

Fulvio Irace

Through his architecture, Emilio Ambasz does more than simply produce "catalogs of the ineffable": viewed with hindsight, the abacus of his design production reveals the regular rhythm of a combinatory system that adopts an experimental approach, reinterpreting and inflecting recurring typological features or building materials in relation to specific programs.

The "trope" of the metal grid appeared for the first time in the project for the Mexican grape growers (1976) as a metaphor for a sheltering cover, subsequently morphing from this pergola form to become a latticework wall in the Hortus Conclusus maze in the *Parcs et Jardins* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (1989). It even takes on the role of a "structural" cladding in the New Town Center in Chiba (1989).

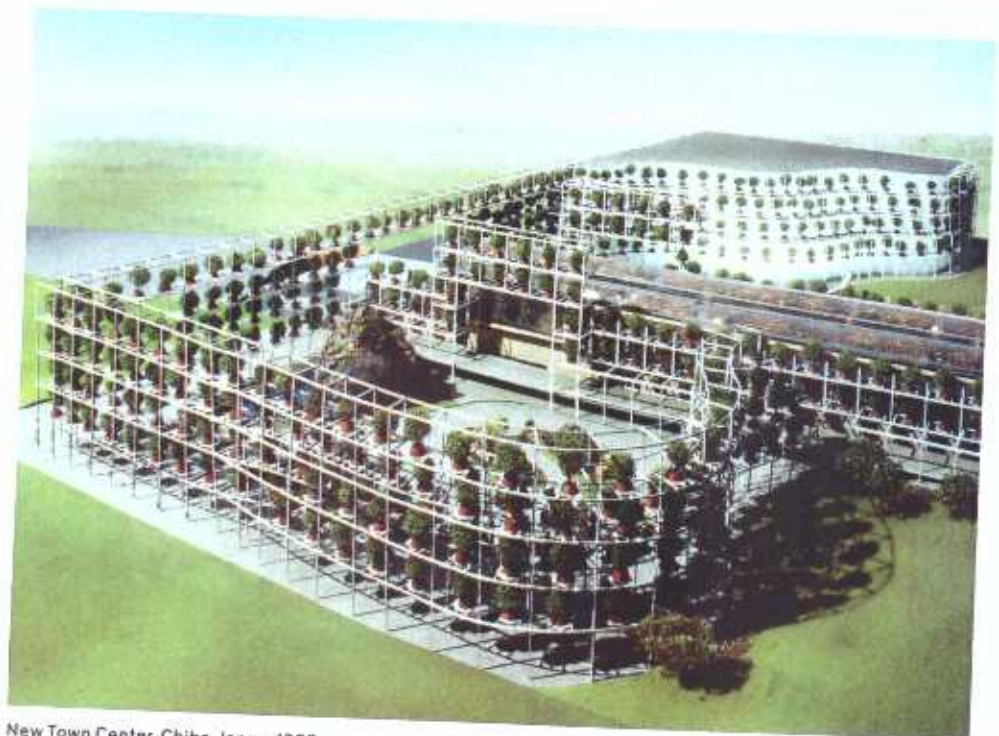


Hortus Conclusus, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, 1989

For a whole host of reasons Ambasz views this city as the prototype of the "green towns" that should become the hallmark of Japan's new urban planning policy, reflecting its highly developed, technologically avant-garde society which is simultaneously sensitive to an age-old tradition of respecting and devoting attention to nature.

Grounded in the principle of melding humans and the environment, the Japanese "green towns" are designed in the light of the great scope for remote working opened up by evolving electronic means of communication. Conceived for at least 10-30,000 inhabitants, these urban centers also have outstanding transport links thanks to the new high-speed rail network. The train station thus becomes the heart of the city, enhancing its configuration as a genuine "town center." In Chiba, for example, the new town center is configured as a multifunctional complex of public and private spaces, with "green architecture" encoding a uniform design process for all the new facades in its urban context.

Ambasz uses an open structural grid as a defining feature within the cityscape, both to mitigate the environmental impact of Chiba's new commercial center and to help minimize the precarious sense of incompleteness that can arise in ambitious long-term construction projects. Space for plants is provided in each module of this three-dimensional metallic network, which Lauren Sedofsky traces back to Sol LeWitt's evocative cubic constructions.¹ The structure thus forms a barrier, shielding the area from nearby road and rail arteries, while also establishing visual continuity between the various parts of the complex; a paradoxical element of permanence in the heart of the evolving new urban center.



New Town Center, Chiba, Japan, 1989

Rephrasing the plant-based grid in its mature form as a fully fledged vertical garden, Ambasz therefore anticipates explorations of mesh facades, notably exemplified in work by Herzog & de Meuron in Napa Valley. His work also foreshadows solutions such as those adopted, for example, by Gaetano Pesce in the Organic Building in Osaka (1994), or by Jean Nouvel in the "plant-based" facades of his design for the French Embassy in Berlin (1997), the "green wall" for the Fiat Belfiore redevelopment in Florence (2002) or the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (2006) and, last but not least, by Herzog & de Meuron at the Caixa Forum in Madrid.

The Western brise-soleil motif is transformed into the continuous facade of a vertical orangery, planted with various tree species that offer a seasonal cycle of blossoms; a twofold reference, alluding to Western cultural concepts of the well-ordered garden and the Japanese tradition of cultivated nature. The theme is reprised on a colossal scale in the Torii gateway, with two high office towers signaling the entrance to the city as trains pull into the station. The vegetation growing on the facade conceals the underlying curtain wall, evoking Japanese dwellings' covered verandas.

The poetic gesture of transforming the curtain wall into a vertical garden, restoring the natural environment, is also a logical reworking, through the prism of biotechnology, of the focus on energy-saving concerns that has become such a vital part of the contemporary architecture agenda. This is quite deliberately developed into a figurative theme that runs through contemporary commercial buildings, for example in OMA's design for Koningin Julianaplein in The Hague (2002). It also figures in radical green redesigns of this type of architecture, for example in Ambasz's ENI building in Rome's EUR complex, an exemplary testament to the International Style's impact on 1950s Italian design culture. Ambasz's strategy seems on the one hand to embrace the environmental approach that Gabetti e Isola incorporated into the ENI-Snam project in Milan, yet simultaneously proposes an original iconography for the Italian energy giant's headquarters, creating a sense of corporate respect for the natural envi-



Museum of Modern Art (MAMBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1997

THE GREEN MOUNTAIN

Fulvio Irace

The first stages of Emilio Ambasz's "journey to the East" date from the second half of the 1980s; the locus of cultural transfers between East and West throughout history, Japan has above all been a lodestone for the dreams of art and modern architecture. From Wright to Taut or Mies van der Rohe, architects have sought, through the mystery of Japanese tradition, to master the tension inherent in modernist endeavors to attain the ideal purity of total "truth."

