MICHAEL GRAVES

Evolving A Language

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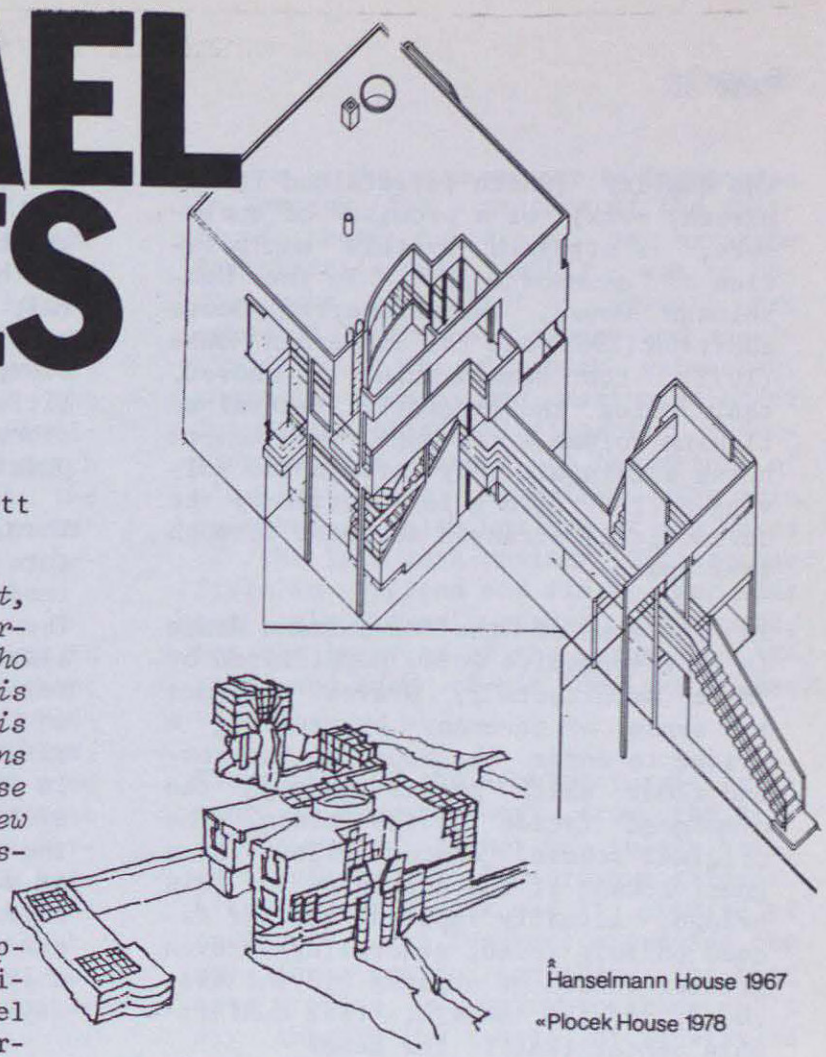


↑Hanselmann House 1967

«Plocek House 1978

"Enclosed, please find one architect, most eloquently versed in Architectural expression of the Modern Style, who finds the unity of narrative in his historically allusive work with his further maturity, and finally gains enough 'savoir faire' to scatter these allusions about, giving birth to a new language of carefully examined disunity; a new architecture".

Such might qualify as a brief description of one of the most unique practitioners of architecture today. Michael Graves' career seems to be almost parallel to a *de-evolution* of Modern Architecture of the most sophisticated variety. "De-evolution" is really quite a paradoxical term in this circumstance, as his work has matured immensely, to a stance of considerable polarity to that he held at the time the book "Five Architects" was published, in 1972. At that time he had only undertaken a few projects, and of those which were built, such as the Hanselmann House (1967), one could only sense his masterful ability to manipulate the Modern "Box", much akin to the abilities of his 4 major counterparts: Meier, Gwathmey, Hejduk and Eisenman (the latter a colleague on assorted endeavours). Graves, however, had in his work a degree of complexity which these four did not share. Gwathmey and Meier were both consumed in historical references of a recent variety, (namely the work of LeCorbusier in the 1920's), Hejduk was working with overlapping grids and geometries, while Eisenman was involved in a similarly overlapping, very complex "mathematical" architecture.

