

DESIGN 5

Joe Dolce



Library of Applied Design

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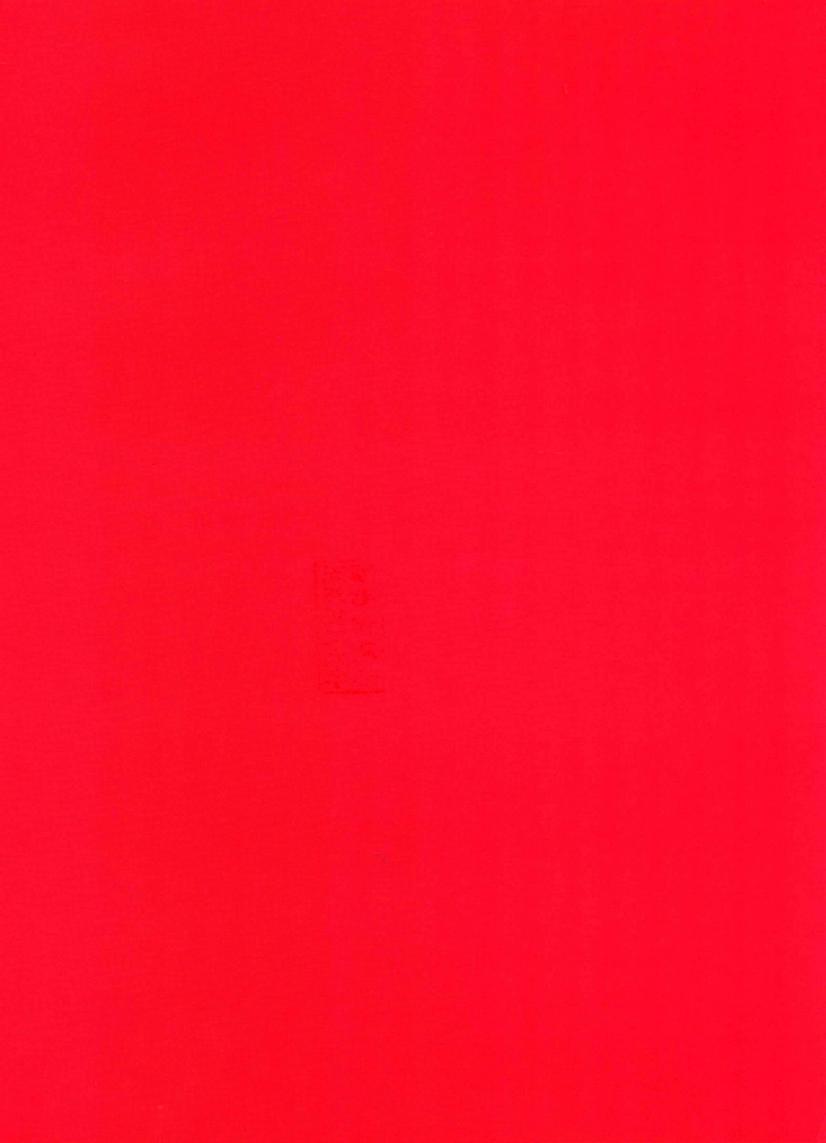


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An Interview with Emilio Ambasz

by Joe Dolce

Emilio Ambasz-industrial designer, architect, landscape and graphic designer-was born in Argentina in 1943 and completed his undergraduate and Master's degree in Architecture at Princeton University. From 1970-76, he curated the Design department of the Museum of Modern Art, and among his notable exhibitions was "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape" in 1972. He has served two terms as the President of the Architectural League, won many awards in both architecture and industrial design, and has been the subject of several international exhibitions. In 1976 he designed (in collaboration with Giancarlo Piretti) the Vertebra chair, the world's first automatic, articulated office chair, which Mario Bellini once praised as "the reference point for everything that has been designed in its field since." His major building is the Lucille Halsell Conservatory in the San Antonio Botanical Center in Texas. He currently heads his own firm, Emilio Ambasz & Associates in New York City.

JD: The Eskimos have the igloo, the Greeks have the vase, and the American Indians have the teepee—If objects are the mirror of the society, what object best typifies the eighties, an era that's come and gone?

EA: The tiny 3-inch TV. Wasn't it Pascal who said, Consume, ergo sum? There it stands in one object, fetish and temple.

JD: Is design more about comfort or convenience or art?

EA: Mostly it's a prosthetic device, a device that makes up for something you don't have. If the world were a welcoming place, you could just put your hand on the ground, and take what you want; but since the world is not like that, you need devices to correct the deficiencies. Ideally, the object has to have some magic—it must please the

mind and the heart. For me a product is usually a temporary reconciliation between one's desires and the difficulties which are imposed on us by the evironment. So in any product you'll find a tiny instance of peace and then a slowly eroding doubt about its construction and the longing for the next one.