Is it perhaps just a coincidence that the extraordinary prismatic glass facade in one of Ambasz's first Japanese projects—the Nichii Obihiro Department Store in Hokkaido—is imbued with postindustrial echoes of Bruno Taut's utopian vision, conjured up in Paul Scheerbart's *Glasarchitektur*?

The complex, which has the air of an enormous sparkling quartz, is swathed in a multifaceted glass veil, with tall trees planted in the space between this enclosing element and the structures within. The irregular forms of a greenhouse thus take shape, its contours defined by both the imperatives of building regulations and the precisely calculated interplay of shadows and reflected light.

The trope of the green mountain—recurring so frequently in Ambasz's projects that it in a sense becomes an archetype—is combined here with the image of an inhabited mountain. The iconography created embraces myriad historical illusions, yet is also densely charged with new meanings, as demonstrated by its recent reprisal in two competition designs by Jean Nouvel: the Musée de l'Évolution Humaine in Burgos (2000) and the Guggenheim Temporary Museum of Art in Tokyo (2001).

The Nichii Obihiro Department Store, an optimistic counterpoint to the dense urban fabric in Hokkaido's second largest city, offers a radically innovative twist on the recurrent typology of the shopping mall. This "mountain-mall," as Lauren Sedofsky describes it, rejects both the notion of architecture as container and the idea of a microcity of merchandise, opting instead for a hybrid geological structure in which nature and the man-made pay their design dues to the Japanese art of the garden.

A large hollow center—inspired most immediately by the organic irruption evoked in the Union Station redevelopment project in Kansas City—houses a winter garden that creates an all-pervasive impression of a “naturalistic” landscape rather than simulating the static order of nineteenth-century “palm houses.” This symbolic reference to the interior as an organic “cavity” is the first in a family of recurring tropes in Ambasz’s large-scale projects, as manifested in variations on this theme in the Worldbridge Trade and Investment Center in Baltimore (1989), the Mycal Cultural and Athletic Center in Shin-Sanda, and the Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall (1990).

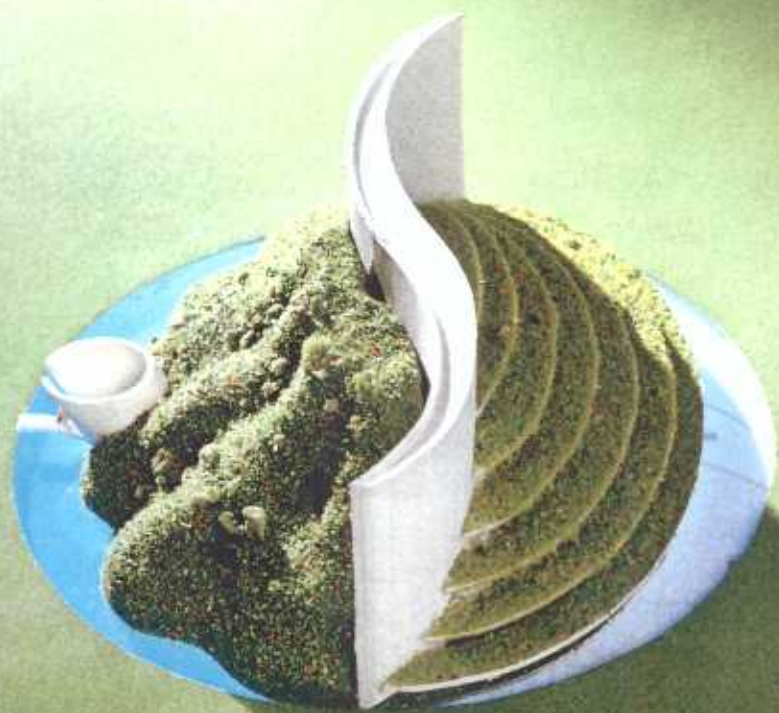
Whereas the Baltimore complex strengthens the allegorical deployment of geological morphology, the Mycal Center teases out the idea of constructing a total landscape, with the visible fragments of the functional structure seeming to hold back a topographical explosion within. In Fukuoka, the stair—a symbol of the descent into the depths of the earth in the visual aphorisms—becomes the underpinning for a “natural promenade” that extends the existing park upwards, creating scenographically resonant effects. The stepped profile of this Japanese iteration of an “Arcadian ziggurat,”¹ stratified into shallow terraces gradually ascending from the surrounding park, combines the practical concern of providing natural light to the office spaces with the symbolic mysticism of a “sacred staircase,” which runs through the various gardens—for meditation, rest, refuge, etc.—to conclude in the panoramic vista from the upper terrace. The impression created by this vegetation-cloaked building turns it into a metaphor for a gradually dawning awareness of the city’s equivocal identity, finally drawn together into a whole in the view over the bay from the belvedere’s heights.

The ethical imperative and constructional device informing Ambasz’s “green over gray” design strategy lies in giving the community back all the greenery that has vanished due to new construction projects. It is a strategy that draws on a philosophy of subtraction and repositioning typical of landscape art, while also tapping into an idea of architecture that Ettore Sottsass has described as being “like a talismanic instrument of a wager, of a hidden ritual to fascinate some immense natural divinity, [...] a liturgy, performed to obtain forgiveness for the scars we inflict every day on the planet.”²

However, the shopping and office centers in Shin-Sanda, Fukuoka, and Hokkaido as well as the National Diet Library in Kansai Science City are also elements of a pragmatic utopia articulated by Ambasz—the “green town movement”—that is particularly relevant to the dynamics of urbanization in Japan: “creating new urban settlements which do not alienate the citizen from the vegetable kingdom, but rather create an architecture which is inextricably woven [...] into nature.”³

- 1 James Wines, ed., *Green Architecture* (Cologne: Taschen, 2000), 69.
- 2 Ettore Sottsass, in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic: Architecture, Exhibit, Industrial and Graphic Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 10.
- 3 "Why Not the Green over the Gray?" *Damus*, no. 772 (June 1995): 83.

