Cynthia Davidson

The Environments Of Emilio Ambasz

New York, November 17, 2020 – The Museum of Modern Art announced today the establishment of The Emilio Ambasz Institute for the Joint Study of the Built and the Natural Environment. The goals of the Institute, through a range of curatorial programs and research initiatives, are to foster dialogue, promote conversation, and facilitate research around the relationship between the built and the natural environment – making the interaction between architecture and ecology visible and accessible to Museum visitors and the wider public while highlighting the urgent need for an ecological recalibration. – MoMA Press Release

With the announcement of the Ambasz Institute last fall, architect Emilio Ambasz is, in a sense, coming home, back to the place where, in 1969, he became a curator of design; a place where his graphic design work entered the collection even earlier, and where both his industrial and architectural projects are in the museum's collections. A peripatetic individual who says he feels most at home "in my shoes," Ambasz agreed to two transatlantic Zoom conversations in June, 2021, to discuss the new program at MoMA, which he endowed with a $10 million gift; his work as a curator in the early 1970s; and his exceptional career in architecture and industrial design. What follows is an edited transcript of those conversations, giving some insight into the life and mind of a man whom many call the father of green architecture – an achievement that the University of Bologna recognized this year with an Honorary Doctorate in Architecture and Engineering. – CD

CYNTHIA DAVIDSON: How did a boy born in the provinces of Argentina get himself to Princeton University in 1963?

EMILIO AMBASZ: When I was 11, I knew without knowing that I wanted to be an architect. I was only interested in toys having to do with architecture. When I was about 15 or so, I started listening to the courses at the university in Buenos Aires. It had about 6,000 students of architecture, so nobody noticed me. I also bought Frank Lloyd Wright's *In the Nature of Materials* and Bruno Zevi's *Saber ver la arquitectura*. I told my parents that I would go to America, because America, for

me, was the stage of the world. Is it still in the 21st century? I sadly nurture doubts. Anyway, I did everything possible to connect myself with architecture. Mainly, the great thing was Amancio Williams, an Argentine architect who was a great poet [of architecture]. I thought one would learn poetry from a poet, so when I was 15, I presented myself to him and he accepted me in his office. So I could be in his office in the morning and afternoon, I went to high school in the evening. I really gained his trust, he even trusted me to go to Uruguay to find an architect of record for a building he had designed for the richest industrialist family in Argentina. I got Eladio Dieste to be the architect of record, who told me, *Young man, I don't do that, but I will do it for Amancio*. And also a brilliant self-taught structural engineer, Mr. [Leonel] Viera.

Now, having done all of that, and getting to a certain age, I started applying to American schools, and knowing quite well that competition was severe, I applied to about six or seven. I can't remember exactly. The most interesting one was Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, which replied, *We know you're going to be accepted somewhere else, and that's the reason we're not accepting you.*

CD: Really?

EA: But I was accepted by Princeton. They gave me an absolutely immense scholarship. When I came to Princeton, I thought I was coming to the Institute for Advanced Study. I looked around for Einstein, but he was probably in another part of the campus.

CD: Yes. The institute is a separate entity.

EA: I couldn't stand the fact that I had to sit with the freshmen in Commons, which was the name of the dining room, and listen to kids saying, *Pass the butter, please*, or other such profound statements. I started as a freshman in the School of Architecture, but thanks to a few professors, mainly Peter Eisenman, I was moved from freshman to senior in the first semester. Because I went to class with a coat and a tie, people asked Peter if I were very rich. And Peter said, *Oh, yes, Emilio's father is in the oil business.*

CD: I've heard that story. It's a good one.

EA: Because it was true. How did the son of a gas station attendant get to Princeton? The rational answer would be luck, luck, and luck again. The second answer is a much more historical one. There was a gentleman at Princeton by the name of Alden Dunham, who was in charge of admissions. That was his first year, and he managed to convince the university that it was populated by WASP boys, all of them sons of rich alumni, and that he had to create a class that was more varied and mixed. So that is why I was accepted with an absurdly large scholarship, absolutely large, okay? And the third answer is that it was simple, single-minded perseverance on my part.

You should have seen me, a young, little student sitting at a seminar table, trying to look intelligent so they wouldn't ask me questions because I barely could speak English. When I came to America, my first girlfriend said that I spoke like Gary Cooper. I didn't study English in Argentina, because under Perón, you couldn't. English was a capitalist language and it wasn't taught in school. So I would listen to television, cowboy films, and repeat every word. I had expressions like "How you like them apples?" that were absolutely laughable. Anyway, that is the story of the boy from Argentina. Born not in the Pampas, I assure you. Where I was born is a subtropical climate. At 4:00 pm it rains. At 4:30, the clouds come out from the sidewalk and go up.

CD: So that's how you got to Princeton. You're infamous for graduating in one year.

EA: The second semester, I was in graduate school. And at the end of the first year, I went directly to graduate school in a more formal way. I had a four-year scholarship that was so big it covered everything. The man in charge of matters in the School of Architecture, a professor by the name of Henry Jandl, said, *Pay nothing, and just keep on enjoying the scholarship*. But at the end of the first year, I said I was going to Yale, at which point they said, *What do you want?* And I said, *I don't want anything. But since you ask in such nice terms, I want Colin Rowe*. And they got Colin Rowe. Of course, I was introduced to the idea of Colin Rowe by Peter. Before Colin arrived, I collected all of his essays – all of those I could collect – and out of my not very meager scholarship, I paid to print them in offset form and gave it to all my classmates so they would know who he was. When he arrived and saw that, he said he was going to sue me for copyright infringement. I should have received him with a bottle of cheap scotch, although kerosene might also have been acceptable.

At the end of my master's – I'm coming to the end of this – Robert Geddes, dean of the school, asked me to join the faculty. Kenneth Frampton told me that the appointment was quite disputed, mainly by Graves. Graves and I were like cats and dogs. I disliked his way of teaching, and I didn't mince words. The students he would favor were the ones that made Michael Graves architecture. I thought that that was not a way to teach.

CD: So did you join the faculty?

EA: Yes, indeed. Then, at a certain moment, Peter [having left Princeton] began having conversations with the director of the A&D department at MoMA, Arthur Drexler, because he had done a show for him. Peter had the idea to create the Institute [for Architecture and Urban Studies]. I would wait for Peter when he returned from New York on the bus, and we would talk about what he and Arthur discussed. As a matter of fact, Peter suggested to Arthur that I would be a potential candidate to be a curator, because Mildred Constantine, who had been the associate curator of design, was moving to another position. So I went for an interview. Arthur had a few questions, including what did I think about Mies van der Rohe. I said, *Well, isn't it remarkable that a man that invented in reality the most refined and elegant architecture provided a formula for speculators who do very cheap buildings*. Anyway, that is what I remember from my conversation with Arthur. So I was invited to join the museum. But my invitation was 50/50, 50 percent of my time as associate curator and the other 50 percent as the associate director of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies.

CD: You joined MoMA on July 1, 1969, at the age of 26. The press release said you were responsible for industrial and graphic design, publications, and exhibitions. Did that mean curating, plus writing, plus designing exhibitions?

EA: Yes, I designed exhibitions. I did several exhibitions, but I was not forced to stay within the domain of graphic or industrial design. I did a few architecture shows. For example, I took a book by Peter Wolf on Eugène Hénard, who was an urbanist in turn-of-the-century France, a remarkable urbanist, in my opinion, and I did an exhibition of his work. So I was all over the place.

CD: You did a Luis Barragán exhibition, too, right?

EA: That was much later, at the end of my time at MoMA. The first show I did was

Eugène Hénard. I also did one on [Charles] Rennie Mackintosh and his chair designs.

CD: How did the concept of environmental design as opposed to architectural design enter your consciousness? As I understand it, you named the CASE group, Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment, in the mid-'60s while still a student.

EA: This is absolutely true. I was a student then. But to go back to your question. You said environmental design as opposed to architectural design. It's not opposed. At that time, I was thinking of *environmental design* as one way of saying that architecture exists not only beneath its own premises and as a discipline, which is quite restricted to its priests, but in a larger sociocultural context. That's really what I meant by environmental design. I thought that we had to expand architecture's relation with the social and the cultural context where it operates and not as if it were a self-enclosed discipline.

