

So Much Ado about Michael Graves and the Reasons Why

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Abstract

Beginning from the early 1970s till first decade of the 21st century and in fact till now, Michael Graves's persona had induced a profound eternal dialogue. Much before he designed his Portland Building, which gave a final and original voice to the then growing discourse on Postmodernism, and with the installation of the buildings' Portlandia, Grave's influence reverberated among the cult of Avant Garde and the Architecture profession. This study attempts to examine this author - Michael Graves, and to evaluate his work, recall meanings, similarities and contentions within these works and re-discover reasons for his growing influence over the period of his active contributions and architectural essays. It is an analytical review of the works authored by the architect beginning from the Hanselman house in 1967, to the Portland Building in 1980. The study observed that Graves's ambivalence to fictionalize Architecture as well as his surprises with colors is fundamental to his successes.

Keywords: Michael Graves, Portland building, postmodernism, portlandia, Synderman house, Hanselman house.

1.0 Introduction

Beginning from Grave's first recorded commission, the 1967 Hanselman House in Fort Wayne Texas to his Bernacerraf House designed and built in his home town of Princeton; the transitional Synderman House in Fort Wayne Indiana between 1972-1977; the Plocek House in Warren, New Jersey which incidentally was the first complete work that advocated Graves aesthetics synthesis to the much discussed Portland Public Service Building and other works preceding it, such as the Humana Building in Louisville and the Indianapolis Institute of Art Centre, Michael Grave's works have metamorphosed consistently in style an character and

relapsed again. His generally first acclaimed work – Hanselmann and for which he received the American Institute of Architects (AIA) award in 1975, was essentially inspired in form and character from the cubism of Le Corbusier. This building and in fact his Bernacerraf House designed immediately after it simply reinforces the modernist credo although some traces of murals and colors were discovered in their machine-sleek aesthetics. The Sydermann House was critical to the Graves aesthetics evolution and foreshadowed the very crucial and nascent stage of his affections for Postmodernism. It was at this point that the architect began to realize the inherent limitation of the Le Corbusier School of Architecture and sought reinterpretation to a wider public audience than speaking in the private language of the modernist to the elite minds of the Avant Gardes alone. In the word of Michael Graves himself, he argued that this language must imbibe the thematic associations invented by culture for architecture to represent shared aspirations. It is the representation of this aspirations that obsessed and became the ‘wish’ of the postmodern society, and which ultimately gave rise to post modern architecture. In the attempt to reinterpret architecture in this new found credo, Graves deflected completely from previous affiliations with the modernist and gave all his allegiance and energy to seek for new meaning in postmodernism. This opportunity eventually came in April 1979, when the city of Portland held a national design competition for a new city office building at the budget of 22.4 million Dollars. Graves’s initial submission was moderated and with the assistance of Phillip Johnson, who was requested by the Portland officials to consult and monitor process of selection, modified initial designs and re-submitted for the competition. His design was finally selected among the three pre-final cases that bided for the program. The other two includes the Canadian modernist architect, Authur Erikson and Mitchel Guigola. Mitchel Guigola design was precast concrete structure with side walls of reflective glass. The building was completed in August 1982 and generally became an icon of a new social order, giving a recognizable face to postmodernism in the general public. It is against this backdrop that this study attempts to examine the works of Michael Graves and reason why he is important to the postmodernist Architecture.

2. Postmodernism

By the middle of the twentieth century, Europe had already experienced the two World Wars (Artlex, 2023). Indeed, the events that inspired the postmodern movement were the end of World War II, Vietnam War, the Korean War, the Cold War, and the Civil Rights movement (Sylar, n.d.). Then, artists and architects emigrated to New York, which has become the center of the art world, where abstract principles were applied (Artlex, 2023). Within this exodus and coupled with the recent experience, the American society began to see reality as subjective. There was also a burgeoning desire to correct the fall-outs predicating from the wars (Sylar, n.d.). A main protagonist of this, was Michael Graves, who designed several building with the postmodernist ideologies. And one of these is the Portland Building.

Graves's breakthrough in the Portland Building was heralded as the original voice of postmodernism and offered the first mature statement of postmodernist architecture. In a sense, Graves dwelt on the varied and broad possibilities offered by postmodernism to achieve success. Postmodernism has been evaluated as a style that is not necessarily against modernism but a reaction against modernism and employs tools and vocabulary that are abominably detestable to the modernist. It is a less cohesive movement than a style and attitude towards culture, art and society (The Museum of Modern Art, 2023). Inherent in the style, is the lack of any form of linear logistics that typify modernist rules thereby leaving designers to the free choice of gyration, gyrating in their discretionary use of symbols, anthropometrics, historicism, revivalism and abstracting from modernism itself to create original voices. The main characteristics of postmodernism are anti-authoritarianism and the integration of high culture and mass or popular culture, and that of art and everyday life (The Museum of Modern Art, 2023). Postmodernism employs the use of these varied elements to create codes, syntax and languages thus communicating to a wider audience than the rival modernist architecture. Thusly, buildings become fictional and can tell stories.

