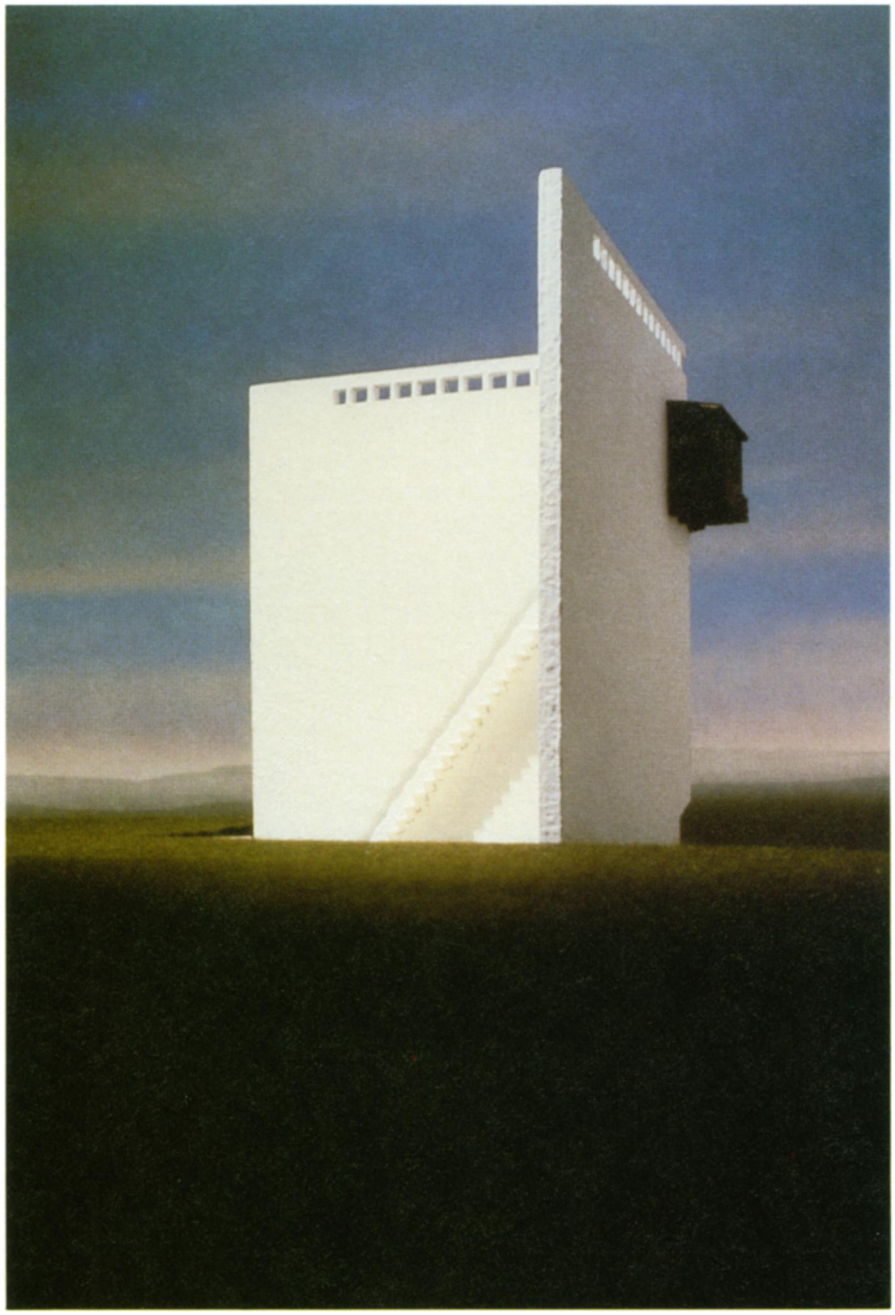
Beyond Metaphor, Before Form



Emilio Ambasz
with Robert Hart, M. Mattei, N. Salvarani
Drawing for a House for a Couple
outside Cordoba, Spain 1979–80

● *Emilio Ambasz*

I have a confession to make. I'm not Emilio, I am Ambasz. In reality I am Emilio's metaphor. I asked him to join me in this assignment, but he has excused himself on the basis that he is not a theoretician or an ideologue as are some of his European friends whom he unkindly calls "yesterday's Marxists, tomorrow's black marketeers." He claims that he is not interested in politics or in power as are some of his New York friends. But I don't believe it. He says he doesn't seek to make metaphors, but tries to create an essential image. He doesn't care to suggest models but rather he seeks primal images. And he conceives of architecture as an act of the myth-making imagination, a difficult pursuit to establish in any systematic way.