Graves made the break as follows: the rigid box was broken up horizontally and vertically such that it would be interpreted as space or surface jogged out of inertia by the interjection of planes, solid volumes and voids. The continuous space would not only be interrupted on a two-dimensional level (the language of the plan) with planes and solids, but with a strong consideration for interruptions in the third dimension (up and down). As a result, the box becomes an expansion, spatially and linguistically, of the 1920's LeCorbusier work. Overall, one derives a view of a Graves project such as the Hanselmann House that is essentially as follows: a rigourous, taught structure, articulated by the vertical and horizontal plane, columns and beams which are moving through, into and around a series of sensuous foci of attention in the house.

Indeed, in this stage of Graves' *oeuvre*, the sensuous volume and void, wrapped in varying degrees of tightness, become "Promised Land" areas.

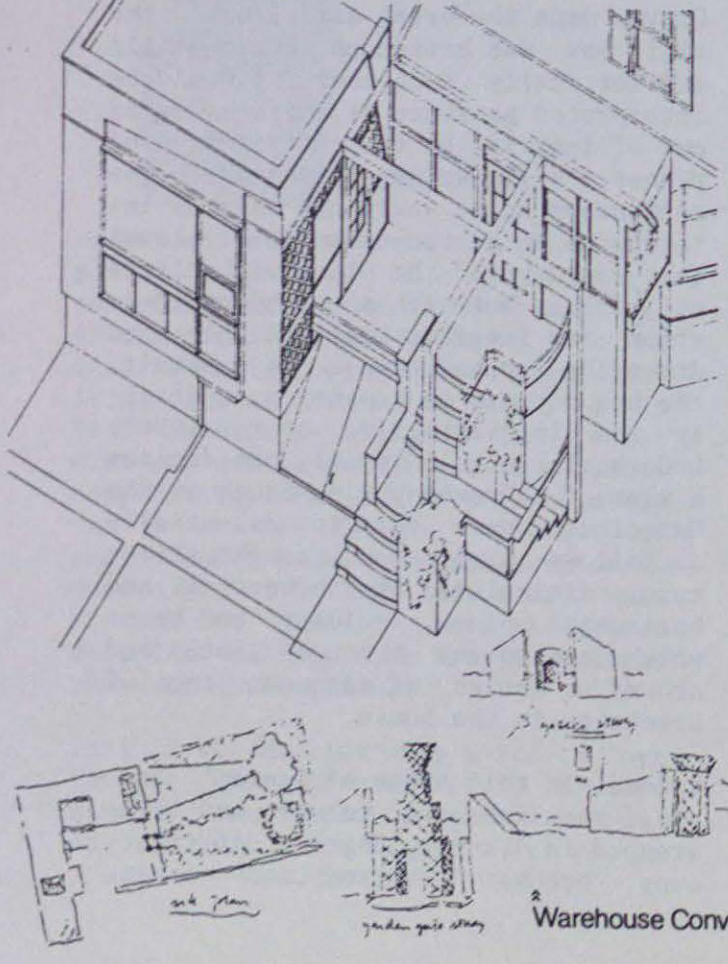
The quality (which is retained in his present work) of a promise of enclosure, is attained by this manipulation of *characetr foil*. In the Hanselmann House, the Benacerraf House addition (1969) and the Snyderman House (1972), the common point is shared, that being the elegantly restrained flowing volume - the goal, the *hearth* being attainable only through the solving of the rigid grid's puzzle by the ceremonially arranged movement through that space.

