

Paradise Made: Two New Gardens in Texas

So irresistibly is human power ground to dust by some unseen force which seems to mock at the majestic rods and ruthless axes of authority and trample them for its spirit. - Lucretius, De Rerum Natura V II¹

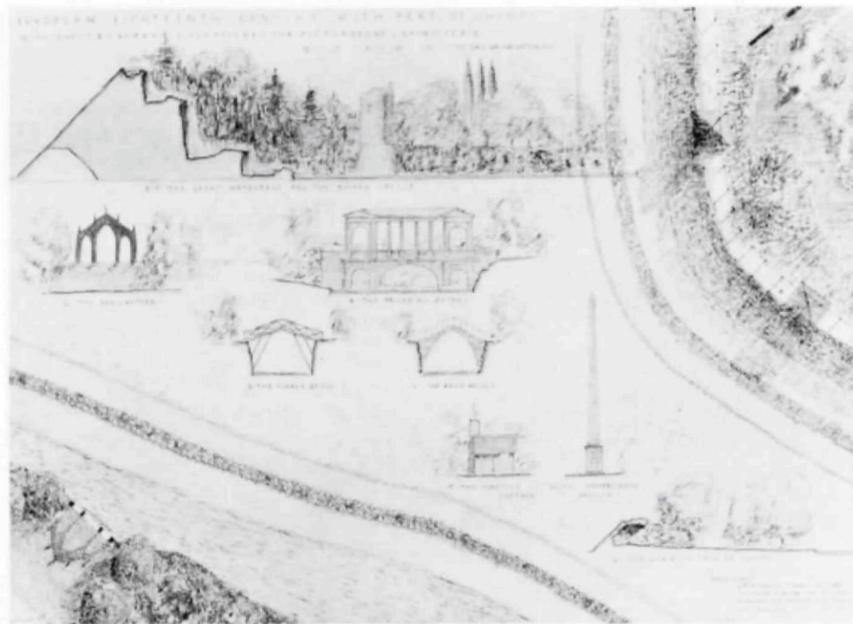
In America, working the land has been more an issue of the human spirit than an aesthetic or intellectual pursuit. While thousands of years have passed since primitive men associated elements of the environment with fearful personalities, it has been just a few hundred years since settlers from Europe established their place against the vast and powerful wilderness they encountered here. Respect for the natural landscape has since dominated American culture, perpetuating a belief that the land is more suitable material for worship than manipulation. Nature's power can be both terrifying and healing, inspiring men to a moral and healthy existence. The garden as a work of art for the city - a bit of wilderness captured, in fact, designed and constructed like architecture - poses a moral dilemma which accounts for the romantic, "naturalistic" direction of most American landscape design: to retain some reminder, albeit artificial, of Arcadia within the urban context, the garden is expected to conceal its artfulness and to at least *look like* something untouched by human hands.

Well, not necessarily, or not anymore, if two new Texas gardens are any indication. Both Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe's project for the Moody Gardens in Galveston, and the Lucile Halsell Conservatory at the San Antonio Botanical Center by Emilio Ambasz eschew the romantic tradition, exploring instead the notion of the garden as a construct of human intellect. Truly modern in the sense that they both consciously refer to other aesthetic works, they each have been described metaphorically - the Moody as museum and the Halsell as cathedral - linking them firmly to cultural institutions and architectural artifacts rather than the forces of nature. Although they speak a different language, the artist's head as well as hand are present as the makers of these places, and a look at the two projects reveals just how varied the touch can be.

Natalye L. Appel



"China: The Gardens and Landscape of Buddha," Moody Gardens, Galveston, Texas, Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, architect