Graves capitalize on these notions to invent new languages and creative styles that reveal new vocabularies. In the Portland Building, for example, some observed that: (i) the building conveyed a sense of monumentality through Graves's characteristic use of massing and scored stucco that

speciously suggested that the building was constructed from large stone panels, (ii) that the large entry and foyer recalled early twentieth century county houses and halls. Some have in fact observed that the east and west elevation can be seen as a figure standing on two legs and that this reinforces the anthropometric character of the building. In his own words, Graves noted: the design of the building addresses the public nature of both the urban context and the internal program. In order to reinforce the building's associate or mimetic qualities, the facades are organized in a classical three-part division of base, middle or body, and attic or head. The large paired columns on the main facades act as a portal or gate and reinforce one's sense of passage through the building along its main axis from Fourth to Fifth Avenue (figure 1). The columns are tied together



Fig. 1: Showing them Lay-out plan and Fifth Avenue

and embellished by garlands, a classical gesture of welcome, thematically related to the wreath carried by Portlandia- a classically garbed woman (figure 3).

3. The Portland Public Service Building

The Portland Public Service Building with the generic name, Portland Building is a fifteen-storey office building in the urban core of Portland Oregon. It is one of the few design-build American buildings having been designed by Michael Graves and construction was a joint venture

between Pavarini Construction Company of Greenwich Connecticut and Hoffman Construction of Portland. The building occupies a 200 by 200 foot (4000 square feet or 3716.1 meter square) city block. The building is surrounded on all its four sides by fully developed properties which includes the Portland City Hall. The use of color in the Portland Building is both dynamic and surprising especially when compared with the restrained color palette of its surrounding buildings. At the base, the color is bright which symbolizes its mutual inclusiveness with the surroundings and a blue pent house at the top which heralds its harmony with the sky. Despite the regular cubic shape, the building reflects the aura of monumental mass and restlessness; attributes which are as the result of un-relaxed color composition, the over-scaled and highly stylized classical decorative features on the building facades, the use of garlands on the facades, use of pilasters and hammered copper monumental statue.

3.1 Settings

The Portland Building is located in the center of a grid defined by roads and aisle (fig. 2). To the



Fig. 2: Showing Downtown Location of the Portland Building

Multnomah County Courthouse, built in 1912. To her immediate south is the Portland city Hall, a building listed in the National Register of Historic Buildings and dated from 1895. To the east façade is a one-block city park; Chapman Square with Lonsdale Square Park sits on the block next to it across from the Courthouse while Federal park sits to the southeast. The avenue, running

along the buildings west side (the Fifth Avenue) is a major transit corridor with multiple bus lines and a light rail all moving one-way. Directly across this Fifth Avenue is an office tower constructed in 1962. Apart from this locational description, the building itself, is designed according to the classical norm of base, the shaft and the capital with a grand centered entry on the west facade (fig. 3) on which also rest the Portlandia.



Fig. 3: The Portlandia on the west façade.



Fig. 4: Steps clad in bluish green ceramic tiles

Moreover, the building base consists of a full-storey loggia and two successively and proportionally shorter steps, clad in bluish-green ceramic tiles (fig. 4). A very important architectural feature of the building is the multi-storey terracotta pilasters on each of the four facades. On the roof level of the building, a short decorated parapet wall is located to flush with the outside wall. A centrally located geometrical mechanical enclosure is located at the center of the roof but is not visible at street level. Finally, a planter with just sufficient depth is installed on top of the main roof and on top of the mechanical enclosure.

4. Evolution of Graves Designs:

Trends in Graves design from the Hanselmann House to the Benacerraf House, designed at New Jersey (both in 1967), the Synderman House at Fort Wayne Indiana, 1972; the Schulmann House at Princeton, New Jersey 1976; the Plocek House 1977, the Fargo Bridge and the Portland Building at Portland, Oregon 1980. All singularize the evolution in Graves work

skewing from modernism to postmodernism. It is imperative to examine some of the discuss relating to these in the following order:

4.1 Hanselmann House



The House is a family of two adults and four children (fig. 5). Its front elevation consists of metal

Fig. 5: The Hanselmann House

Pipes and frames with the main entrance leading to the main volume of the house located in the center of these frame composition. The rear wall of the house contains the murals which in a sense serve as a prelude to Graves' postmodernist vocabulary. The imagery of the mural captures elements of the house composition in the surrounding landscape.