In the case of the Hanselmann House (a representative work, popularized by "Five Architects"), Graves provides the sense of ceremony by creating a bridge to enter the house on the second floor which passes through the *displaced* facade of the house. The original scheme, which called for a guest house at the beginning of this bridge, actually imposed another facade on this route, generating an even greater sense of urgency in the discovery of the *hearth*, that comfortable center that is the home.

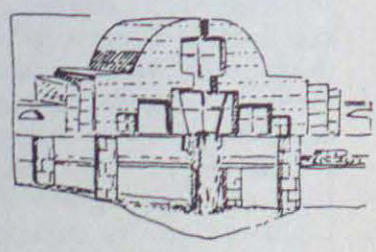
His commercial projects, notably Gunwyn Ventures (1972) also bear the strategy of a placid, undulating core, in this case animated by a Graves mural, amidst the tangled web of structural and functional elements. (However, by no means are these rigid entities necessarily structural or functional, unless one considers the manipulation of space another function).

Then, this master of Modern architecture changed, as if his work became an inadequate interpretor of his efforts. The thin, undecorated planes which slashed through the interior and exterior spaces of his works, and which in their collectivity formed an elaborate environment, had to be expanded in their meaning. A more classical architectural tradition was evoked by the use of mouldings on walls (or parts of mouldings at least), capitals and bases on columns, and elements from our own North American tradition, notably elements of the Stick or Shingle Style.

A project which embodies much of Graves' new found enthusiasm for architecture with semantic meaning is the small addition to and partial renovation of the Claghorn House in Princeton, New Jersey (1974). The Claghorn House, a New England Queen Anne style building in white clapboard built in the 1890's, moved Graves to recollect the spirit of some of the decorative elements of the house; not directly, but through allusions to their generating *roots* and to the notions of garden terraces that were prevalent in the 1890's. On the exterior (the porch), latticework recalls the house's Stick Style antecedent, and elements



«Claghorn House, 1974



Fargo-Moorhead, sketch 1977

Warehouse Conversion, 1977

taken from the house itself, such as the mouldings and the broken pediment, link the extension suggestively to the original building. Graves again, as in the extension to the Benacerraf House, creates an exterior *room*, doing so on this occasion by introducing *structure:* two beams crossing over the porch, generating an enclosure. Finally, the stair descending from the porch recalls Michelangelo's stair at the Laurentian Library; that, like Graves' stair in this exterior enclosure, being an overscaled stair in a room.

Colour, too, changes at this point in Graves' oeuvre. In his Modern (perhaps one can say Neo-Modern) work, he principally employed pastel shades of blue, pink, yellow and green, and when used other than in his murals, could almost be interpreted as a soft spoken version of the de Stijl approach to colour in architecture. Colours were not primaries, symbolic of the straightforward manner of the machine (or *machine for living*), but for Graves symbolic of the *erotic* character of the house, i.e. the home, or the *hearth* which we spoke of earlier. With the Claghorn House, a broadening seems to have occurred in Graves' perception of the role of colour. In addition to his awareness about the sensuality of the pastel tones, Graves added to this vocabulary symbols of the earth and nature. Such colours as terra cotta, dark green, blue grey and sky blue all represent elements of nature: the soil, flora, water and the sky. Graves painstakingly examined the appropriateness of each of these messages, and relayed them without error.

During this period of transition, rose the introduction of an increased number of Graves' interpretations of classical elements, foreseen perhaps by the allusion to the Laurentian Library staircase in the Claghorn House. The impetus for this new fluency of narrative in his work seems to have been provided by the existing building in which he was to live. A 1926 warehouse in Princeton, built by Italian stonemasons in the same manner as farmhouses in Tuscany (for a measure of the spirit of these buildings, see Bernardo Bertolucci's film "1900"), was to become the progenitor of Graves' new sense of *entrance*, *garden* and *courtyard*. As in the Claghorn extension, there is a continued manipulation of fragmented classical elements, referring, we can assume, to the nature of classical ruins themselves. The ruin in nature, which was one of the bases of the late 18th century Picturesque Style in England and Italy, pervades not only Graves' garden structures, but the interior of the warehouse itself and much of his designs hereafter.