CD: So you weren't necessarily thinking about the natural environment yet?

EA: I was thinking about the total environment. Not the green environment at that time, no. It included it, but it was not exclusively that, no.

CD: The environmental was the focus of your 1969 essay "The Formulation of a Design Discourse." The ecological as distinct from human endeavors is the focus of the Ambasz Institute. What is the difference between environmental and ecological, and why are you emphasizing the ecological today?

EA: The focus of "The Formulation of a Design Discourse" was on an analytical system, or system analysis, which understands problems in terms of systems and components of systems and how they influence one another, which brings us back to my earlier answer. That's really what the essay works out. The word *discourse* is used in the philosophical sense. You have a discourse if you have a set of values and meanings that are established and constantly reevaluated. But back to your question about the environmental and the ecological. Frankly, the *ecological* is something the museum's people wrote when they did the PR about the Ambasz Institute. In the contract I have with MoMA, the word *ecological* was put in by [architecture curator] Martino Stierli, probably, I suspect, because *environmental*, or something like that, bothered some people on the board of trustees. The board of trustees is made up of some people who are in the business of construction, and the notion of doing green architecture and taking into account factors like maintenance, which go beyond immediate building, is just a disturbing function for them. Probably he used the word *ecological* to avoid a certain amount of irritation. *Ecological* comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which means a dwelling, not only in the sense of a house but also in a temporal sense: to dwell or to wait.

CD: If MoMA is now emphasizing the ecological, that's very interesting. In a 1993 interview with Sharon Zane, you said that MoMA "could provide institutional support, to actually become an impresario and trigger certain types of projects." Why would such a transformation of the institution be important?

EA: In my practice as a curator, I distinguished two types of curators, the farmer and the hunter. The farmer curator plants, harvests, and collects the seeds. He sells part of the harvest; the seeds that he collects he will plant again for next year's harvest. The hunter curator is one that proposes the subject, then goes out and makes it happen. I

believe that in a museum, the curators in painting and sculpture and photography should be farmer curators – that is to say, they should harvest and they should collect seeds, which they should classify and evaluate. The hunter curator, for me, is only possible in architecture. I was interested in the fact that the institution, MoMA, provides an immense platform that allows you to put into practice certain ideas that do not exist. Imagine the curator of painting who goes to see a painter and says, *Hey, take a look at this new type of plastic paint. Do me a painting with that*. Makes no sense, does it? But as a curator of design and architecture, I could go to Italy and say to the designers, *You are making beautiful furniture, but I know that you're deeply unhappy, because the furniture is only the beginning of your concern. You would like to be able to design at least the surrounding environment where that furniture operates, let's say the domestic environment, or domestic landscape*. I did that with Italian design, and I did it again with the taxi show, where I proposed the creation of a new taxi. I believe that the architecture curator can become an impresario. That is what I was trying to tell Sharon Zane.

CD: Essentially your first big project at MoMA, which you began formulating in 1969, was the Universitas conference in January of '72. What were you hoping to achieve with this?

EA: I was aiming to create an institution, a feasible institution. It was to be located in Jamestown, New York. It was a project that greatly interested [Governor] Nelson Rockefeller because he was interested in creating a State University of New York equal to the state university system in California, to Berkeley. He was planning to have a fast train from New York, and was arranging for trains to stop in Jamestown. The key for the whole operation was the Land Grant Act, whereby most of the American agricultural universities were created in the 19th century. I saw that that law was still valid, and we could use it to create urban land-grant colleges and be granted approximately 70,000 acres of land that would be the experimental field for the university. I worked with some economists to try to figure out how that would work. We were quite advanced in the notion that it was possible to obtain enough funds to finance that type of university without selling the land but by leasing it, and that the university would be engaged in several things. Very important for me was preventive health care. I thought it was absolutely pivotal, so it wasn't only architecture I was interested in. The great misfortune was that Richard Nixon resigned, Gerald Ford became president, and he made Rockefeller his vice president. About 120 seconds afterward, Rockefeller, in the great princely tradition, lost all interest in the university. And poor Mr. [Anthony] Adinolfi, the building chief of the university, almost died of a broken heart.

CD: What relationship does the new Ambasz Institute have to these goals? Notably, your call for MoMA in 1972 was to develop a research arm, and your Program on Environmental Design was to be an independent program. Is that what you're hoping the institute will be?

EA: I can say the following: I'm a boy of few ideas, infinitely reformulated. That is an answer that Borges used to give, and I always liked it very much. He says it's always the same story, it's just reformulated differently every time. With *environmental*, I expected the department to be concerned not with architecture simply as a building but with the social-economical context in which architecture was operating. That's why I prefer to use the word *environmental* and not *architecture*, because architecture, for me, limits

itself to thinking about the building and all of the canons of architecture, which are plenty, thank you very much. I wanted to expand to the sociocultural domain and even to the natural domain. Now, today, what I want to do with the institute is the following. For me, MoMA's architecture department has been the champion of modernism for 75 years, and that intellectual capital is almost exhausted – not completely, but almost. I thought that the department should renew its capital. I wasn't going to come back to be the curator, so I thought I could provide the funds to have an institution within the department that would be concerned with establishing a correlation between nature and architecture, understanding that everything we do is a contribution to man-made nature, which is replacing, overbearingly, the nature we were given.

CD: In a similar vein, you argued that transformation of society and culture, to have real effects, should take place within existing institutions. The Ambasz Institute seems a bit like planting a seed, since you're talking about seeds, for the structural transformation of MoMA, or at least the Department of Architecture and Design. How do you perceive it? Is it just another program at MoMA, or does it have transformative potential?

EA: The institute is a distinct institution within MoMA. It will become whatever they can make of it, okay? But the point was that the Museum of Modern Art has, for 70 or 75 years, been the champion of modernism. That intellectual capital is considerably exhausted, to be polite. I think there has to be a renewal of that intellectual capital. I put it in those terms. I wrote it in those terms and it irritated MoMA, but what can I do? I'm the rich kid, okay?

CD: Have you met Carson Chan, the first director of the institute?

EA: No. I don't even know who he is. He seems to be very enterprising and intellectually very ambitious, and that is very good. Because any institution will run as fast as the individual in charge of it. So we will hang from his coattails, and we will go with him.

CD: Given that you hit the ground running when you joined MoMA, it seems you've been playing the long game. When you launched the Program on Environmental Design, did this expand your purview beyond industrial and graphic design? Or was it a precursor to the concerns you would raise in "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape"?

EA: I proposed to Arthur that we do the show on the state of Italian design because they had been making very beautiful products worthy of being in MoMA's collections. But when I got to Italy and started observing the intellectual domains, I realized that the products were not what made the phenomenon of Italian design so interesting. The Italians had a far deeper understanding of design as one way of analyzing and criticizing society. Mind you, most of them were architects. They didn't have much work, which is also a circumstance that cannot be forgotten, so they had dedicated themselves to doing products. At the same time, there were groups of architects that refused to do anything, what I called the moratorium architects, who said, *You cannot do anything in society until society changes*. And there were others that said, *Well, maybe you can use objects in some way to try to change society, as a provocation*. This is why the show ended up covering a much larger domain than just the handsome products that you can see at MoMA and then run to a store to buy. How many Braun toasters were sent to me by people who, in furious letters, said, *Your pretty toaster burns toast!*

Now, to come back to one word that you used, *seeds*. From seeds sprout trees, trees

"Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," installed in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 26–September 11, 1972. Photo: Cristiano Toraldo di Francia. The Museum of Modern Art Archives. All images courtesy Emilio Ambasz.

sprout flowers, from flowers sprout fruits, fruits attract birds. The birds eat the fruits, they fly away and do their thing in other gardens. My notion is that you plant the seed and hope for the little bird to spread it to other gardens.

CD: It is said that the "New Domestic Landscape" exhibition introduced an expanded field of operation for architecture that was then eclipsed by the theory debates that arose after Drexler's Beaux-Arts exhibition. Why was Italian design at that moment a way to explore or demonstrate this expanded field?