I've asked him to give me something that will explain to people what he does. Something from HIM, not my interpretation of what he is doing. He gave me two statements, actually two fables, one for the beginning and the other for the end of this essay. Emilio is speaking:

Members of a very large corporation came to me explaining that they were interested in investing some of their assets outside of their traditional field of activity. They wanted to invest in housing. They asked me to develop designs and a program with a view toward establishing a factory that would produce prefabricated houses. They provided ample research and development funds and the professional fee was agreed upon. The first step I took was to create a catalogue of domestic places which was organized into two sections: retrospective and prospective.

The retrospective section was conceived as an operation of the memory. It was a kind of historical recollection of domestic places, those fragments of the house that had survived the decay or the evanescence of their original context.

So the catalogue contained Pompeiian atriums, Japanese terraces, ambulatories, patios, courtyards, medieval window seats, Roman baths, roof gardens, arcaded porches, foyers, entrance halls and more. The prospective section was intended as an exercise of the imagination. It involved designing new places without any historical antecedents, and it postulated new spatial concepts that corresponded to emerging notions of flexibility, adaptability, territoriality and individual privacy. Now each of those places, those that were recovered as well as those that were postulated, was printed on a double page in the catalogue. On the left-hand page plans, sections and elevations were drawn, and on the right-hand page there was an axonometric drawing of the place. In the case of the retrospective section photos were added that were ever so slightly blurred so as not to fully reveal texture, while still denoting space and mass. Once the catalogue was completed, I proceeded onto the experimental stage. The goal was to test the capability of the proposed housing method to provide housing needs, not only those of a very large number of users of similar social and economic backgrounds, but also those housing needs of small groups with differing backgrounds.

In California we found 14 families interested in jointly developing a housing project for which they purchased a piece of land. Each family was given a copy of the catalogue of domestic places and each individual in the family was asked to make a selection of elements for his new home. Once the family members had completed their preliminary selection, they then sat down to discuss their choices with an architect of the group. Next the architect's task was to encourage the family to combine into a coherent scheme those elements that each member had selected. So they added places that had been overlooked and removed others when it became clear that they were incongruent with the central purpose of the group. The combination of things was sometimes bizarre but the experimental design team did its best to help each family to achieve a scheme that satisfied the programmatic and social requirements of the family as well as the psychological needs of every family member. Next they elaborated each family's housing scheme into diagrammatic plans, sections and elevations. Each dwelling was then sent out for bids and sub-contracted to builders of the area. The builders were not given working drawings nor details. Each contractor was expected to work them out according to his own building techniques and according to available materials.

Construction proceeded as smoothly as you can imagine with 14 different owners looking over the contractors' shoulders, but the builders managed to produce a house more-or-less on time and more-or-less within budget. Now, I have to confess that the so-called Pompeiian atriums, Dutch gardens and Corbusian roof gardens lost some of their texture when translated into the California vernacular. But the spaces were there all right and the juxtaposition of fragments, those fragments recovered from different historical periods, sometimes generated unintended ironies. They were nevertheless also suggestive of new meaning. The most important thing is that the cost per square foot of each house is about the same as the cost per square foot of the most inexpensive prefabricated system in existence, one that is very rigid in comparison with the one that we developed. So we felt that we had managed to demonstrate to our satisfaction that it is possible to have a participatory approach to industrialized housing. However, since this approach did not require new factories or any new investments, we were fired.

A project that Emilio has been working on since 1973 is on a very beautiful hacienda site 20 kilometers outside of Mexico City. The people who bought it do computer programming for government and industry. They had in mind a development of office buildings. They employ 160 people: economists, mathematicians and programmers. Each of them is a prima donna and each of them had to have a window.

