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# ALAIN ELKANN INTERVIEWS

**Emilio Ambasz**

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## TO RECONCILE ARCHITECTURE WITH NATURE.

The Argentinian architect **Emilio Ambasz**, Spaniard by Royal Grant, is known as the forerunner of **green architecture**.

*Emilio Ambasz, when did you decide that you wanted to be an architect?*

I knew since I was eleven that I was going to be doing architecture. I was a child with a fixed idea. It never occurred to me to do anything else. All my toys were to do with building things. I didn't know it was called architecture, but I knew I was going to be building.

*You followed your dream and went to study architecture at **Princeton**, where you did a Masters very quickly, finishing in only two years. How is that even possible?*

I was immensely lucky. Princeton is unique. It's like an English university where you can program your own work. As a freshman, I did a number of architecture projects and my **Professor Peter Eisenman** proposed that I should be moved to senior in the first semester. I agreed with that because I hated the food that was served to freshmen. The second semester I was in graduate school, and then the second year I got a Masters. I stayed at university to teach although it was not my passion, I was asked by the Dean to do it. Then I resigned to go to **MoMA, the Museum of Modern Art in New York**, to become a curator.

*How old were you?*

I was 25 when as a curator at MoMA I conceived of a show called *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*. I was 27 when I originated a still visionary project called *The Universitas Project, Solutions for a Post-Technological Society*.

*You have built all over the world, in Spain, Japan, America, but divide most of your life between the United States and Italy. When did you first come to Italy?*

When I was a student Princeton gave me a summer scholarship, as they said “To cure my nerves.” I came to Europe for the first time, and fell in love with Italy. I realised what an extremely subtle and contradictory country Italy is.

*Which is the city of your choice where you live when you are in Italy?*

Bologna and Venice are the two cities I like very much and where I spend most of the time. I am quite often in Milan. I like Torino very much but I don't live there. I also adore Rome and Florence, but at six o'clock in the morning when I am their only lover.

**“The task of the architect is to reconcile what we do with the nature that we were given”**



*Emilio Ambasz built this house (seen from above) for his friend the art dealer Leo Castelli in East Hampton, New York.*

***Emilio Ambasz, you are also a designer, and in Bologna in 1976 with your then partner Giancarlo Piretti produced the iconic chair Vertebra?***

Italy is a golden place to be an industrial designer. The weakest link in the work of an industrial designer is producing prototypes, and there are very great craftsmen here with whom I could build my prototypes. I did not work for a client, I worked for myself. I invented products which I wanted, and then I designed them, developed them, engineered, built the prototypes, tested them, got patents, and then went as far as producing the tooling and the machinery to make the product.

***What was so special about Vertebra?***

It was the first chair that moves with the body. If you lean back the backrest tilts with you and supports you in the middle part of the back. If you lean forwards to write, the seat goes down several centimetres so the edge of the chair doesn't bite into your thighs and inhibit blood circulation. All that is done automatically by the chair, without any levers or buttons.

***The celebrated Japanese architect Tadao Ando says that you were the first architect in the 20th century who understood how important it is to be aware of the environment and not only the project in itself. In Japan in 1995 you built ACROS Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall, a very special building. Is it in many ways the iconic ideal of your work?***

Fukuoka demonstrates that you can have greenery in the centre of the city, that you can make a building that gives back almost the complete amount of land the footprint of the building covers. And it does it with greenery. The advantages of greenery are not only psychological and spiritual, but also practical. Inside the Fukuoka building the temperature is about 15 degrees

lower than it is outside, without any equipment working. Also, it absorbs rainwater, so that does not then go into and overload the drainage.

*You also built the **Lucile Halsell Conservatory** in San Antonio, Texas?*

The task of the architect is to reconcile what we do with the nature that we were given. I hope my architecture stands as a practical reconciliation between nature and buildings.

***La Casa de Retiro Espiritual** that you built about 40 kilometres north of the city of **Sevilla**, Spain, is particularly important to you. Why did you take this pioneering approach?*

I truly cannot give you an answer because I don't think in a rational way, I make images. I am an image maker, and I think by images. The image from where it all started was *La Casa de Retiro*. When I did that project in 1975 I did not realise what I was doing, I just did it. It was only when I looked at *Casa de Retiro* after I designed it that I could rationalise the ideas in it, for example, the use of earth, the notion of integrating the building into the landscape so that it's impossible to separate the building from the landscape. The idea is to use the land as a way of providing heating and cooling automatically and economically.

**“Modernist architecture has exhausted its intellectual capital”**

*Emilio Ambasz, you built a house for the art dealer **Leo Castelli** in **East Hampton, New York**, in 1980, the **Casa Canales** in **Monterrey, Mexico**, and also the **Casa Privata** in **Montana** in the **United States**. What is the particularity of these three private houses?*

All of them, always built above ground, are in some way houses that recover 100 percent of the land that the building covers in the form of gardens which are accessible.