EA: American designers were furious. To them, these were a bunch of Italian designers who were making very pretty objects while bending every possible rule, rules that they, in proper Bauhaus tradition, had been educated to uphold. And it's not that I did it purposely. I'm not an intellectual. I perceive and I act, okay? I make images. I am an intuitive person. And I am relatively observant. My idea was that Italy was producing the objects that MoMA had always celebrated in the Bauhaus tradition, but in reality, what they were making in Italy was something far more powerful. It implied, and this became evident to everybody, that design was a cultural production that covers many different aspects of society, not only the little pretty flower.

As for Arthur's show, I have no idea why he did it. Maybe because he was looking for something pretty to show. I used to think sometimes that it was just because all those drawings from the École des Beaux-Arts were available. I don't think it was an attempt to go back to that school of architecture. He was too lucid and too intelligent to pretend that an exhibition would do that.

CD: What lessons did you personally take away from "New Domestic Landscape" that influenced your own design work?

"The Taxi Project: Realistic Solutions for Today," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 16–September 7, 1976. The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

EA: That the designer can, in some way, introduce ideas with objects, and that objects are the containers of ideas. I also learned that I put much more trust in images than I put in words. I grant that ideas come wrapped in words but I distrust words, because when you deal with words, you're in the semantic domain. And in the semantic domain, you're in a conventional domain that is already agreed upon. That means it cannot be innovative. It can only be operating within an established culture. With images, you can start in some way to suggest a different mode of thought, a different mode of perception, and in some cases, maybe, a certain way of acting upon the present.

CD: That's very interesting, since I edit a journal that resists the seductive power of the image and puts its trust in the power of words.

In 1976, you curated "The Taxi Project." What happened to the prototypes you commissioned? How did they resonate in the world after the show closed?

EA: When I proposed to MoMA to do the taxi [prototype] show, they said, *You will have, of course, Detroit*, and I said, *Of course we will have Detroit*. In the meantime, I negotiated with Fiat and with Volvo to produce taxis according to a design program set by the Taxi & Limousine Commission for the type of vehicle the New York taxi should be. When I approached Detroit, Detroit told me to go jump in the lake. So I went to David Rockefeller, then the chairman of the museum, and said, *Mr. Rockefeller, we have a problem*. So he wrote to the chairman of General Motors, who wrote back saying, *David, I don't understand why you're bothering yourself with that. Pay attention to your bank. We sell 50,000 Chevrolets every year as taxis, and nobody has any problem with them*. At the end of the show, the press release quoted this statement by the magnificent chairman of General Motors, and the lawyers of General Motors came running, hoping that they could sue us for libel. I showed them GM's letter and they walked out.

In the meantime, I had designed a museum for Grand Rapids, and I became acquainted with Gerald Ford, then the vice president, who lived in Grand Rapids. He asked me, *How is that [taxi] project coming?* I said, *Sir, we are going to have a big problem,*

because the American car industry is not interested in participating. And he said, *What do you think would be necessary?* I said, *Well, you know very well how capitalism operates. They want to be underwritten, like in a socialist country*. So he got the Department of Transportation to make available two million dollars for two American companies. I flew back to Detroit and met with Chrysler, where they gracefully told me they would do it, but would send a prototype made up of scagliola – that is gypsum, okay? And I said, *It will be marvelous. I can just imagine the opening day, when the television crews are there, and somebody opens the door of your scagliola taxi and it breaks and they end up with a handle in their hands. No way. We are giving you a million, that should be good enough for you to build a full-scale model.* They had no interest whatsoever. So the two million was adjudicated to two small American companies. One of them produced a hybrid car, and the other produced a steam-driven car, which took us back to the end of the 1800s. So where did it all end up? I had two units made for each of the vehicles presented. The Department of Transportation took the cars and tested them. I don't know the results of the tests. But I can tell you that Volvo tested their prototype before sending it here. They designed it so that the taxi could also be an ambulance, because they couldn't afford to produce such a vehicle only for the taxi market. Fiat produced the Alfa Romeo prototype, which was designed by [Giorgetto] Giugiaro. Volkswagen refused to design a special vehicle, saying their Kombi was perfect as a taxi.

CD: When you compare the taxis in New York today to the photographs from the show, it seems that it took 40 years to get a better taxi. The shows you curated prove that MoMA is a powerful base of operations for architecture and design. So why did you leave the museum in 1976?

Emilio Ambasz, Cummins Engine Company Signature 600 Diesel Engine, 1996.

EA: MoMA was going to embark on a three- or four-year construction project. By that time, I was already 32 or 33, and I thought that I was too old to waste three or four more years at MoMA. And frankly, I don't think I was a good curator. I wanted to do architecture – after all, I had started playing with architecture toys. And I never ever looked back and never regretted it. And I had no idea of who I had been, or what my position was, until Gaetano Pesce called and said, *You're crazy, Emilio. You're resigning? You have power, you're my only friend with power*. I said, *Gaetano, I prefer poetical power to political power*.

CD: I heard that after the taxi show, after you left MoMA, that Cummins Engine got to you, and you started designing diesel engines.

EA: The situation was exactly like this. Mr. [Irwin] Miller, Cummins's chairman, who was really an enlightened industrialist, truly a remarkable man, had the idea that his diesel engines should be judged as archaeological entities by a culture that would come 100 years later. Those were his words. And that culture is produced from nine to five, not after five. Eliot Noyes had been the industrial

design consultant for Cummins. When Eliot died, Mr. Miller asked a number of people about a new designer, including Cesar Pelli and Paul Goldberger. They, not knowing anything, said, Emilio. So he invited me to come to Columbus, Indiana, to meet with him. At the meeting was a very charming and kind man by the name of Mr. Schwab, who was the chief engineer. Trying to look intelligent, I asked Mr. [William] Schwab, in the presence of Mr. Miller, *When do engines die?* He looked at me and said, *Well, you know, we don't say they die, we say that we cannot overhaul them anymore. And we cannot overhaul them after usually 500,000 miles because they rust, and then they're beyond repair*. So I said, *To cool the engine, instead of using water, which rusts the engine, why don't we use oil? We can take the oil out of the block and cool it in a separate bronze or copper aftercooler*. At which point he stood up and said, *Marvelous idea*, which I assumed was meant tacitly to say, *Finally, someone said what I have been trying to do for the last 30 years. Since he seems to be a friend of Mr. Miller, I will say that this is the best thing ever*. And that's how we went into developing an engine that was cooled with oil.

CD: Emilio, how would you know to cool an engine with oil if you didn't have that early background in oil?

EA: Exactly. Imagine, how would I? Yes. Well, how would I?

CD: You have described yourself as an inventor, and your projects as prototypes. In fact, you hold 220 industrial and mechanical patents. How is your work in architecture and urban design related to and different from your work in industrial design?

EA: Architecture, for me, operates in the domain of poiesis. Or *poiēsis*, if I can be very Greek. The domain of industrial design is pragmatic. Industrial design products are always related to the body of the user. Whether it is a toothbrush, a chair, even a car, they all have to do with the body and the relation of that product to the body. Architecture's relation to the body is much more than use. Architecture deals with the body, yes, but also with the brain and with feelings. Therefore it is in the domain of poiesis and not solely in the domain of the pragmatic.

CD: Earlier you said objects contain ideas. Do you think of the object also as presenting an image?

EA: No, it's presenting its shape.

CD: So where does the image of the object come in?

EA: The image of the object is something you keep in your memory, but not before the shape has presented itself. In architecture, the idea does not exist until an image arrives. And the image, if it is worth anything, is prototypical and has to be decodified. I separate architects into three types. There is an architect artist, who invents architecture, and there is an architect professional, who takes what the architect artist has invented as a prototype and introduces it into the culture and operates with it as a type. So the prototype goes from the architect artist to the architect professional, and becomes a type. In time, the culture changes and the type becomes a stereotype. That is the way images are born, that's the way they die.

CD: Is the third type the stereotype?

EA: The third is the stereotype, a type that became a stereotype. The hack architect uses stereotypes. The professional architects – Skidmore, Owings & Merrill would be like that – they operate in the domain of

types. And the artist architects – Frank Lloyd Wright or Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier – are in the domain of prototypes.

