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Emilio Ambasz. *A Cooperative of Mexican-American Grape Growers, California, 1976*

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Emilio Ambasz

A Cooperative of Mexican-American Grape Growers, California, 1976

Europe's eternal quest remains Utopia, the myth of the end.
America's returning myth is Arcadia, the eternal beginning.

[Though this is a rural project, its nature as a cooperative of nine families qualifies it for inclusion in this urban context. As cooperative agricultural enterprise was historically the forerunner of city organization, it is appropriately re-examined here.]

The nucleus of this cooperative is constituted by nine families who, aided by federal and state grants and loans, have been able to acquire land in a Southern California valley. This is a very warm climate, not ideal for grape growing.

This project foresees the development of a grape-growers cooperative of Mexican-American farmers in four settlement phases. The *first* settlement phase will see the nine founding families living directly under the vineyard's shaded roof. A wall of hedges will delineate the private territory of each family, who will then move into their respective territories the mobile houses they already possess.

The entrance to the vineyard will be defined by opening a passageway at the corner of the remaining walls which once belonged to a long abandoned adobe ranch. In order to respect the cultural heritage of the Mexican-American settlers the nine families' square plots are laid out in a formal pattern, reminiscent of early

Hispano-American towns. A number of parallel walls of hedges, defining the access road running from the entrance gate to the housing settlement, have been planted to express the first settlers' hope that the cooperative will prosper and grow along this access avenue.

In the *second* settlement phase, 16 new families will bring their own trailer homes with them. Two new residential squares will be added and divided into smaller squares for a variety of activities, including a garden at the edge of a pond. This garden will be composed of prism-like formations of hedges, each one about six feet square and 20 feet high.

By the time the second settlers arrive the cooperative's production will have grown to the point of allowing the creation of a winery. Located near the entrance, this winery will warehouse the grapes in a conical silo—a Mexican type of structure traditionally used for warehousing the land's produce. The winery itself will be underground so that the wooden vats can be kept at a cool temperature.

The *third* settlement phase is more the architect's wish than the settlers' plan. One hopes that the internal hedge-walls separating each family's private territory will by then have been clipped away, and that a more communal pattern of living will have developed. As for the *fourth* settlement phase, it stands as a surrogate for the eternal quest that all walls wither away and that man be able to live in peace under a vineyard's shade and off its generous grapes. EA

Emilio Ambasz (b. 1943, Argentina) has taught at Princeton, Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Carnegie Institute for Technology, Pittsburgh, and since 1971 he has been a fellow at The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, New York. As curator of design at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, he organized and directed several major exhibitions including: *Paris: May 1968, Posters of the Student Revolt*, 1968; *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, 1971; and, *The Taxi Project: Realistic Solutions for Today*, 1976. He is author of numerous publications including: *The Architecture of Louis Barragan and Working Fables: A Collection of Design Tales for Skeptical Children*. As a furniture designer he collaborated with Giancarlo Piretti on Vertebra, a seating system. His architectural projects include: Center for Applied Research, Mexico City, 1974; Community Arts Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975; and, Housing in an Agricultural Setting, Pembroke, Georgia, 1977.



A perspective view of the hedge walls defining individual territories in the *first* settlement phase of a cooperative.