The notion of the architectural fragment in Graves' work from the mid-1970's onward cannot be solely taken as a reference to Picturesque gardens. Like his early work and its promise of enclosure, the fragment expresses the need for a search - notably, for that same promise. As one had to weave one's way through the tangle of vegetation and architectural ruins in the Picturesque garden, the *enclosure* we speak of became more urgent as the goal. Playing a similar game by placing *unfinished* or *parti* architecture in his carefully planned landscapes, Graves makes his buildings (for the most part, private residences) *grands objets trouvés*. The critical issue in this dialectic between architecture and landscape is that, unlike his earlier work in which the architecture and the landscape were distinct entities in conversation, his recent work goes one step further than a conversation through metaphor and allusion; it establishes an area where architecture becomes landscape and landscape becomes architecture. The architectural fragment in nature and the *structure* of shaped topiary illustrate this premise.

The *parti* approach of Graves at this time seemed to work itself to an extreme in the Crooks House (1977), whose street elevation is essentially a mon-

tage of architectural bits blown up to a monstrous scale, and flattened versions of Graves' earlier solid/void exercises. However, the interior is remarkably calm and well mannered. Both the facade/ruin and the radially organized topiary in the rear of the house focus one's *search* on the center of the house. Throughout this paper, the phenomenon of the natural center of the house has been called the *hearth*. Graves has struck this chord resoundingly in the Crooks House. Indeed, the calm, warm center receives its character from the large formal fireplace, which rises without barrier through the center of the house, finally punching through the skylight above. Graves, with this gesture, captures much of the panache of the American Home.

Finally, in Graves' most recent work, a greater degree of *wholeness* is sensed. Those elements which were architectural fragments before, as in the case of the Crooks House, have been pulled together to form a distinct architectural entity. Within this scheme, the building itself becomes a fragment of a larger statement. For example, the much talked about Plocek ("Keystone") House draws its strength from the very fact that it is fragmented. Each piece of the house is an architectural bit which can stand on its own, despite the *broken* aesthetic which Graves imposes on it. This is due to a trend for these pieces to become *identifiable solids*, or masses which have a central, unifying element which taps the archives of architectural history. For example, Ledoux's house for the keeper of the river Loue is recalled, as well as motifs on the walls of the Saltworks at Arc-et-Senans, in the laundry *pavilion* behind the Plocek House. The torrent of water which cascades out of the mouth of the building again illustrates the intimacy present between Graves' architecture and landscape, but drives home the following assertion: Graves' landscape has somehow transcended nature, and become a captive; a piece of architecture itself. In the case of the Warehouse renovation, the differences between architecture and landscape were clouded. The landscape was tamed, and the architecture was freed from predictability. However, the Plocek landscape is a fully controlled element, a *prop*, on an architectural stage. This, of course, is not a bad thing. He simply represents a return to *dependable* landscape (à la Versailles) which does not change as the topiary in Graves' earlier work might do if it was not maintained. Presumably, we are expected to assume that the fragments of the Plocek House are surrogates for this topiary. In an overview, we must assume that Graves has reached a conclusion of sorts; one which he may either continue to refine as his projects take on a greater magnitude, or shirk, if his stance does not sit well with the larger clientele which he is soon bound to serve.

Up to this point, Graves' projects have been of a size which has allowed him to experiment liberally with the evolutionary aspects of his architectural expression. Building with balloon frame construction techniques allow great flexibility in *what one can do*. Thus, this free evolution has been facilitated. Fortunately, Graves' work has gained, at an appropriate time, an aspect of solidity and mass, which will work in his favour in such projects as the Portland (Oregon) Civic Centre. His architecture displays a fluency of historic interpretation that very few architects today have, and this fluency seems to be being put to use on larger buildings; those which have lacked intimacy, eccentricity and colour for many years. There is no doubt that these qualities will profoundly influence both the work of new, young architects and our very conception of the texture of urban architecture.