What Emilio proposed to them was a building that would take into consideration the fact that Mexico was a lagoon before the Spaniards came. Consequently, if you are going to build in Mexico and put a finger in the earth, you get water. So he proposed to build a basin hidden behind two walls. One of the walls is an energy wall—a sun wall—the other one is a billboard. The basin is approximately 450 by 450 feet and contains a power station where solar energy is turned into electricity at a horrendous price. The primary feature of the project is that every one of the components is ready-made—off the shelf. The offices are 50 by 50 foot barges which can be rearranged according to the needs of various programs and projects. The barges float until located in position. They're moved by a small motor boat, but once positioned, compartments are filled with water so the barges slowly sink four feet to the bottom where they rest. The polyethylene tubes connecting the barges are made by a French company, and are nine feet in diameter, with a movable floor on which you can walk. Under the floor are the coaxial cable and electrical wires that connect to the computer. A cloud of cold water mist, first used at rodeos to settle the dust and bring down the temperature, is used to make the basin's water recirculate, reducing the ambient temperature on top of the computer center, thereby reducing the air conditioning load. I believe that Emilio used the mist in order to produce a rainbow.

The main notion of the people sponsoring the construction of the building is that they may become a technocratic alternative to the present political system, and in case a revolution comes, they may be appointed as the new priests of power. Now, Emilio insisted that there was no need for this building, that in reality all of these people could be at home with little terminals at their tables, but the employers were skeptical, so that notion is perhaps for some future time. The barges may be removed and one of the barges may be turned into an island of flowers in the Xochimilco tradition.

In an exhibition of Italian design that Emilio produced at The Museum of Modern Art in 1972, he again went to extraordinary lengths to make things look as if they had been taken out of a catalogue. By the end of the 1960s Italy was an interesting place in terms of design, not only because of its production of consumer goods, but also because of its high level of critical observation of the consumer society. The exhibition was divided into two parts: one part was environments that were shown inside the museum; the other part was presented in the garden and consisted of boxes, made for shipment to other museums, that contained furniture produced in the previous decade.

After the success of that show, Emilio was asked by a group in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to design a new museum. He suggested that they shouldn't build a new museum for their collection, but that since they were in Grand Rapids, the American center of furniture production, it made more sense for them to create an exhibition center concerned with the notion of artifact production. He also suggested to them that they utilize an abandoned federal court building that was in the midst of deteriorating Grand Rapids. As a result, they bought the building for one dollar from the General Services Administration.

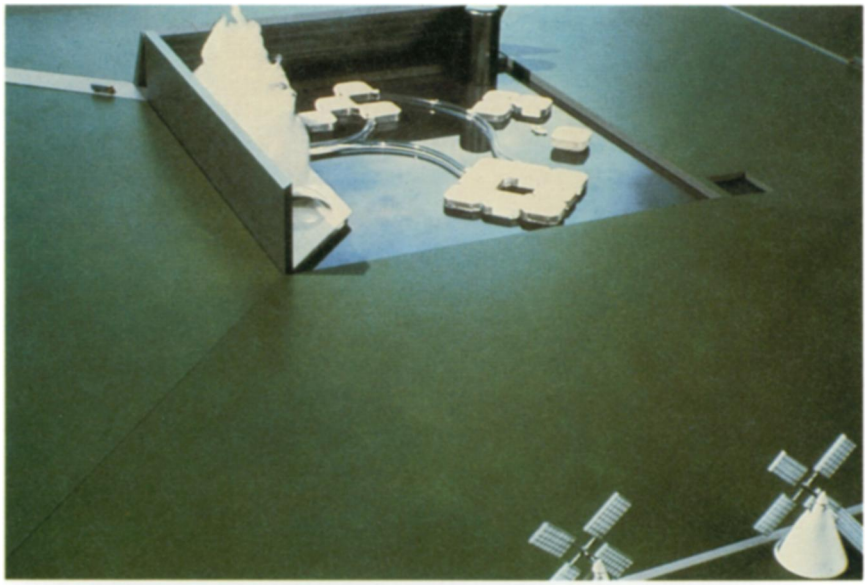
The proposal was to reverse the entrance of this rather handsome Beaux Arts building and put it on the back side for several reasons: one is that it brings back the French interpretation of the Italianate type of entrance, so that in the Italian way you enter through the courtyard; also, putting the entrance in the rear had the advantage of reinforcing the edge of the neighboring retail development area. So to some extent it helped to reinforce the process of downtown revitalization. It also related the building to the junior college in front of it, from which a great number of visitors to the museum would come. So Emilio proposed one simple gesture—an inclined plane. The inclined plane would lean on the building and would allow several things to happen: it would create a *porte-cochere* under which buses could come to unload their passengers; it would allow the creation of a stairway up to a grand foyer entrance; water cascading down the inclined plane and collected at the bottom for recirculation would provide air conditioning. This was also one way of lowering the heat load on the inclined plane. Furthermore there was a general notion of using an inclined plane throughout Grand Rapids in order to recover other buildings that could form parts of a community art center. There were two abandoned cinemas and one theater and the idea was to use inclined planes leaning in different ways on the buildings to indicate that any building with an inclined plane creating arcades or passages formed part of the art complex of Grand Rapids.