Novo, *novo*-, is a marvelous root word. *Novo* means new in Latin. That's what I seek. For example, you talk about the text. When I think, I think in terms of images. When I think of Le Corbusier or of Wright, do I care to dwell on their millions of words? Or do I take refuge in their prototypical images? Maison Dom-Ino, Villa Savoye, Ronchamp, Fallingwater – that's what matters to me. Not the words, some more skillful than others, certainly. Le Corbusier wrote much more aggressively and much more seeking to convert. Wright was another sort, he was preaching, which is completely different. He was not interested in converting. Maybe he knew that his character would not attract followers.

CD: Many of your peers consider you the father of green architecture. Assuming you are happy with that moniker, what is green architecture? How can we differentiate today between green architecture and the greenwashing of architecture? What do you think of LEED certification?

EA: Okay, look, at present, for me, the green movement – let's call it that, okay? – is not a movement, it's just a label. It is a state of awareness, okay? It's not yet a conceptual reality because it lacks a precise system of discourse and it lacks a theoretical structure that would allow it to transmit a body of knowledge. And more important, it would allow it to be constantly reevaluated. It's an attitude, so far. It's not yet a principle. But I have no doubt it will become one. It will. I, of course, am immensely upset about all the people who have jumped on the bandwagon of green architecture. Some of them have been immediately successful and created really extraordinary practices by selling pots of plants on balconies and calling that green architecture. That's not what I mean by green architecture. The main problem is that society is like a sponge and absorbs everything.

CD: What do you think of LEED certification? Is that helpful?

EA: Yes, LEED certification is useful. If anybody asked me to do it, I would not know how to do it. I would call someone to do it. I'm not a specialist in that. When I do a building, I work with many engineers and technicians. They're the ones that make sure that you respect the requirements of LEED. But I don't think it's sufficient. There has to be something more. If a building is sustainable and LEED-approved and blah, blah, blah, but does not move the heart, it's just one more building. An edifice, not architecture. To do a building, you need technology. To do architecture, you need art.

I'm all for sustainability. I find that little attempts, for example, a building that saves electricity by putting up a solar panel or things like that, are fine. But the real attitude should be a communal system of solar panel collectors, not a single building doing the solar energy collection. It would be more economical and more efficient. The strategies, I believe, need to be more social, more community-minded than individual. At present, that's the way it is done, but it's not enough.

CD: My friends in San Antonio love the garden you did there. How did you arrive at its glass forms? Are they in contradistinction to the softness of the landscape?

EA: Cynthia, it doesn't escape you that a greenhouse needs glass or the plants would die on you very fast. The client came to me and said, *I want you to do a greenhouse*. And I said, *Where?* He said, *San Antonio*, and I said, *But why do you need a greenhouse in San*

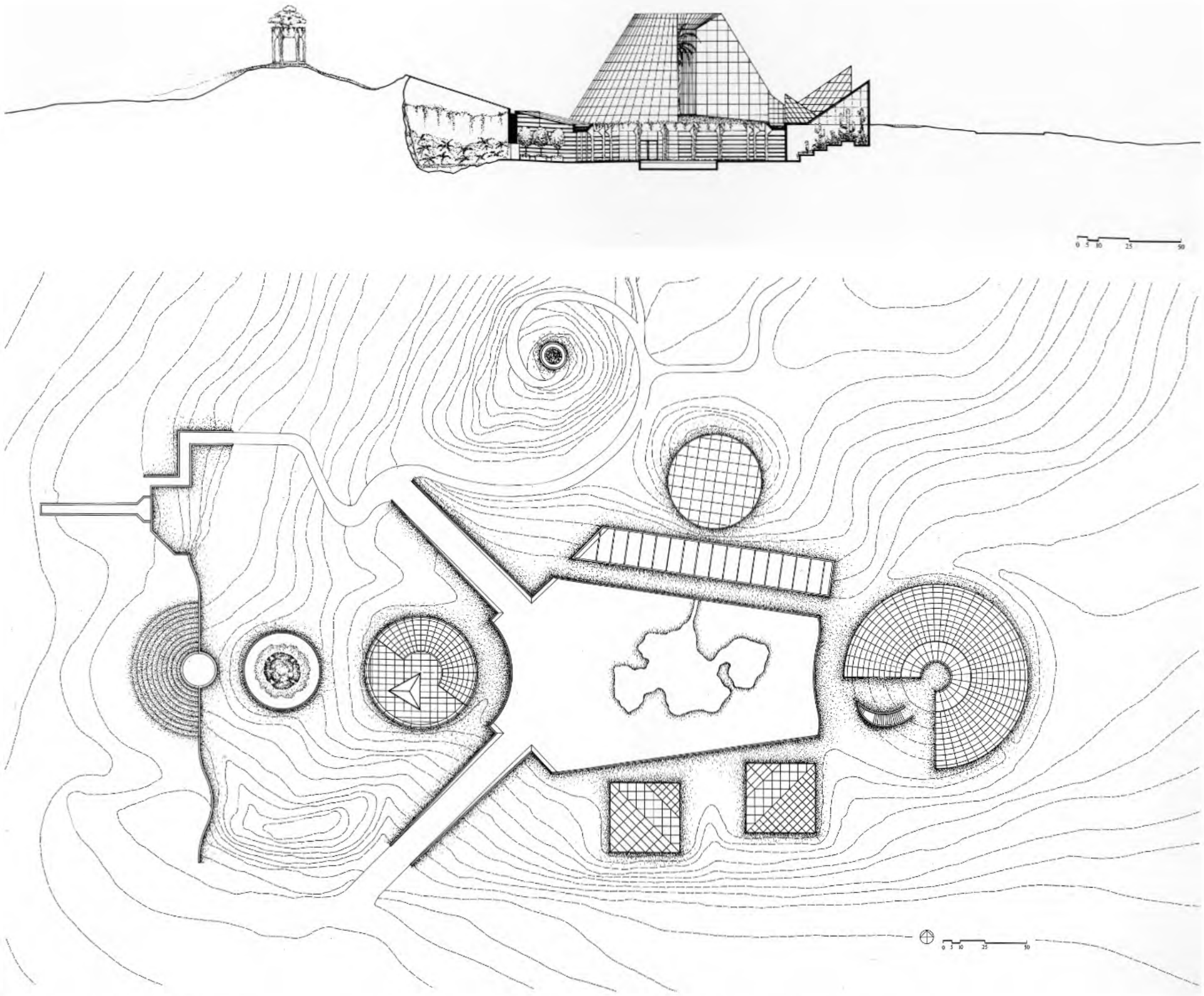
Emilio Ambasz & Associates, Lucile Halsell Conservatory, San Antonio, Texas, 1988.

Antonio? The climate is so good. So he said, *No, the problem is that we can get in three or four hours, a drop in temperature of about 15 degrees, and the plants cannot accommodate it and they die, or else we get very strong cold winds, which come down all the way from Canada, down the prairies, and they kill the plants. So we need to protect them*. So that's why the buildings are there. Now, at the same time, like all those clients of mine, they come with beautiful ideas, with splendid minds, and with very tight pockets. Therefore, there was not enough money to put in all the types of mechanical equipment that a building like that needs. So most of the buildings are surrounded by earth on the ground level to reduce the heat load. Now, the glazing is there for two reasons, not only for the lighting. Because there is too much sun, I hung curtains to filter the sunlight. This is probably one of the few greenhouses with curtains. Now, money was very tight, so I had to invent the glazing system. What we did was use the structure itself as the support for the glass. The glass was not in a frame, it was just glued onto the frame with a lot of glue. If the building moved, the thick layer of glue would be enough to absorb the twisting of the building, and thereby the twisting of the glass, because, believe it or not, glass, to a certain extent, and in some dimensions, is elastic. It will bend – of course it will bend with very minor curvatures, but it will bend. Carlo Scarpa knew a lot about that. His main amusement, whenever anybody visited his buildings, was to hit the glass with his hand. It would create a tremendous amount of noise. And people would say, *What are you doing, you're going to break the glass*, and he would say, *No, glass is elastic*.

CD: The hospital you designed in Mestre, outside of Venice, is also largely glazed.

EA: Very much so. It's really a greenhouse. I have been in enough hospitals, and they are always depressing because you have a feeling that you're coming into a place that ignores you or into a warehouse or a military garrison. I wanted the hospital to receive patients with a bouquet of flowers. And when they are recovering, they should be able to walk between plants. So half of the rooms look directly into the greenhouse and half of the rooms have their own gardens. It has been quite successful, actually, really visited by everybody, because it was supposed to be the first green hospital. Now, I was aware that such a type of hospital wouldn't cure people, but my hope was that it wouldn't make them sicker.

