

A recurring state of mind



‘Green’ architecture as an evolving attitude rather than a fixed rulebook—bridging technology and nature through the ideas behind some of the most iconic buildings

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Let us examine the relationship between an emerging green-sensitive culture of plant-integrated buildings, and all the new — some very valid, but many quite superficial — technologies claiming to produce “green architecture.”

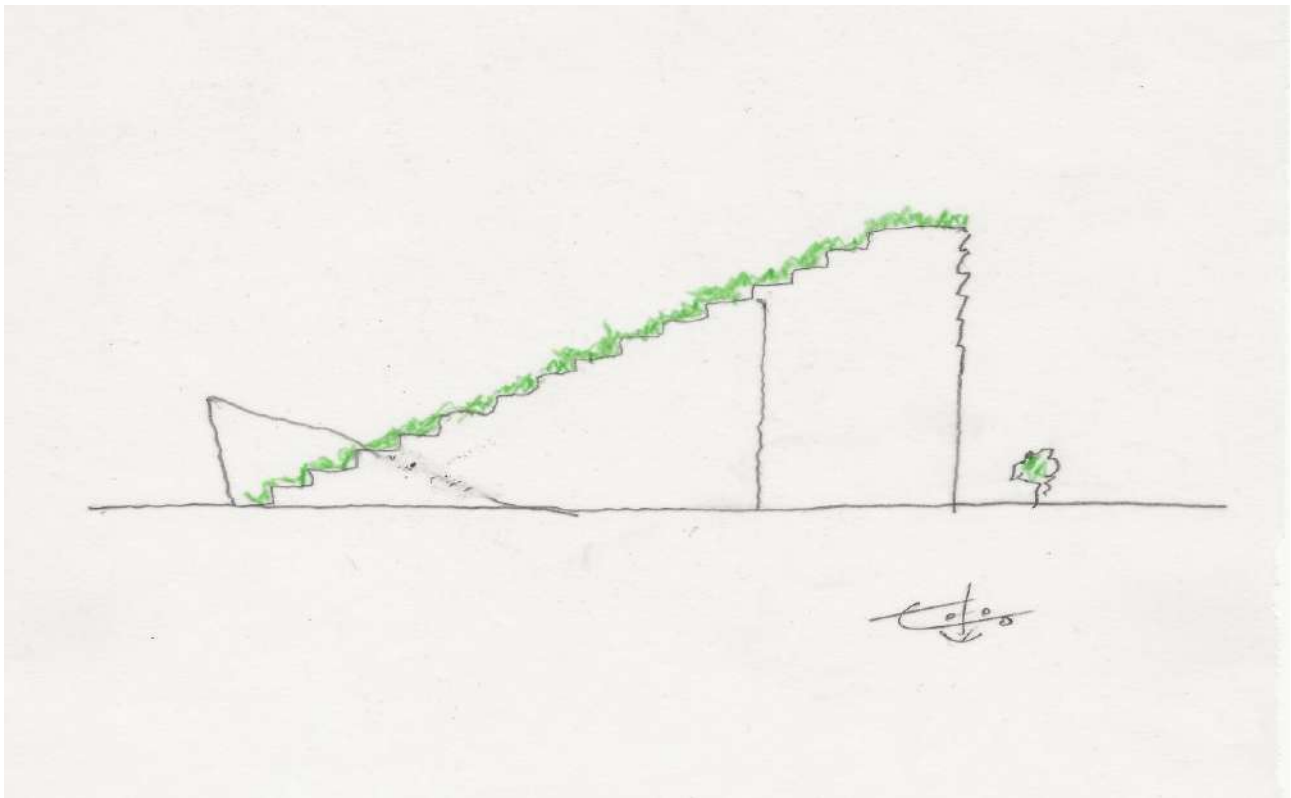
Let us start from the beginning. The so-called **Green Movement**, in its many guises, of which sustainability is an honorable one, is a big umbrella where, at present, I would not dare to cast too much light because the shadows are still looking for their bodies. It is a state of awareness; it does not yet constitute a conceptual reality because it lacks a precise system of philosophical discourse and a theoretical structure that will allow it to transmit a body of knowledge, and to constantly re-evaluate itself. It is an attitude so far; it is not yet a principle.