JD: Was the Vertebra chair born out of vast study, or in a minute's inspiration?

EA: It wasn't that I sat down to design an office chair. I was simply sitting on one and rocking on two legs. I thought it would be good to have a chair that, much like a good friend, wouldn't give in to everything I say, would pose a certain resistance, and provide a certain amount of support. That was the birth of the tilt-back mechanism. I hit upon an idea, but not by any process of organized, analytical, deductive thought.

JD: Do you align yourself more with the artist or the engineer?

EA: I am interested in building products that provide a mechanical service, so I don't really think of the object artistically. I think of it more as a little animistically endowed entity that has a capacity of answering back to certain movements. One pen I made bends, so if you sit down and it's in your pocket, it won't break or hurt you. This is the nature of the things I do.

JD: One magazine predicted that what finance was to the '70s and marketing was to the '80s, design will be to the '90s. What do you think?

EA: Perhaps in Italy. In 1972, I curated an Italian design show at the Museum of Modern Art and have since followed that country closely. It was a poor country which made a commitment to quality and innovation and invention, rather than to low wages or inexpensive products.

JD: Is it working?

EA: For them, indeed. It's no secret that the Japanese have also observed it closely. That's

probably why they're so far ahead of everyone else. **JD:** How so?

EA: The Japanese are much more concerned with being great managers of information—information about developing new products—intelligent, valued-added products. They do not want their children to be highly-paid workers, nor even highly-paid bureaucrats—they want them to be highly-paid managers of information, almost like a banker manages financial capital. Those are the people who make the highest salaries.

JD: Accordingly, then, they'll have to rule the world.

EA: They're no longer concerned with things like quality control. Why should they worry about quality control when they have convinced the Americans to worry about it? When they could get the guys in Mexico to produce quality products with the same quality as they make them in Nagoya.

JD: What's your evidence of this?

EA: Plenty. I work for several different Japanese companies that are actively engaged in trying to construct products that will satisfy needs in the future. It's like they're making partial configurations of what the future may be.

Take a company like Sony. When they put a product on the market, it is considered dead the day it appears. At that minute, they start developing three alternative products. One of them, has a 10 to 15 percent improvement on price. Another has a fifty percent mechanical or manufacturing improvement. The third is a mutant. The financing of this new product is based on the income of the old one. In their bookkeeping system, they don't require the one on the market to pay for itself before they begin developing a new one.

JD: So how can America compete with that?

EA: It's simple: Americans should rekindle their love of becoming students. They should learn from

their masters, whether at home or abroad, and they should study other peoples' minds and achievements. That's what the Japanese do from elementary school. Therein lies the secret; the rest is nonsense.

JD: What about this equation: when there is a downturn in the economy there is less emphasis on design. Is that true, and if so, how can it be refigured?

EA: You need new products whether the economy is in a downturn or in an upturn. There's no way a society based on creating products can suddenly believe that it no longer has to make products. America has committed itself to intermediation.

JD: Intermediation?

EA: Yes, buying and selling. It's the easy way. There's no responsibility, no risk, no long-term headaches. The only drawback to transferring the responsibility of making a product to somebody else, is that you are given a very small profit margin—buy at eight, sell at eight and a quarter.

JD: But clearly this country is comprised of more than just middlemen?

EA: When I was at the Museum of Modern Art, I presented five objects of high technology for the collection. All five were American technology but four were assembled in Europe. The Bang and Olafson record player was one of the choices and it exemplifies my point. The chips came from Texas Instruments and they cost about \$15. They were assembled in Denmark, where it sold wholesale for about \$290. By the time it got here, it was going for about \$600. Fifteen dollars remained in Texas, \$200 remained in Denmark.

The point is that all the parts were American but the labor was being given to an outside country, and that is of great concern. To me, he whom invents ways of providing labor should be given the Nobel Peace Prize. That's the answer to your question about what you do in a downturn: You make products. Labor is work. You can't base an economy on intermediation.

JD: Would you prefer a company run by a designer to a company run by an MBA?

EA: I think that the errors made by a designer would be far less catastrophic than the errors made by a bottom line man. Unless the corporation understands that it is in the business of inventing products that provide better solutions, there is no hope. And I assure you that very few corporations understand this. Even the enlightened ones. You need financial capital, yes, but you also have to have intellectual capital. This is the up-and-coming way of measuring success.

JD: Our last recession was fifteen years ago. Do you think there is any lesson to be learned from that in terms of the way products are made and manufactured today?

EA: You have a society that is in recession because, in part, it has changed its values. Today we value immediate gratification. There is no encouragement for industrialists in the United States to invest in product making because medium- and long-term investments are immediately punished by Wall Street. Companies have to make a profit and if they don't, the stock immediately falls, and when that happens, people try to take over the company. Nor is there encouragement in the tax system for new product development. You are much better off having a financial officer handling the corporation because you earn more that way.

