ROBERT STERN

MICHAEL GRAVES

INTERVIEWS

"Post-Modernism", "Modernism", "Mannerism", ... This magazine has set itself up as a forum for debate, and it seems to me that although classification can be useful, there is also the limiting aspect of circling groups of architects whose work is actually individual, and although influenced by a timing in history and general intellectual development, is also personal: having to do with the many and also minute developments in an architect's oeuvre. Two cases in point are Robert Stern and Michael Graves. Each, although often classified as similarly "Post-Modern", is in fact very different in the themes and intentions behind their work. Therefore, these two interviews are not presented in our theme section. This is important at the magazine; that even at the level of publication and administration there should be room for a wide difference of opinion and respect for that. Similarly in architecture, the correlation between these two architects is that each worked in his own way, when work was scarce and criticism was high, each believed that a personal directions would someday matter. As teachers, and both do teach as well as maintain practices, it seems that's the best lesson they could give.

One other similarity: both interviews were conducted in cars driving through Toronto in the spring of 1983 looking at the work of other architects. At ***THE FIFTH COLUMN*** **we welcome your own opinions.**

Kathy Dolgy

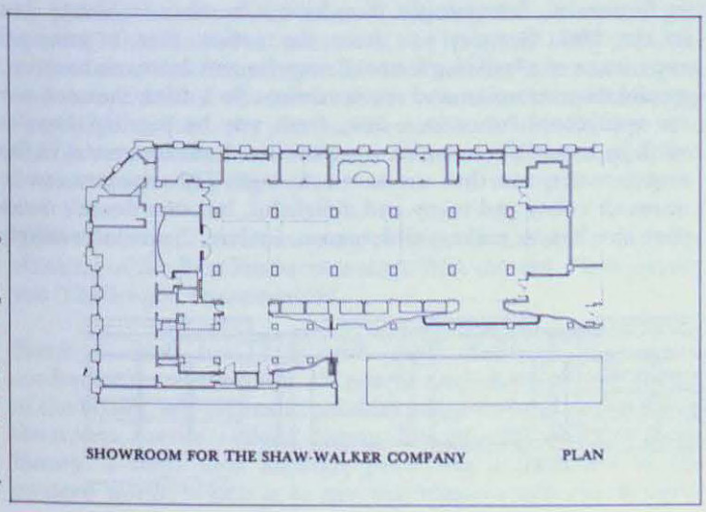
ROBERT STERN

TFC: What is currently on the boards at your office?

Robert Stern: Quite a few different categories of projects. We have some houses. Houses have been a staple of my practice ever since the beginning. We're also the architects for the Shaw Walker furniture company, which is a manufacturer of office furniture. We did a large showroom in Chicago, their flagship showroom if you will. We're also doing showrooms for them in New York and in Washington, and perhaps one in Los Angeles. We also have two buildings at the University of Virginia. One is an addition to a dining hall. We're adding two hundred seats and really trying to transform a building that the university and I regard as a rather unfortunate design of the Seventies, into something more appropriate to the university's traditions. We're also doing a student dormitory consisting of two buildings forming a little courtyard on a very sensitive site just beyond the Jeffersonian part of the campus. I've just done a competition, I don't know whether I've won it, in association with a firm in San Diego, called Martinez/Wong and Associates for a small office building in La Jolla, which I'm very excited about. We are also doing condominium housing. One project has two hundred units on a golf course called St. Andrew's outside of New York City, for Jack Nicklaus. Another is on a very sensitive resort site, much smaller, about eight individual houses for a developer on Long Island. Then, to go from that fairly large scale to the really tiny scale, we're doing the inside of a hundred foot sailboat which is now being built in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. It will sail in the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, nice warm places. That's a very interesting problem: to work in a very compact space.

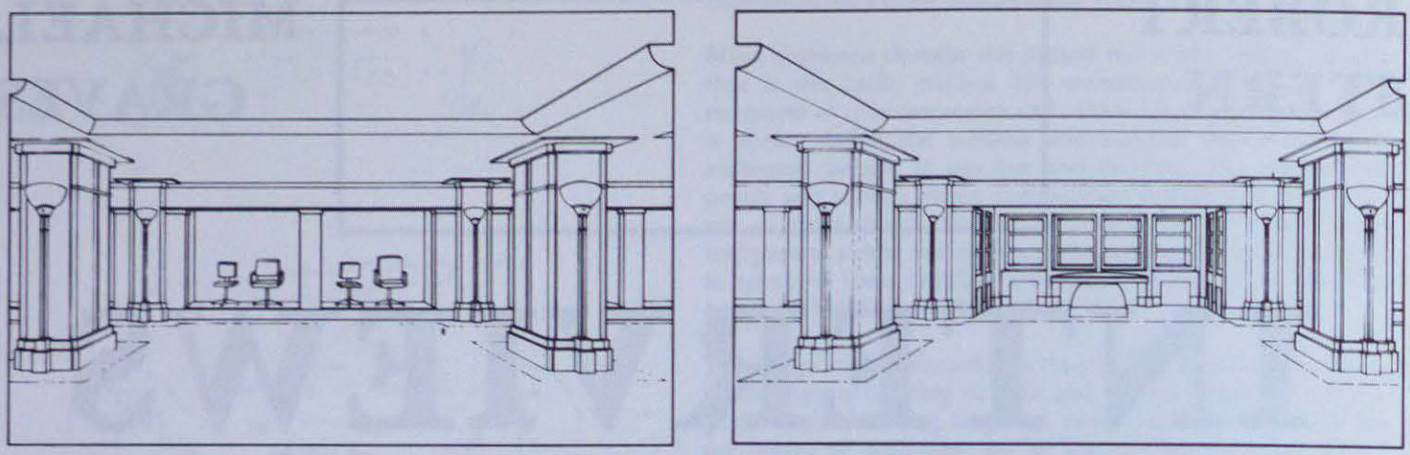
TFC: You've said that architecture is a 'story-telling' or 'communicative art.' What do you see as the important stories in your work right now?