The formal and functional inflections of these projects epitomize the catalog of urban solutions that the vision of a postindustrial Broadacre City demands: high-speed trains instead of private cars and "mountain-buildings" instead of the isolated skyscrapers imagined by Wright. The National Diet Library, designed as a node in Kansai's new Science City, embodies the living memory of the country's historical culture, making it both a symbolic and functional element in the new urban landscape built on the hills of Keihanna: a "sacred mountain," a ritual tumulus, akin to those where sacred texts were preserved thousands of years ago. As a monumental reinterpretation of the rock/mountain archetype underlined in "Emilio's Folly," the National Diet Library's hillock of earth lies at the origin of the ensemble's configuration, embodying the vital role that collective symbols play in creating well-defined urban identities.



THE EARTH AS A GARDEN

Fulvio Irace

The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art.

Robert Smithson¹

Scratching, incising, removing layers of soil: the hallmarks of the concept of architecture as a total landscape seem to be the architectural manifestation of the 1960s American avant-garde's endeavors to create "landscape," analyzed notably by Rosalind Krauss in her famous 1978 essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." Collaborations with artists form an important chapter in the bildungsroman of Ambasz's evolving design strategy, in which he does not simply respond to motifs developed by others but figures as an active protagonist.

His friendship with Robert Smithson, and indeed his admiration for the principal representatives of American landscape art, from Sol LeWitt to Michael Heizer and Richard Serra, springs spontaneously from their natural conceptual kinship, which grows out of a belief that "every act of construction is a defiance of nature": "the ideal gesture would be to arrive at a plot of land so immensely fertile and welcoming that, slowly, the land would assume a shape—providing us with an abode. [...] We must build our house on Earth only because we are not welcome on the land."²

Environmental art, typically at odds with the construction of spaces, refuses to represent reality by duplicating it. Instead it chooses to recreate reality anew through tangible interventions; defining places, making a mark on the earth, producing installations that seem not to rest on the ground but somehow to emanate from the very soil. This is architecture generated by digging into the ground and displacing the earth, intersecting with preexisting natural elements. In a radical redefinition of the landscape's traditional significance as a backdrop to be contemplated, it becomes the vanishing point in an undertaking that imagines the setting in terms of total theater. Actively including the viewer makes it vital to include perception in the equation, conferring meaning to the way that each specific site is individuated. Introducing the spectator's viewpoint implies

reflecting on the landscape's temporal reality as a locus constructed through interactions between human and nature. That makes it impossible to conceptualize nature as somehow separate or existing prior to cultural anthropology. On the other hand, it opens up scope for a narrative of the landscape as the end result of a working process that bears all the typical traits of a foundational rite, as for example in the Borrego Springs' agricultural cooperative.

Like Michael Heizer or Robert Smithson's earthworks, Emilio Ambasz's environmental architecture presupposes drawing up an imaginary topographic study that is informed by the preeminence of the land as the matrix of the future landscape. Sounding out its contours signifies establishing a symbolic—one might even say ontological or ancestral—correlation between geology and psychology, articulated in didactic, apologist tones in the working fables and on a pragmatic note, focusing on environmental remediation in the large-scale projects. The allegorical dimension of these places is perfectly legible only in a bird's-eye view. The layout of the Nuova Concordia residential complex in Castellaneta, for example, sheds the bucolic air associated with vacation villages when viewed from above, revealing instead a complex, almost hermetic configuration of signs, inscribed in the ground like traces of an archaeological dig. No readily recognizable icons can be identified here, bringing us once again to Ambasz's abstract and minimalist architectural sensibility, which draws on asymmetry and geometry to transform the temptation of naturalism into subtly surreal imagination.

Ambasz elucidates his stance in the following terms: "I believe that in our pursuit to master Nature-as-found, we have created a



Nuova Concordia residential complex, Castellaneta, Italy, 1994

1 Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 110.

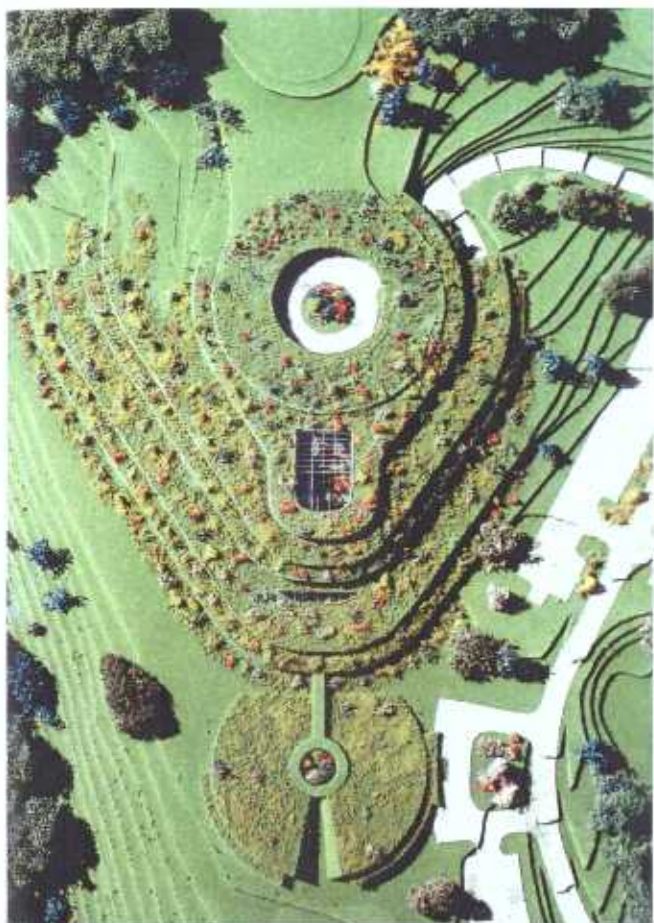
2 Emilio Ambasz, "Replies to Michael Sorkin's Questions," in the present volume, 284.

3 *Ibid.*, 286.

