



# GREEN OVER GRAY

AN INTERVIEW WITH EMILIO AMBASZ

by Michael Bullock



  
Emilio Ambasz photographed by Jerrold Liebman for PIN-UP.

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“**Emilio Ambasz** is here?” asked incredulous visitors during the opening of MoMA’s **Emerging Ecologies** show in September. It was the first formal exhibition put on by the museum’s **Ambasz Institute**, an institution dedicated to “the joint study of the built and the natural environment.” Such is the aura of mystery surrounding Ambasz that even the mere potential of his presence at the opening of his namesake institute causes a minor stir. The Argentine-born architect, industrial designer, and curator has quietly pulled many strings behind some of the critical movements in architecture and design over the past 50 years: as the curator for design at MoMA from 1969–76, he introduced the U.S. to **Italian Radical Design** and the work of Mexican architect **Luis Barragán**; as an industrial designer he created the world’s **first ergonomic chair**; as an author he has penned several seminal **books** on architecture and design; and as an architect, he pioneered the field of sustainable building — “green over gray” is one of his catchphrases. Throughout his activities, he’s maintained a relatively low profile that seems at odds with his flamboyant personality. A masterful showman in both his work and in person, the 80-year-old experiments with drama, spectacle, and intrigue to create radical, poetic, yet very real buildings, often covered in earth, plants, and trees. His work from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s is so ahead of its time that it continues to offer glimpses into a possible future. Ambasz’s vision comes out of an original practice: he subscribes to an almost meditative technique that combines mental image projection with the writing of fables. But his high-minded musings are always balanced with hard-nosed pragmatism, a combination of traits that has allowed him to convince corporations, governments, and private institutions the world over to take extraordinary, forward-thinking risks that have long-term benefits for the communities involved. Ambasz would never consider himself an environmental activist, however, simply a champion of reason. As he puts it, “Sustainability is another word for survival’s common sense.”



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Casa de Retiro Espiritual, Seville, Spain. Photography by Michele Alassio. Image © Emilio Ambasz & Associates.

**Michael Bullock:** You're a paradox: considered a romantic, you're also a hard-nosed realist. It's a rare combination.

**Emilio Ambasz:** People are perplexed by that. They don't know how two seemingly conflicting traits can exist in one person. I tell them, "I'm a very pragmatic man and at the same time very poetic. You give me finance, I'll make you rich. You give me the chance to do a building, I'll create poetry."

**As a poet, what is your definition of nature?**



The traditional Western notion is that nature is the enemy, that man's creations must fight nature. We have to find a way to understand architecture as one component of manmade nature, because in reality what we now have is no longer the nature we were given. We have the nature we made.

### **How would you describe the relationship between justice and nature?**

Justice is a conceit of the mind that does not exist in nature. We have to create it. It is the product of altruism, reason, commitment, and stubbornness. And every day, it will be broken, and every day it has to be recreated. Justice for nature and justice for humans are on different domains and different levels. If you do justice to nature, you're a just person, in the biblical sense. Justice for humans is done using laws, economics, financing, health systems, and unions. There's no society without justice, it has to be pursued and practiced. It can never be relinquished.

### **What about the balance between ecology and technology?**

Many believe that if you use technology to do a green building, you have achieved a great thing. I think we must be careful. The technological building without a soul is just one more building. I would say what I always say at the end of any lecture: "Never mind how sustainable the building is, never mind how green it is, if it does not move the heart, it's just another building. Architecture has to move the heart."

### **Has your understanding of nature evolved over the course of your career?**

I realized that nature is paying us back for not respecting it, and is far stronger than we thought.

### **Should the goal of environmentalism always be sustainability?**

Sustainability is another word for survival's common sense.

### **How does that manifest in your own practice?**

Everything I do, I cover with greenery, so you don't see the work. My desire is that my buildings speak with a loud voice but a closed mouth. A building should be so strong but simultaneously so modest that it doesn't impose itself, doesn't fight with anything around it, and is at peace with nature and its immediate context.





A rural family retreat in Seville completed by Emilio Ambasz in 1975, the Casa de Retiro Espiritual departs from the traditional Andalusian home — including a central patio and an ornate brise-soleil set high in the massive stucco walls. Photography by Michele Alassio. Image © Emilio Ambasz & Associates.



