ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Unified New Language of Design

The exhibition of work by Michael Graves that will be at the Max Protetch Gallery (37 West 57th Street) through June 15 is impressive for several reasons: It is a 15-year record of the the development of a most extraordinary and provocative kind of architectural talent; it documents some of the most significant changes going on in the art of architecture today; and it presents what surely must rank among the most delicately assured and beautiful drawings to be seen in or out of the field of architectural design.

Michael Graves is a 44-year-old architect who is part of a loosely allied group of younger practitioners of quite wide diversity who have become known as the post-modernist school. He has built some houses and parts of houses in New Jersey and Indiana (he came from Indianapolis by way of Harvard and is currently based in Princeton), is about to build some larger and more important houses, and will begin construction soon on the Fargo-Moorehead Cultural Center that will join North Dakota and Minnesota in a single structure — a remarkable design that will span the Red River and shatter a lot of ideas about what such a building, or any building, should be like.

Because of his limited production to date, his ideas are most effectively exposed in this exhibition, which consists of fully developed schemes from intimate early sketches to detailed renderings and models, plus a selection of photographs of completed work, a sampling of sketchbooks, and the mural-size abstract paintings that he executes both for his buildings and for his own continuing exploration of color and form.

Graves was a painter before he was an architect, and his painting and architecture both stand on their own merits. But one of the distinctive characteristics of this work is that the two arts partake of each other's nature in a way that adds a dimension to each that neither would have had without such interaction. This is, in effect, a hybrid art, pushing new frontiers.

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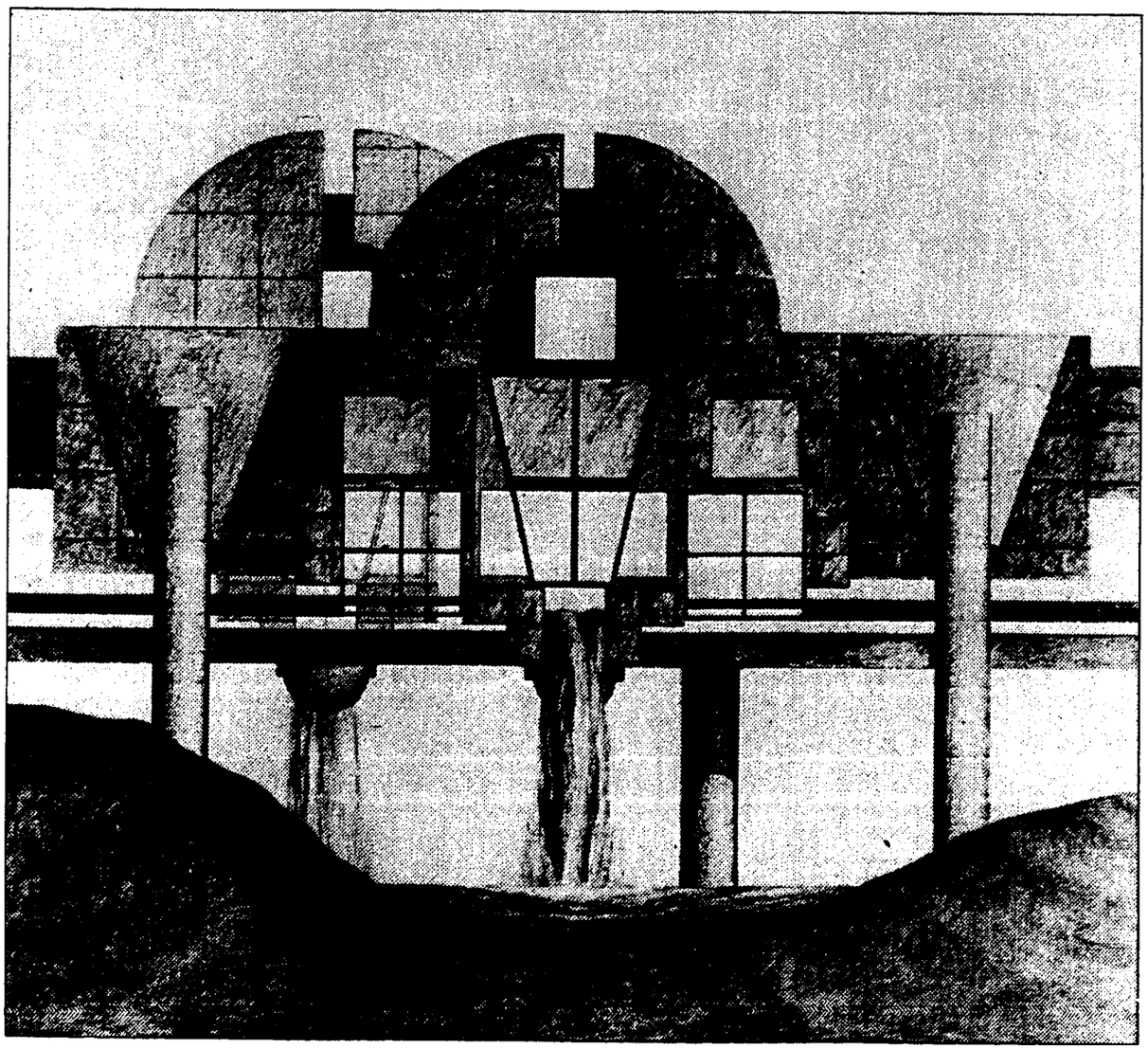
It is the kind of work that sends the viewer away with the sense that some kind of breakthrough is being made, and that the art of architecture has been moved a step farther along its creative and historical path. A departure of this sort, arrived at gradually over 15 years in Graves's case, inevitably involves real risks. It can lead to a dramatic expansion of design possibilities or an overemphasis on surface effects. And it will shock and puzzle those now grown comfortable with the "tradition" of modernism. Radical change that readjusts vision and meaning this deeply ruptures easy understanding.

