

Emilio Ambasz

Inventions: Architecture and Design

“I’ve chosen to be a fabulist rather than an ideologist, because in the case of the former an immutable nucleus endures, destined to survive the decadence of ideologies,” Emilio Ambasz has stated. On the other hand, this architect and designer, born in Argentina and active in various parts of the world since the late sixties, has been described by Terence Riley—former Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at the MoMA—as “the last great architect of the Enlightenment.” Both claims are suggestive, and both seem fully applicable to his work. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore the time lapse between the 18th century and the paradigm shift of modernity in the second half of the 20th century, the moment when Ambasz made his appearance in the public sphere: this offers a key to an understanding of his work beyond identifying labels. Various revisions of the significance of the Age of Enlightenment, with its baggage of utopian architecture, now permit a more multifaceted view of its legacy. In particular, they reveal the more irrational and less articulated and ideological elements of the complex experience that was reduced by historiography to the simple rule of an indeterminate goddess called “Reason.” The leap from these hasty conceptions—even if only nominal—to rationalism and the Modern Movement is automatic. And yet something other than chronology distances Ambasz, setting him apart.

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House of Spiritual Retirement.
El Ronquillo, Sevilla,
1975
Photography: Michelle
Alassio

Establishing an independent position, Ambasz has managed to critique the dictatorship of technology without becoming seduced either by postmodern historicism (inexorably drawn to pastiche) or by the naive picturesqueness that occasionally results from architecture's approximation to the natural environment. In the statement quoted above, Ambasz declares himself to be outside history, in a terrain that is more fertile and more lasting, but also more difficult to grasp and manage: that of fable, or myth. If he speaks to us of a mythical past, an ancient Arcadia or an archetypal world, he does so, however, like the anthropologist who, in a similar fashion to the fabulist, discovers not only the bucolic character of the past which lingers in the collective imaginary, but also its component of violence, the result of a constantly provoked crisis in the dialectical construct nature/culture. It does not seem coincidental that in 1972, during the period when Ambasz was active as a curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, René Girard shook the foundations of classical anthropology with *Violence and the Sacred*. In his constructed designs, but also, and especially, in those which have yet to see the light of day, Ambasz condenses his position as a fabulist rather than an ideologist, and as an artist with telluric associations rather than a mere utopian dreamer. In his work, *telos* seems for the first time to rise above Arcadia by means of an inversion of values and roles between architecture and nature, yet without ever completely revealing which is more civilized and which more violent.

We must inevitably recall another fact that is by no means a coincidence. In 1979, Rosalind Krauss published “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” an essay that not only anticipates the use of the term “postmodernity” but also unwittingly situates us before many of the starting points of Ambasz’s architecture. At the Casa de Retiro Espiritual (with its subterranean courtyard) in El Ronquillo (Seville), at the Ospedale dell’Angelo in Mestre (Venice), or in the project for the administrative complex of La Venta in Mexico City, the relations suggested by Krauss between sculpture, architecture, landscape, non-architecture and non-landscape are reinvigorated. Only now do we know that the end of modernity brought with it a desperate search for relational models, not only between people but also with the environment. There is, then, a fundamental parallel between Ambasz’s manner of designing and the refutation by many artists of his generation of the age-old principles of painting and sculpture. If some placed the plinth on top of the sculpture or took the canvas off the stretcher, Ambasz reminds us that a descent can lead to a paradise and an ascent to an inferno, by delving further into his inversion of the atavistic terror of the *telos*. The architecture of Ambasz converts a former non-place into a space for relationships, and like the fabulist, he confronts the terrible violence underlying culture; by narrating it, he turns it into a ritual object of communion, or even, forces the discourse a little further, into a relational object.

Fukuoka Prefectural
International Hall.
Fukuoka, Japan,
1990



As a non-ideological fabulist, a non-rational reasoner, an architect and industrial designer, a curator, city planner and landscapist, Ambasz returns to some of the concepts that were addressed earlier by the Reina Sofía Museum in the exhibition *Drifts and Derivations*, such as the role of nature in the

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redefinition of the once omnipotent Modern Movement. He does not fall into the temptation of associating himself with his origins and so profiting by the notion that everything from the Southern Cone is imbued with the forces of nature and magic. Ambasz's own definition of his thought and work as "mythopoetic" proposes an alternative to the two monolithic concepts of artistic creation in Latin America: one associated with that "magical" new world, and the other, more recent one, reconfiguring a "cold and geometrical" image of the continent. Ambasz deliberately chooses an adjective, "mythopoetic," to refer to that uncomfortable

period located by ancient history between an age dominated by magical thought and that forged by logical thought. His work, like myth, tells a seductive but not necessarily persuasive tale; it reminds us of what binds us to the earth but refrains from completely exhuming it, reformulates itself

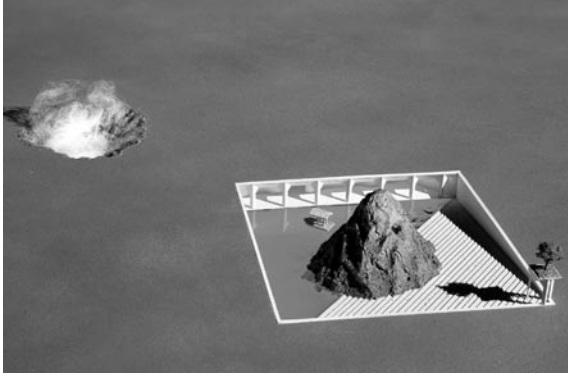


Banca degli Occhi,
Venecia-Mestre,
2009

differently in every territory and, with each new act of projection, narration and fabulation, provides anchorage for countless relational possibilities.

Biography

Born in 1943 in Argentina and now a Spanish citizen, Emilio Ambasz studied architecture at Princeton University. He worked as curator of design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1970-1976), where he directed and installed numerous exhibitions on architecture and industrial design. He was president of the Architectural League for two terms (1981-1985), and has taught at the School of Architecture at Princeton University and, as a visiting professor, at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Germany.



Emilio's Folly: Man is an Island, 1983
Photography: Louis Checkman

Among his foremost projects are the Mycal Cultural and Athletic Center in Shin-Sanda, Japan, which won the Saflex Design Award in 2000; the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan, which won the prize for the 1976 Progressive Architecture Award; the Casa de Retiro

Espiritual, designed in 1975, distinguished with the Progressive Architecture Award in 1980, and built in El Ronquillo, Seville, in 2000; and the Lucille Halsell Conservatory at San Antonio Botanical Center in Texas, designed in 1988, which won several prizes, including the renown Quaternario Award in 1990, for its notable technological achievements. Ambasz also owns many patents of mechanical and industrial design which have gained major distinctions, such as the Gold Prize awarded in the United States by IBD in 1977 for his co-design of the Vertebra chair system.

Ambasz represented the United States at the 1976 Venice Biennale. In 1989, the retrospective *Emilio Ambasz: Architecture* was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and a travelling exhibition, *Emilio Ambasz: architecture, exhibition, industrial and graphic design*, was shown the same year at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. Other retrospectives of his work have been held at the Tokyo Station Gallery in Japan in 1993, and at the Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City in 1994.

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