

"THE GRANDFATHER OF GREEN ARCHITECTURE"

Text by Prof. Marco Filoni for the article in La Repubblica

Revolution does not happen by making revolutions; it happens by presenting solutions. Le Corbusier's golden statement shines in synchrony when talking about Emilio Ambasz, the most revolutionary architect currently in circulation. His face exudes passion: soft and groomed lines reveal youthful yet daring eyes all crafted in a somewhat chivalrous manner. Ambasz, an octogenarian, has etched his name as the "Messiah of green architecture" (as dubbed by James Wines); he has received all the most important architectural awards in the world (not least of all, he will be awarded an Honorary Degree at the Polytechnic University of Turin on November 30); and when it comes to urban afforestation, vertical forests, or the reuse of existing structures through natural elements, he is universally recognized as a pioneer his works have influenced some of the most renowned names in contemporary architecture, from Renzo Piano to Jean Nouvel to Tadao Ando.

It's not surprising, then, that the curators of the exhibition "Emerging Ecologies: Architecture and the Rise of Environmentalism" at the MoMA in New York (open until January 20, 2024) have placed Ambasz's work and works at the center of the exhibition. Yet, when the architect is pointed out, he deflects the compliment like all true greats, modesty is not lacking. "I just tried to find a way to build that allowed me to integrate architecture with nature," he says. "What interested me was to give back to the community, in the form of accessible gardens, most if not all, of the land that the footprint of my buildings occupies."

It is the formula of "green over gray," which made him universally known with the famous ACROS Building in Fukuoka, Japan. This formula indicates one of the many possible ways to create new urban settlements that do not distance citizens from the plant kingdom but rather give life to architecture that is intricately interconnected with greenery, with nature. In other words, it demonstrates that we can have not just a house and a garden but a house in the garden.

How did you develop this idea?

It became clear to me only after designing the Casa de Retiro Espiritual in Seville in 1975: here, despite the large windows overlooking the courtyard, if it's 44 degrees in the summer outside, inside it's barely 23. And when it's 5 degrees outside, inside it doesn't go below 19.

Is that when you started thinking about using green as a fundamental element?

From the Casa de Retiro, I derived a first set of ideas. First principle: as mentioned, return as much land as possible occupied by the building in the form of gardens. Second: design a building so interconnected with the surrounding landscape that it becomes impossible to separate one from the other. Third: decorate it using ornamental motifs that change with the seasons, like plants. Fourth: use soil and plants to create a rooftop garden and extend it, where possible, to the walls. The fifth and last principle, but the most important: design works that sing loudly but with closed mouths. At the time, it wasn't easy to get these ideas across... The Western concept that considers human creations as distinct and separate entities in contrast to nature has exhausted its intellectual and ethical capital. Here there is more philosophy than architectural design... One of my convictions is that if you identify the essence of a problem (what the Japanese call *yūgen*), you can more easily arrive at a permanent solution and this has been the guiding thread of my design research, both in design and architecture.

But how do you do that when designing?

With prototypes. Artists be they poets, painters, or architects when worthy of the name, create prototypes. Most of the time, the artist is not aware of the meanings embodied in their prototypes until they have realized them. When these meanings begin to be understood or interpreted, the original prototype begins to change, expand, even destroy the existing language or invent new ones. Once the prototype is "understood" or "interpreted," that is, it becomes an integral part of a culture, behold, that fully understood prototype becomes a type, that is, the object of a typology. It becomes part of a culture. Over time, when culture takes on the type and accepts it without conditions, it becomes a stereotype. That's why my concern what I have always pursued has been to invent prototypes.

How does it feel to be considered the precursor of the green movement in architecture?

Green Architecture is a large umbrella on which, at the moment, I wouldn't dare to shine too much light because it is a place where shadows are still looking for their bodies. It is a state of awareness; it is not yet a conceptual reality because it lacks a theoretical structure that allows it to transmit itself as a body of knowledge and be constantly reassessed. For now, it is a way of feeling. It is not yet a generative method, philosophically speaking.

Do you feel like a father to this movement?

Let's say that today I have children and grandchildren and quite a few of them are "bastards." Am I happy to be their progenitor? It all depends on how these followers will improve the art of architecture. What is needed for green architecture to become a practice and not just a fashionable sensibility (which then leads to greenwashing)? Do not confuse the pyrotechnics of technology with architecture. To create an ecological building, technology is necessary; to create architecture, art is necessary.

What is the artistic essence with which you practice architecture?

Regarding expressive means, I try to approach a design problem in the clearest, most rigorous, and graceful way possible. I want architecture reduced to the essential and, at the same time, rich in potential meanings.

If I can paraphrase Paul Valéry, my search for the essential in architecture is not about being as simple and light as a feather; it is instead about being minimal and concise, like a bird. You are passionate about fables; you have written some, saying that you consider them the true fulcrum of your work over the last fifty years. I am interested in discovery, not recovery; I am passionate about ideation, not classification. In the unexplored realm of invention, taxonomy is a systematization process that has yet to be born as a system. Similarly, precisely because I seek the essential and want to base my work on lasting principles, I chose to write fables instead of theoretical essays. I believe I have grasped a fundamental concept: fables remain unchanged even when theories have long collapsed. The invention of fables is the fulcrum of my working method and not just a literary fancy. After all, the subtext of a fable is a ritual, and it is in support of rituals that most of my work develops.