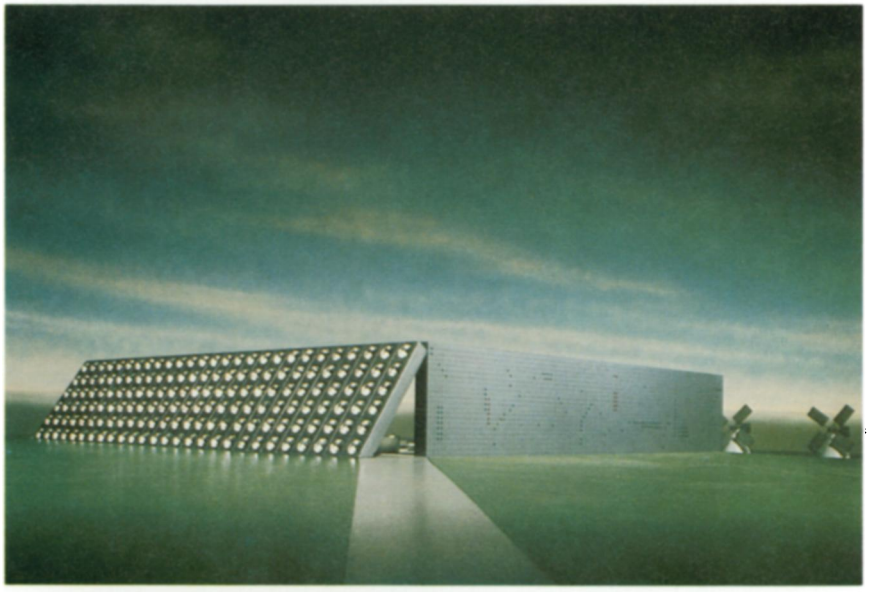
The next project was for a dormitory town of 3,000 inhabitants, about 12 miles from Hanover, West Germany, where many enlightened professional people live. The adults were concerned that the children, who did not, of course, remember World War II, should be given an object lesson relative to that war. They didn't know precisely what it should be, so they invited theologians, artists and sociologists to make suggestions.

