

A Green-Architecture Pioneer

Emilio Ambasz creates buildings that belong to the landscape.

By MATT SHAW

When the architect Emilio Ambasz won a 1998 competition to redesign the headquarters of Eni S.p.A., an oil company controlled by the Italian government, he recalled wagging a metaphorical finger at the company's president, saying: "You owe it to Italy to do something green."

Mr. Ambasz proposed a new facade for the building that would cover the rusting and leaking 1960s curtain wall, and save millions by eliminating the need to relocate workers. This exterior portion would be a 20-story "vertical garden," which would cool the building by shading it with flowers and plants that would change colors seasonally.

Though the green facade was never built, it represented a typical confrontation by a fearless pioneer. No polluting, extractive governmental bully was going to shrivel his environmental dreams.

Now 79 and a witness to many trendy environmental innovations, including verdant towers, Mr. Ambasz finds that rather than outracing his times, he is running neck-and-neck with them.

In 2020, the Museum of Modern Art established the Emilio Ambasz Institute for the Joint Study of the Built and the Natural Environment, which he helped create with a \$10 million contribution from his foundation. The institute supports programming and research about environmentally responsive design. It is an urgent mission. Nearly 40 percent of energy- and process-related carbon dioxide emissions come from building operations and construction, according to the United Nations Environment Program.

In the fall, Rizzoli published "Emilio Ambasz: Curating a New Nature," a monograph by the Columbia University art and architecture historian Barry Bergdoll that explores Mr. Ambasz's multifaceted career as a designer, architect and museum curator.

"He is a legendary figure who creates legends. He is a great storyteller," Mr. Bergdoll said in a recent interview, "but his most lasting contribution is green architecture."

Born in 1943 in Chaco, Argentina, a province about 600 miles northwest of Buenos Aires, Mr. Ambasz recalled deciding to be an architect when he was nine years old. At Princeton University, according to Mr. Bergdoll's book and other sources, he somehow convinced the faculty to let him complete both undergraduate and graduate studies in two years and was appointed as a lecturer in the architecture department there.

He left abruptly in 1969, when he was offered the job of design curator at the Museum of Modern Art. There he organized two groundbreaking shows, "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape" (1972), which introduced radical Italian design to the world, and "The Architecture of Luis Barragán" (1976), which sparked an enduring passion for the Mexican architect.

In addition to his curatorial endeavors, Mr. Ambasz practiced industrial design, claiming dozens of mechanical patents, including one for a flexible, responsive seat-back for Vertebra, a very early ergonomic office chair, introduced in 1976. His designs for the N14 and Signature 600 engines won multiple awards for Cummins, the engine manufacturer that Mr. Ambasz served as the chief design consultant for from 1980 to 2008.

Growing up in Argentina, he was influenced by Latin American magical realism in literature. He wove and published his



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The architect Emilio Ambasz, top, at his apartment in New York. Examples of his green architecture include Casa de Retiro Espiritual in Spain, above left, and the ACROS Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall in Japan, above right.

own fantastical tales, which he called fables, though they lacked the usual ingredients of talking animals and pithy morals. "Fabula Rasa" (1976) told of a man who founded the discipline of architecture by building a home for the gods.

Mr. Ambasz was one of the leaders of the environmental movement in the 1960s. For him, "green" means more than LEED-certified, net-zero or energy-efficient structures, but rather buildings that indisputably belong to the landscape.

"Emilio's work is about poetry and how we would live with respect and appreciation of nature," Mr. Bergdoll said. "In that sense, he was very prescient."

Mr. Ambasz often describes his approach as "green over the gray," with berms, buried buildings and botanical facades giving back what was appropriated by human-made

structures. "I want to create urban settlements which do not alienate the citizens from the vegetable kingdom," he said in an interview. "I am creating an architecture which is inextricably woven into the greenery and into nature."

In his Casa de Retiro Espiritual (House of Spiritual Retreat), a residence completed in 1979, outside Seville, Spain, with two monumental white walls framing views of nearby mountains, the living spaces are sunk into the ground and covered with a green roof. Using the earth as insulation decreased heating and cooling costs. "Sustainability" was not a word then. I did it because it was the right thing to do in that climate," he said.

He is as forward facing as any industrial designer versed in the tools and ingredients of mass production. "Often we think of the early protagonists of ecological design as

returning to premodern materials like timber, wood and clay," said the architectural writer and editor Suzanne Stephens. "Ambasz was different, as he wasn't shying away from the most high-tech materials like steel, concrete or glass curtain walls."

At the Lucile Halsell Conservatory at the San Antonio Botanical Garden, which opened in 1988, he built massive concrete retaining walls around the sunken building in a scheme that decreased energy usage. A reviewer for Progressive Architecture magazine was critical about the circulation path and greenhouse rooms. But that didn't stop the jurors for the magazine's annual awards competition from giving it a prize. Mr. Bergdoll said he considered the conservatory to be an important example of "an architecture in which the plants were full-time residents and human beings but visitors."

Despite his many accolades, Mr. Ambasz has remained in the shadows of more ac-

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claimed architects of poetic buildings, like Steven Holl, who designed the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., and many other cultural centers.

Ms. Stephens attributed this low profile to his polymath tendencies. "By doing so many things so well," she said, "he was never typecast as any one thing, which didn't allow the public to really understand how talented he is."

Still, his projects are crowd pleasers, even when they displace a public park, as did his design for the ACROS Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall in Japan, completed in 1994. Mr. Ambasz's solution was to cover the government office building in garden terraces that the public could use.

"When you see it, you are astounded by this mountain of green," Mr. Bergdoll said. "It is wild and overgrown, and you can forget that there are people there."

The architect James Wines has written about Mr. Ambasz's environmentalism in several essays and in a book, "Green Architecture," published in 2000. He said, "For Emilio, the building art is a transcendental calling, where the combination of structure, vegetation and their relationship to the environment are seen as part of an integrative utopia."

Today, the Ambasz Institute supports research into the evolving practice of ecologically minded design. Its Material Worlds series and annual Earth Day lecture bring in diverse speakers to discuss advancements in green materials and projects.

"We want to redefine the way a general audience understands architecture," said Carson Chan, the institute's director. "More than just building design, the aim is to engage with the entire process that goes into making architecture. Only then can designers start to address the climate crisis."

The Ambasz Institute will develop concepts that are dear to Mr. Ambasz by stimulating those ideas in the work of others. Chief among them is the understanding that ecological design is not simply about making buildings with minimal carbon footprints or trees on their facades.

"If an architectural work, regardless of how respectful of nature it may be, does not move the heart, is there a point in it?" Mr. Ambasz asked before answering his own question: "It is just one more building."



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