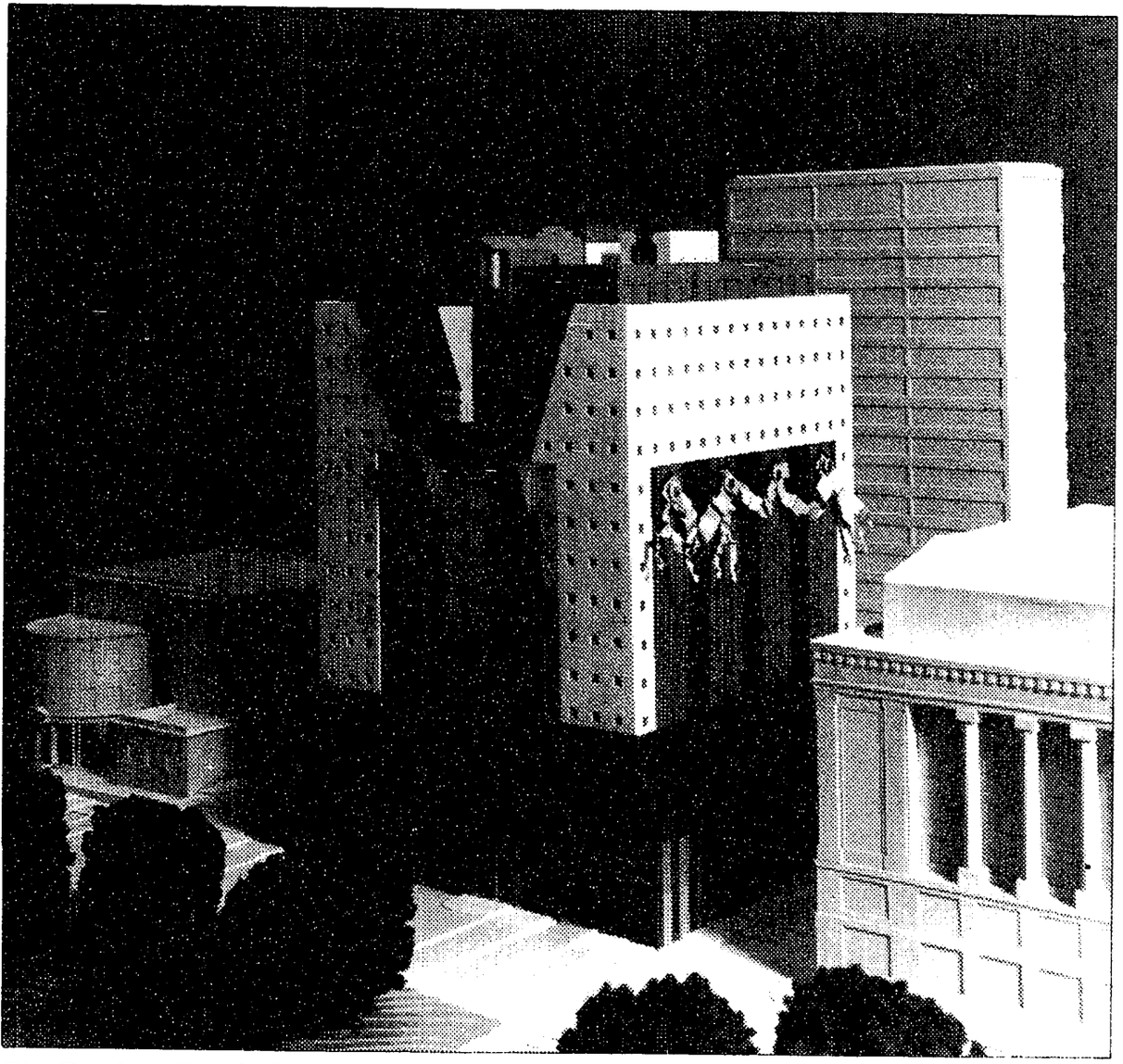

The Portland Public Office Building designed by Michael Graves—"the post-modern building of the year"

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Boom in Bigness Goes On

This is the year in which schizophrenia took over officially in architecture. The event of the year may have been a formal confrontation at the Harvard Club in early December between the high practitioners of modernism, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, whose prestige skyscrapers proclaim the esthetic of money, function and power in every major American city, and the high priests of post-modernism, represented by Robert Stern, Michael Graves, Jorge Silvetti and Steven Peterson, who build a little and write and talk a lot about why firms like S.O.M. are passé.

The debate was refereed by the editors of the Harvard Architecture Review, an earnest, high-culture publication put out by students of the Graduate School of Design that gives a lot of space to this sort of thing. But the truly remarkable feature of the meeting was that S.O.M. asked for it, in a "What are we doing wrong?" spirit, which might be freely translated as what do you guys know that we don't know. "Practice" and "polemic" lined up on opposite sides of the table. S.O.M. was told that the austere glass box is out and decoration, color and historical allusion are in. The ultimate putdown was delivered: Modern is a bore.