*What was your relationship with **Leo Castelli**, who at the time was the most famous and important art dealer and discovered the great artists of pop art, from **Jasper Johns** to **Robert Rauschenberg** to **Andy Warhol**, **Roy Lichtenstein** and so on?*

He was truly remarkable, and I really loved him. We had a very long friendship. He once told me he wanted to do an exhibition of architectural drawings in October. I said, “Leo, you’re crazy. October is a great month for you because that’s when all the foreign-collectors come to New York because of the auctions. You’re not going to sell architectural drawings for millions. If you sell two you’re going to sell them for a few thousands and no more.” He said, “I want people to know that if I do something it is because I believe in that very strongly.” He did it in October. And he sold nothing. And he did it again, because you can make a mistake once, but when you do it twice it is a statement.

*In 1980 you did the **Banque Bruxelles Lambert** building in **Milan**. In the mid-80s, you did a very special showroom project for **Mercedes-Benz** in **New Jersey**. You did a commercial development in **Lisbon, Portugal** in 1995. You built the **Monument Tower** in **Phoenix** in '98 and the **Baron Edmond de Rothschild** Memorial Museum in **Israel**. Why are all these projects so very different?*

Perhaps because I’m not an architect. Perhaps because I’m an inventor. An inventor does not come in with a canonical set of answers. An inventor has to look at the problem and provide a solution with the material at hand.

***Do you not consider yourself to be an architect?***

I consider myself something more. I consider myself an inventor. It will be hard to prove that I'm an architect because I went through college and graduate school in two years. I should have stayed longer, I would have learnt something. I went too fast, so probably I don't know enough about architecture, but I know that in front of any problem I try to find a solution.

***Why did you write Working Fables, a collection of design tales for skeptic children?***

It helped me make a number of theoretical points, but in the form of fables. A theory has a certain period in the culture, then the culture changes and the theory disintegrates. Fables survive much better than theory, because they suggest certain states of spirit. Rather than being conclusive, fables generate possibilities.

***What is your concept for a city?***

A city is a result of an aggregate of many kinds of contradictory wills. Cities have to emerge out of the collective will, not out of a simple purpose. We have seen that Brasilia and Chandigarh have not worked, but independent buildings in Brasilia and in Chandigarh are great pieces of architecture individually. Designing cities is an immensely difficult problem. I don't believe it possible for an architect to do a city.

***Which is your most memorable city?***

New York is the theatre of the 20th century. Regrettably, I doubt that it will be the theatre of the 21st. Venice is extraordinarily memorable, and came about as a collection of independent wills, each of them enacting their own vision, in some way constrained by the infrastructure of the city that has very strong requirements which they obeyed.