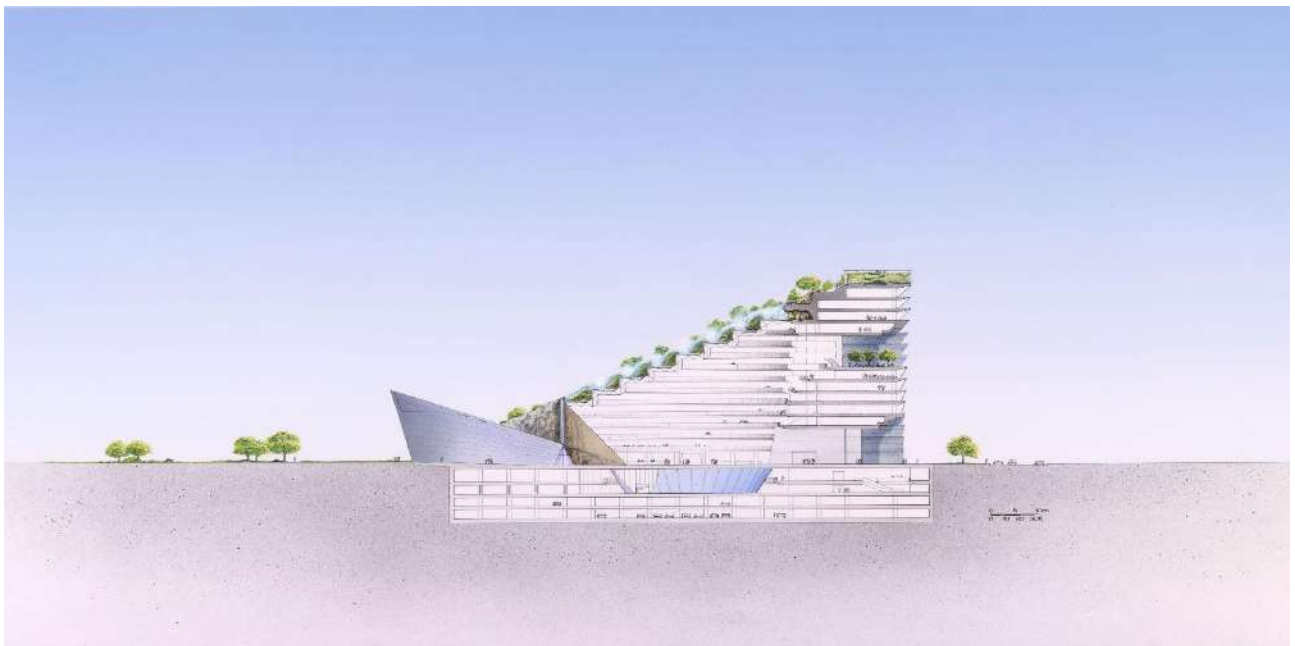
Green is currently a state of mind that may yet create its own **cultural reality**. To that end, technologies are being developed, but they have not yet created a reliable body of methods. I have no doubt that in time it will happen. The key point is not to confuse **technological pyrotechnics** with architecture. To make a green building you need technology; to create architecture you need art.

Building inevitably changes nature as found and turns it into a **man-made nature**. The goal should be to reduce and, if possible, compensate for our intrusion in the vegetal kingdom. Building an individual energy-economical house is not always the best way to save or produce energy. Social investment in a communal method for producing solar, sea, or wind energy may prove far more productive and efficient. We must be careful to foresee the secondary and tertiary effects of our well-intentioned attempts at **energy saving**. In a parallel field of endeavor, we find recent studies intended to determine the amount of noxious emissions created when woodland or arable land is converted to the cultivation of biofuel crops.