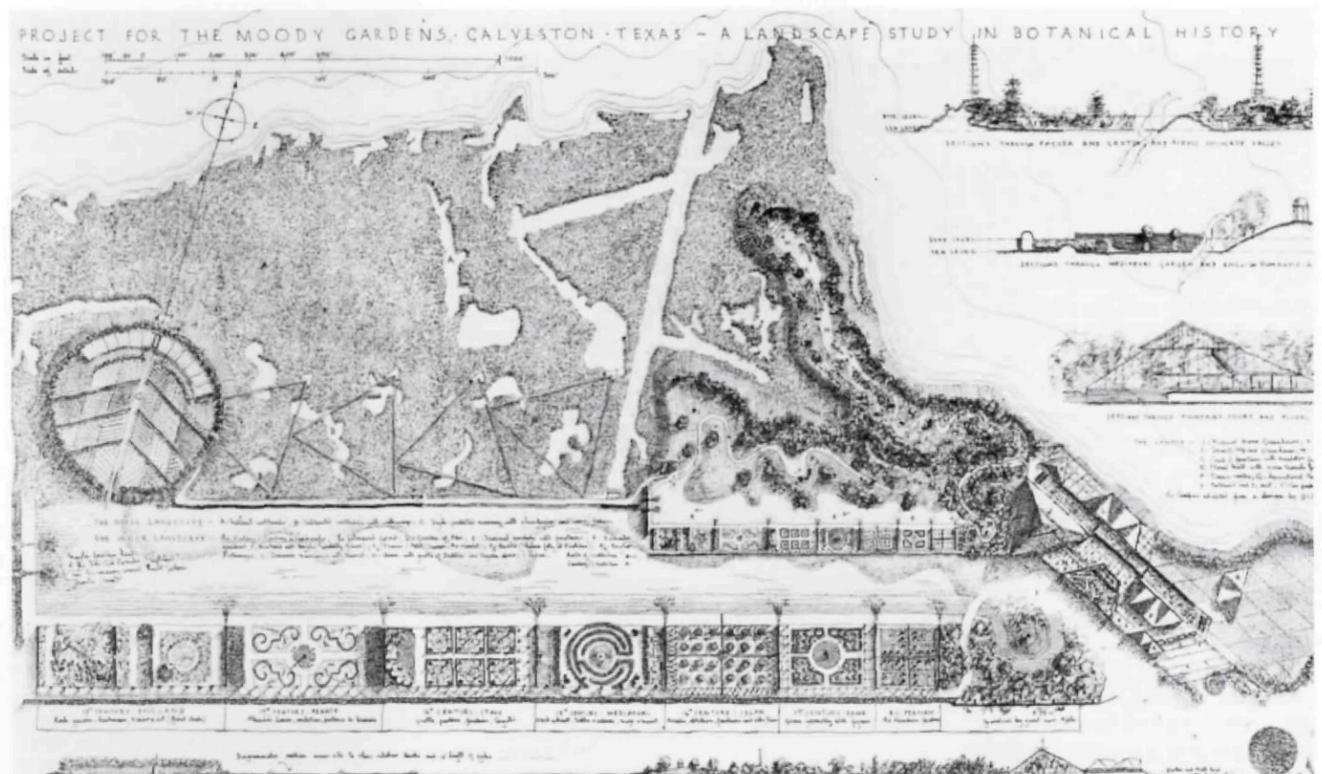
"European Eighteenth Century With Part of China," Moody Gardens

The Moody Gardens: The Origin of Gardens and World Landscape From the Beginning to the 19th Century