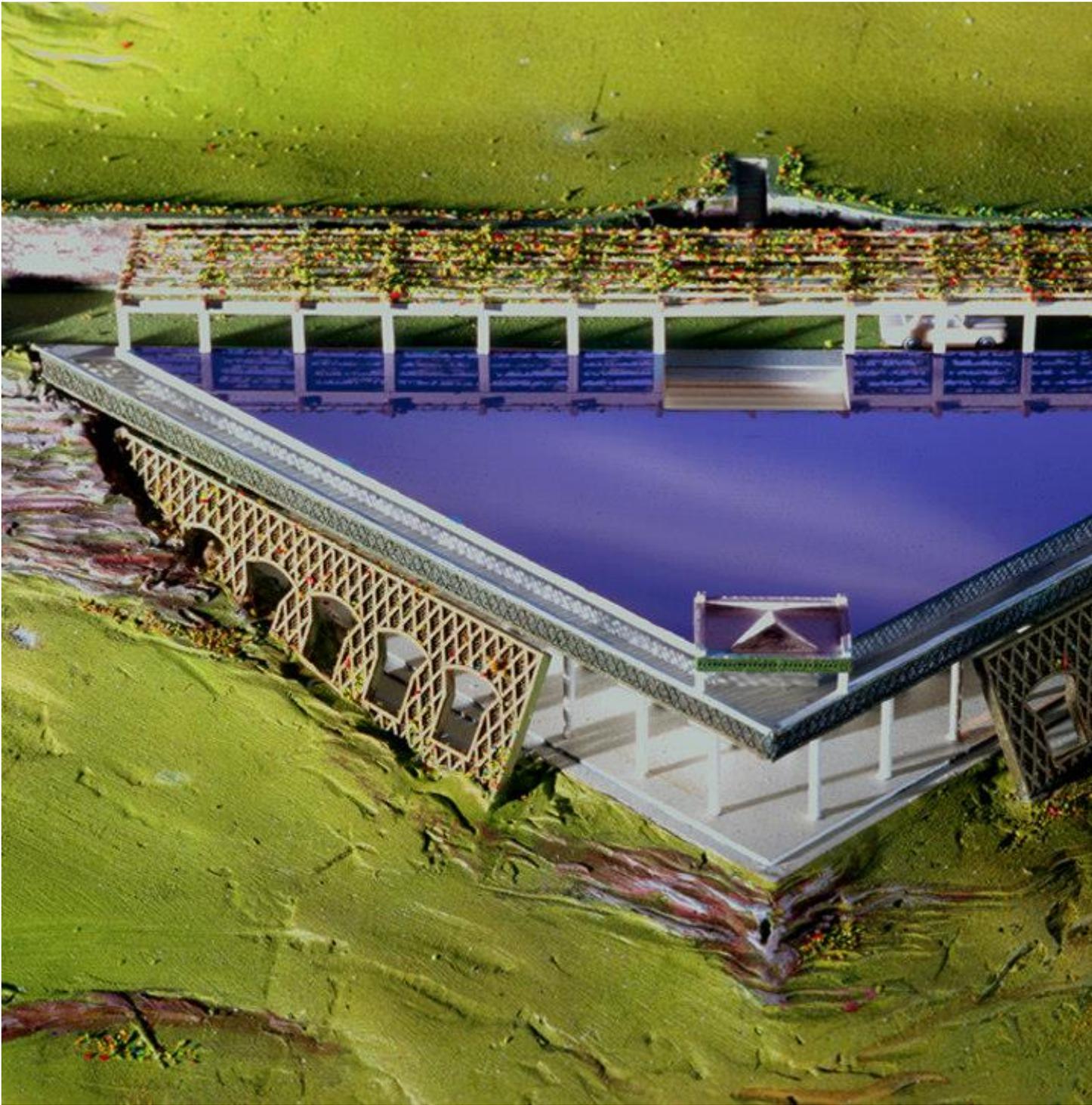
*The Lucile Halsell Conservatory is a complex of greenhouses located in the hot, dry climate of southern Texas*



*Emilio Ambasz built ACROS Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall in Japan in 1995*



*The Museum of Architectonic and Design Arts is to be built in Madrid, on the Pas eo del Prado 30, facing the world renowned Museo Nacional del Prado and Madrid's Botanical Garden.*



*Casa Canales in Monterrey, Mexico doesn't have greenery on the roof, it has water to keep the house cold. Mexico is a very warm climate.*



*Emilio Ambasz built La Casa de Retiro Espiritual about 40 kilometres north of the city of Seville in Spain in 1975*

IN COLL. GIANGARLO PIRETTI



*Emilio Ambasz's Vertebra was the first chair that moves with the body.*

**“We should find a way of  
integrating architecture with  
nature”**

*Emilio Ambasz, which projects would you like to design?*

I would like to redesign Paradise, but I'm not in a great hurry for that!

### ***In which country do you work most at ease?***

Japan, firstly because they appreciate my architecture. Second, and this is a very cynical statement, because the land costs much more than the building, so therefore I never get any problems. Third, because they have extremely good craftsmen. If I do a building for a Japanese client, I say, “Look, we should do it like this, because it’s beautiful and your neighbours will be very pleased.” Then they will allow you to build it, because you need the acceptance of their neighbours to build anything in Japan. If it’s an Italian client, I have to tell them, “Look, it’s a very beautiful building. We should build it because your cousins will die of envy.”

### ***Do you have nostalgia for Argentina?***

I do. As the Pope said, we are so far away. We are not only far away, but above our heads there’s an extraordinary sky of stars in the Southern hemisphere which you don’t see in the Northern hemisphere. Those stars have a way of making you feel very lonely and melancholy. That might be one reason why we are gifted with **the Tango**.

### ***Would you like to work with the Pope?***

Very much. He has a great sense of humour. I designed a church once, but it never got built. I really would have liked to have done it.

### ***Nowadays are your green architectural ideas very much in vogue?***

When I started doing it 40 years ago, nobody asked me to do anything. Now, there are many people interested, it has become something that people understand they need. We are neglecting nature. One has to find a solution to that. For 70 years, MoMA, with which I am deeply connected, has been the great champion of modernist architecture. But modernist architecture has exhausted its intellectual capital. We need to find a way of having architecture which is not against nature, in the great classical Greek tradition that we inherited. There has to be a way, and we should find a way, of integrating

architecture with nature. I do it in one way. There are many other ways. Mine is pretty simple minded. I hope for something deeper to come. I have many images, but, regrettably, few ideas. Let others step forward.