We must build our house on **this Earth** because we are not welcomed on the land. Every act of construction is a defiance of nature. We need to conceive of an architecture that stands as the embodiment of a reconciliatory pact between nature and building. We must create alternative models of the future, proposing a better life to guide our actions if we do not wish to perpetuate present conditions. I believe that any architectural project that does not attempt to propose new or better modes of existence is unethical. This task may stagger the imagination and paralyze hope, but we cannot subtract ourselves from its pursuit. How to achieve that goal? We should not forget that to achieve **sustainability** we sometimes have to use materials that require energy to manufacture them, and in later years will need more energy for their disposal.









With the **ACROS building in Fukuoka**, Japan (presented at the 2025 Architecture Biennale), I have been lucky to be able to demonstrate that in the city we can have “the green over the gray”; that it is not true that greenery is only possible in the suburbs; that heat and cold loads can also be greatly reduced using the economic and ecological materials par excellence, such as earth and plants; and that you can have 100 percent of the land and at the same time 100 percent of the building. In other words, we can have “the house and the garden” instead of “the house in the garden” (40 percent for the house and 60 percent for the garden) as Modernism promised us in its beginnings. It should be restated that if an architectural work does not move the heart, there is no point in it. It is just one more building.

I have always believed that the supreme misfortune occurs when the idea arrives before the image. Ideas come wrapped in words, and words are part of our already established linguistic baggage. Words denote an established and culturally agreed upon typology, when not a stereotype. As such, they inhibit the introduction of new meanings, i.e. of **invention**. Words operate in the domain of semantics, while images belong to the realm of **visions**.

My goal has always been to design without using words organized into ideas. Such a process requires that I remove from my design process any recourse to linguistic thoughts, or equivalent crotches, and that I try to enter a pre-linguistic state of being. For me, linguistically formulated ideas give great comfort to those who are afraid of inventing, and allow for self-congratulatory exegesis. Therefore, I seek to let the images come to me, and only when they have assumed a form do I try to elicit the hidden ideas these images may contain.