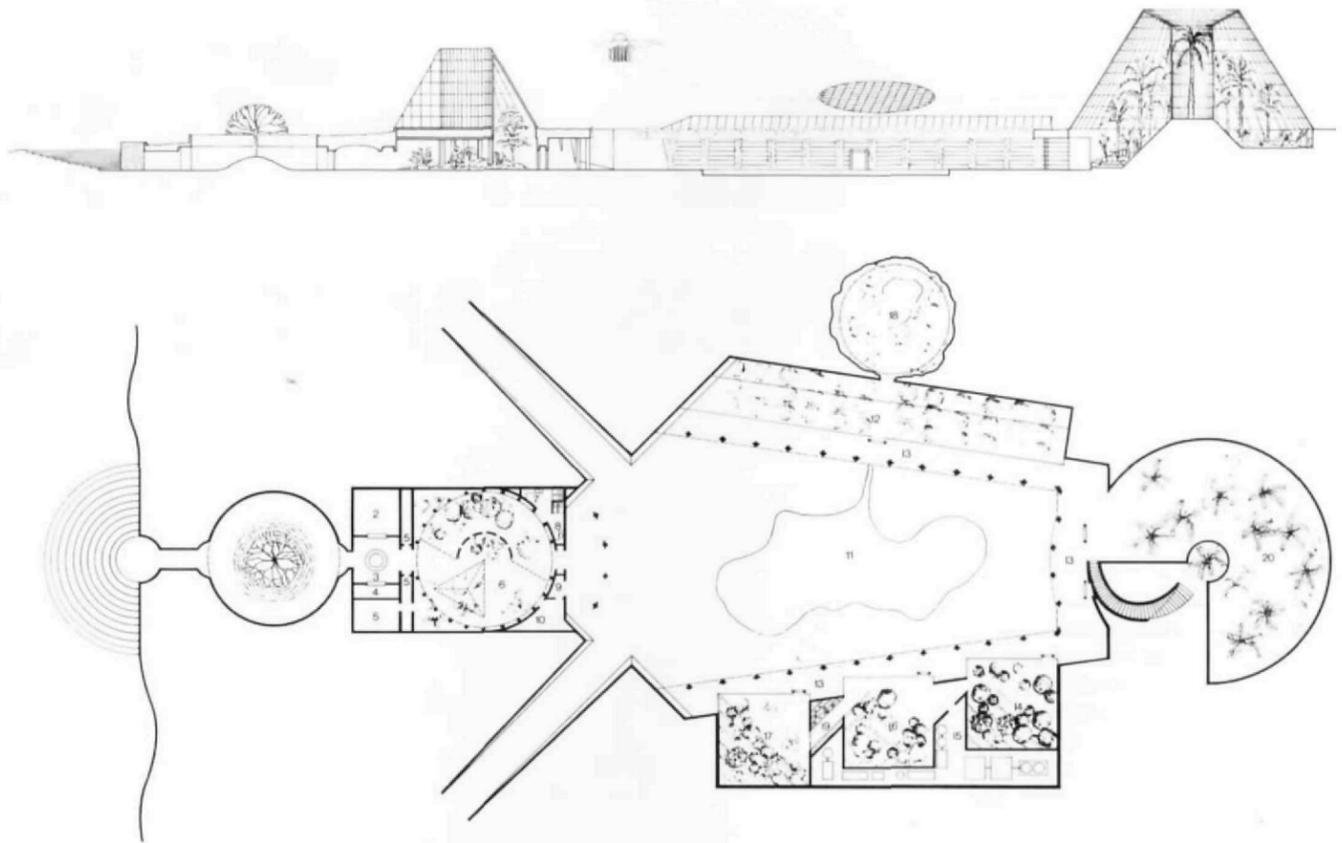
What I've been trying to do in landscape design is to create something that belongs to the present and the future but grows from the past - that has its roots in the psychological side of things. - Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe²

The Moody Gardens complex is an ambitious, multi-phase project situated on a 128-acre site between Scholes Field Airport and Offatts Bayou on the bay side of Galveston Island. It is funded by the Moody Foundation, a philanthropic organization dedicated to creating a lasting gift for the city. Included in the project, which must be self-supporting upon completion, are the Hope Arena, an equestrian therapy center; an animal contact facility; The Garden of Life, a contemplative, allegorical garden by the Houston-based firm, Smith-Locke-Asakura; the Tropical Biome, a one-acre greenhouse that will stand 120-foot tall and house a variety of tropical plants; and several commercial ventures: a white-sand beach, a restaurant, and a 3-D theater. While Jellicoe's gardens are but one phase of the development and will not be completed until after the year 2000, they are clearly the centerpiece of the complex and represent the culmination of the exceptional career of this 87-year-old British architect, landscape architect, and author.

In order to visualize the whole of these huge gardens completed, imagine you are arriving by flying into nearby Scholes Field: in the first blurry view of the land, a green oasis appears against the Galveston grid. Coming in closer, a smaller grid emerges from the oasis and several strange triangles seem to be floating on the salt marsh, recalling Stonehenge or Easter Island in their mysterious origins. Finally, just before landing, one can make out different



"Project for Moody Gardens: A Landscape Study in Botanical History," Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, architect



Top: Site section, Lucile Halsell Conservatory, 1987, Emilio Ambasz and Associates, architect. Above: Floor plan, Lucile Halsell Conservatory

geometrical patterns within the grid, various garden areas in the oasis, and a wilder landscape set apart by a stony ridge. A waterway threading through the site unites the parts like the Grand Canal links Venetian neighborhoods.

A walk through the gardens begins with a campus of display pavilions and greenhouses by BIOS of Seattle, a firm specializing in exhibition design for zoos, aquariums, and natural science museums. One then proceeds chronologically through a controlled progression of historical gardens beginning with Eden. A series of ordered parterres representing the major classical cultures leads to a canal which delineates the beginning of the romantic English landscape. The terrifying forces of nature soon appear in the form of a serpentine "magic mountain," which acts, like the Himalayas, as a great divide. The journey ends on the other side in Japanese and Chinese gardens and the rugged wilderness of the Far East – a dense cover that conceals a giant Buddha until the final climactic moment. It is here, in this uncivilized, irrational wild, that one reaches the antithesis of the first grid of classical gardens: One has passed from the rational realm into the realm of the subconscious – from truth to beauty and into the sublime.

