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Aedicular modern: the architecture of Michael Graves

by William H. Jordy

On Graves's design and architecture.

For the public at large, Michael Graves first came to prominence with the considerable hubbub that surrounded his Portland (Oregon) municipal building—first the model, then the completed fifteen-story, blockfilling structure itself. The Portland structure was Graves's first "big" commission to be completed. (The bureaucracy took possession of it in 1982, after more than a decade of well-publicized design activity.) The barest recital of its ingredients calls up issues central to Graves's design. Moreover, given the building's prominence just now, it calls attention to some important aspects of the present situation in architecture as well.

If the description of the Portland building reads more like a list than an amalgam, that is because the design stacks one entity or motif on another, much as a child might make a "building" of architectural blocks. As in much so-called postmodern architecture, the result is visual effects that are intentionally collisive.

The first four floors, containing an arcade around the building at street level, are clad in blue ceramic panels. They step back in three tiers (vaguely reminiscent of the stepping back of New York skyscrapers of the Twenties) to create a base for a chunky, cream-colored, eleven-story near-cube, which is laconically punched by square windows. This dumb wallpaper for the "typical" office building is overwhelmed in the center of each of its elevations by large, contrasting, banner-like fields in browns and reds, which blend with the smoky glass of the windows. On the two principal entrance fronts this banner is emblazoned with an image of a pair of giant pilasters rising to swelling capitals; these support a giant keystone. But it is all stage-flat illusion: alternating vertical bands of brown stone and glass rise within a field of glass (all of seven stories high, nine windows across) to simulate "fluted pilasters" on a colossal scale. These are topped by projecting, dark brown, wedge-shaped blocks—"capitals" waiting to be carved. The "capitals," in turn "support" a red trapezoidal field that rises across several more stories to invoke a gigantic "keystone," anachronistically crossed by horizontal window bands. The flanking walls contain comparable rectangular glass fields, each with a row of four more simulated pilasters. Here the pilasters are buttoned at the top with light blue circles to suggest escutcheons, and all are connected by a series of light blue zigzags meant to suggest a ribboned garland, which calls up classical embellishment. All this architectural rhetoric, then, appears as mere signboard quotation on the surface of the commonplace "modern" office building. In fact, most of the color in this building comes, not from different kinds of materials as it appears at first

sight, but from plasticized paint on ordinary concrete surfaces. Because of the juxtaposition, indeed, the whole building is sensed as a kind of quotation, and all the more because it displays a complete catalogue of the conventional window patterns from which "modern" Main Street has lackadaisically taken its pick: vertical bands and horizontal ribbons, the repetitive dottings of discrete openings, and, finally, the glass wall.

At the top, notched into the "keystone," a belvedere looks out over the city. Above, a floor is set back. On its roof there was to have been an acropolean complex of small, primitivized, peak-roofed buildings, which would have provided a mock village for the city's ceremonial functions—something like a pedestaled piece of Portland itself. Unfortunately, it was scrapped for lack of money, but the model shows us how it was to have looked. The playful, broken form of these miniaturized buildings was to have been reinforced by metal garlands lightly tacked to the side walls and fluttering off them into space—tattered, windblown ornaments suggesting the slightly forlorn gaiety of bunting once the festival is over. More flutter was to have surrounded the huge flying female figure of Portlandia. She was to have been lofted in a swirl of drapery and clouds above the principal entrance, like Bernini's St. Theresa perhaps, or a little like the Prometheus who sails somewhat ponderously over the fountain in the depressed court at Rockefeller Center. Portlandia so bewitched the city that she will in fact take her place on the building once the money can be raised. Her sculptor has decreed, however, that she will be a kneeling maiden (like the White Rock fairy) looking benignly down on her people as they enter to query taxes and water bills.

As the building now stands, it is blunter, more stolid, than it was to have been. All the sobriety was to have been feathered away at the edges with lighthearted abandon, thus completing Graves's affable irony. The irony itself is aimed at a culture less committed than it once was to the functionalist convictions inherited from an early modernism, and ready for monumentality, but still intent on giving first allegiance (and most of its dollars) to the mundane. Graves's heroics are mock-heroics. His fanfare of signs calls architecture to its ancient grandeur, away from the dross of an earlier modernist zeal for the more-or-less bare-bones expression of function and technology. Hence, the charm, both beguiling and problematic, of Graves's work.