CD: You have used the phrase "green over gray" to describe your work. Given the number of buildings today that sport trees, one could interpret "green over gray" as cladding, even window dressing. What do you mean by "green over gray"? And can you point to a particular project of yours to illustrate this?

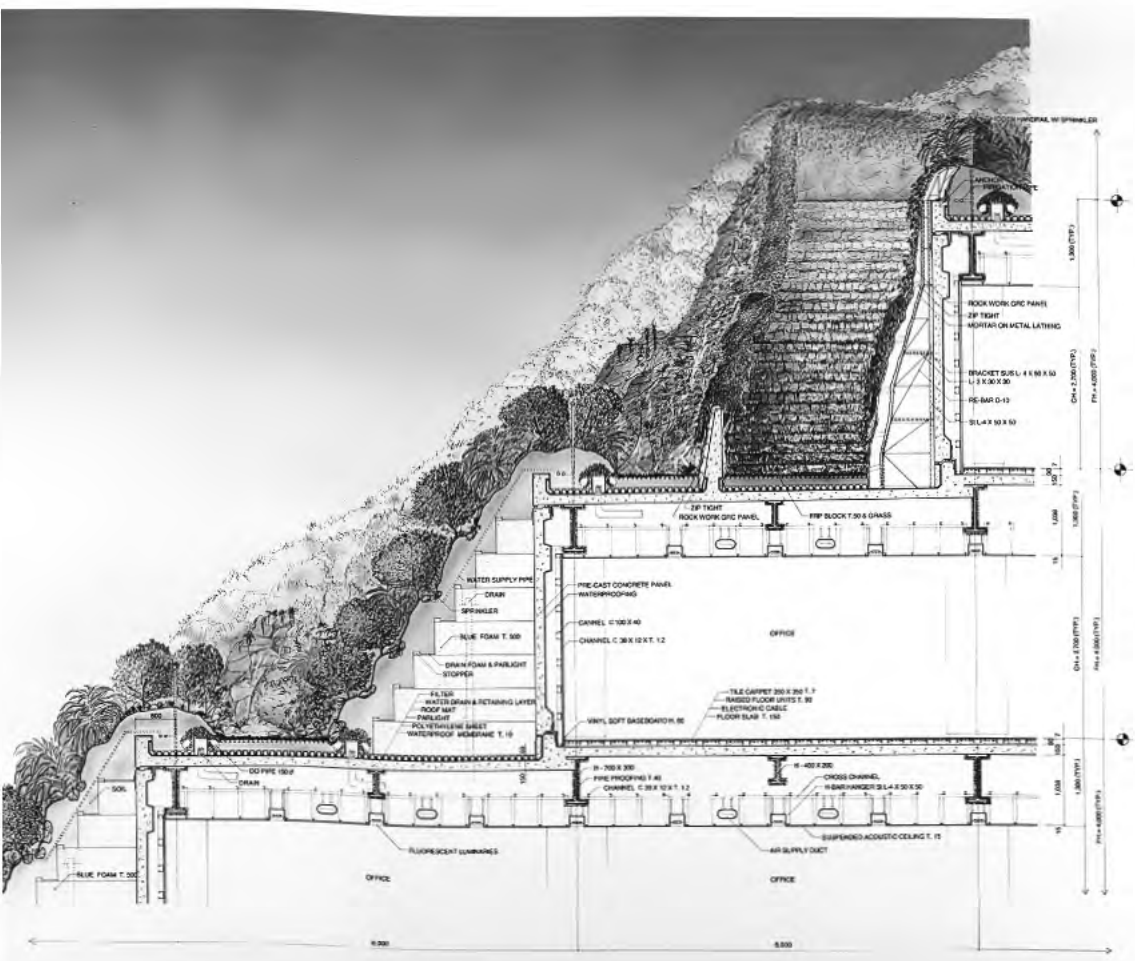


Emilio Ambasz & Associates, Lucile Halsell Conservatory, San Antonio, Texas, 1982. Section and plan.

EA: Well, there are a number of instances of the superficial uses of plants. There's nothing terribly wrong with covering the facades with greenery, it's just that they don't move the heart. If it doesn't move the heart, what type of architecture is that? By "green over gray," I meant the replacement of the notion of architecture as gray and the integration of architecture, which is man-made, with natural nature, which in some cases I've achieved. The project in Fukuoka is one where it worked out quite well.

CD: How was Fukuoka worked out?

EA: As I told you, I don't work by thinking or reasoning. I work by making images. And once I make the image, I try to understand what it means. Many times, I don't get it immediately. It takes time. In the specific case of Fukuoka, I was not aware when I made the image for Fukuoka that the city government was taking away half of the only park the city had, and that, unbeknownst to me, that fact was creating a great amount of unhappiness in the people of Fukuoka, who were protesting. When I did that image, I recovered almost 100 percent of the greenery that the building footprint was to cover. That is what made the building possible and that's why it won the competition. Everybody told me, *Don't bother, it will be won by [Kisho] Kurokawa.* The jury was 46 men, and their decision was supposed to be unanimous. Two of them did not vote for Kurokawa, they voted for me. Since it was not unanimous, instead of being



Emilio Ambasz & Associates, Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall, 1990. Stepped garden section detail.

sent to the mayor of Fukuoka, it had to go to the governor of the region.

At that moment, the newspapers in Japan, mainly *Asahi Shimbun*, got hold of that. And if you know Japan, you know how, inconceivably, terribly indifferent its people are because they don't think that they can change anything. It's very rare that they will protest unless they want to enter some negotiation. So the governor selected my project. My client took me by the neck, more or less, to put it in an image, and took me in front of the group that commissioned Kurokawa to convince them that my client never asked me to win, that I was a barbarian *gaijin*, which means a foreigner, and didn't understand anything. Now, because of that building, 25 years later the climate on the top garden, according to the owners of the building and the university that works with them, is about 15 degrees Fahrenheit lower in temperature. Fukuoka is in the south of Japan and therefore is quite hot. And did I plan for that? Certainly not. It just resulted in that, okay? It suits my privately held belief that perfect acts will generate perfect coincidences. I do not doubt that a statement like this is enough to irritate any logical person.

CD: That's interesting about the temperature. I thought you were going to say that it had a ripple effect in terms of more greening of the urban space.