Graves's architecture goes considerably beyond those borrowings from the past that are being thrown around like so much loose change today for a "historicism" that is no more than caricature. He is slowly, painstakingly and lovingly inventing a different language of form and meaning, taking us into a realm of architecture where we have not been before. He has simply left the highly publicized groupings of post-modernism behind.

A Michael Graves facade may look like a pastiche of building parts, or a kind of jigsaw of trompe l'oeil materials and historical references. But traditional elements are never directly copied; they are filtered through the interpretations and reinterpretations of centuries of changing vision and culture, to be recombined in an intensely personal and abstract way. They can be wrenched out of context, like the removal of the keystone of an arch from the entrance of a house, to have the form reappear as another part of the structure. These buildings are like films that use flashbacks and events seen through many eyes to tell a story of ambiguous and multi-faceted meanings.



Michael Graves's design for the Fargo-Moorhead Cultural Center Bridge

He speaks of his "diaries and sketchbooks of remembered things," of sources that range from antiquity to the International Style. But the details that he records are treated more as inspirational archetypes; he seeks the essence of walls, doors and rooms, the way in which style and association shapé our sense of being and place.

On the most universal level, this is an architecture that is meant to create perceptions of special relationships between the worlds of man and nature. In Graves's eyes, the windowed interiors of a painting by Mantegna and the ceremonial doors and windows of a Palladio house both reveal the "event" of the opening to the outside world in a very special way — an event that only architecture can properly celebrate.

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Graves's early designs were tortuously preoccupied with the mannerisms of 1920's international modernism. Their thin screen walls lapped and overlapped and were embellished with a geometric fanfare of railings, stairs and balconies. The work was so packed with ideas and effects that its intricacy verged on hysteria. Even so, Graves was

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always in control. Unfortunately, it was just this complexity for its own sake that younger architects chose to copy.

Above all, Graves is a colorist. His sense of color is elegant and subtle and an integral part of his art. Those early "white" houses that were so well publicized were not meant to be left unpainted. Graves uses what he calls "representational" color, keyed to nature and the environment, with base tones in dark green or terra cotta, to suggest ground, or brick, and blue tones above, for sky. The polychromed wall always has a specific set of references.

It is important that all of these references, from color to metaphor and historical recall, serve a larger, unifying idea. Otherwise Graves's work would be no more than disruptive surface embellishment, something it skirts dangerously at times. What keeps it from being "bits and pieces" eclecticism is the esthetic intelligence that digests and transforms the sources into a consistent and unified language of design. Every age has its architectural vocabulary, based on its particular articles of faith. All architects build with such a set of principles, whether they invent them — as Graves does — or inherit them as received wisdom, such as the functional and structural determinism of modernist doctrine. That is how style evolves.

Nothing could better illustrate that development, or the nature of the stylistic differences between modernism and post-modernism, than the case history of the New York town house at 17 East 65th Street. Designed by George Nelson and William Hamby for Sherman Fairchild in 1942, this small building still stands as one of the rare examples of the International Style in this city. The present owner, French & Company, has commissioned Graves to redesign the facade.

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It is the wrong building, unfortunately, for the job; the house should have been declared a landmark long ago. The once-white facade, with its sleek horizontal louvers and glass-walled ground floor, so characteristic of early modern work, is now painted an ugly and unsympathetic red. Graves's design would use a mixture of new and old elements focused on a central column in a mannerist composition manipulated with delicate bravura. But to restore history to architecture and erase history at the same time makes no sense at all.

On a happier note, the more substantial Kalko and Plocek houses are going ahead, and so is the Fargo-Moorhead Cultural Center. The transformation of Graves's subtle and painterly collages of ideas, textures and colors to important three-dimensional buildings is something that one awaits with a mixture of hope and fear.

The drawings are such elegant artifacts in themselves. But something happens in the translation from the picture plane to the real world, and there are executed works that simply do not read the same way as they do on paper; the refined intelligence can turn into something fussy and obscure. Graves's fully developed ideas, as demonstrated in this exhibition, have great subtlety and power, originality and elegance. They must wait to be judged on the basis of at least one completely realized major work. But he has already added to the meaning and language of architecture in a significant way. ■