

This is an interview with Emilio Ambasz that appeared in INTERNI magazine:

"I divide architects into three categories. There are artist architects who create new models and contribute to culture. Then there are skilled architects who may not invent anything new but operate excellently within the canons established by colleagues in the first group. Finally, there are architects of stereotypes who replicate the work of the first two. I am naturally interested in artist architects; they are the ones who contribute to culture."

At 82 years old, Emilio Ambasz maintains a vivid and clear critical attitude to perceive, interpret, and distinguish, which, fifty-one years ago, brought success to Italian design worldwide. Ambasz, an Argentine architect and emeritus professor with strong connections to Italy, curated the exhibition "Italy, the new domestic landscape" at the MoMA in New York in 1972, revitalizing the image of a country and its creativity globally. On September 17, Ambasz returns to the MoMA, an institution with which he has always had a special relationship, this time as a patron for the first time. In 2020, a generous donation from the Legacy Emilio Ambasz Foundation gave life to the institute named after the master, dedicated to "the joint study of the built and natural environment" within the New York museum. Three years later, the first exhibition supported by the Institute arrives, titled "Emerging Ecologies." The retrospective is dedicated to 150 works, realized and unrealized, that "anticipated, inspired, addressed, and developed environmental and ecological themes in the United States from the 1930s to the 1990s," as explained in the press release. Ambasz is not the curator of this exhibition, a role entrusted to Carson Chan by the MoMA. Ambasz says, "Those who finance a cultural event must then keep a distance from the content: I created the fund and left the museum free to organize the exhibition as it saw fit."

How did the idea of Emerging Ecologies come about?

We are facing an unprecedented environmental emergency. Every building is an intrusion into the plant kingdom and a challenge to nature. We must design architecture that embodies a pact of reconciliation between nature and construction, creating buildings so intrinsically connected to the surrounding environment that they cannot be separated from it. I believe that to convey these themes and sensibilities, sporadic events, what are called "fruit of the week" in English, initiatives that have little impact, are not enough. So, three years ago, I thought it was right to make a donation that would, in turn, support well-made exhibitions with profound meaning. I have no children; leaving a legacy to the MoMA was the right thing for me to do. This exhibition comes after four years of discussion with the museum and is the first true retrospective on architecture and the environment created for an audience not only of architects and professionals, as it should be. A museum, especially one as international and prestigious as the MoMA, has the duty to monitor reality and share with the public the results of its evaluation.

The exhibition features works by Frank Lloyd Wright, James Wines, Richard Buckminster Fuller, Beverly Willis, and also Emilio Ambasz.

My works are the only content of the exhibition that I know because, as I mentioned, I did not interfere with the curation. There are three realized projects and one that remained on paper. I care a lot about the latter: it is the proposal to renovate the Eni building at Eur in Rome. Twenty-five years ago, I proposed transforming the facades of the skyscraper,

which needed to replace the old, climatically non-functional facade with a new one, into green walls. The plants, with their flowering cycle, would have been a powerful ecological narrative, expressing ENI's ecological hope. An additional glass wall, between the building's body and the green wall, would have provided better climate control inside. There are also well-known projects in the exhibition, such as the Casa de Retiro Spiritual in Seville, the ACROS center in Fukuoka, and the San Antonio Botanical Garden in Texas—all projects where architecture protects, mitigates, and regulates the climate, rather than subjecting it.

Is there an exact moment when architecture began to become alien to nature?

I would reverse the question. It's not that at a certain point a rupture occurs between architecture and nature; Western vision has always driven the project to consider nature as something to overcome and surpass. Traditionally, architecture is an artificial garden that does not get along with the natural one. There is no exact moment to trace this rupture because there has never been unity.

Many architects today do not like to talk about sustainability; they perceive the concept as an intrusion, assuming that good architecture is ecological architecture. What do you think?

I divide architects into three categories. There are artist architects, who create new models and contribute to culture. Then there are skilled architects who may not invent anything new but operate excellently within the canons invented by colleagues in the first group. And finally, there are architects of stereotypes who replicate the work of the first two. I am naturally interested in artist architects, those who create new culture: Tadao Ando, Renzo Piano, Jean Nouvel, who are also authors of ecological architectures.

What do you think of the Bosco Verticale, considered by many as an international standard of green architecture?

I am happy that there is a building with plants on the balconies.

Does ecological architecture depend on the repertoire of new eco-friendly materials, or is it much more than that?

Neo-materials are undoubtedly an important support, but in sustainable architecture, something else makes the difference. There are constructions from centuries ago where people live comfortably in summer and winter without air conditioning and heating, even in very hot or very cold areas. However, before skilled architects, something else is needed for sustainable architecture.

What is that?

A system of social values reflected in the fiscal system. If we want ecological architecture, we must provide tax breaks and facilitations for those who choose the virtuous path. Fiscal regulations are the mirror reflecting a society's values: I can claim to have the noblest

environmental goals, but if I don't help designers and the public achieve them, those goals remain abstract.

Is there an Italian sustainable design scene like there was the ITALY: THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE scene fifty years ago?

I hope it exists. Italian architects are talented, but they are not well supported.