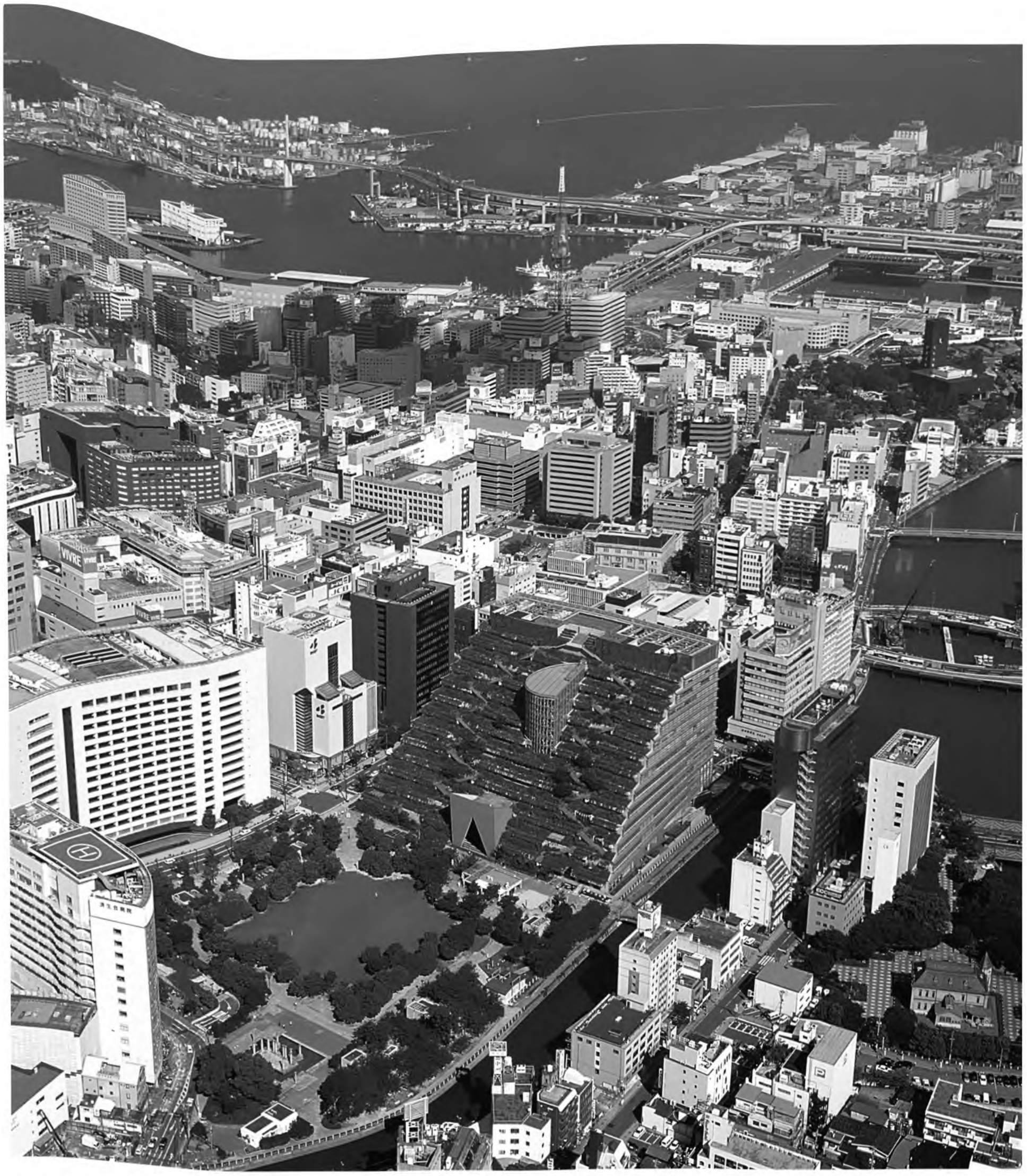
EA: No. What it did was demonstrate that you could have greenery in the center of the city. You don't have to go to the periphery or to the suburbs. But again, it wasn't that I was set on a campaign to demonstrate that greenery in the center of the city is possible. My image was simply a building covered in greenery, and I was really lucky that I won the competition.

CD: How does the building at Fukuoka extend the park physically? It extends it visually, right? Can people in the park access the facade of the building?

EA: You can go up all the way to the very top by stairways, which start in the park and are within the greenery. And the beautiful thing, and that I really intended, is that when you get to the very top, you can see the bay of Fukuoka. It's very handsome, almost like the bay of Hong Kong. The City of Fukuoka has never given me back my original sketch, which was a section of the building. I am told they use it as the logo of the city.

CD: Let's continue with this idea of image. What do you want the image of your Casa de Retiro in Spain to convey?

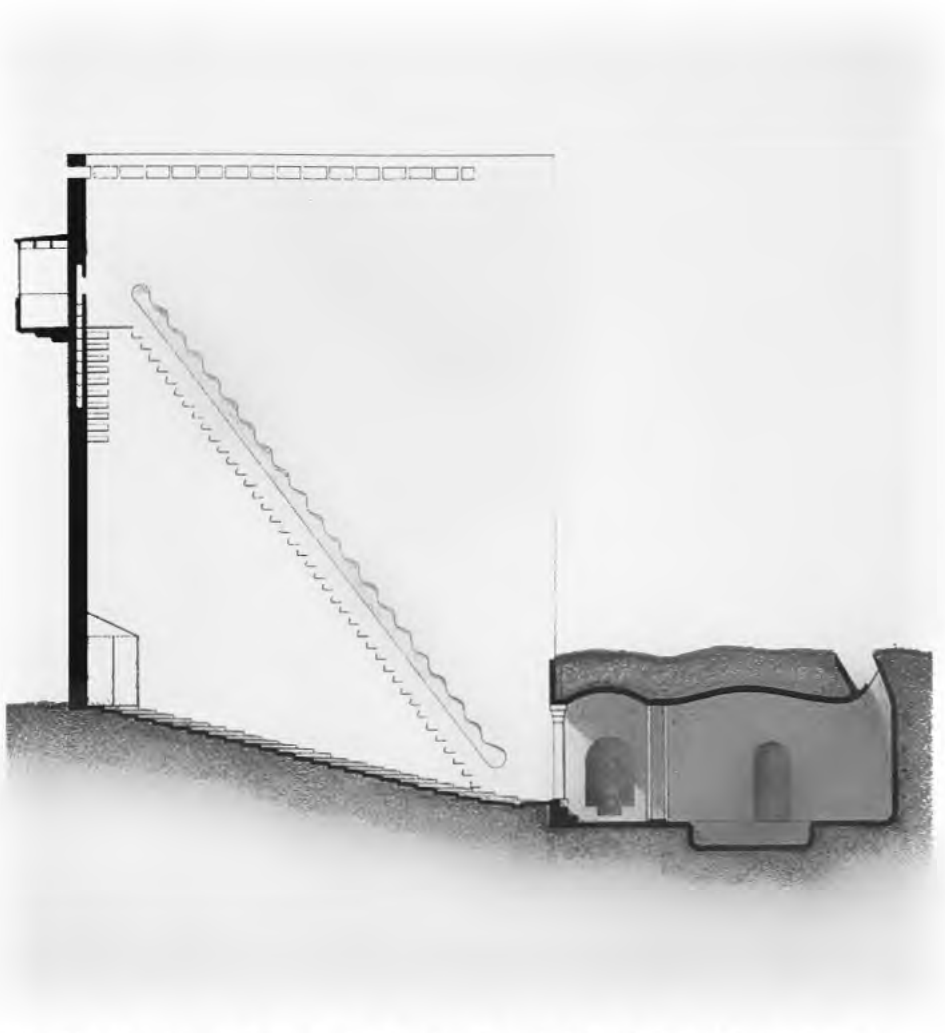
EA: Yes. I made an image. I was not conscious of what I was generating, but once it appeared, I realized that what I had done was something I could derive a number of principles from. I didn't intend to make a building that was efficient from an energy viewpoint. I just wanted to insulate the building from the intolerable heat of Andalusia. I wasn't aware that I was designing a house that, once it was built, with the roof and



Emilio Ambasz & Associates, Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall, 1995. Photo: Hiromi Watanabe – Watanabe Studios.

walls covered in greenery, there wouldn't be any need for heating, there would be no need for air-conditioning. It was only afterward, after I designed that building, or I generated an image, that I started thinking, what does it really mean? And when I started to decodify or decipher it, I realized it harbored a number of ideas. One of the first ideas was to give back as much as possible the ground that the building covers and make it into gardens that are accessible to the users of the building and, better still, to the community. The second thing I realized is that I had designed a building that was so intricately related to the surrounding landscape that it wasn't possible to separate one from another. And third, I had created ornament that changes with the seasons. And I did it deliberately to decorate the building – *decoration*, that great taboo word, which should not be used, we were told. I

believe greatly in decoration. In fourth place, putting earth and plants on the roof to create a garden allowed me to make a building that sings with a loud voice but with a closed mouth. What I'm trying to say is that I don't sit down to try to do buildings that really save electricity, that are sustainable, I just design the building, and then I try to think, what does the image imply, mean, represent? Because the key task is to develop a technique, an ineffable technique, and then leave yourself at the mercy of inspiration. Now, you cannot build a school on that and it's much more detested by professors, but that's the way I operate.



Emilio Ambasz, Casa de Retiro Espiritual, Córdoba, Spain, 1975. Section.

CD: But let me ask you, isn't the primary image of that house the two freestanding walls, the corner?

EA: Yes, very much so. It is a very essential image. I wanted to be able to evoke the totality of architecture, or the poetry of architecture, using very essential means, to reduce everything to the most essential things.

CD: But one could argue you don't even need those walls, so what do they mean for you?

EA: Do I need those walls? Yes and no. I have to tell you why yes. They stand for the pleasures of architecture. You need them also because you need light inside a house. If it were direct sun, you would cook inside that house. But the walls reflect a more subdued light, so the house's inside is full of filtered light that has been reduced considerably by the reflection from the walls.