That message may be clear at Harvard and carried as far as Japanese architectural journals, but it hasn't exactly hit the streets of New York. The building of the year is the new, New York skyscraper, a bigger-than-ever model produced by the current construction boom and Byzantine manipulations of the zoning law. These superbuildings are being designed in multiples by such establishment modern architects as I.M. Pei and Edward L. Barnes. That is an absolutely unprecedented phenomenon in New York, where the developers' explicit preference has been for standard plans that maximize profit and minimize design. But, alas, it is not the raising of standards as much as the raising of roofs that is involved. It would be a slow developer, indeed, who did not see "star names" and "better designs" as useful negotiating tools in the game of zoning-bending being played with the City Planning Commission, or who would fail to recognize the profitability of prestige in a high-cost market.

In some cases, the old architectural establishment is also the new architectural establishment, which only compounds that schizophrenic feeling. The 1980 prize for having it both ways goes to the firm of Philip Johnson and John Burgee, now dressing the big, basic, corporate tower in post-modernist, historical-allusionist clothing — working, one might say, both sides of the establishment street. Or rather, uptown and downtown. Their answer to the topless towers of New York are Madison Avenue Baroque for A.T.& T. and crenellated battlements, masonry division, on Nassau Street. (The glass ones are in Pittsburgh.)

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For the real post-modern building of the year and the post-modern architect of the year, one must go to Oregon and Michael Graves's competition-winning design for the Portland Public Office Building. Once seen, this is not an easy building to forget. With construction proceeding rapidly, it could become the first post-modern monument.

Any office building, public or private, short or tall, is a box, but the admirers of this one say that it is a box with a difference. (The design also has its detractors but they are not very original; they call it a "jukebox" or a "giant mausoleum.") This is a 10-story box on a two-story base, wrapped in Graves's familiar, chromatic imagery. Huge pilasters of more Deco than classical style rise seven stories, topped by a five-story, spreading keystone form and giant bracket in Pompeian reds and greens. An overall pattern of square windows makes the wall look like a flat, punched screen.

In post-modernism, form follows function far less than structure follows art, but since this is architecture, one assumes a reasonable relationship between the two. The structural logic here was that this complicated facade with its perforated surface was to be treated as a screen wall, with a major part of the load carried by an interior core. When the client requested a change to a concrete exterior wall, this logic was lost. The light screen wall became a heavier, bearing wall, virtually turning the construction inside out, while the facade continued to deliver its original visual signals. Since irony is a self-proclaimed hallmark of post-modern-

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ism, this might get the complex-and-contradictory prize of the year. But the controversy about the building and Graves's insistence on an almost druid-like significance for every element of the design has obscured the fact that this is a thoughtfully and economically planned structure that beat out its competitors easily. If it promises a surfeit of symbolism, it also proposes some efficient and interesting spaces.

This was a big year for preservation. Although the split between the devotees of new and old buildings continued, with preservationists battling developers pretty much as usual, any old structures that could be profitably converted were turned into profitable, and popular, luxury remodeling jobs. What is new this year are some curious marriages being consummated between the antagonists. New York developer Harry Helmsley became the unexpected preservation hero of the year with the opening of the Palace Hotel and the painstaking restoration of the Villard Houses, which were retained as part of the new hotel after a lengthy battle to save them. To say that the Palace wouldn't be more than standard posh without the McKim, Mead and White landmark building is to belabor the obvious; but to Harry and Leona Helmsley must go the credit for making the obvious unmistakably opulent. The Whitelaw Reid section of the Villard Houses has been returned to burnished perfection, and the city, the hotel, and the Helmsleys, are the richer for it.

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Downtown, the South Street Seaport has sold its soul (but saved its museum) for a classy mess of pottage in the form of a sleek marketing scheme that will pay the Seaport's way from now on but sacrifice the last of its 19th-century character to the commercial exigencies of a tourist and shopping center. Whether the Seaport was seducer or seducee in this deal is moot. And in midtown, St. Bartholomew's is planning to dispose of its community house and garden to one of the developers currently wooing the church with the siren song of "harmonious and complementary development" along with a great deal of money. The words and music are terribly familiar.

Since it is the nature of the art of architecture to be equally at home in the street or the museum, this year also saw some notable museological events. The new $18-million American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum opened in May, six times the size of the old one and with a totally reinstalled collection. The handsome garden court, by the architects of the museum's expansion program, Kevin Roche/John Dinkeloo Associates, has become a new focus of the building, with 19th-century marble slaves and naiads and architectural artifacts never displayed before.

But the exhibition of the year was held in Paris last spring — a major retrospective of the many-faceted work of the 19th-century French architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. The first show of this size and importance devoted exclusively to an architect, it filled three floors of the Grand Palais under the auspices of the French National Museums and drew almost as many visitors as the Monet show next door. The impressive display went a long way toward rehabilitating the reputation of the Victorian tastemaker and restorer of medieval monuments whom the 20th century has called Viollet-le-Spoiler. Exquisite watercolors, impeccably detailed drawings and rich furnishings revealed a sensitive eye for the beauty of buildings and their settings. No schizophrenia there at all. ■