Such concern for history is central to the postmodern moment in architecture today, although most of the architects associated with the movement dislike the label. Especially since the 1960s, the study of history has steadily intensified its grip on architectural schools, and the history that is taught there has been conditioned by the allure of color slides: by the theatrical ephemerality and intense color of the illuminated image, by the fragmented simplification of images barely glimpsed in quick succession, by the exhilarating disjointedness inherent in learning by comparison, contrast, and allusion. The shuffle and reshuffle of images offer up endless permutations of the past. Robert Venturi's vastly influential book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), describes the effect. Modeling his own argument on William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Venturi also found seven ways to complicate architecture out of its clarity and simplification and thus to banish the boredom (as the Sixties had come to regard it) of early modernism. He illustrated his first edition with examples from the entire history of architecture, the tiny images laid out in rows, clustered beside the text like slides on a light table.

For Graves, as for many other architects of his generation, Le Corbusier is the starting point. Although one of Le Corbusier's most quoted aphorisms states that "primary forms [of solid geometry] are the beautiful forms because they are easily comprehended," he himself anticipated the current, more complicated modality for design as early as his *Vers une architecture*, now sixty years old and still the single most influential book for twentieth-century architecture. The staccato text (less written than spoken) is accompanied by an array of arresting images, the poor quality of reproduction enhancing their impact as simple shapes freighted with meaning. They are so ordered that the mere turn of the pages produces unsettling juxtapositions, pitting the great architecture of the past against what he considered to be the most conspicuously modern objects of the present.

It is not, however, the later Le Corbusier of the sculptural, *brut* concrete buildings that principally attracts Graves. The overtly heroic monumentality of the late buildings—like the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, the Monastery of La Tourette at Evreux, or the governmental buildings at Chandigarh—was more congenial to an earlier generation of postwar

American architects, like Eero Saarinen, Louis Kahn, and Paul Rudolph. In varying ways these architects saw themselves as possible successors to the great trio of modernist "form-givers": Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe (perhaps also Alvar Aalto). And in this spirit of immanent succession, the architecture of the postwar architects tended toward the big gesture, with the massive, weighty, deliberate sorts of forms that the desire for monumentality often inspires. Witness the giant nodding piers ranged to either side of the hammock-slung roof of Saarinen's Dulles Airport in Washington or the solemn composition and ceremony of Kahn's Salk Biological Research Center in La Jolla, or the brute tower clusters and bridged forms of Rudolph's School of Architecture building at Yale.

By the mid-1960s, however, such muscular "form giving" was slightly passé. For Graves and his generation, designing with finesse, wit, and knowledge was more to the point. So they instinctively turned back to the earlier Le Corbusier of the taut, white boxes, especially to those inexhaustible Stein and Savoye villas, completed between 1927 and 1931 in the Paris suburbs of Garches and Poissy. This turning back was significant: by retreating to the start of the modern movement, Graves and his generation affirmed their penchant for historicizing. And by substantially detaching the beginnings of the modern movement from the modernism that followed, they made early modernism itself assume the aspect of history. The Stein and Savoye villas especially suited this purpose. As early as 1947, Colin Rowe had subjected the Savoye villa to a perceptive analysis, revealing its concealed Palladian qualities, and many other essays on the villas' historical allusions have followed his lead.

Graves was one of the architects whose work appeared in *Five Architects* (1972), a slender volume that won much critical attention when it was published (its introduction, incidentally, was by Colin Rowe). *Five Architects* contained no one point of view; it was instead a cluster of related positions by a group of New York architects who knew and respected one another. All then stood on the threshold of their professional careers, which the book was also meant to advertise. (This it brilliantly succeeded in doing.) The Five, in addition to Graves, were Peter Eisenman, Charles Gwathmey, John Hedjuk, and Richard Meier.

One thing The Five did share was an enthusiasm for the early work of Le Corbusier. They all took a rather formalistic view of Le Corbusier's early work, using its architectural language (which was partially that of early European modernism generally) as their starting points. They focused on the pristine geometry of his thin-skinned boxes, on the proportional systems that gave harmonic order to his buildings, on the frank expression of the supporting skeletal frame, and on the allusions (partly inspired by Le Corbusier, but with Rowe's interpolations) to ancient and Renaissance classicism. Some of the group, and none more than Graves, were also attracted by Le Corbusier's witty introduction of collage allusion into his buildings. Especially important were the fragments that suggested the world of modern technology, like the sheltering marquee over the entrance to the Villa Stein derived from an abstracted cross section of an airplane wing, or the freely curved forms atop the Villa Savoye suggesting the stacks and vents of ocean liners.