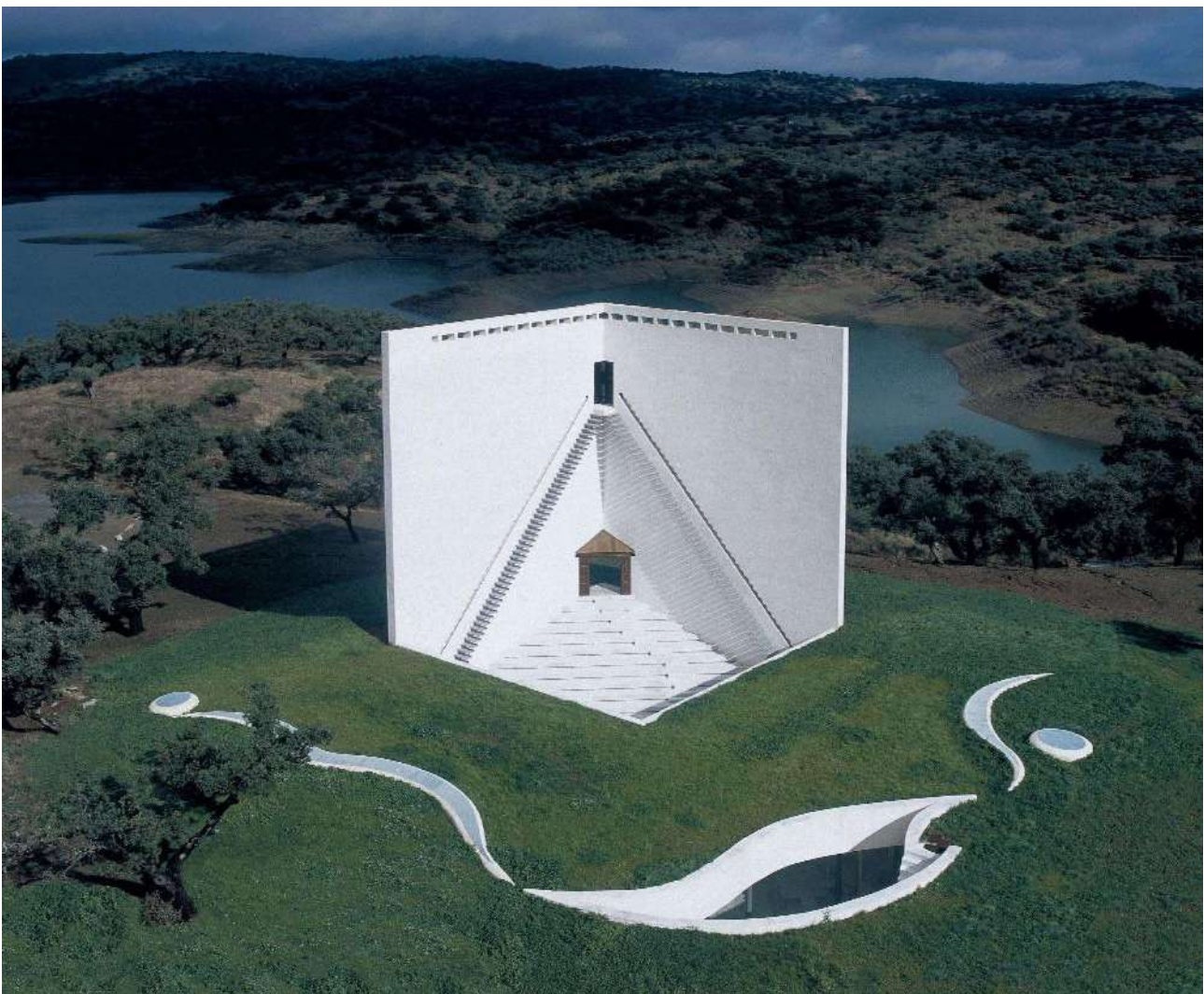
Of course, here we encounter the risks inherent in any procedure of **interpretation**, but the idea(s) we may believe, rightly or wrongly, to be inherent in the image cannot change the image’s already embodied substance. Let there be no misunderstanding. It is not a matter of image versus idea. An image, once generated, if it is perceived to be prototypical, does contain an idea, albeit in a way that is yet to be decodified. Suffice the above to justify my acknowledging being an **image-maker** and not an intellectual.