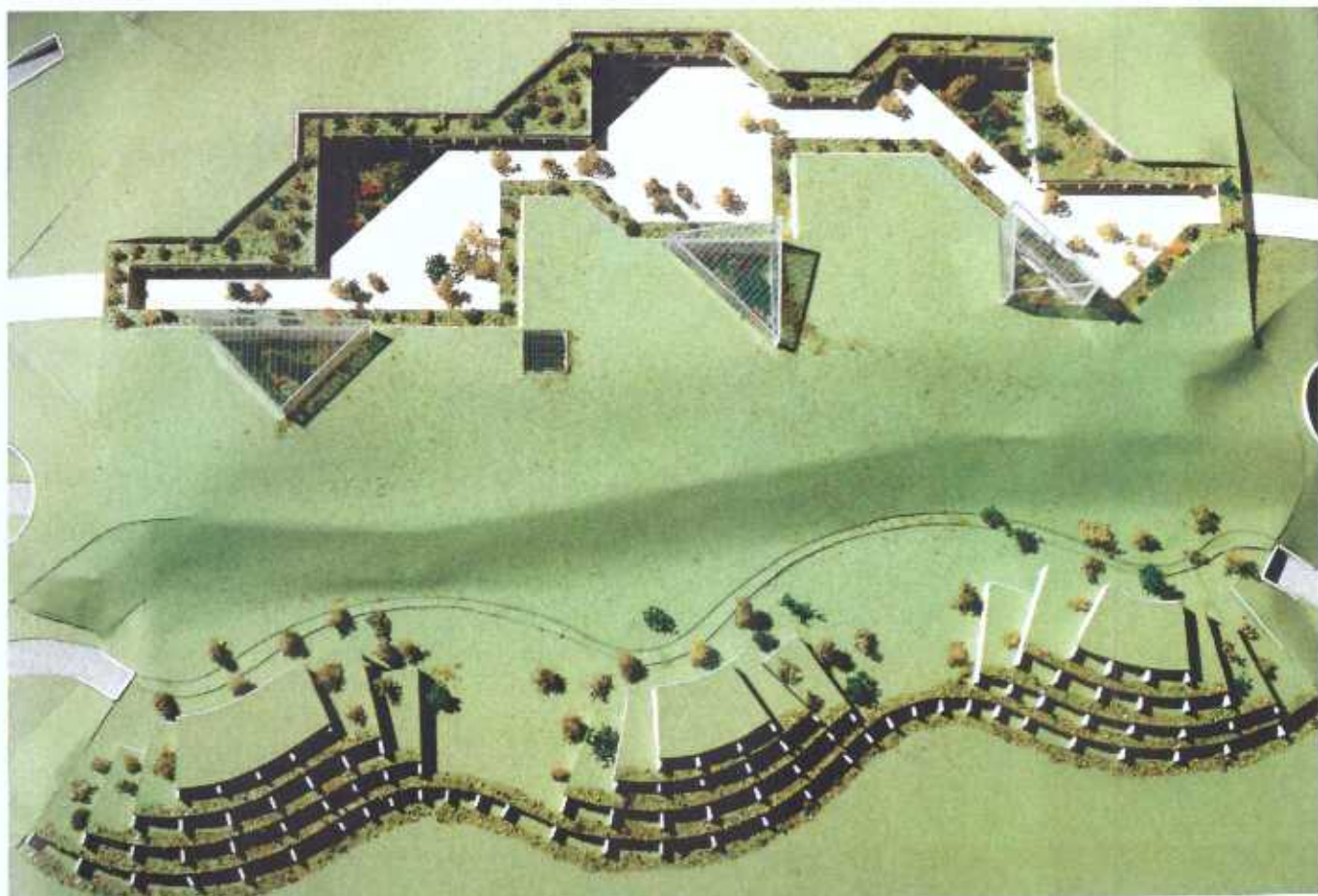
second man-made-Nature, intricately related to the given-Nature. We need to redefine architecture as one aspect of our man-made nature, but to do so we need first to redefine the contemporary meaning of Nature."³

In the regeneration proposal for La Venta, on the outskirts of Mexico City, reforestation of a badly neglected woodland area serves as a springboard to create an eccentric spectrum of geometric forms amid the vegetation. The new plant nurseries establish a hybrid typology of terraced levels that accommodate office space within and open-air sections to grow tall trees on the exterior. Inhabited as it is by mysterious presences—a rectangle, a triangle, a semicircle etc.—the La Venta forest is a nonmimetic landscape, almost the architectural equivalent of Foucault's idea of the construction of a space, making a mark on the landscape by earth-based interventions or vegetation. The Winnisook Lodge hotel and leisure complex in Catskill Park, on a wooded ridge of Belleayre Mountain, is a further project in the same conceptual category. Winnisook Lodge is structured around precise, curvilinear forms that are reminiscent of the remains of ancient cities swathed in luxuriant vegetation, seeming almost to be a three-dimensional extension of the adjacent golf course. A virtual presence is therefore correlated to the architecture's "absence": the hint of an analogy that alludes to nature vanquishing the ruins of the built realm.

The Vathorst shopping center outside Amersfoort sets up formal echoes with the idea of a prehistoric site revealed by archaeological excavations; extending in a deep fault line cut into the ground, it seems a fitting tribute to the Dutch environmental ethos, in a country whose entire history is cast as an age-old tale of the antagonism between the sea and the land.



The Winnisook Lodge hotel, Catskill Mountains, New York, USA, 2000



The Vathorst shopping center, Amersfoort, The Netherlands, 1999

BUILDING IN THE GARDEN

Fulvio Irace

Considering the garden as Emilio Ambasz's "Aleph" and "the biosphere of his greatness of place,"¹ as Michael Sorkin has written, the Argentinian architect can easily be seen as a new twentieth-century Paxton. However, whereas the latter, availing himself of the new technological possibilities of "greenhouse-style" construction in his Crystal Palace design, epitomized nineteenth-century pretensions of rational control of the world, the Argentinian architect seems to accord the greenhouse the role of a poetic iconography for his idea of artificial nature.

The greenhouse, a transparent display case for an artificial, climate-controlled environment, is a translucent refuge that functions as a counterweight to the grotto's penumbrous gloom and the soil's compact opacity. In contrast to the magnificent nineteenth-century blossoming of glass-based structures, the greenhouse therefore cannot be viewed simply as a stand-alone structure, for it functions instead as the principal element in a semiotic system that also encompasses the soil in order to establish the effect of a total landscape—as for example in the Edmond de Rothschild Memorial Museum in Ramat Hanadiv.

