The Portland Building, 1980-82
Photo: Proto Acme Photo
At a time when American architecture, so long dominated by blandly functional variations on the basic Modernist grid, has begun once again to assume a certain artistic prestige and to excite public attention and polemic, the work of Michael Graves stands squarely in the eye of the "Post-Modern" storm. Touted by Paul Goldberger, architectural critic of The New York Times, as "perhaps the only architect practicing today who has managed to devise an essentially new style—to create buildings that really do not look like anyone else's and seem to speak with a new voice," Graves' architecture has been also labeled "dangerous" by Wolf von Eckardt of Time. And mean-spirited colleagues at the national meetings of the American Institute of Architects in 1983 sported "I don't dig Graves" buttons in an unprecedented protest against the AIA Honor Award to his Portland Building. His work clearly focuses some of the most salient and controversial issues of contemporary architectural debate—issues which challenge not only the architectural establishment but also American culture in general. Yet it remains at the same time intensely personal and beguiling, resisting easy classification.

The reductivist Modern esthetic of structural explicitness and mechanical efficiency (not to mention per-square-foot economy) was seriously called into question as early as 1966 when Robert Venturi (architect of the Hartford Stage Company building, 1971) impudently countered the venerable Mies van der Rohe's parsimonious "Less is more" with his own "Less is a bore!" in the "gentle manifesto" calling for Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (published under the aegis of the Museum of Modern Art which had, in the 1930s, introduced the International Style to America.) Importantly, the illustrations in Venturi's Post-Modern plea for an architecture of greater vitality were culled from the very architectural history that the Modern movement had rejected in its revolutionary tabula rasa purism of the 1920s. And, although Venturi and his partner Denise Scott-Brown would soon turn to vernacular and popular sources in their quest for an accessible and culturally relevant architectural language, this important validation of historical example opened the way for a younger generation of architects—Michael Graves among them—who were themselves seeking to test the constricted boundaries of architectural possibility.

In the 1970s, Graves was considered one of the "New York Five" along with Peter Eisenman, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk, and Richard Meier (architect of the Hartford Seminary building, 1979; see Richard Meier/MATRIX 58). Sharing with them an enthusiasm for the early work of Le Corbusier, whose formal vocabulary he took as a starting point, Graves produced in these early years an architecture of complicated spatial articulation and planar overlays in witty dialogue with the Corbusian grid—an intellectual architecture of semiotic dislocation, fully accessible only to the initiate few. It was only in 1980, with his brazenly classical design for the municipal office building in Portland, Oregon, that Michael Graves' architecture began deliberately to communicate to a broader audience. The strong reactions to its message were
testimony not only to its controversial content but also to the newly evocative resonance of the language itself.

Michael Graves' "figurative architecture" (his term) of the 1980s employs a symbolic code of suggestive geometric forms which are combined like words in literature, making reference to architecture of the past, to the human body, and to nature. Alluding more to evocative archetypes than to specific historic sources, Graves' language is one of poetry, calling forth both personal and cultural memories. Whether we read the image of a rectangular block capped by a triangular gable which recurs so often in his projects as a "primitive hut," a classical temple, a child's rendition of "house," or even some real estate once held on Boardwalk or Park Place, it is bound to call up associations of shelter, even of home.

The "honest" expression of structural and mechanical "truths," which for the Modern Movement assumed the dimensions of moral imperative, is no longer of primary importance. To the contrary. It is instead the representational appearance of structure that counts. Thus we often find emblematic emphasis placed upon exaggerated images of support (as with the braced post-and-beam members at Liberty State Park) which do not necessarily perform a wholly structural role. It is perfectly valid, even desirable, in Graves' architectural "figuration" to conceal the nature of the (often quite humble) structural materials under a veneer of incised paint or stucco which will evoke a history of masonry substance replete with rich associations. Such poetic license is guaranteed to raise the Modernist's hackles.
Where Modern architecture—with its "curtain walls" and "glass skins"—tends not to differentiate between inside/outside, or window, doorway and wall, Michael Graves sees clear and separate definition of such elements as key to the regeneration of architectural language and to the restoration of ritual significance to such cultural activities as entrance, gathering, viewing and procession. Thus windows in Graves' buildings are iconically square, bounded by wall plane, and seemingly underscaled (though quite often an indication of human scale within a monumental building, as at Portland.) They represent both the concept of "window" and the ritual of viewing as each opening maintains its own discrete identity and each view to the outside is referentially framed by the enclosure. Likewise, the monumental columns, piers, keystones and gables that dramatically articulate the entrances to his buildings, make a ritual "event" of the passage from outside in.

Graves' ideas about the re-formation of architecture center on his desire to shape settings for human activity where a sense of dignity and of place can prevail. He engages the viewer in empathetic identification by giving his buildings feet, bodies and heads, like the base, shaft and capital of the classical column, often using subtle color coding to allude to a ground to sky progression.

Inside, this analogy continues in the clear differentiation between floor, wall and ceiling—distinctions marked by color changes within the elegantly somber range of mauves, terra-cottas and the blues that have become Graves' signature.

With so much concern for rep-
representation and communication, one might well expect the experience of these "representational" buildings to be that of a sequence of bulletin boards, conceptually challenging, but sensually unexhilarating. But here, once again, Graves' humanist vision has taken command to re-form our ideas about interior space after decades of Modernist free-flowing, space-frame flexibility. Seeing enclosure as crucial to a sense of place, he has reintroduced the clearly delimited, human scale "room" which was lost as an avant-garde design concept with Frank Lloyd Wright's celebrated "destruction of the box" some 75 years ago. In distributing these rooms, he once again alludes to historical precedent, introducing sequence types based upon basilican, monastic, Roman villa and "Beaux Arts grand-style" plans, all of them utilizing axial alignment and the separate articulation of major and ancillary spaces.

