Emilio Ambasz
*Inventions: architecture and design*

DATES: 1 December 2011 – 16 January 2012

PLACE: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía Sabatini Building. 3rd Floor

ORGANISED BY: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

COORDINATED BY: Fernando López
The *Emilio Ambasz. Inventions: architecture and design* exhibition, organised by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, will make known to the Spanish public the main works by this architect and graphic and industrial designer through models, objects, original drawings, photographs and audiovisual material.

Acknowledged in James Wines’ *Green Architecture* book as a “forerunner of Green Architecture”, Emilio Ambasz (Argentina, 1943) has been looking to defy preconceived ideas about construction with his own vision of architecture, proposing green designs for hospitals, greenhouses, skyscrapers, apartment buildings, office buildings or department stores. “I believe that any architectural project not attempting to propose new, or better, modes of existence is unethical. […] I see the task of the architect to be that of reconciling our man-made Nature with the organic one we have been given”, he explains.

The exhibition will dedicate a room to his architectural works. They are all designed according to a technique that the very Ambasz defines as “green on grey” and reveals his effort and eagerness to integrate nature and construction in his architectural designs. 36 models of his major projects in the field will be on display in this gallery, such as Center for Applied Computer Research (Mexico DF, 1975); Casa del Retiro Espiritual (House for Spiritual Retirement, Sevilla, 1975); Plaza Mayor (Main Square, Salamanca, 1982), Lucille Halsell Conservatory in San Antonio Botanical Center (San Antonio, Texas, 1982); Mycal Cultural and Athletic Center (Shin-Sanda, Japan, 1990); Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall (Fukuoka, Japan, 1990) or the Ospedale dell’Angelo (Venice-Mestre, Italy, 2008), amongst others.

Besides, *Emilio Ambasz. Inventions: architecture and design* will also cover other field of work by this creator, such as graphic, industrial and exhibition design. Altogether, the visitor will have the chance to discover 40 industrial design objects, 16 graphic design works, as well as two hundred photographs and drawings. Celebrated works such as the Vertebra chairs (1974–75) or Lumb-R (1981), the Polyphemus lantern (1983), the Logotech lamp (1984), the Flexibol Pens (1985) or the Vittel Water Bottle (1985) will also be on display in the show.

“Green on grey”

Emilio Ambasz’s designs have a technique that the author himself calls “green on gray”, through which he aims to reconcile the real-estate agent’s intense wish of taking full advantage with the public necessity of green and open spaces. In these projects, architecture and landscape get the best use of the soil, and at the same time they offer a wide zone of interior and exterior public gardens. “We must design a "pact of reconciliation" whereby we have both, *the building and the garden*, i.e. one hundred percent of each one, organically integrated. In such concept the building "gives back", in the form of communally accessible greenery, as much as possible of the land it covers”, Ambasz clarifies. This wish of “giving back” to the community in the form of parks and gardens, the equivalent of the soil
that covers the track of the building, is one of the constants in this architect’s career: “For the last 30 years —he explains—, I have striven to find a built manner in which to integrate architecture with nature”.

Designs for the Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall in Japan are a clear example of this urban and innovative style, able to satisfy both needs. Its north face presents an elegant urban façade, while the south side lengthens an already existing park through a series of gardens in terraces which ascend to the top of the building. This design have made the park and the building inseparable: the building gives back to the city the same portion of land it had taken from it, while favouring the coexistence of a great urban structure and an open public space.

In his preoccupation in combining landscape and architecture, many of Ambasz’s projects focus in features such as the presence of light, the rumour of water, the manipulation of perspective and the human use of space to give rise to feelings of hope and tranquillity: “I have always striven in my work to present alternative models of the future so that we can change the present. [...] If there is any strength to my architectural ideas, it comes from the fact that I believe that architecture has to be not only pragmatic but also move the heart”, Ambasz states.

The Lucille Halsell Conservatory at San Antonio Botanical Center (Texas, US) is a clear example of the imaginative use of technology in Ambasz’s works. In this innovative project, the land serves as a container for plants, protecting them from extreme solar light and heat. The exhibition rooms are distributed around a typical, traditional Texas patio. The wide skylights, the inclined pyramids and the curved crystal cones, that suggest a cosmological observatory, emerge from the soft undulations of the land, reflecting an ever-changing sky. To Ambasz, the visitor is not only a spectator, but an essential participant in the landscape hierarchy of natural and artificial experiences.

Biographical Notes

Born in 1943 in Argentina and now a Spanish citizen, Emilio Ambasz studied architecture at Princeton University. He worked as curator of design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1970-1976), where he directed and installed numerous exhibitions on architecture and industrial design. He was president of the Architectural League for two terms (1981-1985), and has taught at the School of Architecture at Princeton University and, as a visiting professor, at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Germany.

Among his foremost projects are the Mycal Cultural and Athletic Center in Shin-Sanda, Japan, which won the Saflex Design Award in 2000; the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan, which won the prize for the 1976 Progressive Architecture Award; the Casa de Retiro Espiritual, designed in 1975, distinguished with the Progressive Architecture Award in 1980, and built in El Ronquillo, Seville, in 2000; and the Lucille Halsell Conservatory at San...
Antonio Botanical Center in Texas, designed in 1988, which won several prizes, including the renown Quaternario Award in 1990, for its notable technological achievements. Ambasz also owns many patents of mechanical and industrial design which have gained major distinctions, such as the Gold Prize awarded in the United States by IBD in 1977 for his co-design of the Vertebra chair system.

Ambasz represented the United States at the 1976 Venice Biennale. In 1989, the retrospective *Emilio Ambasz: Architecture* was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and a travelling exhibition, *Emilio Ambasz: architecture, exhibition, industrial and graphic design*, was shown the same year at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. Other retrospectives of his work have been held at the Tokyo Station Gallery in Japan in 1993, and at the Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporâneo in Mexico City in 1994.

**CATALOGUE**

On occasion of the exhibition, a catalogue in Spanish will be published, including texts by Emilio Ambasz and also Barry Bergdoll, Kenneth Frampton, Peter Buchanan, Lauren Sedofsky, Dean MacCannell, Peter Hall and Fulvio Irace. Three interviews to Ambasz by Michael Sorkin, James Wines and Hans Ulrich Obrist will complete the publication.

**FTP access to the EMILIO AMBASZ exhibition:**
ftp://77.226.250.242
User: AmbaszExpo
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