

Design Ideas

The last word

Emilio Ambasz:

“I have a plan for heaven too”

by Aurelio Magistà

You won the Compasso d'Oro because, the jury explained, you are a “pioneer of the relationship between buildings and nature that has created genuine “living” manifestos for a culture of sustainable development”. But as a pioneer, don't you think that some of today's architecture is “green”, not to mention seductive and popular as well, in appearance only, because the reality is that they require resources and maintenance costs that make it difficult to think of them as good examples of sustainability?

"In themselves, plants are indispensable and inoffensive. Nature is abused when it is used as a kind of make-up to cover mediocre buildings and to allow architects to claim that they've built green, ecological buildings. But let's start at the beginning: the "Green Movement" and its many guises, of which sustainability is one of the most praiseworthy, is a big umbrella that, at the moment, I wouldn't turn the spotlight onto too much, because the shadows are still looking for the bodies they belong to. It is a state of awareness. It hasn't become a conceptual reality yet, because it lacks an established system of philosophical debate and a theoretical structure that permits it to pass on knowledge and continuously re-evaluate it. It is an attitude: it is not yet a principle.

"Green" is now a state of mind that could yet create its own cultural reality. Some technologies are being developed to this end, but they haven't created a reliable methodology yet. I have no doubt that it will happen in the future. From my point of view, the crux of the matter lies in not confusing architecture with pyrotechnics. To build a green building, you need technology. To create architecture, you need art."

The government building you designed for the Japanese city of Fukuoka has become an instrument of peace between local government and its citizens. Can architecture be a sign of good governance?

"Ahhh...where is Ambrogio Lorenzetti when you need him to add Green Architecture to his “Allegory of Good Government”? Undoubtedly a good architect is essential for excellent architecture, but that is not enough. It also calls for an enlightened client, one who sets very high standards and demands that they are always met. It is not a simple formula of course, especially as far as public commissions are concerned, where all too often officials are powerful but are also narrow-minded and think that the only criterion they need inspiration from is cost containment, rather than their citizens' happiness. They forget the warnings in Ezra Pound's *The Pisan Cantos* that “with usura hath no man a house of good stone”. In the specific case of Fukuoka, my project was not expected to win the stiff competition between the three architects that were invited to participate. It wasn't until much later that I discovered that forty-seven jurors had committed to voting for a local architect, but one of them - probably in a ditch by now - voted for my project instead. Since the

rules of the competition required that the mayor be presented with the jury's unanimous opinion, the decision was left to the regional governor. The newspaper "Asahi Shinbum" managed to get their hands on an image of the models of the three building projects that had been presented and published them, asking the public to vote for the one they thought most "suitable" for the city. Bearing in mind how cynical and sceptical Japanese public opinion can be - in other words that actions cannot change anything - and the consequent reluctance to commit to any action, there was considerable support in particular for my project, because with its accessible gardens it gave back to the city's inhabitants half of the only city centre square that the municipal government was willing to concede for a long time. Seeing the public's approval grow stronger and stronger, the governor awarded the prize to my project. And the rest is history."

Buildings, pens, street lights, engines, watercolour sets, briefcases, handkerchief TV, 3D-inspired graphic design, patents: you are an extraordinary example of eclectic creativity. How do you design such different things so brilliantly?

"We have to build our home on Earth only because we are not welcome. Every action that aims to construct is a challenge to nature. If nature were perfect, we wouldn't need homes. In the same way, we know that nature hasn't made us all strong or perfect. We need intermediation tools that can incorporate or cancel out our weaknesses and shortcomings. I don't know if I'm really an architect or a designer like the others. But I do know that I'm an inventor. My passion is to invent solutions that can solve problems. We often forget that architecture, and even design, has to be a manifestation of our spiritual and social imagination. I never let it slip from my mind that an architectural solution has to move the heart. If it doesn't, it's just a sterile exercise in ingenuity. I never forget that an object has to complement our physical deficiencies, but that, in spite of its beauty, it has to do it discreetly, as if we did not need this artefact to assist us."

In the history of Italian interior design, the New York exhibition "Italy: the New Domestic Landscape" that you curated in 1972 is a milestone, a key event in making Italian manufacturing famous across the globe. You were very young at the time: did you realise how much power you had?

"No! I have never thought of myself as having any power, other than the determination to fulfil my destiny. This question reminds me of the phone call I got from Gaetano Pesce when I announced that I would finally resign my post at MoMA to devote myself to my passion for architecture and design. Gaetano tried to persuade me not to do it, predicting that I would fail in a profession and complaining, by the by, that he didn't want me to do it because I was his only friend with a bit of "power". I thanked him for his disinterested interest, explaining to him that I never thought of myself as a good curator, especially because I was more of an exasperated hunter than a good cultivator, as I believe a real curator should be."

Would you like to tell us about how that exhibition came about, about its success, which maybe you didn't expect, and about the long-lasting attention it generated? And is there anyone important, apart from yourself, that helped bring it to life?