It is a curious path from the harsh site, which resembles more a salt marsh than Eden, to this epic tale of man's cultural history. Jellicoe's first scheme was described as a "sort of primordial soup working its way towards a rational grid"³ intended to resolve the conflict presented by the raw Galveston Bay tidelands next door to the technological network of the airport. According to Moody Foundation Director of Horticulture Peter Atkins, Sir Geoffrey's initial idea was a true botanical garden in which plants were to be more important than man. The third of his projects based on the great Roman landscape poets, the Moody Gardens was to be an interpretation of Lucretius's "De Rerum Natura" ("On the Nature of Things"), which places man as just another small incident in the creation of the world. However, because of the need to actively attract paying visitors, Atkins and the foundation felt that human experience should play a more leading role. While some of the original abstraction is still evident, the final scheme has become a fairly literal translation of Jellicoe's seminal book, *The Landscape of Man*, into an actual experience.

The primary intention of the Jellicoe garden, to make visible the dualities of man and nature, cosmos and chaos, became sublimated to the matter of entertaining visitors while teaching them something about history. In attempting to reconcile these contradictory requirements of the client with his own metaphysical goals, Jellicoe seems to be struggling to avoid "amusement-park syndrome" and the stigma of insignificance of places like Disneyland. Instead, he hopes to evoke a strong response to the deeper meaning of the landscape by creating real encounters with representational gardens.

Nonetheless, the thought of either a heroic march or an amusing boat ride through epochs of sequentially ordered gardens complete with historically accurate detail poses a tremendous challenge to the clarity of Sir Geoffrey's original concept. No matter how easily one follows the narrative from a well-proportioned Gothic bridge to a sensual Italian Baroque grotto, the contents, like the artifacts in a museum, are always seen out of context. For an informed observer, the rhetoric of replication may provide an explicit link with ideas manifested in gardens of the past, but it will remain to be seen whether this museum can really come alive for a visitor who has no vital relationship to the time or place of the specimens.

The Halsell Conservatory

There are architects now engaged in recovery. I am interested in discovery. – Emilio Ambasz⁴

Like the typical botanical garden, the conservatory has a simply stated program: to provide an environment which maintains conditions necessary for plants to survive while providing visitors with a delightful and educational experience. If the Moody Gardens is atypical in the complex web of imperatives directing its program, the Halsell Conservatory, by contrast, calls for only the basic requirements. Emilio Ambasz, however, has never been content to work solely within the practical realm. The Argentine-born architect is well known internationally for a series of minimalist, illusionary projects which often juxtapose earthworks with architecture in surreal compositions. In this, his first major commission other than interiors to be built, Ambasz, like Jellicoe, attempts to introduce something beyond the obvious.

The Lucile Halsell Conservatory is the latest addition to the 33-acre San Antonio Botanical Gardens which opened to the public in 1980. It, too, was made possible by the initial gift of a philanthropic organization, The Ewing Halsell Foundation, supplemented by additional public and private funds. Constructed on the site of an old water works and reservoir, the complex includes formal gardens, a Native Texas Area and the South Central Xeriscape, a water conservation demonstration landscape.

The 90,000-square-foot conservatory is located in one corner of the botanical gardens adjacent to a modest residential neighborhood. This position suggests, in a way similar to the Moody Gardens site, the opposing forces of nature and civilization and the challenge of responding to the two. While Ambasz's design does take on this debate, he treats it abstractly, isolating his design from the context, as if this place sprang up, fully grown, out of an empty dream landscape. With no recognition of the conditions which exist just a few feet away, he presents models and drawings of a group of artifacts, half-buried, like enigmatic ruins of an ancient city miraculously appearing in a vast and forgotten field.