The Le Corbusier of The Five, however, was Corbusier complicated. Partly they complicated the master's example by fragmenting his work and its principles into its constituent elements, which could then be separately elaborated. In the neo-Corbusian ambience, for example, skeletal frames often stake out a volume that the enclosing box does not wholly follow; or a section of the frame may be rotated so that part of the building is obliquely oriented to the rest; or a relatively simple play between a two-storied space and a balcony overlook will be shredded by stairs, landings, bridgings, and balconies, as though Le Corbusier had lost his way in one of Piranesi's imaginary prisons.

The neo-Corbusians also complicated their mentor's example by crossing it with other buildings in early modernist architecture that offered more opportunities for syntactical complexity. Most especially they revived the neglected early modern work of a group of Italian architects whose work centered in Como in the 1930s. The most familiar example of these is Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio of 1936. They also studied the Schroeder house (1924, in Utrecht) of the Dutch architect Gerrit Rietveld. Whereas Le Corbusier's primary concern had been the overall effect of the sculptural and image qualities of architectural form, the Italian and Dutch architects concentrated on the manner in which architecture was built out of the elements of the early modern style. The Italians played off the enclosing box against the supporting skeletal cage, and they gave the cage the prominence and gravity of classical columns and entablatures. Rietveld fragmented architecture into primal linear elements (columns, beams, and framing elements for openings) and planes (wall increments) in order to make visible the "build" of the building.

Graves's Hanselmann house of 1967 in Fort Wayne—which appeared in *Five Architects* and which leads off a recent book on Graves entitled *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects 1966-1981*[1]—typifies his early work. It is based essentially on a double pair of near cubes. One of these volumes encloses the house proper; the other is essentially a "box" of outdoor space staked out in front of the major living area of the house. It has its own stage-flat front, to which a separate studio (as yet unbuilt) attaches. A stair rises to a door halfway up the stage flat, across a bridge through the outdoor volume of space, and onto the volume-for-living-in behind. The approach by axis, the climb of stairs to an imaginary elevated platform, the emphatic frontality of the house (doubly emphasized by the two elevations)—all allude in schematic, erudite ways to the classical tradition. First Palladio, then Le Corbusier, now Graves, the house seems to say, ticking off the history of its inspiration in an almost pedagogic manner. It is not content merely to be; it must also demonstrate.

Even as one moves along this diagrammatic approach and surveys the front elevation of the principal living area of the house, Graves's complication of Le Corbusier is apparent. There is a collage-like overlapping of cutouts and transparencies, a layering of space into depth, a counterpointing of skeletal frame and enclosing box. All of this is enormously subtle and elegant. And within, the shredding of space vertically and horizontally culminates in a living-room mural by Graves (like Corbusier, a painter as well as an architect). In the mural, cubist-inspired forms—in pale blues, moss greens, pinks, and creams—float insouciantly on and off the wall plane like torn paper. It is as though Juan Gris's architectonic cubism had been crossed with Matisse's colorful gaiety. The full range of Graves's forms appears in the mural: the large assertive shapes, the overlapping fragments, the wispy featherings (reminiscent of the tattered garlands originally contemplated for the Portland building and the fluttering garments of its muse). The forms in the mural allude as well to the way in which the porous architecture opens to its site. (By contrast, Le Corbusier's villas are clear, compact, and, for all their physical thinness, everywhere decisive and firm.)

Comparing the Hanselmann house, at the start of Graves's career, with his recent Portland building reveals the major shift that has occurred in his work. Beginning around 1974, a syntactical emphasis, in which early modernism played a conceptual game with classical and Renaissance architecture, gave way to a metaphoric emphasis, in which larger architectural fragments allude to a wider range of the classical past. In this new emphasis, the past increasingly enlarges itself from the general recall of ancient and Renaissance classicism to make more specific reference to Mannerist work of the sixteenth century, Piranesi, and the classicism of the Enlightenment and of early nineteenth-century Romanticism. Design from pieces, so to speak, gave way to design from chunks, or to what might be termed Graves's "aedicular" mode, because the big building conspicuously contains little buildings, or aediculae, within it. In fact, Graves's more recent work contains two kinds of mini-buildings. There are two-dimensional aediculae such as the banner-like architecture blazoned across the Portland elevations; and there are three-dimensional aediculae like the miniaturized buildings originally planned for its rooftop.