Ettore Sottsass has noted that in the architectural work of Ambasz "there are almost never objects plainly resting on earth, as is usually the case in more conventional architecture where buildings are just a statement, and that is all. Emilio's architectural creations are a bit outside the earth and a bit inside it. They are like stone slabs emerging from the earth, or fissures cracking the earth open, rather than attempts at controlling the universe by means of logic or agreed-upon signs. His is an architecture seeking, almost always, to represent the internal and eternal movement of an all-encompassing planetary geology while at the same time respectfully reflecting local pulses, explosions, contractions, tempests, and deeply welled mysteries."²

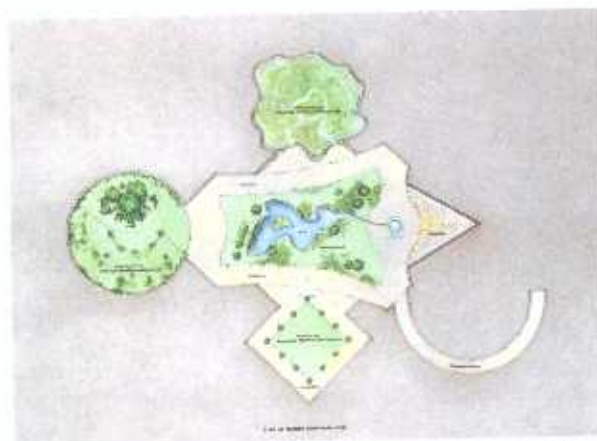
Within this complex symbology, the Lucile Halsell Conservatory in San Antonio (1982) remains the principal text and the matrix from which a design family with multiple and sometimes paradoxical applications is generated. In the hot, dry climate of southern Texas, for example, greenhouses protect plants from the sun rather than cap-

turing its light and warmth. In this context the earth is the element that really contains and protects the vegetation, with the variable prisms of curtained glass functioning simply as a covering. The configuration of the glazing varies as a function of the sun's angle of incidence, an expressive catalog of geometry, with the panes projecting upwards like frozen fragments of an underground explosion.

As a result, the project imbues the landscape with the touching and vaguely romantic air of a scenic garden; in a gentle undulating meadow dotted with fragile ruins, the vegetation becomes an integral part of the construction and thus indissociable from it; a collective transposition of the obsessions articulated in autobiographical terms in "Emilio's Folly." The vaguely anthropomorphic layout of the Lucile Halsell Conservatory is centered on its open underbelly, a patio—the eternal "channel of sky" lauded by Borges³—that acts as a potent lodestone; with its arcades holding in check the greenhouses' air of controlled explosion, it exerts a powerful magnetic pull on the verdant islands of the individual "places."

Ambasz explains "Architecture is, for me, one aspect of our quest for cosmological models. [...] Every one of my projects seeks to possess at least an attribute of the universe."⁴

In his conception of the San Antonio Botanical Gardens as a ceremonial itinerary unfurling above and below the horizon line,



Baron Edmond de Rothschild Memorial Museum, Ramat Hanadiv, Israel, 1993

1 Michael Sorkin, "Et in Arcadia Ego," in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic: Architecture, Exhibit, Industrial and Graphic Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 23.

2 Ettore Sottsass, in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic*, 9 (see note 1).

3 Jorge Luis Borges, "Un Patio," 1923.

4 Emilio Ambasz, "Replies to Michael Sorkin's Questions," in the present volume, 284.

Ambasz demonstrates a grasp of the greenhouse's surreal significance as an expression of the nineteenth-century yearning for the miraculous. This entails mastering the passage of time through technology, optimizing the power of the climate, and bringing together in this virtual Arcadia everything that appears scattered and fragmented in the real world, not to mention seizing pleasure: in a nutshell, eliminating nature's perils and innate harshness.

Perhaps this is why the model of the greenhouse can be applied to such apparently heterogeneous contexts, as Joseph Paxton intuited when he transposed it from the realm of horticulture to create gardens of goods and consumer desires. Beneath the transparent vaults of the Sirmione Thermal Gardens, for example, palms and other tall trees flourish alongside indoor pools, melding physical well-being with contemplation of nature. In the seemingly pristine natural landscape set on a peninsula by Lake Garda, a sense of a charming garden is evoked, yet the most refined wonders of sensory culture are concealed beneath the turf, blending the thermal springs' natural benefits with the artifice of human know-how.



Thermal Gardens, Sirmione, Italy, 1996

URBAN GARDENS

Fulvio Irace

The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and it is also the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity.

Michel Foucault¹

Set in opposition to the nonsites of utopias, the countersites of the heterotopias described by Foucault mark out the reality of a space in which all the other places of real life “are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.”²

Introducing a garden into the historical city’s stone-defined order, as in Ambasz’s proposal for Plaza Mayor in Salamanca, expresses a contradiction that can be resolved only by a poetic gesture of reconciliation. Breaking down the rectangle’s perfect geometry by introducing a series of converging steps into the protected, tree-lined space of a sunken courtyard implies creating an “other” place that interacts with the stony hierarchy of Churriguera’s facades, opening a surreal window onto the blithe realm of nature. As a consequence



Eschenheim Tower, Frankfurt, Germany, 1985

1. Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," text of a lecture presented to the Architectural Studies Circle in 1967, trans. Robert Hurley, in Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, vol. 2., ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 175–85, here p. 181–82.

2. *Ibid.*, 178.

3. Emilio Ambasz, "Replies to Michael Sorkin's Questions," in the present volume, 285.

4. Lauren Sedofsky, cited in *Analyzing Ambasz*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Monacelli Press, 2004), 60.

of the project's metaphorical value, it can be transposed to very different contexts, equally informed however by the artificiality of the urban landscape. Think for example of the Houston Center Plaza: an open piazza in the perfect grid that constitutes the matrix of the city, simultaneously emphasizing and questioning its historical hallmarks of regular, dense blocks. In both projects the functions of urban life are banished to extensive spaces carved out below ground level, while water features and the striking use of topiary clearly proclaim the role of the senses in perceiving the city.