Central to the scheme in both plan and section is the excavated court which serves to organize the various display rooms much like the traditional

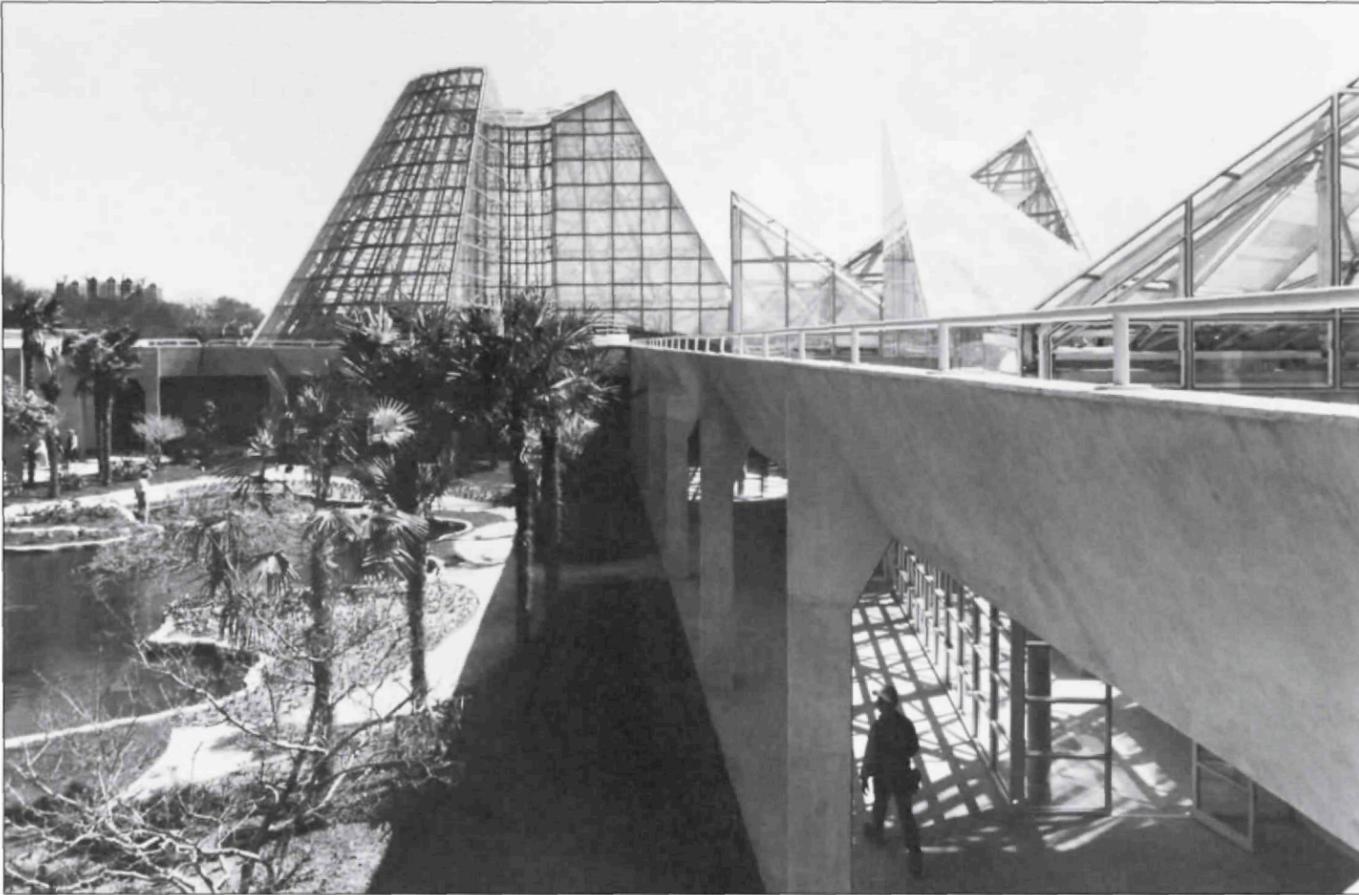
Southwestern hacienda. The court satisfies what Ambasz believes to be an eternal desire to "have the roof disappear to reveal a benign sky where it is always sunny, delightful, and sensually pleasant."⁵ With its still pond, orangery, and vine-covered peristyle, this sunken cloister is the heart of the garden, the place where "the roots are reconciled with the clouds."⁶

The rooms of the conservatory surround the cloister, each room nestled into bermed mounds of earth and covered with shimmering prismatic glass roofs on aluminum space-frames. On the most fundamental level, each of these environments provides a window into another culture via its climate, with displays ranging from desert to tropics to alpine meadow. The austere juxtaposition of the high-tech roofs with the cave-like rooms below speaks metaphorically of the fundamental dualities of Arcadia and Utopia, the primacy of the earth upon which man imposes a technical artifice.