JD: Do you think that a recession might frighten certain manufacturers to decide that some of their products at least need a face lift?

EA: The problem is not with American manufacturers. Like hunters wanting to survive in the jungle, they are pretty agile. But I find that the jungle has really restricted the possibilities of

movement. With the current financial and tax system, there is no reason to take a risk. When you have a company rewarded for taking debt and not for risking a new product, what do you do? Probably, you buy another company instead of making anything new. Why explore for oil when you can find it on Wall Street?

JD: How do product designers then, make themselves more useful to the people who use their services?

EA: The designer is a powerless entity in the corporate organization. He is not involved in decision making, because decision makers don't feel that you can gain insight into a problem by asking a designer for an invention.

Let me give you a minor example. The story of the Sony Walkman is well known: Morita was told by everyone that nobody wants to go around with a silly little radio on his ears. But he was the owner of the company, so he did it, and he discovered an immense market. So now, Morita calls in the marketing people, and listens to their projections for products based on trends. He does that on one Friday, and the next Friday he calls in the designers and asks them to propose products. They're not supposed to talk numbers or statistics. They simply propose products, invent artifacts. Out of a hundred, maybe two are interesting. But they're asking designers—to project tomorrow using existing technologies. This is the way of the future.

JD: Obsolescence is critical to the design profession; without it, you'd be out of a job. How does society balance the need for the new with the environmental concerns that it inevitably raises?

EA: You tax the product from the day it is born, so that its burial costs are paid for in advance. You don't allow the company to take all the profits and force the society to carry the cost of disposal. This means that there will be a reduction in the number

of products consumers will be able to buy because they will cost more. And buyers will have to start making choices because there will be a certain restriction in a number of vaulable things, which, of course, is completely contrary to present thought. It's a poisonous notion. I will be invited to dinner by the presidents of the three auto manufacturers in Detroit and they'll serve me a meal, which will probably be my last one.

JD: How would you explain your profession to your five-year-old daughter, if you have one?

EA: I'd simply let the water run out of the faucet and tell her to drink. She would then look for a cup and I would ask her to make her own. Maybe she would pick up an empty shell of a grapefruit. Then she might ornament the shell with things that somehow represent the spirit dwelling inside the product. Hopefully that is an explanation and not rhetoric.

JD: And how would you explain it to your 75-year-old mother?

EA: This is a lost cause.

JD: If you were to teach design, what texts would be mandatory reading?

EA: The Philosophy of the Future, by Ernst Bloch. He was a communist philosopher, completely apostate according to the Communists, because he thought there was no way of acting ethically in the present without an image of the future as a guide. Second, The Poetics of Space, by Gaston Bachelard which is an exploration of the space which dwells in architecture. I would also ask them to listen to Russian poetry. They wouldn't understand the words, but they would hear the sounds and hopefully understand that sound is matter. They will thereby understand material in some abstract, but realistic way, and rhythm, cadence, proportion as well. Finally, *Philosophy of Method*, to study the way you organize and approach a problem so that it

becomes manageable.

JD: What is most useful to a student of design today: a degree in philosophy, business, or Japanese?

EA: I really think a course in the making of idols—totem poles, saints, etc...Every culture makes idols in which it believes. They are the physical embodiment of that which is revered and worshipped. Essentially, it would be a course for shamans.

JD: What is your favorite ready-made object?

EA: The sewing needle, because I know how to make it better.

JD: Oh?

EA: You take the thread and you dip it into a certain plastic which becomes hard. You can then stitch with a hard tip of the thread.

JD: Thereby eliminating the needle?

EA: That's my reverse answer to the standard statement made by designers that it is an impossible product to improve. They haven't delved deeply enough into the root of what is needed.

JD: What's the most beautiful object you come in contact with every day?

EA: In New York, I live in a house with no furniture except for a bean bag chair. Every time I want to sit down, I have to decide the shape I want the seat to take, and then I get to make it. To me, what's beautiful is something I can somehow transform.

JD: What's the worst thing about being a designer?

EA: Not being the client. I think the designer should make products to meet his own expectations.

JD: What's the best thing?

EA: That you can make a model of a product you invent, in a solitary room, and you can see its scale, its texture, and imagine that it is alive. And perhaps, if it's not very technically or electronically endowed, you can fool yourself into thinking that it has been born.



Talanhan

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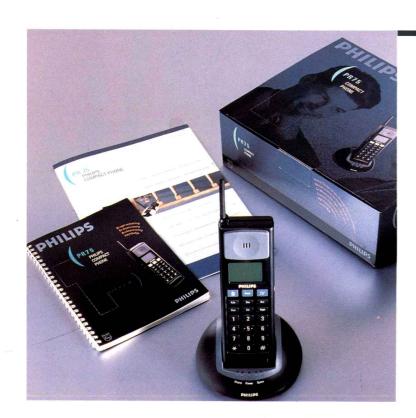
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