CD: The Casa de Retiro and the computer research center in Mexico City were both designed in 1975, while you were still a curator at MoMA.

EA: Yeah, yeah.

CD: Given how we've adjusted work space during the COVID-19 pandemic, I'm interested in something you wrote about the Mexico City project. You said, "Behind the design of this environment is the premise that nobody should have to work. At worst, one would work at home and not need a large building but rather a small one to simply house a computer and receive messages. The building has been conceived, therefore, as a set of elements that can be progressively reconfigured and recombined as the needs of the office vary over time." Did you make this idea clear in 1975? And why was the project not built? What other factors were at play?

EA: I made the idea very clear. And notwithstanding the fact that the group of people who had commissioned the building knew that I spoke Spanish, they said, *Está un poco loco*, which means, *He's a bit crazy*, when I told them exactly what you just read. I said, *There is no need to have the people coming here to work. They can work from home with their computers, so you will slowly be able to remove the barges and then leave only one barge in this image of the islands of Xochimilco*, which are really islands of flowers.

Emilio Ambasz, Casa de Retiro Espiritual, Córdoba, Spain, 2004. Photos: Michele Alassio.

CD: Islands of flowers?

EA: Xochimilco is not very far from Mexico City center. It is a place where people sell flowers from boats, so they are like floating islands of flowers.

CD: It seems like a prescient idea given where we are now, not only because of the coronavirus but ever since computation has become nearly universal. In 1975, no one had really a computer at home.

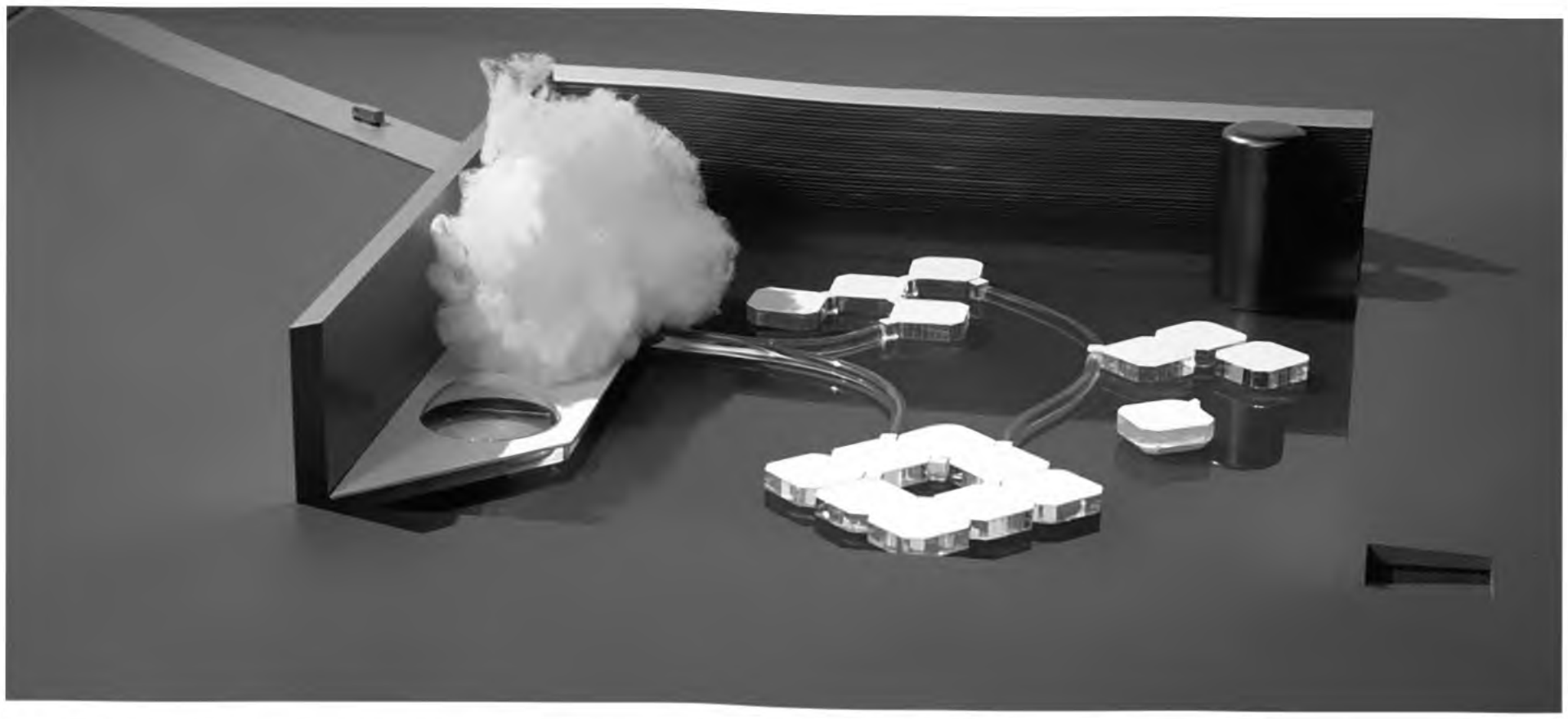
EA: Let me tell you the story of this project. I was doing the Barragán show, and I was with Barragán in his car, which was being driven by a chauffeur. He was telling me that he had gotten this commission and told me what it was. I took a piece of paper and said, *Well, Señor Barragán, you know how I would do it? I would do it like this*. So I put my two hands together, you can't see them, but they more or less simulated the two walls of the Mexican project, and added water because, I said, all of Mexico City before Cortés arrived was once a veritable network of water canals. That would solve the problem of drainage and at the same time would allow the barges to change positions as the tasks they housed changed. He turned to me and said, *Your project is much more beautiful than mine, do it yourself*. But they commissioned not little me, they commissioned big Barragán.

CD: Did he build it?

EA: He didn't do anything. No.

CD: In 1971, you published three short essays in *Perspecta*, one titled "Manhattan: Capital of the Twentieth Century," playing off Walter Benjamin's "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century." When did you discover Benjamin's *Arcades Project*? And how did it affect your view of cities at that time?

EA: There was a translation of Walter Benjamin's writings that I think Yale University Press published. I was smitten by Benjamin, because I believe in a distinction between the critic who is a belletrist writer and the critic who is a writer in the *Kunstgeschichte* [art historical] style. For me, Benjamin was a belletrist, like Baudelaire,



Emilio Ambasz, Center for Applied Computer Research, Mexico City, 1975. Model. Opposite page: Photomontage.