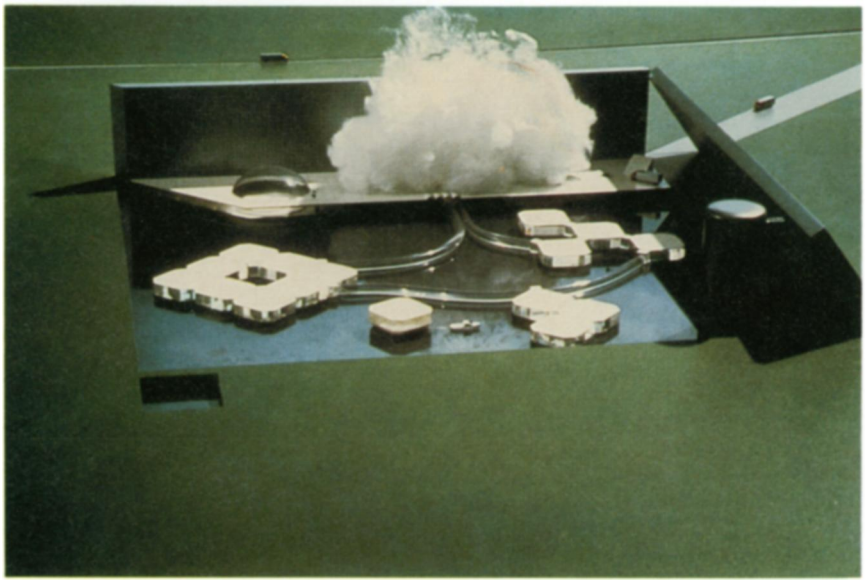
Emilio proposed the creation of a number of gardens—relatively small gardens. A garden is assigned to each child born into the community. The gardens have an entrance composed of a wall and two trees that lead into what is a contemporary notion of a labyrinth with no center. Each of the gardens is defined by walls of hedges, seven feet high, five feet wide, that define a walkway. The idea is that when a child is five or six years old he is taught the rudiments of gardening and becomes responsible for the plants, enabling him to begin to understand about cycles, about planning, about taking care of things. A further notion is that when the child grows up and wants to make a larger garden, he would have to negotiate with the neighbor and they would both have to cut their walls of hedges in order to expand the garden. The ultimate idea is that when the child, heavy in years and in wisdom, dies, the plaque of marble that bears his or her name is turned upside down and the garden is reassigned to a newly born. When that person is six or seven he receives the garden and must decide whether to respect the planting there or to uproot it. Now, of course, the townspeople are relatively sophisticated and they never thought that this idea would be realized, so there is a big plaque explaining that the townspeople who created this garden for their children do not believe that all the children will respect each other's gardens or that they will necessarily share them. But they hope that a majority will. There is also a clear awareness that some of the gardens will be abandoned or neglected, but that is a fact that was accounted for.

Emilio rather cynically thought he had won the prize because it was the cheapest building proposal but he was told that, while he might have thought he was being tongue-in-cheek, in reality his proposal was in the great Lower-Saxony tradition. You may recall that when the Hanoverian kings went to England from Northern Germany they brought with them their tradition that when someone goes into retirement, he is given a gift of a small plot of land.

Emilio Ambasz
with Robert Hart, L. Vinciarelli, R. Fontana, R. Burda
Drawings for the Center for Applied Computer Research and Programming
Mexico 1975







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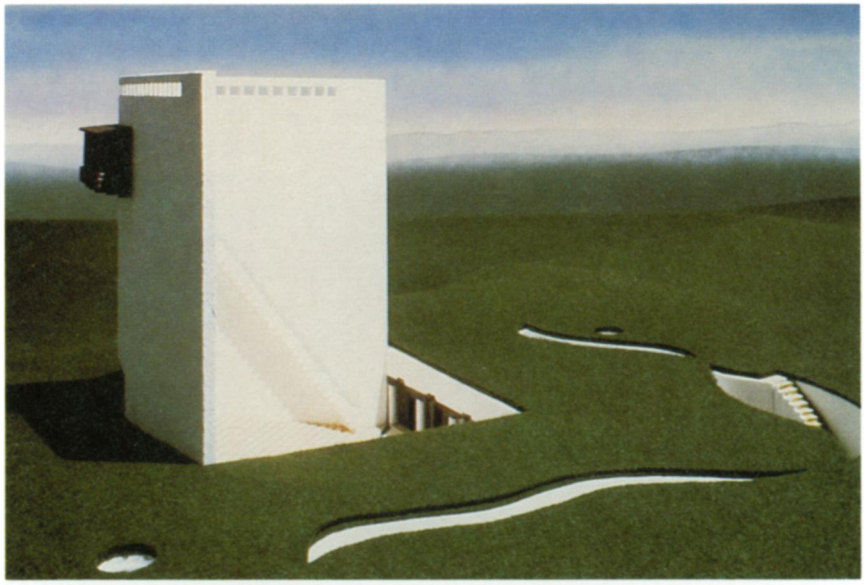