Built beneath the ground, sinuous walls and a smooth open interior are lit from skylights while the earth provides insulation from both heat and cold. A waterfall cascades into the home, which is further punctuated by patios. Photography by Michele Alassio. Image © Emilio Ambasz & Associates.

### Is that how you coined “green over gray”?

“Green over gray” is a slogan, a tool for facilitating the prosperity of an idea. It’s a very easy way for many people to understand what I’m trying to do.

### You also write short stories as part of your process.

I write **fables** because they provide me with a way of presenting images and hopes, not manifestos; I’m incredibly reluctant to make definitive manifesto-type statements because they tend to be followed by people who are relatively weak in spirit and misread them. We have seen what happened with many of the ideological manifestos. So, I believe very much that a fable is like a seed — if it enters a fertile brain, it will grow into a plant.

### Which is your favorite among your fables?

I will not say, only because it will mislead everybody into thinking I’m a writer, and I’m not. I’m an architect, and I’ve spent many years fighting to be seen this way. You have my book of fables, so you can read what you want from it.

**So, let’s discuss your architecture. There are three key buildings of yours that I feel have done the most to foster the practice of **green architecture**: the **Casa de Retiro Espiritual** [Seville, Spain, 1975], the **Lucile Halsell Conservatory** [San Antonio, Texas, 1982], and the **Acros Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall** [Fukuoka, Japan, 1995]. Let’s start with the Casa de Retiro Espiritual. In a way it’s your Glass House: a career-defining built statement that offers an entirely new**



**archetype for the family home. It features an unusual open-book façade that soars above the living quarters, which were built entirely underground.**

First of all, no, they weren't built underground. I have never, ever built anything below grade — it's costly and very risky for the workers. The Casa de Retiro Espiritual was constructed above ground, and afterwards they spent a day and a half covering parts of the walls and the roof with earth. The hill is artificially created. The term is "bermed." Every one of my projects that you see covered like that is bermed. The climate in that region of Spain is sweltering in the summer, so, by covering the roof with earth, I didn't need to use a heating or cooling system. My other goal was to design a house so integrated with the landscape that there would be no way to disentangle one from the other. Think about it like a painting and a frame; sometimes, an artist paints on the frame. In this case, I wanted to have no frame and no painting — they had to be one and the same. There could not be a distinction between them. I liked that the building does not interfere with the landscape. If 1,000 people saw the house, only a handful of them would realize that the landscape is manmade.

### **How did the success of the Casa de Retiro Espiritual affect your subsequent output?**

From this project, I derived some core principles: building in such a way that it integrates with nature and building in such a way that it gives back 100 percent of the greenery that the footprint of the building covers. This became a necessity. You should not build unless you can give back 100 percent of the greenery you're disrupting. I am not an intellectual, I'm a man of images. Only once I make an image do I start thinking about what ideas are contained within that image. I always proceed from images. If you arrive at the idea first, you are in the domain of semantics. If you use words, you're in the domain of the known. If you want to create something new, you must let images come in. The problem is you cannot create a school around that — you cannot systematize or teach image-making.





Emilio Ambasz photographed by Jeremy Liebman for PIN-UP.

**You are like an architectural psychic. Your clients must have been very forward-thinking. When they came to you, what did they ask for?**

They didn't come to me. I built the house for myself.

**Well, it would require a strange person to build such a radical building.**

It was a powerful image. But it was a paper project. Building it gave me a great amount of credit. In 1975, when the house was still unbuilt, I received an award from *Progressive Architecture*. Robert A. M. Stern was a juror, and he had a great sense of justice to give me the award. He fought with the jury. So, honor to him. It needed to be built to give it credibility. Given that I'm still part of the human condition, I felt that I must provide the public with something that is accessible. A built house is accessible. There is no way you can bring about love for architecture unless that feeling exists. You cannot generate love by knowing about love. You have to create work that inspires that feeling. I try to grab people's hearts. I try to seduce. That is my goal.

**What does the house look like today?**

It's impeccable — the same as when it was built. Of course, every seven years we have to repaint it.

**When was the last time you saw it in person?**

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I went last June because we had a meeting at the house. But I've never lived there. I've never slept there for one night. I inhabit the house mentally. Am I puzzling you?

**Puzzling me? No, not at all.**

Then I'm failing.