Ambasz however refuses to define himself as the romantic heir of an Arcadian, antiurban vision, linking his work instead to the testaments of history: "To this day, you can go up to the top of the towers of a medieval city like Bologna, and discover that behind the facades defining treeless streets exist immense gardens which occupy almost 25 percent of the city area. Those were once vegetable gardens, and places where cows grazed. Those grounds were of utmost importance to survive a siege. [...] I strive for an urban future where you can open your door and walk out directly into a garden, regardless of how high your apartment may be."³

Lauren Sedofsky writes that in fact "in Ambasz's case the urban/nonurban distinction seems null and void. His production involves a prototype developed, not in the country, but in total isolation, a pure laboratory product."⁴

In a sense akin to Robert Smithson's "land reclamation," Ambasz's aspiration to create an elegiac, happy Arcadia does not seek to deny the reality of what exists but instead asserts his focus on a palpable notion of the earth. His more recent work addressing transformation of strategic sectors of the city appears to focus especially clearly on this aspect. That is particularly apparent in the project for the Eschenheim Tower in Frankfurt, which aims to resolve the problem of traffic along the nineteenth-century ring road. It develops a solution that covers over the road infrastructure by introducing variations into the street levels, and incorporates an artificial hill that functions as a pedestrian bridge, linking the existing park and gardens into a verdant organic network. A strategy thus emerges that advocates fluid solutions to redesign circulation in tune with the logic of green urban planning, overcoming the separation of isolated buildings. The rationalist notion of the grid assumes a rational, vital meaning when applied to a range of artificial ground levels, forming the backbone of a renewed link that draws extensively on biotechnology and natural resources. The proposal for a residential and commercial development along Catharijnebaan in Utrecht is entirely in keeping with this approach; it is couched as a fitting tribute to the country most actively involved over the last few decades in developing an innovative conception of the landscape as a man-made technological Arcadia.

DOMESTIC GARDENS

Fulvio Irace

You always have the sense that behind the walls of these projects are absent presences or present absences. The notion of that which is in front of you and what happens behind the wall has always appealed to me. There is a certain anima or spirit behind the wall.

Emilio Ambasz¹

Picking up on an age-old tradition, the topic of the primordial dwelling, the dream of "Adam's house" and an investigation of phenomena that preceded the emergence of built forms reemerge and play a crucial role in Ambasz's explorations, reflecting his metaphysical concern with returning to the origins.

Radically pared down to just a handful of elements that reflect the drama of architecture celebrated in its liturgy, the Casa de Retiro Espiritual in the environs of Seville, in Spain, conveys the absolute tenor of a manifesto. The house as a refuge forms a poetic response to the intimacy rooted in the space, and, as Ambasz underlines "is not an answer to the pragmatic needs of man (that is, the task of building), but a response to his passion, his imagination."²

From a distance two walls that meet in a right angle announce the house's invisible presence; two steep stairways come together on high in the meditative belvedere; two streams of water descend along channels cut into the walls, flowing together in a semicircular basin set at the center of the patio.

The austere, timeless language purifies emotion in the surreal immobility of waiting; the architecture is reduced to a pure "simulacrum" and the earth emerges as the key player in the patio's serene emptiness. Rejecting static representations of space, Ambasz conceptualizes the house as a journey deep into the notion of dwelling, delving into the mystery of what is behind the wall. As Durand reminds us in *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (1960), "the axis of descent is an intimate, fragile, delicate one [...] we remount (time) and rediscover prenatal calm."

The drama of the descent narrative is tempered in the triangular patio, which sets up something akin to a filter between the exterior, reduced to a mask and a regained sense of living space. It is the notion

1 Quoted in *Analysing Ambasz*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Monacelli Press, 2004), 24.

2 Emilio Ambasz in *Progressive Architecture* 58, nos. 4-6 (1977): 233.

of the Eternal Return; of the Rituals of the Beginning. There is nothing monumental in the house's interior, which reveals an irregular and organic space structured by surprising recesses and unexpected projections that delimit the areas where the everyday rites of domestic life are celebrated. Diffuse light floods from the serpentine skylights, which carry a sense of the changing seasons into the interior, while curving walls advance and retreat like membranes, opening up to reveal concealed receptacles.

The landscape seems to appear in its pure state in the Manoir d'Angoussart design for the Lambert family in Bierges, Belgium. It is like a still life of geometric forms composed of the earth, conjuring up an image of a field that offers shifting perspectives. An ivy-clad facade welcomes the visitor like the ultimate destination in a trajectory of mute volumes and solid embankments. Set within a gorge, the house is built entirely within the earth, with grass, plants, and raised landscaping forming its introductory salvo and ornamentation, fusing the house and garden into a single entity.

The Montana house is again primarily embedded deep in the landscape, with the pared-down framework of the detached facade peeping somewhat hesitantly out of the grassy surroundings. Designed for a sophisticated art collector, the bucolic "hut" with six rustic wooden columns punctuating its facade is the first in a series of three follies to accommodate the family, the on-site guardhouse and an art gallery.



Private estate, Montana, USA, 1991



Private estate, Montana, USA, 1991

GARDENS OF MEMORY

Fulvio Irace

“An inexhaustible inventor of metaphors,”¹ Emilio Ambasz has always stated that he believes in architecture as an “act of mythmaking imagination”: “It is not hunger, but love and fear – and sometimes wonder – which make us create.”²

With its focus on representing fundamental principles, reflections on memory are set center stage in his architecture: an ancestral memory that touches on history to tap directly into the eternal enigmas of birth and death.

Pro Memoria Garden is the title and the programmatic thrust defining Ambasz’s project to create a living memorial to the horror, torments, and destruction unleashed by war. Every child born in the small town to the south of Hanover where it is located is welcomed into the world with a symbolic gift: a patch of land and a marble slab with his or her name inscribed upon it. Each diminutive garden is reassigned to a newborn when its previous owner dies; a new name then joins the previous name or names on the marble slab. As a living reflection of the town’s history, the garden will trace out the destinies



Barbie Knoll, Pasadena, California, USA, 1995

1 A. Meadini, in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic: Architecture, Exhibit, Industrial and Graphic Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 15.

2 Emilio Ambasz, "Replies to Michael Sarkin's Questions," in the present volume, 284.

3 Ettore Sottsass, in *Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic*, 9 (see note 1).

of the local populace while also testifying to the yearning for reconciliation shared by all human beings, transcending ideological and political divisions. The infinite garden's geometrical layout is guided by the organic pattern of a form that is neither foreseeable nor fixed: reflecting all that exists "as an ever-changing process" to cite Ettore Sottsass, Ambasz's work articulates a quest to find "a constant state of fluidity" to convey dreams, aspirations and fears through the prism of quotidian rituals and ceremonies.³

There is also a hilltop of memories in the museum-park dedicated to the ultimate icon of eternal dreams of beauty and youth: the Barbie doll. Reinterpreted as a postmodern version of the classical ideal of femininity—a Californian *kore*—Barbie plays the lead role in this informal Temple to Athena set in the hills of Pasadena: a kind of folk Sanssouci dedicated to the myths and history around this famous doll, showcasing the milestones and turning points that punctuate Barbie's fluctuating fortunes.