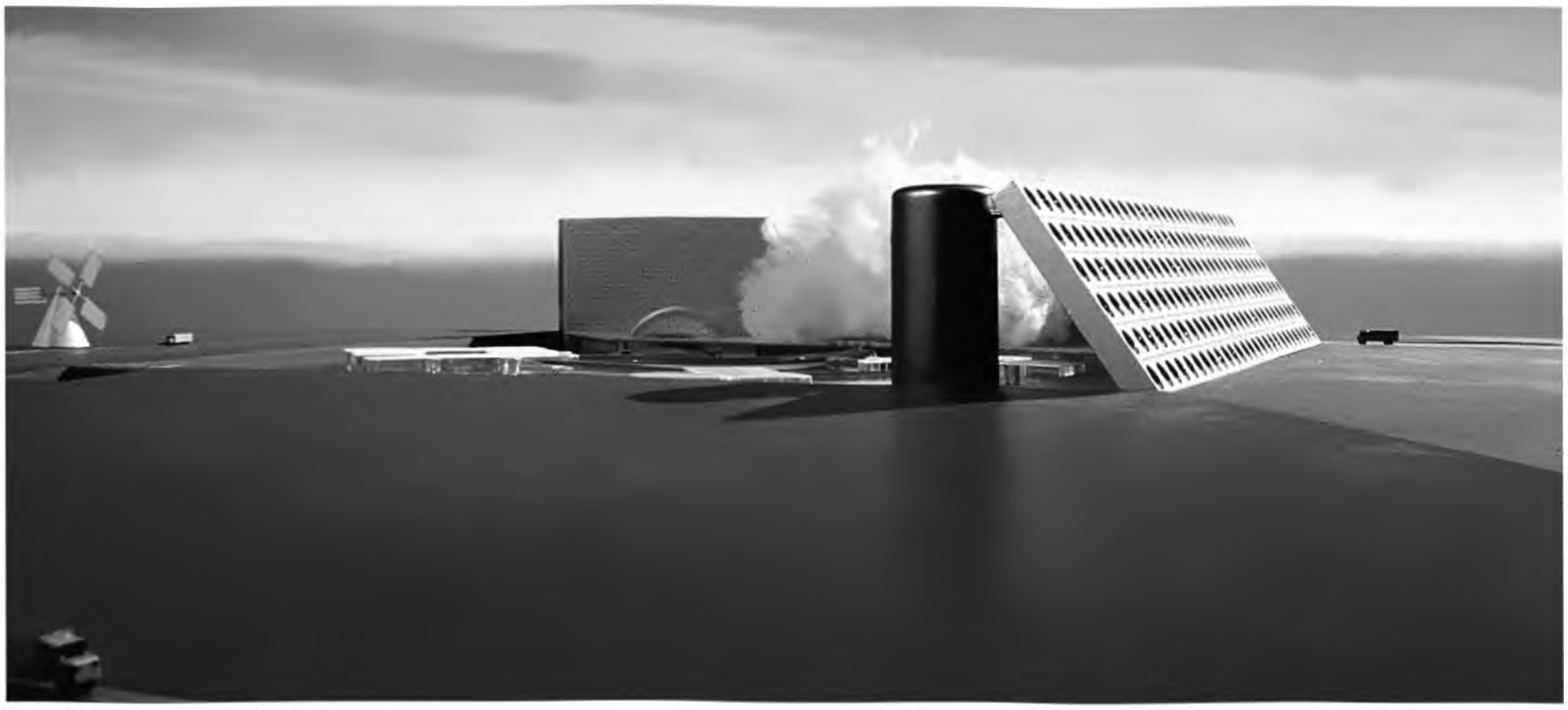
and I was fascinated by that mode of perception. A poetic mode of perception is far more insightful than a rigorously historical one. And, of course, it influenced me because I write fables. The first one was "Manhattan: Capital of the Twentieth Century," which, yes, picks up on "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century."

CD: In the essay you write that the power of design is to question the present and give it new meanings or to restructure it. If architecture can only work in the present, what is its responsibility to the future?

EA: You can only make proposals for the future in the present. Therefore, any project that does not propose a better type of living, a better type of existence, is unethical, and it has to propose it in the present. That means it has to produce a type of building that probably is prototypical or experimental or whatever it is. But I believe very strongly that the architect's ethical obligation is that of proposing a better mode of existence, through architecture, and that can only be in the present. To have an effect on the future, it has to play in the present. We have to be courageous to change the present.

CD: What is your concept of the emerging city today?

EA: What is a city? I am immensely distrustful of undertaking, as an architect, the design of a city. For me, a city is an aggregate of many opposing wills, contradictory wills. The homogeneous idea of a city like Brasília hasn't succeeded. It has to be the result of a number of communities, their wills opposing and slowly modifying one another, to have a real city. Designing a building is a paramount undertaking, but designing a city is nerve to the point of effrontery, it is unadulterated chutzpah, unless you first design the infrastructure, the whole system of movement and of services, so that elements and buildings can be added later and removed. And these architectural elements have to be designed in such a way that when they are removed, they create the minimum amount of upheaval. But the design should only be that of the city's infrastructure. Over time, elements are added and elements are removed. And when you design the elements to be added, you have to be conscious that they will be removed. And that it costs to remove them, that you have waste, that you need energy to remove the components. That's why I was talking about "Manhattan: Capital of the Twentieth Century" as an extraordinary infrastructure,



the grid or net on which you can put buildings and other such things and remove them, but the infrastructure remains standing there. Of course, an infrastructure is not just physical, the city is also a city of information. One of the advantages of information nowadays is that you probably don't need such rigid physical elements because it can now be transmitted by digital devices. Manhattan is a city of information and a city of culture.

CD: The Universitas Project raised questions about the relationship between design and science, with a working paper that said, "Design cannot prosper within the confines of the scientific worldview." What do you think about the role of science and technology in architecture today?

EA: Well, science operates in the domain of that which exists, trying to understand it, or trying to modify it. Design or architecture operates in the domain of visions, of proposing things that don't yet exist. It operates in the domain of *invention*. And that is a difference. The method for invention cannot be the method of science. It requires the methodology of science to evaluate what it has produced, it requires a methodology of science to evaluate what it is inventing. But there is no method of science to generate visions. I believe only in visions, I believe in architecture as invention. I believe in architecture as the domain of artists.

CD: In that sense, if science solves problems, like how to deal with the coronavirus, does the professional architect also solve problems?

EA: The professional architect, of course, has to solve problems, because he's operating within a set of requirements, between sets of laws and regulations, and capital and society, let's say the public. Yes, he's solving problems that people have. And he's using visions or images that have been created by others, and tested, and probably, in some cases, even tested by science. It is one way of collecting experience and applying and reutilizing it, so it's not wasted. But the images that are being used, if they are of any quality, as I said, must be prototypical. If not, they are types, they are typologies. And the professional architect works within the domain of type. How many architects, and you know them very well, create prototypes? It's a terribly difficult question.

Take a look at, for example, nature as a concern of architecture in different periods. It has appeared in many a vision. Giulio Romano, in Palazzo Te, was desperate to run away from Renaissance strictures, so he upset the rules of the columns and the

grid. Decades later, in a much better case, [Bernardo] Buontalenti made the geomorphic buildings in Pratolino for Francesco I de' Medici. This kind of concern for nature keeps reappearing with a different word to define its style. First it is called mannerism, later it's called art nouveau. For example, rococo furniture resembles nature, etc. The fact that now we're having a certain concern for nature really means that it's a pervading concern, which comes back in every culture. Nature is a substantial longing that keeps reappearing throughout the ages. I don't see anybody doing rococo or art nouveau architecture today. They're only trying – in a few cases – to reconcile nature as it was given to us with the nature we have been creating, okay? We have transformed nature to the point that if you find a tree today, it's there because somebody placed it there or someone left it there. There's almost nothing that man has not intervened in. So what you need now is a notion of architecture in which architecture is considered to be one element of the nature that we are creating. And it has to be in reconciliation with the nature that was given to us. The Greek notion that we have to conquer nature because nature is our enemy has subsided. The enemy is the nature that we have made, if we have made it badly.

CD: I have a last question, one that involves words rather than images. You have said that Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* is one of your favorite books. Why? What is its bearing in architecture?

EA: I read poetry. I read Wallace Stevens, I read everything like that. Lucretius is an extraordinary Roman poet, before Christ, who thought about the universe in terms of atoms, who thought that gods did not exist and everybody was free to make their own destiny. That was quite remarkable when people were so superstitious and bound to adoring gods made of bronze. Lucretius had been a student of Epicurus, but his notion that man is alone in the universe is what I found so remarkable. And I find it remarkable that without ever mentioning him, Baruch Spinoza, the Dutch philosopher of the 1600s, had very similar words. I think that the great misfortune in our culture was the moment we put our bet on Descartes and not on Spinoza. As a matter of fact, I am now reading a novel on Spinoza, which has nothing to do with philosophy. It is an invention of his life.

CD: Why do you call your own writing fables? What does the word *fable* mean to you?

EA: A fable usually is an educational device. You write them to teach a moral lesson. In that regard, allow me to confess I am only interested in discovery, not in recovery; I am keen on invention, not on classification. In the uncharted realm of invention, taxonomy is a process yet to be born. In the same way, as I search for essentials and lasting principles in architecture, in opting to write fables rather than write theoretical essays I may have grasped something basic: fables remain immutable long after theories have crumbled. The invention of fables is central to my working methods, it is not just a literary accessory. The subtext of a fable, after all, is a ritual, and it is in the support of rituals that most of my work addresses itself.

It is said that *verba volant, scripta manent* (words fly away, while writings remain). But for me, it is images that transport the heart to higher domains.

Cynthia Davidson, editor of *Log*, enjoys a good fable.
Anna Renken, editorial intern, was instrumental in doing research for and editing this conversation.