**[Laughs.] When you started building, in the 1970s, what was the reaction to the environmental movement?**

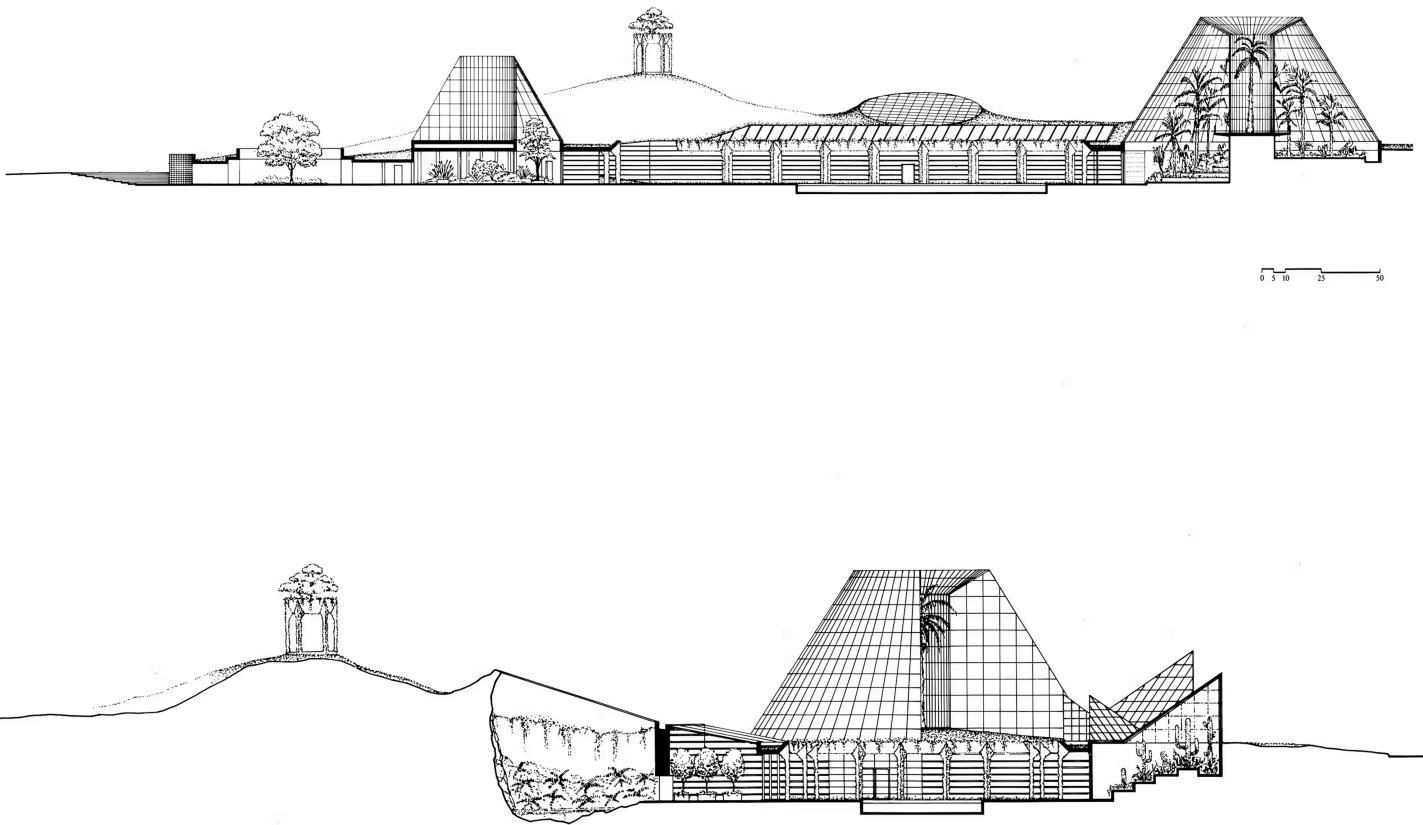
In the beginning, I was often asked if I was some druid. People thought I was crazy when I covered buildings with plants. Nobody was doing that. I had brilliant architects working for me who quit because they said that type of "green shit" had no future — to my utter distress. I mainly survived doing industrial design.