The extremes in this series of "little theaters" are the Palm Room and the Fern Room, the highest conical glass roof spiraling skywards and the deepest excavation into the earth. Additional contrast between light and order on the one hand, and the misty, nebulous, and out-of-focus quality on the other, once again expound upon the theme of man versus nature. These stark, absolute contrasts, like a relentless argument, remain in one's memory – not the details of the architecture or the specifics of the plantings.

In moving through the retaining wall that constitutes the main façade, one passes through a small entry court into the cloistered courtyard, experiencing the same hierarchical arrangement encountered in a Latin-cross church. A look at the plan, however, reveals a strange figure. Rather than the perfectly symmetrical body expected in a cathedral, a representation of the body of Christ and the City of God is merely implied here, not literally but metaphorically. There is an unequal number of appendages; the belly and the head are of unknown extraction – surely not the stuff of a classical body. Yet somehow this surreal recombination of unfamiliar parts speaks as powerfully to these strange times as the cathedral spoke to times past.

Inside the nave of this "church," one can move directly through the body almost on



Paul Hester, Houston

View of Central Court and Palm Room skylight from southwest, Lucile Halsell Conservatory

axis from entry to apse; or wander instead through a series of side chapels. The unforced passage and multiple readings contrast sharply with Jellicoe's systematic, chronological narrative. In his "museum," the visitor is directed to experience history in the proper order.

Above all, the essence of this garden is that it is a living museum. – Peter Atkins⁷

I see the conservatory as a series of little theaters of climate and culture with the civilizing effect of cathedrals. – Emilio Ambasz⁸

In "The Writing on the Wall," Anthony Vidler invokes Victor Hugo, lamenting the death of an "architecture that speaks" at the hand of the printed book.⁹ If, as he says, "Nostalgia for lost meaning... has marked the more tragic visions of the state of architecture in modern times," then both Jellicoe and Ambasz are surely searching for a new form of signification as a way out of the modern/postmodern dilemma. The difference in the two gardens is the result of the designers' extremely divergent points of view: where Jellicoe attempts to reveal the secrets of historical gardens through a literal replication of select examples, Ambasz seeks a metaphorical representation of the timeless dialogue between man and nature.

Although the mimetic language of the Moody Gardens is very explicit in its references, the project's effectiveness well may be hindered by the inherent elitism of such an approach – like hieroglyphics, the meaning in these precise images is most accessible to those with prior knowledge of the history of landscape design and architecture. Furthermore, as Adorno has noted, the idea of a "living museum" is contradictory, for museums have a connotation with mausoleums; places where memory is preserved by housing the revered, but dead, objects of the past.¹⁰ The Halsell Conservatory has a more subtle, implicit tie to the past. Its archaic language of contrasts – light/dark, open/closed, up/down – is universally meaningful, if not clearly traceable to any specific historical or aesthetic origin. In his "garden cathedral," Ambasz allows just enough ambiguity for each listener to hear a bit of what he wants to hear. Like a good teacher, the architect has masked the lesson in a story that reveals its points in many combinations, in any order, thus allowing the garden to continually renew its power of expression. ■



Cactus Conservatory, Lucile Halsell Conservatory

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Notes

- 1 E.M. Farrelly, "The Triumph of Jellicoe," *The Architectural Review*, September 1985.
- 2 Helen Buttery, "Geoffrey Jellicoe: Designs For All Seasons," *Designer's Journal*, January 1986.
- 3 Interview with Peter Atkins, 5 October 1987.
- 4 Phillip Smith, "A Millenarian Hope: The Architecture of Emilio Ambasz," *Harvard Architectural Review*, vol. 5.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Emilio Ambasz, "Glass Houses For People and Plants," a symposium sponsored by the Ewing Halsell Foundation, San Antonio, 15 June 1987.
- 7 Edwina Krohn, "The Island Spirit at Moody Gardens."
- 8 Ibid., 4 and 6.
- 9 Anthony Vidler, "The Language of the Monuments," *Oppositions*, Spring 1979. For another, more explanatory discussion of rhetorical architecture, see Judith Wolin, "The Rhetorical Question," *VIA* 8.
- 10 Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, 1981.



View up southwest entry ramp towards residences on Pinckney Street, Lucile Halsell Conservatory