Graves's erstwhile companion in arms, Peter Eisenman, lamented this shift in an article entitled "The Graves of Modernism."[2] He asked, in effect, whether Graves had abandoned the serious task of reinvigorating modernism for the frivolity of manipulating nostalgic imagery. In *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects 1966-1981*, Vincent Scully shows himself to be more favorably inclined toward the change in Graves's work, but he, too, sees problems in it:

> Michael Graves' architecture . . . depends in fact upon two words: "allusion" and "illusion." Its forms consistently allude to others and make us see what isn't there. As such it comes as close to carrying out a linguistic program as any architecture can do. More than the work of any other architect it is a conscious attempt…to create architecture through a semiotic method. But architecture is not only or even primarily sign and allusion; it is above all else three-dimensional mass and defined space. In one kind of balance or another with nature it creates the entire human environment, and is experienced physically by human beings—experienced empathetically, in what might be called a pre-semiotic state of perception.

Both criticisms imply that Graves's architecture possesses an insubstantiality of imagery more appropriate to literature than to architecture. But Graves's aediculae may provide a solution. This new strategy of design, which Graves is still developing, has several important implications, not only for Graves's architecture but also for the broader situation in architecture today.

In Graves's more recent work, the building is both brought into being and commented upon by classicized forms generated at three levels of thought and action. Through the three-dimensional aedicula, the classical allusion occurs as what might be called *quasi-actuality* because it contains space which can be lived in as a piece of the larger building; but, as a mini-building, it also appears as an emblematic entity (much as a dog house may invoke its master's domicile by miniature mimickry). In the two-dimensional aedicula, the classical allusion appears essentially as *sign*, to be seen but not lived in. Finally, in the use of such underlying principles as certain kinds of proportional systems or rhythmic organization, classical allusion appears essentially as *concept*. None of these three levels depend upon literary sentiment. All are architectural in nature, and all can be acted upon in architectural ways. The key to their union is, in fact, the three-dimensional aedicula; insofar as it alone unites within itself the potential for elaboration as abstract principle, as sign, and as real space for occupancy.

Graves came to use the three-dimensional aedicula when he abandoned the omnibus box of open space that had characterized the modernist ideal and chose instead the clusters of discrete, room-like spaces organized in a formal, hierarchical way. Louis Kahn is an evident source of inspiration; and, behind Kahn, his early "old-fashioned" training in what was both the ante- and anti-modern mode of academic architectural composition promulgated by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which dominated American architectural training from the 1890s into the 1930s. Kahn opposed the undifferentiated openness of modernist *space*, substituting for it the traditional ceremony of *rooms*. So another classicizing source, that of the Ecole, joins the roster of historical ingredients in Graves's work. But not to give Kahn all the credit, we should recall Le Corbusier's lifelong enthusiasm for the Carthusian Monastery of Ema near Florence, which he visited in his youth. There the monks' cells were fitted as individual mini-houses around a garden court. The aedicular cell, as Graves uses it, is very evident at Ema.

Graves uses aediculae in order to allude to classical architecture of the past in the process of extending this tradition in the present. He has no intention of literally imitating or adapting the past in the manner of nineteenth-century eclectics. Like most (but not all) of his postmodern contemporaries, he deliberately, even a bit too self-consciously, primitivizes the forms of classicism. This widespread primitivism has several reasons. Most simply it is a matter of economics, where the expense of craftsmanship (or even of machine-stamped replicas) generally dictates that a simple cylinder must suffice for a fluted column, or a blank wedge for a capital. But it is also a matter of maintaining a visible dialectic between history and modernism: blunt cylinders and wedges accord with the pure geometrical shapes that used to be the "beautiful forms" of modernism. Their very bluntness suggests the newness of this historicism, as a primitive phase leading to future splendors. This primitivized generalization of form also accords with the ideal of "type" so omnipresent in the current architectural situation. Again, it is not specific, literal historicism that is wanted, but the essence of history—"metahistory." By condensing architectural themes, the aedicula has close affinities with the type. As both a miniature of the large and a simplification of the complex, it invokes the primitive hut, a mythic source of architecture and a cardinal theme of architectural history for Graves and many of his generation.