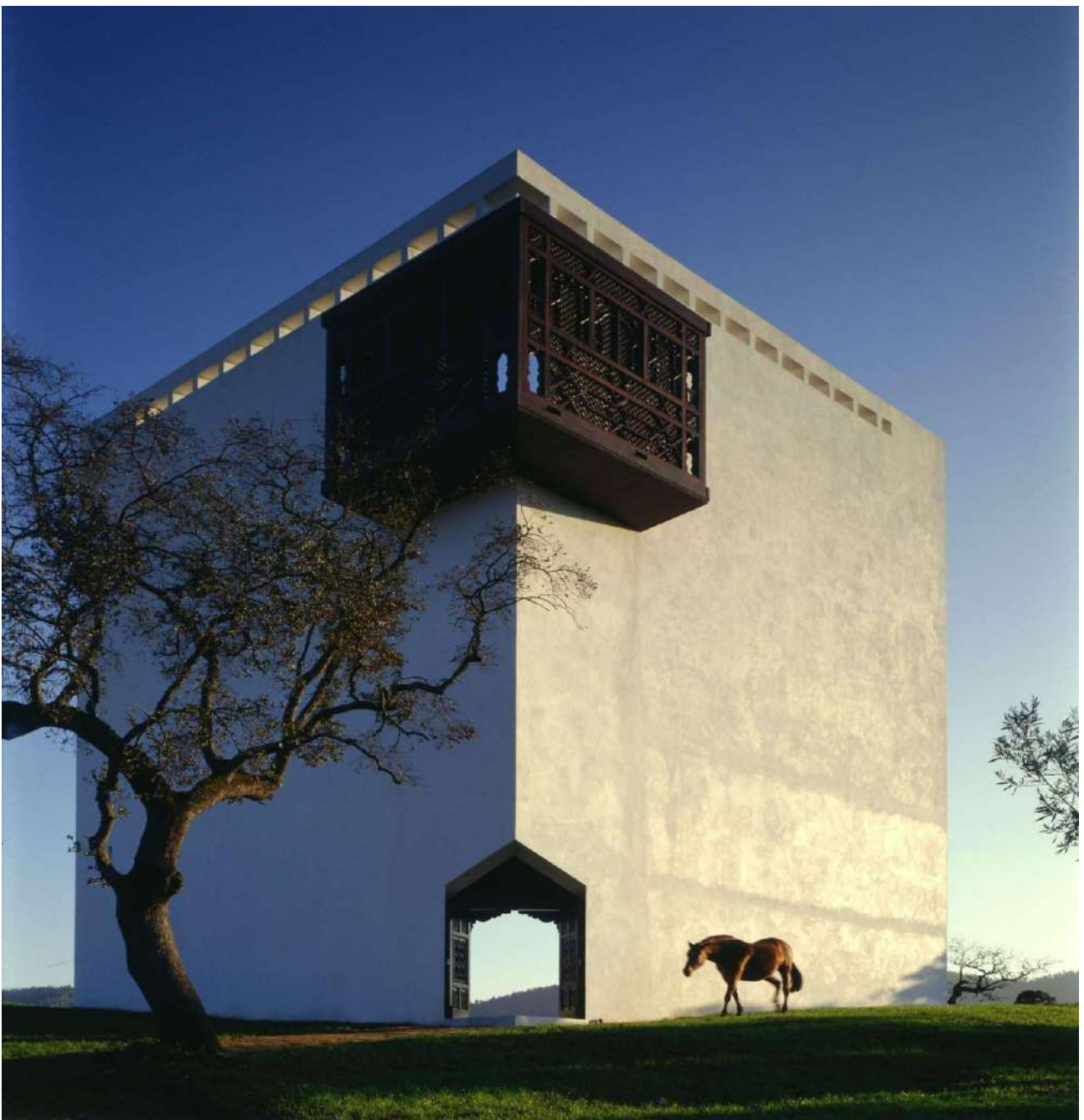
I am aware I should not utter such profanities lest I am exiled from academic certainties. The idea of sustainability only became clear to me after I designed the **Casa de Retiro** in 1975. I did not deliberately intend it to be an energy-saving house. I just wanted to insulate it from the insufferable

heat of the Andalusian summers. I was unaware that by this conceit I was designing a house that, when built with its roof and some walls shielded with earth, would have no need for heating or air conditioning. Neither was I intending a house that would return almost all the earth occupied by its footprint. Only after I examined and tried to decipher the house's image did I realize that it contained the seed of some sensible ideas.

Notwithstanding this house's great glazed expanses toward the patio, when the outside temperature reaches 44° C, inside the temperature barely rises to 23° C, reaching 27° C one summer day when there was a 3-hour party for over 50 people, with closed windows. In winter, when we registered 5° C outside, inside we had 19° C even with one of the large, 3-by-3-meter panes of glass fully open. Did I consciously seek to build a sustainable house? No. To me, it was just common sense to insulate the construction. Did I intend to become the "Messiah of Green Architecture" as James Wines has all too generously called me? No.