Initially I intended to present beautiful items created in Italy to the American public. But arriving from Italy and spending some time looking further into the idea, I realised that there were numerous examples livening up my surroundings, and that design was thought of by many designers as an act of social criticism and an opportunity to create culture. I therefore decided to present it in all its complexity: the Italian design of the time implied something more than just creating objects that met the functional and emotional needs of individuals. People believed that processes and products could be used to critique society. Since then much has changed and items have moved from

museums to the markets. Once upon a time they were precursors of impending social change. They have now turned into omnipresent elements in society. While they may not have kept the utopian promises of 1968, they've nonetheless enriched and improved the quality of our everyday life. If those items haven't become signposts pointing the way towards a better and brighter tomorrow, they nonetheless happily play a more modest role: pleasant companions in our daily activities. Italian manufacturing of the time gave people joy, it faithfully fulfilled its role and - why not? - it tickled our fancy and flattered our pride. In some respects - less important but just as true - it helped us during the day and gave us peace of mind at night. With their charm and beauty, those products served us well. While some perhaps didn't move us, they nonetheless touched our hearts and reawakened our senses. What greater recognition can an object and the culture that created it be given for honourable service rendered over a period of time?

Tell me something about the people who helped you the most with the exhibition.

There were many, many Italians, all mentioned and thanked in the catalogue. At this point I would like to remember the two key members of my team: Anna Querci, who unfortunately recently passed away, having previously worked with Gio Ponti on the Domus magazine, her radiant friendliness helped negotiate the loans and the donations of the countless objects that were part of the exhibition; and my fellow student at Princeton University, Thomas Victor Czarnowski, who not only spoke, but also wrote like a native, English, French, Italian, Spanish, Polish and years later also Chinese, but who also had the logistical genius that this complex exhibition required."

You are Argentinian, Spanish by Royal Grant, American by choice, and Italian in terms of your creative and production connections. What do you feel for each of these different countries, in particular for Italy, which recently awarded you the Compasso d'Oro?

"We Argentinians are the great bankers of information. If someone sneezes in Paris, the week after there will be a symposium in Buenos Aires to work towards a theoretical framework for this manifestation. Argentina is not only the end of the world, as Pope Francis reminded us after being elected, but it lies under a sky studded with a huge number of stars visible to the naked eye that weigh us down and crush us in solitude, which begets melancholy, as our tangos prove. Spanish citizenship is a royal recognition for my winning project for the '92 Universal Expo in Seville. I like to pretend that it's also a reward for the House of Spiritual Retreat that I built in Andalusia, and then I've been wanting to act in the theatre in New York since I was eleven. For me it was the world's stage. Will it still be in the 21st century? Ich glaube es nicht [I don't think so, Ed.]. I adore Italy, the one country that really deserves to think of itself as the most beautiful in the world. It's probably down to all those princes and marquesses who turned their small kingdoms into shining jewels, not only because they were vain, but also to annoy their neighbours. One of Italy's greatest contributions to the world today is the ability to live in a constant state of humanist anarchy."

You've designed several office and work chairs. Now that people have been forced to consider working from home because of the pandemic, how do you think offices might change?

"You'll know that a revolution in the workplace is happening when you see office workers bringing their desk chairs home. In actual fact, working alone is counterproductive. They could agree to work for three days from home and two in the office, but standing: it will encourage them to walk, which is always a good thing, and to have short or casual meetings."

Food design is the most recent category that ADI has added to industrial design categories. What do you think about it?

I am a great fan of Italian cuisine, with all its sauces and regional varieties. De Gaulle thought it was impossible to govern France because it had three hundred different types of cheeses. I don't know what he would think of Italy, where two citizens means three parties, and one of the two will defect to another party in time. I think the ultimate proof of shrewd Italian tolerance lies in the fact that despite the infinite number of different pasta shapes, the raw ingredient is almost always the same: when differences are not about substance but essentially shape, there's the basis for peaceful coexistence. What else could I say, being the superficial inventor of shapes that I am?

What project would you like to work on that you haven't yet?

"I would really like to redesign heaven, but I'm not in any rush."

About him

Architect, curator and teacher, Emilio Ambasz is one of the three international winners of the Compasso d'Oro 2020. Argentinian by birth (in 1943), American by choice, he has been a pioneer of "green" and eco-sustainable architecture and has often worked in other countries, including Spain, Germany, Japan and Italy. Architect, designer, graphic designer, lecturer, essayist, he has curated numerous exhibitions. In 1972, as curator of the Design section of MoMA in New York, he organised the exhibition "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape", which helped make Italian interior design famous across the globe

On design.repubblica.it

Insights into the works of Emilio Ambasz

Dida 1:

Healing power

Emilio Ambasz in the Ospedale dell'Angelo, built in Mestre in 2008, based on the idea that nature can help cure people

Dida 2:

Freestyle comfort

The Vertebra chair, designed with Giancarlo Piretti in 1974/75, is automatically adjustable without the need to use buttons, levers or other mechanisms

Dida 3:Garden terraces

The Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall, built in 1990, with its terraced gardens. The building is open to the public

Dida 4:Inner refuge

The House of Spiritual Retreat, near Seville, designed as a weekend getaway for a Spanish couple with two children, completed in 1975