**What was your response to the criticism?**

I just told them I love trees. Trees are magnificent things. In the early 1970s, when I had the idea for the Casa de Retiro Espiritual, it was uncommon for architects to berm a home. Like I said, it starts with an image for me. I always start with images. It has to do with the old saying that's often attributed to Gropius: "Develop an ineffable technique and abandon yourself to intuition." I'm intuitive, and I have considerable technique.



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In the hot, arid climate of southern Texas, greenhouses need to keep out the sun as much as let it in. For Emilio Ambasz & Associates's award-winning 1982 Lucile Halsell Conservatory in San Antonio, Ambasz "used the earth as a container" to control light and heat while minimizing the need for mechanical systems, reducing building costs by 20 percent. Image © Emilio Ambasz & Associates.

## So how did the project for the Lucile Halsell Conservatory at the San Antonio Botanical Garden come about? What was brief from the client?

The initiative came from a remarkable man named **Gilbert Denman**. He was a great philanthropist and the trustee of a number of Texan foundations. He came to see me and said, "I would like you to design a conservatory for San Antonio." And I replied, "Why? You have such a good climate there. Why would you need to protect the plants from the sun?" He said, "We need to protect the plants from the wind. The winds come down from Canada at about 100 miles an hour and the temperature drops, sometimes in four hours, about 30 degrees Fahrenheit. And the plants cannot react in time, so they die." Because the budget was tight, I had to invent a technique for building the structures. Again, I built it on the ground and afterwards it was bermed. One of the secrets you learn as an architect is that when the clients come to you with requirements, you should double the amount of money they claim they have and halve the amount of space they believe they

need. It's a matter of massaging and getting them to understand what they really need and what they must really pay.

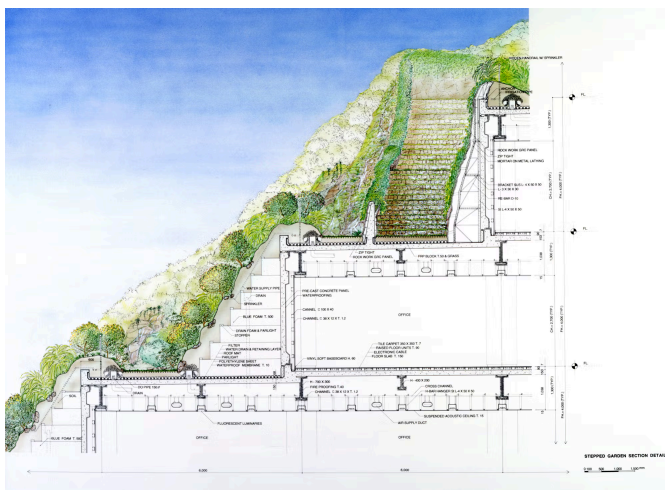
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### What was the community's response?

The response is remarkable. It's a peaceful place. People love plants. I think plants are a psychological requirement. The mayor told me that, after the **Alamo**, it's the most visited place in San Antonio. It's also very profitable. They charge a fee, and it supports itself.

**Another building of yours that is popular with the community is the Acros Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall in Japan. A large section of the building is covered in earth and plants. It's incredible to have a bermed building of that scale in the center of Japan's sixth-largest city.**

The main challenge with the Fukuoka project was the site — an existing four-and-a-half-acre park at the heart of the city. Of course, the people were rightly most unhappy about losing it. So, what did I propose to them? To do it like that [points to an architectural section depicting the building's terraced gardens]. I was not supposed to win in this competition. But a very unusual thing happened in Japan: the public pushed for my project. Usually, people in Japan don't act politically, they are very apathetic. But they pushed for my project, and the **Asahi Shimbun**, a leftist newspaper, published it, and that gave it even more strength. So the city decided to build my project. I was considered a barbarian, a foreigner, a *gaijin* who didn't understand anything, but once construction finished, it was immediately well received. The public loved it. We hired Tase Michio, who I consider to be the best landscape architect. I think of him as a gardener, which is a higher state than being a landscape architect — he really loves plants, and planted about 35,000. We tested all of them as the building was going up because, with typhoons, you must ensure that the winds, which come at about 120 miles an hour, will not blow them away. Now there are about 50,000 plants, meaning that the birds collaborated with us.





In 1995 Emilio Ambasz designed the ACROS Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall, which inaugurated what would become known as “green architecture.” Image © Emilio Ambasz & Associates.