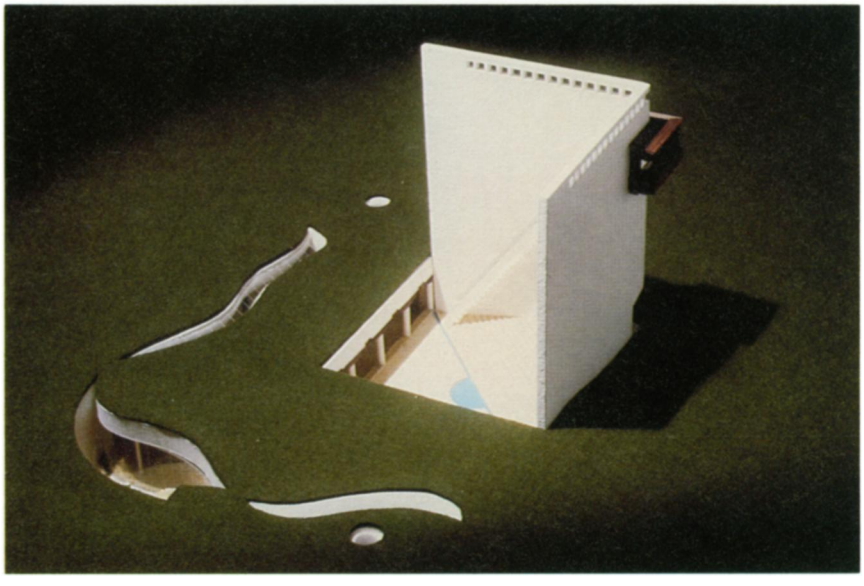

A recently completed project is a house outside of Cordoba, Spain. It's a house for a couple that sits in the middle of a marvelous wheat field. The house has an exterior stairway that ascends to a balcony. A handrail is excavated into the brick wall in such a way that it can carry water—water that cascades from the top where it originates its journey down to the bottom of the stairway where it makes a good deal of noise. You have a tremendous amount of noise in your ears as you begin the ascent, and as you get up to the top of the balcony it becomes quieter and quieter and quieter and the feeling is you have really arrived in paradise, because you no longer hear the noise of the water. The water that cascades down the stairway wall is recirculated. There are two stairways. They have been designed in such a way that only one can be used for ascension and the other for descent. The house is below ground.

In a curious way, this house is in the tradition of Spanish houses. A house in the south of Spain is always inwardly oriented. It looks onto a patio and has a colonnade and a cloister. Cordoba has a very arid climate and the temperature there can be quite hot, so with about three feet of earth above and a system of air circulation, the house can maintain itself almost throughout the year at about 68-70 degrees. There are two skylights and a little patio. The interior walls and the floor are covered with glass mosaics. There is almost no furniture. The main reason for the stairway wall is a practical one. It is oriented in such a way that the shadow is always on one side, and the balcony is always in shadow. Light that enters into the house enters by reflection from this wall. There is an alcove for sleeping, two bathrooms and a big sauna, closets, a kitchen, and another alcove in case of guests. The house is only about 1400 square feet.

Despite Emilio's Argentine birth, there is something very North American about his attitudes, about his distrust of the ideological and his apparent guileless predilection for simple truth. If he has any gift, it is that of stripping his formal production of the over-encumbrance of the kind of univalent ideology that has kept most visionary architects in a state of constant unemployment. Now Emilio, in opting to be a "fableist" rather than an ideologist, has grasped something very basic. Fables retain their ring of immutability long after ideologies have withered. For Emilio, the most creative and the most productive critical faculty is irony. If the work is sometimes compelling it is because it pretends that it doesn't compel. The invention of fables is quite central to his working method and it's really not a literary accessory. As we know, the sub-text of a fable is a ritual and it is to the support of rituals that his work has invariably addressed itself. It is at the level of distinguishing rituals that his projects perhaps make the most serious brushes with the reality of daily life. In the projects that we have seen, there is a paramount concern with the ritual organization of community. The users of his projects are usually small, self-contained societies, living in formal isolation from the larger social organization. This is the weakest part of his work. It would be interesting to see what he might do in an urban situation; undoubtedly he would surrender and sell out.

