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# Building the Global Green: Ecology, Cybernetics and Ontology in Emilio Ambasz's Architecture

Architect Emilio Ambasz (b. 1943) has been identified as "one of the most important pioneers of Green Architecture,"[1] and this project investigates the historical, political, and ontological conditions of his most significant projects from the 1970s to the early 2000s. Today, sustainability is an essential parameter in all design practices, education, theory, and research, from large-scale urban planning projects and housing development to corporate spaces and interior design. Architecture shapes our cities, our homes, and our environment. Accordingly, green architecture now shapes our cities, our homes, and our environment in a *planetary scale*. How can we understand this "green globalization" in architecture?

Ambasz's architecture is often referenced in the field of architecture and design, yet rarely studied comprehensively. Correspondingly, the philosophical and critical implications of the development of green architecture still awaits its scholarly conceptualization. This project aims to correct this deficiency by advancing a philosophical and political critique of the history of green architecture by critically reevaluating Ambasz's architecture. The project will thus re-write the arguably understudied field of green architecture and by so doing trespass and influence a wide variety of disciplines. This research will not only be of great relevance within architecture and design history; the project will provide decisive insights to humanities broadly defined, particularly environmental humanities, cultural studies, science and technology studies (STS), aesthetic theory, and continental philosophy. What is more, the current project will forge bonds with architectural practices—with urbanism, planning, and design—providing a critical and theoretical base for arguably the most pressing question of our time: can we build a sustainable future?



Figure 1: Upper left to bottom right: Lucile Halsell Conservatory, San Antonio Botanical Garden (USA, 1982), Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall (Japan, 1990), La Casa de Retiro Espiritual (Spain, 1975), Proposal for New Town Center outside Tokyo (Japan, 1989).

Throughout his career, Emilio Ambasz's architecture has defied the nature/culture dichotomy by its uncanny attunement to natural elements such as air, earth, water, and plants. His buildings and projects include skyscrapers of trees, buildings that are floating islands, glass mountains, and desert oases. His designs

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[1] *Emilio Ambasz - Emerging Nature. Precursor of Architecture and Design.* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2017), outside back cover.

include houses deep beneath the surface of the earth, artificial *cuts* through natural landscapes constructing non-natural abysses, and architectural forms conditioned by natural air-streams. Yet concurrently, his buildings and sites also belong to an uncanny attunement to technology and cybernetics: Hydrology, high-tech maintenance systems, buildings constructed with novel and developing materials, and high-speed rail systems built into buildings and sites produce a unique built environment that blurs the border between the machine and the garden. Hence, Ambasz's architectural projects stand out as distinctive manifestations of a symbiotic relationship between ecology and cybernetics made explicit on the one hand in the formal, aesthetic, and material characteristics of his architecture, and on the other hand, in the theoretical and ideological landscape where Ambasz places his buildings and projects. As showed by the Project Manager in previous research (Halland, 2018), Ambasz's long-standing peculiar loyalty to the conceptual realms of *both* ecology and cybernetics transcend previously established narratives of postmodern architecture and design discourse and can even be claimed to be ground-breaking endeavors. This project studies the formal explorations of this symbiotic relation through a close reading of selected projects by Ambasz and argues that this symbiosis is pivotal for understanding the emergence of green architecture in both intellectual and aesthetic terms.

However, the current project argues that Ambasz's buildings and projects cannot merely be understood as sites defying the dichotomy between nature and culture: besides belonging to the realm of both ecology and technology, Ambasz's architecture belongs to an uncanny attunement to the mythical and philosophical realm. The pioneer of green architecture describes his architectural practice to be a philosophical exploration of a new primordial dwelling place for humankind (Ambasz, 2017). His aim is to search for "a new philosophic definition of Nature, encompassing architecture as one of its inseparable component elements" (Sorkin, 2004). Considering these aforementioned particularities of Ambasz's architecture, *Building the Global Green* will study the buildings and sites through two conceptual lenses: ecology and cybernetics, and then ask: What are the ontological implications of these two concepts in relation to green architecture?

Ambasz's practice bears equally witness of an ambiguous dialectic between pragmatic solution-orientated approaches and radical utopianism spanning from large-scale city planning projects in Europe to small-scale spiritual land-art projects in South America or Japan. Although this research project investigates the work of an Argentinian architect primarily based in the USA, the project will have an empirical scope that explores green architecture from the *local* to the *global* scale, from Southern, Western, and Eastern parts of the world. "Emilio is a ubiquitous being," says Alessandro Mendini about Ambasz, "his *genius loci* is the entire planet" (Mendini in Ambasz, 1988). By researching Ambasz's planetary green architecture, this project unfolds the particularities, complexities, and problematics of today's *green globalization*—a concept pioneered by this project.

The project will examine both built and proposed projects with a particular focus on La Casa de Retiro Espiritual (Spain, 1975), Center for Applied Computer Research (Mexico, 1975), Lucile Halsell Conservatory at San Antonio Botanical Garden (USA, 1982), Proposal for a New Town Center outside Tokyo (Japan, 1989), and Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall (Japan, 1990). Further, the La Venta office complex (Mexico, 1993), the renovation of The Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires (1997), and the speculative project *Emilio's Folly: Man is an Island* (1983) will function as secondary and supplementary projects. Selecting Ambasz's multi-layered architecture as the project's empirical base enables the study of the notion of green architecture through various timescapes, landscapes, and ideologies: from the local to the global; from large-scale to small-scale; from East to West; from utopianism to pragmatism; from the counter-cultural period of the early 1970s to the 1990s late-capitalist globalization; from the imaginary to the real.

The project's main hypothesis is that Ambasz's architecture displays *new* conceptions of ecology and cybernetics, and that these new conceptions are of the outmost importance not only for understanding the historical, political, and ontological conditions of green architecture, but also for understanding profound complications of our present global conditions and future challenges.

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