In keeping with a general concern for context in Post-Modern architecture, Graves' buildings are meant to engage in dialogue with their environs. By continuing the rhythms set up by significant adjacent buildings (as in the grand colonnades of the Portland facade) or maintaining a continuous street facade (as in the plan for Stamford which would wrap and conceal unsightly parking lots), Graves inserts a sense of order, however fragmentary, into a history of unchecked development. In landscape settings, Graves intends his classically derived forms to recall their archetypal origins in nature. Michael Graves draws incessantly, filling small sketchbooks with chubby, cartoon-like "referential sketches" in ink of buildings seen on trav-
els, in books, etc., all filtered through his very personal, sometimes quirky, comic, vision. These serve as the raw material for studies related to specific projects which are also first jotted in the sketchbooks. The process then moves to a series of "preliminary sketches" in pencil and colored pencil on the yellow tracing paper that has become something of a Graves trademark. In the case of an important commission such as Portland, hundreds of these softly shaded, often free-hand, drawings will be produced, one on top of another, to study changing formal and color relationships. The third sort of drawing shown here is the more carefully ruled and delicately modulated final drawing which presents the finished design proposal. That changes can still occur will be easily observed by comparing the elevations of the Environmental Education Center with the photographs of the finished building, or the Portland model with the building as constructed, its flambouyant garlands and roof-top village suppressed by Modernist protest.

Michael Graves was born in Indianapolis in 1934. He received his architectural training at the University of Cincinnati and at Harvard University. In 1960 he won the Prix de Rome and studied at the American Academy in Rome. Graves is Schirmer Professor of Architecture at Princeton University where he has taught since 1962. He is currently designing a major addition to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Judith C. Rohrer
Guest Curator
Hartford, Connecticut

PLEASE NOTE:
Michael Graves will be giving a MATRIX Lecture at the Athenaeum, in the Avery Theatre, on Sunday, September 30, 1984 at 5 p.m. The event is free and the public is cordially invited.

The same day the Athenaeum will open twenty extensively refurbished galleries of American art.

On Sunday, November 4, at 2 p.m. and on Friday, November 9 at noon, Guest Curator, Dr. Judith Rohrer, will talk informally on Michael Graves in the MATRIX Gallery.
Works in MATRIX:
Project dates represent the dates of commission. Those works by Michael Graves' hand are designated by "(MG)."

The Portland Building, Portland, Oregon, 1980 (completed 1982).
Reproduction of composite referential sketches (MG).
Three facade studies and one penthouse study, each pencil and colored pencil on yellow tracing paper (all MG).
Model: cardboard, paper, plastic and paint.

Environmental Education Center, Liberty State Park, Jersey City, New Jersey, 1980 (completed 1983).
Reproductions of windmill studies, and bird's-eye view of harbor (MG).
Preliminary entrance elevation, entrance elevation and roadway elevation, each pencil and colored pencil on yellow tracing paper (MG).
Plan elevation and site elevation, both ink on paper.
Two sections, both ink and colored pencil on paper.
Model: cardboard, wood, paper and paint.

Ohio State University Visual Arts Center, Columbus, Ohio, 1983 (competition entry).
Reproductions of composite sketches (MG), first floor plan, and longitudinal section.
Site plan, ink and colored pencil on paper.
View from Seventeenth Ave., ink on paper.
Seventeenth Ave. entrance, Seventeenth Ave. elevation, High St. elevation study and Fine Arts Library elevation study, each pencil and colored pencil on yellow tracing paper (all MG).
Model: cardboard, paper, plastic, paint.

Reproductions of six pages of sketches (MG).
Preliminary south elevation and court elevation, both pencil and colored pencil on yellow tracing paper (both MG).
House, west elevation and studio, north elevation, both pencil and colored pencil on yellow tracing paper (both MG).
Courtyard drawing, pencil and colored pencil on tracing paper (MG).
Two sections and two floor plans, each ink on paper.
Model: cardboard, paper and paint.

Reproductions of four floor plans and one summary plan.
Five views: from Washington Blvd., office gallery, Municipal Building from pedestrian passage, Municipal Building from Washington Blvd., and office buildings from Summer St., each pencil on yellow tracing paper.
Site plan, pencil and colored pencil on paper.
Municipal Building from Washington Blvd., and office building, Summer St. elevation, both pencil and colored pencil on yellow tracing paper (both MG)
Model: cardboard, wood, paper and paint.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Max Protetch Gallery, NYC '79, '80, '83; Portland, Oregon AIA
Chapter Michael Graves: Two
Houses '79; University of Mary-
land, School of Architecture
Michael Graves: Sketchbooks
'80; University Galleries, UCLA
Michael Graves: Works in the
West '81; Contemporary Arts
Center, Cincinnati, OH '81;
Rice University Gallery, Hous-
ton, TX Michael Graves: Three
Projects '82; Institute for Ar-
chitecture and Urban Studies,
NYC The Portland Building '82;
G.A. Gallery, Tokyo
Esquisses
for 5 Houses '84.

Selected group exhibitions:
The Cooper-Hewitt Museum, NYC
Two Hundred Years of American
Architectural Drawing '77; Tra-
jan's Markets, Rome Roma Inter-
rotta '78; Museum of Modern
Art, NYC Buildings for Best
Products '79; XL Venice Bien-
nial '80, Architecture Section:
Strada Novissima; Smith College
Art Museum, Northampton, MA
Speaking a New Classicism:
American Architecture Now '81;
Whitney Museum of American Art,
NYC New American Art Museums
'82; Hudson River Museum, NYC
Ornamentalism '83; Leo Castelli
Gallery, NYC Follies: Architec-
ture for the Late-Twentieth
Century Landscape '83;
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