4.2 Benacerraf House

The addition to the Benacerraf house (fig. 6) - this was the part actually designed by Graves, was intended as a free standing pavilion in a garden and as an extension of the living spaces in the original house. The south façade metaphorically articulates a dialogue between nature and man-made artifact. Details of the exposed metal frames and balustrades recall rationalism but the metaphorical essence skews towards postmodernism



Fig. 6: The Benacerraf House, 1972

4.3 The Snydermann House

The Snydermann House is located in a heavily wooded forty-acre site in Fort Wayne. The plan of the house is composed on four quadrants while the rooms are designed in such a manner as to take maximum advantages of natural daylighting and to establish a progression from the entrance. Throughout the house there is an interaction of opposed elements – flat and curved, interior and exterior, public and private and surprisingly shaep colors. These implies (metaphorically) the interaction between man-made and nature, organic and artificial. The form of the Snydermann house is a sharp departure from previous work which in a sense invoke a fresh statement in Graves personal vocabulary. It is a much bolder attempt at revealing his compromise unlike earlier versions where the compromises were clandestine and on rear walls or left for individual interpretation.



Fig. 7: The Snydermann House showing sharp surprising colors

4.4 Schulman House, 1976

The visual composition of the Schulman house (fig.7) suggests to the curious observer, even *prima facie* a new and distinct vocabulary. In fact, it is the Portland building at its very nascent stages. The building at the front elevation is endowed with a composition of pilasters that was a prelude to the much more monumental pilasters of the Portland Building. The Centre of the building (wherein dwells the entrance frame) is emphasized by a strong symmetricity of the left wing fenestrations and the strongly gridded color frame applied to the garage walls. Next, a terra cotta belt coursing is used to register the idea of the raised ground floor within the house. This is also an omen foretelling the judicious use of the scored terra cotta in the Portland building.



Fig. 8: The Schulman House, 1977

4.5 The Plocek House, 1977

The Plocek house is closest to the Portland Building with uncanny resemblances in the form and the composition of the entrance porch used wittingly to mimic the Portland building (fig. 8). The fenestrations (although sparse) recall the ‘punctuating holes’ of the Portland style. Moreover, the building height (three storeys) is a forerunner of the fifteen storey Portland Building. In fact, it is one of the first times Grave will be experimenting with his new found vocabulary on such number of floors (Karen, 1982).

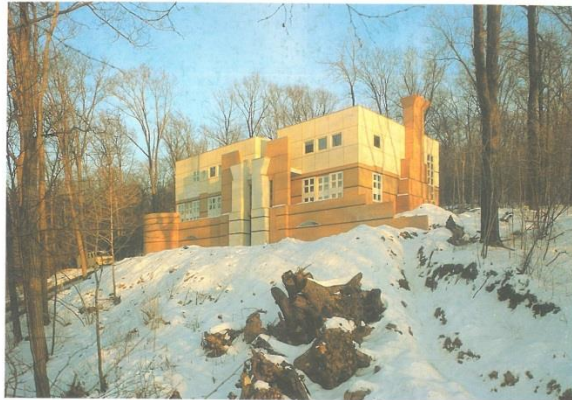
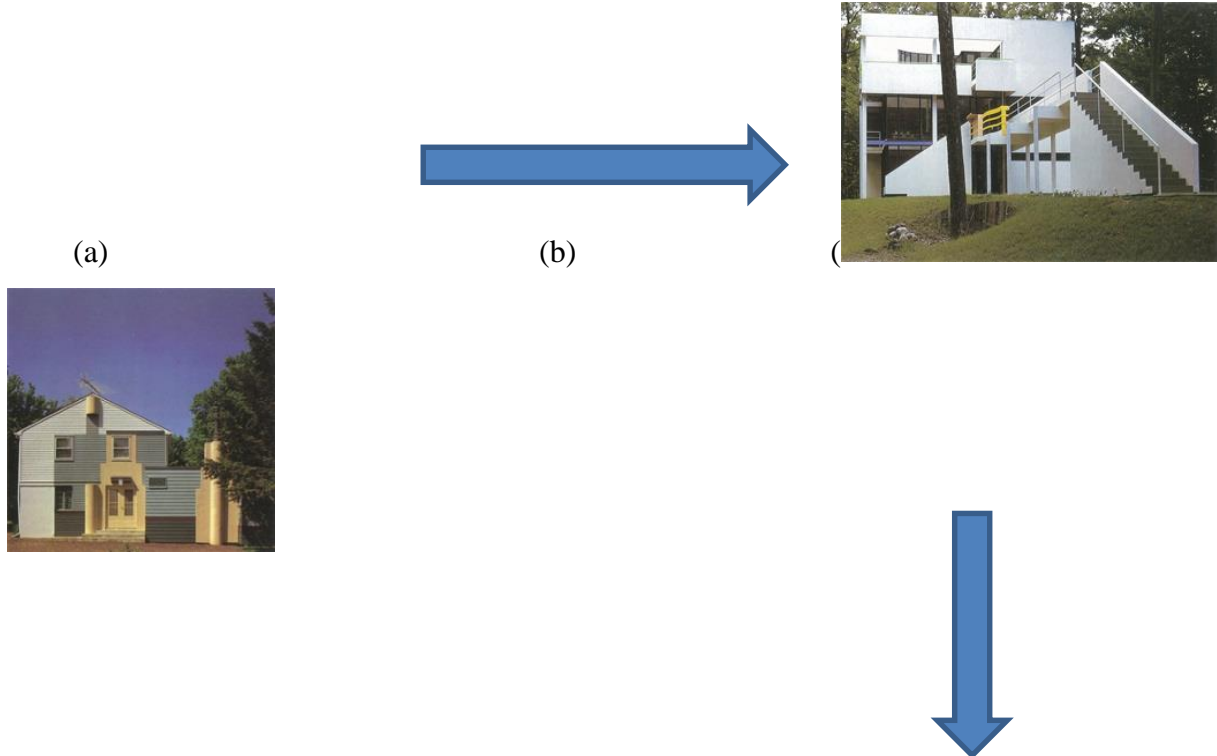