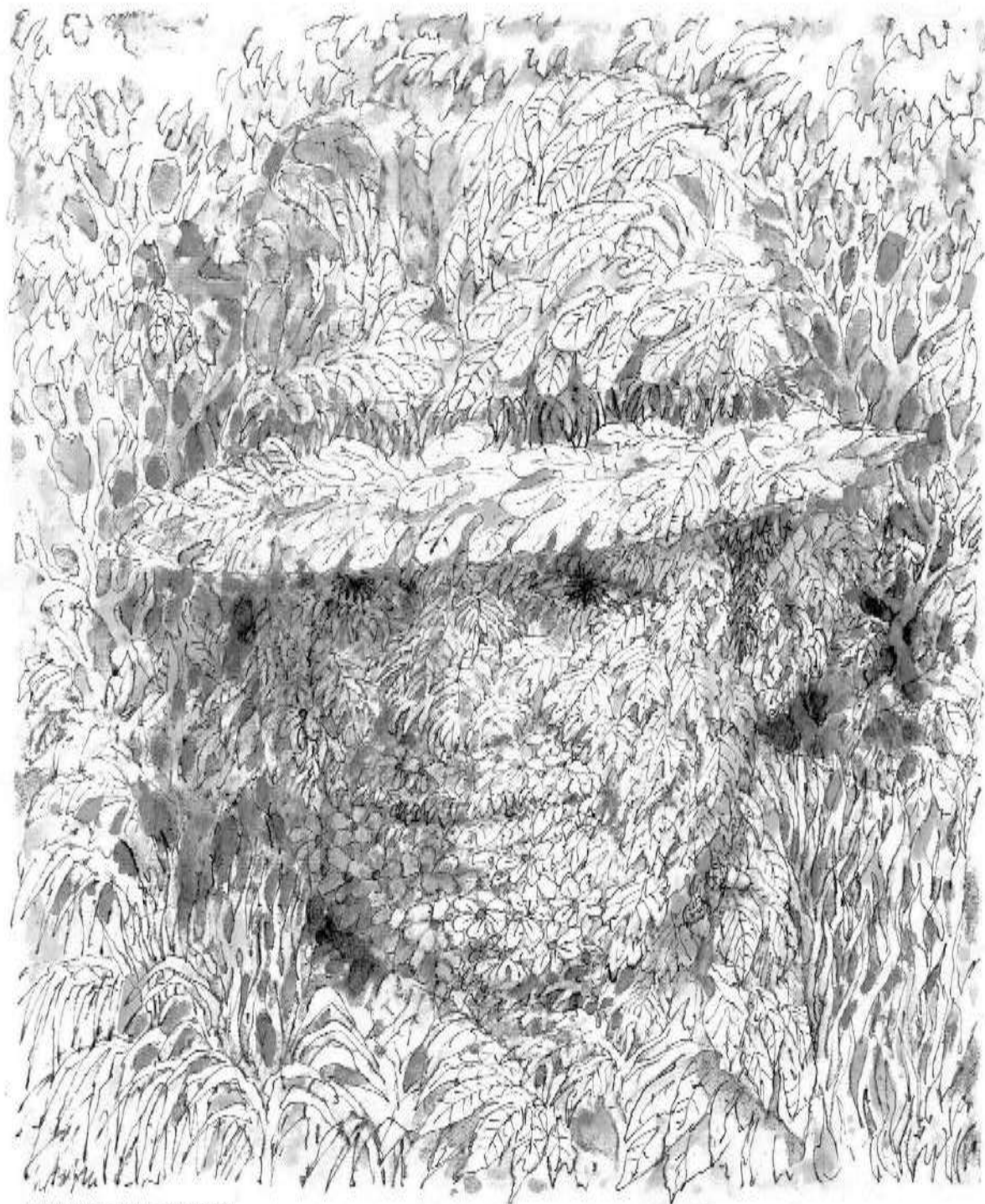
In another instance, from the images I envisioned for the Casa de Retiro, upon later reflection, I derived **my first set of ideas and principles**. Firstly, giving back the greatest possible amount of land covered by the building's footprint, in the form of gardens that are accessible to the users and, if possible, to the community. Secondly, designing a building so intricately related to its surrounding landscape that it is impossible to disengage one from the other. Thirdly, creating seasonally changing types of ornaments, such as plants are, to decorate the building (yes, to decorate, that old architectural skill also lost in the corridors of academia). Fourthly, putting earth and plants on the roof to create a garden, and extend it, wherever possible, to the building's walls. Fifthly, and more importantly, to design buildings that sing with a **loud voice** but with a **closed mouth**.











EMILIO OF THE GARDEN

Photography by
Courtesy of Emilio Ambasz & Associates