The most visited landmark in its namesake city, the 1,000,000-square-foot municipal complex, features an atrium that lights its 14 above-ground floors. However, the building is most famous for its terraced public space that turns the structure into a vibrant park overlooking the harbor. Image © Emilio Ambasz & Associates.



Emilio Ambasz photographed by Jeremy Liebman for PIN-UP.

**I'd like to shift gears to discuss Luis Barragán. You were instrumental in introducing his work to an American audience thanks to a show you curated at MoMA in 1976. Later, you advocated for him to receive the first **Pritzker Prize** in 1979. What was he like?**

Barragán never said anything he hadn't thought out and repeated at least 20,000 times. He was very controlled.

**How old was he then?**

Over 70. He already had Parkinson's. The Pritzkers wanted the prize to go to somebody more well-known, so they gave it to **Philip Johnson**. But the second year it went to Barragán. I remember sitting next to him at the dinner when his award was presented; he was annoyed and said, “Oh, great, it arrives now when my condition is visible.” He was, of course, under a considerable amount of self-control. He

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 didn't want reality to betray the particular image he presented. I suspect he was gay, and that was unacceptable in Mexico in those years.

**It's not like homosexuality was much more tolerated in America during that time, especially for architects.**

I guess so, Philip didn't hide it, but of course he was protected by his considerable fortune and savoir-faire. I used to see him regularly because he was the chairman of the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA when I was a curator there. He once told me, "Emilio, to be a keen architect you need ten percent talent, 90 percent character." And I said, "You, Phillip, have 95 percent." He laughed. He was a masochist. He liked it if you hit him, provided it was done discreetly.

**Wow, hot gossip.**

When **Barry Bergdoll** was a graduate student, I hired him to research the British architect **John Soane**. I turned the research into a book and I gave the only copy to Philip at the Four Seasons. As you may know, he had a permanent table there. My inscription said, "John Soane: first-rate architect, second-rate collector. Johnson: first-rate collector." He rolled on the floor with laughter.

**I could listen to you discussing these legends all day, but you're the legend I'm here to learn about. Last time we spoke, you told me something that resonated deeply: that you believe in prototypes over stereotypes. What do you mean about that?**

An artist, when he creates something, if he's a real artist, creates a prototype. *Proto* means primitive, something that is not understandable or has no place yet in language. The language has to be derived from the prototype. In time, that prototype, or that which is an image, is understood. Once it is understood and absorbed into the culture, it becomes a type. So, the architect working as an architect, as a professional architect, is operating within the domain of the type. A good architect like **Skidmore, Owings & Merrill** will work within the type of domain. In time, that type becomes so incorporated into the culture and overused that it becomes a stereotype.

**Is that why, when you created the Emilio Ambasz Institute at MoMA, one of the core missions was to support experimentation?**

Why did I create the institute? It's very simple. MoMA has been the champion of Modernism for 75 years, and has therefore exhausted its intellectual capital. I wanted that to be renewed. I thought that the only way to restore it was to try to establish a just reconciliation of architecture with nature. Of course, justice is a figment of the mind. As I said earlier, I felt that it was necessary to find a way of conceiving architecture as one intrinsic component of the nature that humans created.

**The institute is now almost two years old. How is it going?**



That is not something I interfere with. You should ask its director, **Carson Chan**.

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ACROS Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall, Fukuoka, Japan.  
Image © Emilio Ambasz & Associates.



Emilio Ambasz photographed by Jeremy Liebman for PIN-UP.

### But didn't you set the parameters?

No, I just gave the money. MoMA should be at the forefront of renewal because the museum has the function of bringing to a level of consciousness the ideas and emotions that are contained in architecture, to evaluate them, and to celebrate them. I thought that interesting and important ideas were no longer happening in the domain of Modernism. It's an established semantics, an almost stereotyped practice. I believe the museum should be concerned with prototypes, not stereotypes. It should be more invested in achievement over potential. By that, I mean it's too obsessed with success to foster experimentation. That's the only comment I make. It's not up to me, I leave it to the next generations of architects, designers, curators, and scientists to evolve these practices.

### What are you most looking forward to?

The next project. That's what keeps me alive. Everything will eventually collapse, and everything will turn to dust. I only have this limited amount of time. I don't have a mission, but I have a particular obligation because I have a gift. I must do what I can. Am I satisfied? No. *Jamais content*. I always want to do more.

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