Fig. 9: The Plocek House, 1977

4.6 Their Comparative Analysis

The evolution of Graves ideas metamorphosed gradually from the Hanselman and matured in the Portland Building (a-d) as also revealed in the use of the terracotta, pilasters, the fenestrations as stated earlier. The figure below is a graphical abstract of this metamorphosis.



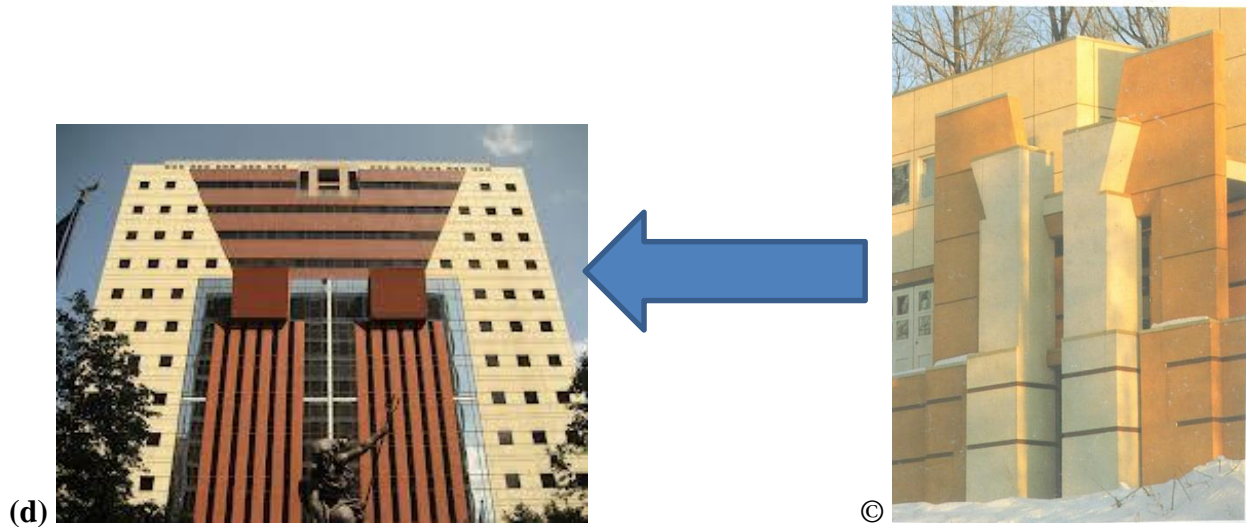


Fig. 10: Comparative views

5. Conclusion.

The Portland Building is the Bauhaus of the postmodernist and it represents the first complete and mature statement of Postmodernism. The ideas that precipitated to the form however, developed with attempts, essays and experimentation over a period of thirteen years (1967-1980). Although earlier works of the inventor of this novel vocabulary (Michael Graves) had always consist of nuances of postmodernism such as the murals in the Hanselmann House, yet these items were hidden and this, in a sense reveals his hypocrisy until at last he was bold enough to reveal his intentions in outward physical and public manifestations as could be seen in the Schulman House and the Plocek Building. As a reward to Graves original voice in American search for a new architectural compositions characterized with clear and lucid architectonics, Graves have received various awards by the AIA and currently rated as a master architect – a status considered as one of the loftiest. All of these makes Graves a central figure in postmodernist Architecture. These and many others lend credence to the reasons why there had been so much ado about Michael Graves.

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