So far he has been careful to present his projects in rather special, very controlled, laboratory conditions. One of the projects of this nature is the cooperative for grape-growers in California. He posits a rather complex interrelationship between the ritual of growth and the harvest and the ritual of community building that actually takes place beneath the grape arbors. Another project of this type is the self-contained community of "farmers" in Georgia, again located beneath the matrix of agricultural production. Now in this case we don't have a leafy umbrella of grapes; what we have is really the land itself. The garden in West Germany is an exercise in pure ritual. All of these projects are essays in the ritual of dwelling and in the rites of the smallest of micro-societies—the family. The Mexican computer company, if

we want to stretch the analogy, can to some extent be seen as a commentary on that most modern of social families—the company family. Now, if a certain flavor of arcadia penetrates his architecture it is with a most exquisite deliberation. As he himself has put it in one of his favorite aphorisms, and he is rather repetitive in them: "Europe's eternal quest remains utopia. The myth of the end. America's returning myth is arcadia. The eternal beginning." Now what arcadia is the central myth in Emilio's lexicon of cultural renewal? It's not exactly the commonplace arcadia of the standard dreams that we know. He elaborates a little bit further. "The traditional vision of arcadia is rooted in the humanistic garden, but America's arcadia has turned into man-made nature, a forest of artificial trees and of mental shadows." In his work, Emilio seeks to mingle the splendors of arcadia with those of the artificial trees and the mental shadows. As we have seen, it's not the machine in the garden that he is after but it's the machine and the garden. Or perhaps someone among you may say the machine under the garden. But while he may be suffused with Yankee visions of splendid nature, he is not suicidal. He knows that the machine is here to stay. It has become a part of us and there is no point in trying to subdue it or to conquer it, perhaps just to teach it its place, to make it show a little respect.

About ten years ago, Reyner Banham, in an attempt at rethinking architecture's use of technology, called attention to the diverse methods of environmental control which have been developed through the use of various sources of energy, and suggested the possibility that such new methods might perhaps provide new forms for architectural invention. While it is true that many of these ideas have lost their validity in the light of the present energy crisis, at the same time it was and still is a serious attempt at demonstrating that the architecture that we know is not the only possible one. Solar architecture constitutes a rather important step forward even if it hasn't meant, in most cases, anything more adventurous than adapting traditional building techniques for utilization of solar energy. Architectural concepts have remained the same. Perhaps there is the seed of an alternative solution in the work we have discussed as it abandons known and established materials and construction methods and the premises and design procedures which have been followed are not the ones that traditionally fit within the main body of architectural knowledge and experience. The building materials that we see in most of the work are either derived from the catalogues of high technology or they come from agriculture. Emilio calls it "agri-tecture."

Now he doesn't seek natural materials or utilize craft as a way of establishing an easy connection with tradition, but rather he wants to use different materials than those traditionally used in order to escape the narrow channels of established professional practice. He follows a procedure that might be called "bricollage:" the design of systems that are constructed with elements or with fragments that have been extracted from other systems that were created for a different purpose. It is a sort of metaphoric operation, where one word is made to stand for something else. But in this case that word or that fragment or that method or that piece of material is not made to stand for something else, it is brought in to a completely new context. Although the compositional methods are still architectural, the hope is that the result would not be the traditional type of architecture. Each of the elements, when detached from its original context, still retains its basic characteristics, but when introduced into a new context, it is reevaluated and is assigned new functions, new tasks and consequently acquires new meanings.

There is something critical that could be said about his selection of projects. One of the most basic criticisms that can be directed against him is that up to the present his work has been rather simple. But the simplicity, when it works best, is capable of producing objects of a certain emotional charge. Emilio has said that the only things he really cares for are pipes. The things that interest some architects, such as the art of architecture, the poetry, mean absolutely nothing to Emilio. He has hypnotized himself into believing that he has to attend to function because otherwise some of the things that he invents might overwhelm him and make him too self-conscious.

To close, he has written a second fable:

The little village was in the grip of fear—fear of divine rages and fear of human passions. One of the villagers started to build a structure that was circular in plan, cylindrical in volume and had a dome-like roof. He used stones and wood and mud. When he finished his work, he came back and told the group that the building he had erected was in the shape of the universe, and that inside the world was the god of the universe. Then taking a rod from the temple he made a circle around the village and with the help of the other villagers he encircled the village with a high wall which was built of earth and of stones. In the center of this village, next to the temple, he erected a large hut that he completely covered, except for the entrance, with a mound of earth. On top of this mound, he placed six vertical, stone slabs. This structure he called his home. The people in the village called it a palace. When he died, his body was laid down inside the hut together with all his belongings, and his son covered the entrance with the large stone slabs that he removed from the top of the mound. Some people say that this is the way architecture started.