After entering an open-air courtyard, visitors arrive in the museum's irregularly shaped hypostyle, where each column corresponds to a version of the doll that symbolizes a particular era and fashion in Barbie's long biography. At the end of the visit, the museum's closed space opens up to the exterior. Here visitors encounter a slumbering vision of Sleeping Beauty embedded in a soft, luxuriant carpet of flowers and foliage: a sensual metaphor of eternal life, the American Beauty of infant dreams emerges like the evanescent *fata morgana* of an eternal lust for beauty.



Barbie Knoll, Pasadena, California, USA, 1995

GARDENS OF HEALTH

Fulvio Irace

Medical and surgical progress have brought about radical changes in life expectancy in the twentieth century, as well as dramatically improving treatment, preventive medicine, and health care, which have attained standards once conceivable only in utopian dreams. In terms of hygiene and distribution of space in the domestic realm, these developments have primarily been articulated in architecture through residential blueprints grounded in the idea that physical health is linked to healthy buildings. However, these improvements in housing design are not mirrored in a similarly tangible transformation of health-care architecture. Apart from a handful of exceptional projects—such as the Paimio Sanatorium by Alvar Aalto or Le Corbusier's unbuilt Venice hospital project—architectural designs have analyzed in minute detail how to ensure buildings in this sector deliver efficient health-care, yet have largely neglected patients' dignity and their right to receive care in the broader sense of the term.

However, rising life expectancy and the associated goal of shorter hospital stays make it imperative to rethink the quality of the surroundings in health-care settings. At the same time, new social standards have spurred endeavors to strike a different balance spatially, incorporating a new emphasis on aspects like light, color, gardens and vegetation in general, and on incorporating areas for patients to enjoy some solitude or rest. Over the last two decades, experimental projects such as REHAB in Basel or the Meyer Children's Hospital in Careggi, Florence, have therefore paved the way for a more humanist view of health-care architecture, introducing parameters usually reserved to private architecture or to leisure/wellness contexts.

The Ospedale dell'Angelo in Venice-Mestre, a rehabilitation facility with around 660 beds, is the first large-scale project to apply these criteria. It reflects an ambitious attempt to bring together a number of exceptional experimental features, consolidating them in a practical form that can serve as a model for numerous other contexts.

The result is surprising, yet the underlying idea is essentially quite simple. Drawing on the principle of the greenhouse and all-round landscape design in developing this major scheme, Ambasz has conceived an extensive district, which also encompasses the

innovative Banca degli Occhi (Eye Bank) alongside the hospital. The ensemble becomes an enormous garden of health, an evocative expanse of green in which the buildings rise up like monuments engaged in dialogue. In many respects, the complex's layout echoes the Lucile Halsell Conservatory in San Antonio, Texas, a true masterpiece of the Argentinian virtuoso's green architecture.

The hospital, the defining element in a huge urban park generously planted with trees, functions as a green barrier to urban development, introducing an entr'acte into a dense, built-up area on the city's outskirts. The building, shaped like an artificial hill, is terraced on the side that faces the park, opening on the opposite side onto an atrium-greenhouse enclosed within a vast expanse of glass. By filtering out noise from the railway tracks, this feature also creates a more comfortable environment for patients in rooms facing southwest. The sloping structure creates a visual link to the two unfolded wings of the Banca degli Occhi, creating rhythmic correspondences that suggest the entire complex constitutes a single extensive garden; a landscape-garden characterized by monoliths that are entirely out of the ordinary, evoking a remarkable sense of surprising presences. Two closed eyelid-shapes define the entrance to the Banca degli Occhi, forming a spectacular gateway to the mysteries of scientific research that reaches out with its forthright symbolism to embrace patients' fears and hopes. Elsewhere in the building the metaphor of the eye is continued, with a 450-seat auditorium symbolizing the pupil, while the Biblical symbolism of "fiat lux" — evoked by Michelangelo in his renowned *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel — is transposed into an abstract form in the courtyard and the two entrance wings.

Ospedale dell'Angelo

Venice-Mestre, Italy, 2008

This 660-bed hospital offers all general hospital services, plus, in the future, a Proton Beam Therapy and Treatment Center. It is conceived architecturally as an aid to the healing process. Its grand entrance hall—a glassed space more than 660 feet (ca. 200 meters) in length, 85 feet (26 meters) in depth, and 90 feet (27.4 meters) in height—is a veritable winter garden, with trees, flowers, and aromatic plants welcoming both patients and visitors. It is the first fully “green” hospital ever built. Patients approaching the hospital, be it by car, bus, or via the newly dedicated train station serving it, pass a large extension of green exterior, visible from every patient’s room, to enter the grand winter garden serving as the reception hall. The reverse ziggurat section of the building ensures that half of its patients have a direct view of the winter garden, while the other half have a personal view to the plants growing outside their windows in deep earth and plant-covered terraced containers. The vision guiding this design was that the building should help allay the fears of incoming patients and also contribute to their recovery in their convalescence. Accordingly, patients can perambulate on a series of dedicated high, terraced platforms overlooking the winter garden. For those patients not able to move far from their rooms, every floor offers lounges with views of the winter garden. To avoid the visual intrusion of a large mass of functional service buildings, all surrounding structures—the administration center, the large parking garage, the mortuary, and the adjacent chapel, as well as all laboratories and operating rooms—have been bermed up on three sides and covered with planting, as are their roofs.

Banca degli Occhi

Venice-Mestre, Italy, 2009

This laboratory, under the aegis of the private foundation Fondazione Banca degli Occhi, is unique not only for the fact that it has more than thirty years of experience in eye transplants and training doctors in these techniques, but also that it has engaged in stem cell research with remarkable ophthalmologic results. The building, following a triangular plan, contains the stem cell research labs, a school for training professionals, operating and recovery rooms, and covered parking, as well as a large underground auditorium. The building is defined by two long trapezoidal walls, sheathed with a bronze patina finish and placed at right angles to each other; their projected tips are separated by a few inches, thus evoking Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel of God's finger transferring his *élan vital* to Adam. The roof of the building is a stepped section plane covered in fragrant greenery that can be appreciated in both an olfactory and visual way by the patients upon entering; it also serves as an open-air auditorium as well as providing an emergency exit for each floor. On the third side, the laboratory technicians and the patients have personal views to the plants growing outside their windows in wide earth-covered terraces. This building is located across the street from the Nuovo Ospedale di Venezia Mestre, recently baptized as the Ospedale dell'Angelo (The Angel's Hospital): the first "green" hospital in Europe.