Both the archaism and miniaturization of Graves's buildings-within-buildings recall garden structures, and indicate his particular sensitivity for the impact of nature on architecture. The approach to the Hanselmann house, for example, crosses the Palladian villa with the nineteenth-century American porch. On the Portland building the belvedere near the top calls the distant mountains to mind, even for those on the ground; the roof becomes a site for a village; the projected metal garlands billow out into space like the vines that he repeatedly uses in his drawings as fluttering relief to architectural geometry. These buildings in which the classical space responds to the landscape in a Schinkelesque manner are, thus far, both the most beguiling and the most distinctive in his work.

In some of Graves's configurated clusters—like the Environmental Education Center for Liberty Park in Jersey City or the Public Library in San Juan Capistrano—the aedicular structures make a peripheral village around a central space. In New Jersey, the structures show log-like rustication, heavily exposed timbering, and pergolas; in California, they are Mission-style, with latticing, partly off the core space and partly around a garden courtyard (like Le Corbusier's Ema). And there are Graves's country and suburban houses. Some are spread as villages of mini-buildings on generous sites, but most possess the block-like compactness of eighteenth-century English and American colonial country houses. All have swaggering, mini-building entrances, comprising cylinders as columns and giant wedges as keystones. The compact block is extended to its landscape setting by pergolaed links to auxiliary outbuildings or by walls treated as stage-fiat architecture. Garages, arbors, bath houses, studios, guest cottages, tool sheds: all are prime subjects for aedicular elaboration. Even tall hedges, for which Graves has a special fondness, appear as wedges and blocks, sliced with narrow allees but retaining a building-like bulk, geometry, and presence. Variously placed as closures, climaxes to courts, gardens, swimming pools, and patios, these structures and sculptured hedges make rooms of outdoor space, extending the rooms inside. Perceived from one point of view, these outdoor spaces are axially balanced; from another they are subtly angled and asymmetrical. Aside from Schinkel's, one senses the influence here of the plan of Hadrian's villa or Gianbattista Nolli's map of Rome of 1748, both favorite historical icons of the moment (they were favorites of Kahn as well). In fact, Graves was one of several architects invited to Rome in 1978, each of whom was given a different section of Nolli's map to redesign.

Vincent Scully has observed that this classicized pastoralism may owe much to the idyllic quality of Princeton, where Graves both teaches and works, and to David Coffin's scholarship at the university there on country villas of the Italian Renaissance. It is in his arcadian commissions especially that Graves's sensibility is most at home: he playfully conjures both illusion and allusion, mingling buildings with nature and offering up architectural references both erudite and witty. It is for these buildings that his fluid but incisive drawings also seem most apt.[3] Their style, at once relaxed and disciplined, accords perfectly with their theme. These drawings, probably the most widely prized of any architectural drawings today, are abundantly reproduced in *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects 1966-1981*.

But finally one must ask: Is this hothouse accumulation of historical influences too recondite, too pretty, too strained, even too literal despite its intentions? Do the spectral signs of past architectural grandeur embody what they invoke? Or do they leave us in a fantasy realm, charming perhaps, but more nostalgic and precious than real? Does the dialogue between modernism and historicism—or between the old modernism and (what is paradoxically) the new—address issues of consequence, or does it deal merely with ephemera? Are these historical borrowings absorbed into the commission at hand, so as to enhance the sense of the function, place, and time of the architecture, or presented as a mannered self-referential glossary?

Such questions of appropriateness, concreteness, authenticity, and relevance have been asked of the work of all those who are identified with postmodern architecture. They are questions not yet resolved in Michael Graves's work. That modernism could not continue forever without history (or with the pretense that it was free of history) is generally acknowledged. That the present interest in history has raised fresh issues and opportunities for modernism is equally undeniable. It is certain as well that only those, like Graves, who take history seriously and who use it with discrimination can ultimately free themselves of the present sense of history in architecture as merely a source for quotation and commentary.

Graves's aedicular strategy of design is promising however in the way it layers its historical meaning in a cross section of plies: concept, sign, and actuality. His use of the aedicula may be the means by which concept and sign in his buildings will become more concrete. It may be the means, too, by which his engaging doll houses, dog houses, and guard houses, clinging like barnacles to his buildings, may come to affect the shaping of the mass in a more integral way. Indeed, his recent designs for office buildings in Louisville and San Antonio seem to show that this is beginning to happen.

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1. *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects 1966-1981*, essay by Vincent Scully. Rizzoli, 303 pages, $45.
2. Peter Eisenman, "The Graves of Modernism," *Oppositions* 12, Spring 1978.
3. Both were shown in a fine exhibition of Michael Graves's drawings at the Max Protetch Gallery in New York from May 12 to June 25.