

Emilio Ambasz and the Solid Pact with Nature

by Fulvio Irace

On November 7th, he was awarded the In/Arch Lifetime Achievement Award (the first time for a non-Italian); on November 30th, he will receive an honorary degree in Design from the Polytechnic University of Turin. In January, the documentary video "Green over Gray," produced by Muse Factory and directed by Mattia Colombo and Francesca Molteni, will be released.

Returning from New York, where he was a key figure in the exhibition "Emerging Ecologies" a comprehensive retrospective on architecture and the environment, where he, along with James Wines, played the role of the uncomfortable prophet Emilio Ambasz is back in Italy. He chose Bologna as his domicile fifty years ago and resides in an ancient villa surrounded by a century-old park. There, he lives and works, experimenting with models later entrusted to industrial production. He designs architectures inspired by his unwavering belief in the need to rewrite a solid pact with Nature. He also writes books, fairy tales, and essays, contributing to the manifesto ("Green over Gray") that has made him a reference in environmental thinking.

For those who have never personally met him, it must be said that Emilio is truly a special character: born in Argentina, educated in America, and with an inclination towards Italy, he seems to have stepped out of a Henry James novel. Like a male Isabel Archer, he moves with the quiet elegance of "The Portrait of a Lady" characters: fascinated by the aristocracy of the old continent (especially Italy), yet simultaneously a fearless advocate of free thought intolerant of a past that inhibits action.

His personal story tells of a boy from provincial Argentina who, to escape the fatalism of Latin soul (and military dictatorship), aimed straight for the heart of the American system, to the most prestigious educational institutions from Buenos Aires to Princeton. In 1964, his rise was as fast as a comet (and partly mysterious). The fortress of North American intelligentsia was conquered by the speed and voracity he demonstrated from the beginning. In 1968, he was appointed associate curator at MoMA, where, four years later, he showcased Italian design.

In 1972, the exhibition "Italy: the new domestic landscape" was not only the event of the year but also a case study in curation that is still being investigated by students and researchers. It was an unexpected gift for Italy: a showcase that one wouldn't have dared to dream of and the launch of the "Italian way" from the sidelines of the design world to a global example. Thus began Ambasz's association with Italy, which still amazes him for its ability to turn weaknesses into cultural hegemony and marginality into centrality.

Among the many titles in his *cursus honorum*, Emilio can boast the prestigious "Stella al Merito della Repubblica italiana" (2014) for his contributions to Italian culture, along with the "Sigillo delle Arti" from the University of Urbino and the Compasso d'Oro alla Carriera. Now, he adds the degrees from the University of Bologna and the Polytechnic University of Turin.

In half a century of activity, he has burned many stages with projects that once seemed provocative utopias, now recognized as authentic prophecies. The heart of his project, since the 1970s, is the reaccreditation of Nature as the force that governs the world. When environmental issues were still on the horizon, Ambasz thought about reforesting historic squares (as in Salamanca, where a garden of fruit trees would provide shade and moderate temperature), using natural elements as protagonists in the urban scene (the futuristic Acros building in Fukuoka, Japan, an office mountain designed like a ziggurat of hanging gardens), and reflecting on millennia-old techniques of earth use for protection and shelter.

For some years, like many, I thought that the Spiritual Retreat House in the countryside of Seville was the result of clever photomontage. Then, the astonishment of reality surpassed that of imagination, and the spectacle of a façade rising on the lawn like an open book revealed the power of thought when it becomes an obsession an architecture both extreme and ecological, as surreal as it is.

"In the last 46 years," says Ambasz, "I have tried to find a way of building that allows me to integrate Architecture with Nature. In all my projects, I have tried to give back to the community, in the form of accessible gardens, most, if not all, of the land that the footprint of my building occupies. My architectural formula, which involves putting 'green over gray' or 'soft over solid,' indicates a possible way to create new urban settlements that do not distance citizens from the plant kingdom but rather give life to an architecture that is inextricably interconnected with greenery and nature."

As you can see, he doesn't speak of techniques and algorithms, biological chemistry, or solar panels. He places imagination and creation at the center, without which sustainability is just an industrial business. If the San Antonio Botanical Garden is an ark for plants that makes people feel the thrill of a possible earthly paradise, the Hospital of the Angel in Mestre and the nearby Bank of the Eye have opened their eyes to an architecture of care, demonstrating what botanist Stefano Mancuso claims about the therapeutic power of plants on the sick.

Growing up side by side with the early American land art artists, Ambasz assimilated their ability to disassemble erect architecture in favor of a composition with the landscape: no more buildings resting on the ground, but architectures molded together with the earth. Even in the 1980s, they seemed like paper fantasies. Of course, projects like the Center for Applied Computer for Mexico City or the Agricultural Cooperative in Georgia, the Schumberger Laboratories in Austin, the greenification of the Eni Palace in Rome, etc., did not have the baptism of the soil, but the seed dispersed in the air, and some of its fruits can be seen in the world, as shown in the New York exhibition.