Authors' Biographies

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is Meyer Schapiro Professor of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University and curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA. After graduating from Columbia in 1977, he did postgraduate studies at Cambridge University on a Kellett Fellowship until 1979. He returned to Columbia for his PhD, which he completed in 1986. His main field of interest and research lies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century architectural history, theory, and criticism.

Bergdoll curated several important architectural exhibitions, among them *Mies in Berlin*, *Le Panthéon: Symbole des Révolutions*, and *Les Vaudoyers: Une dynastie d'architectes*. Between 2007 and 2013 he served as Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at MoMA. Publications include *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity* (2009–2010), *Mies in Berlin* (2001), and *European Architecture 1750–1890* (2000).

Peter Buchanan

is an architect born in Malawi and based in London. After completing his studies at the University of Cape Town, he worked as an architect and urban planner in Africa, Europe, and the Near East. Since 1992 he has been working as an exhibition curator, and as a consultant for urban and green design projects.

During the 1980s he was deputy director of *The Architectural Review*, which published many of his writings. Additionally, he curated exhibitions and volumes on topics such as *Renzo Piano Building Workshop: Complete Works* (1993) and *Ten Shades of Green: Architecture and the Natural World* (2005) for the Architectural League of New York. In 2011 he launched an influential and controversial year-long series of essays and events called *The Big Rethink*, in which he started a comprehensive critique of current architecture in the face of global economic and environmental crises.

Kenneth Frampton

is a British architect, critic, and historian who trained at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. Frampton is Ware Professor of Architecture at Columbia University's GSAPP. In 1972 he joined the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, where he cofounded and edited the magazine *Oppositions*. Over the years he has taught in various capacities at a number of schools, among them the Royal College of Art, London, Princeton University, and the ETH Zurich.

Known for his critical and theoretical writings on twentieth-century architecture, his books include *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1980), *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (1995), and *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form* (2015).

Peter Hall

is a design writer, as well as being a senior lecturer and head of the Design department at Griffith University Queensland College of Art. Until 2012, he served as senior lecturer at the University of Texas, Austin. He has given numerous seminars on design and mapping in institutes such as the University of Minnesota Design Institute and the Yale School of Art. Since 2006 he has served as vice president of DesignInquiry, a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to research in design subjects.

Since 2000, Hall has been a frequent contributor to the magazine *Metropolis*. Publications include *Tibor Kalman: Perverse Optimist* (2000), *Pause: 59 Minutes of Motion Graphics* (2000), *Else/Where: Mapping New Cartographies of Networks and Territories* (2006), and *Sagmeister: Made you Look* (2009).

Fulvio Ircace

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As architectural editor for the publications *Domus* and *Abitare*, he has worked with the most important national and international magazines in the sector. In 2005 he was awarded the InArch–Bruno Zevi Prize for architectural criticism.

Dean MacCannell

is professor emeritus of landscape architecture at University of California, Davis. Educated as an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, he completed his studies with a PhD in sociology at Cornell University. He is a founding member of the International Tourism Research Institute and is associated with the École freudienne de Québec.

MacCannell is the author of numerous articles and works on landscape architecture, community, and culture. His 1976 book entitled *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* is concerned with the development of the sociology of tourism. Other important publications include *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers* (1992) and *The Ethics of Sightseeing* (2011).

Hans Ulrich Obrist

was born in Switzerland, and is a contemporary art curator, critic, and art historian. He is currently artistic director at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Obrist is the author of *The Interview Project*, an extensive ongoing project of interviews. In 1993 he founded the Museum Robert Walser and began to run the *Migrateurs* program at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, where he served as a curator for contemporary art. In 1996 he cocurated the first edition of the European biennial of contemporary art Manifesta. In 2009 he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).

Obrist has lectured internationally at numerous academic and art institutions. While maintaining official curatorial positions, he is also a contributing editor for the magazines *O32c*, *Abitare*, *Artforum*, and *Paradis*.

Lauren Sedofsky

completed her studies at Sarah Lawrence College, and then, in 1974, obtained a Fulbright scholarship that allowed her to settle in Paris, where she still resides. She has taught at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Statistique, and has written film, art, photography, and architecture critiques for the magazine *Artforum*. Among her most outstanding writings is a digest on the pictorial work of Stephen Posen. In addition, she has written the script for the film *Pola X*, directed by Leos Carax.

Michael Sorkin

is distinguished professor of architecture and director of the graduate program in urban design at City College of New York. Previously he was professor of urbanism and director of the Institute of Urbanism at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and held various teaching commitments as a visiting professor at architectural schools such as Columbia, Yale, Harvard, Cornell, Illinois, and Pennsylvania.

Sorkin is architecture critic for *The Nation* and for ten years held the same position at *The Village Voice*. He is also a contributing editor at magazines such as *Architectural Record* and *Metropolis*, and has published twenty books, including *Variations on a Theme Park* (1997), *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* (2009), and *New Orleans Under Reconstruction* (2014).

James Wines

is Stuckeman Professor at Penn State University, and founder and president of Sculpture in the Environment (SITE). He was chair of the Environmental Design department at Parsons School of Design from 1984 to 1990, and in the 1990s was dean of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania.

Internationally known for his commitment to the integration and fusion of buildings and landscapes in their surrounding contexts, in recent years he has played an increasingly active role in the international green movement through projects, classes, conferences, and writings, among which are *Architecture as Art* (1980), *De-Architecture* (1987), *Green Architecture* (2000), and *SITE: Identity and Density* (2005).

EMILIO AMBASZ
EMERGING NATURE
Precursor of Architecture and Design

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Contributions by Emilio Ambasz, Barry Bergdoll,
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Dean MacCannell, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Lauren Sedofsky,
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This comprehensive volume documents the work of the exceptional architect and designer Emilio Ambasz, whose main concern is to integrate nature and construction into architectural design. Ambasz is regarded as one of the most important pioneers of Green Architecture. In his work a combination of landscape and architecture emerges, in which his respect for the environment and ecological sustainability becomes clear. Ambasz, a native of Argentina as well as a Spanish citizen by special grant of 2004, is also well known for his industrial and graphic design accomplishments, which are of immense scope and astounding variety. They range from diesel engines and streetlights, flashlights, and spotlights to portable TV players, flexible pens, fold-out watches, and innovative office chairs. In his time as curator of design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1969–1976) he directed and installed numerous influential exhibitions on architecture and industrial design, amongst them *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* and *The Taxi Project*.

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