Drawings courtesy of Michael Graves, Architect and Robert Stern, Architect.

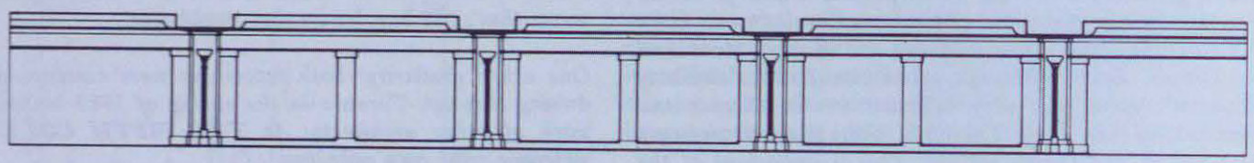


SHOWROOM FOR THE SHAW-WALKER COMPANY PLAN

Layout: Michael Broz and Angus Cheng



VIEWS OF SHOWROOM



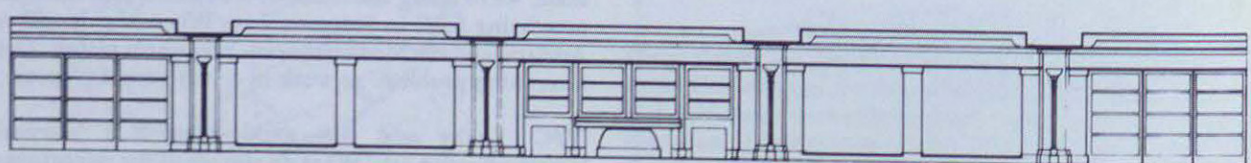
PARTIAL WEST ELEVATION OF SHOWROOM

Stern: The stories always change because the places we build in change, and the programs change, and I change, and so forth. For example, in working on the La Jolla office building, the idea of the Spanish Colonial tradition of architecture, which does describe the south-west part of the U.S., becomes part of the story of how you make buildings that seem more responsive to place. Also, the example of Irving Gill, who also interpreted the Spanish Colonial tradition in *modern* terms. In the La Jolla project, scale is very important because La Jolla is a little village community, part of San Diego, very charming, now become very chic, and very ripe for development. Our design is a response to community pressure to make something as large as a 60, 000 sq. ft. office building which is a pretty big intervention, have a residential scale without having it look like a bunch of houses backed up like so many railroad cars on a siding.

I'm always interested in local traditions, most of my works in the north-east has been shingled houses because the shingle style tradition, the roots of which extend back to the 17th Century, is of interest to me, and I feel I'm quite comfortable working in that tradition. To carry your question a bit further, I think the issues of architecture now, or at least one of the issues I'm interested in, is the question of correctness, of scholarship, of stylistic correctness if you will. In the period of High Modernism architects deliberately set out to avoid making references to traditional forms or styles. Since the break of the Modernist Movement we have undergone a period of jokey or elusive references. But I now feel that a more correct, strict use of architectural forms — of architectural language, if you will — is appropriate. Classicism is what interests me most at this time.

TFC: You've said that the buildings by Le Corbusier that interest you are ones like Ronchamps where the space is dazzlingly complex and mysterious and exciting. Of your Lang House, Vincent Scully wrote, "*As it stands, we penetrate a disorienting plane involving the dramatic effect of the suspensions of disbelief and are there prepared for a new spatial unfolding of spaces before us.*" What do you believe is the role of mystery in your story?

Stern: I think that the great contribution of so-called Modern architecture is the spatial contribution, this notion which existed before the 20th Century, but not so predominantly. You have it in Borromini, for example. You have it in other architects, but in the 20th Century you have the notion that a principal experience of a building is one of surprise and dramatic contrast, spatial disorientation and reorientation. So I think that one can use traditional forms in a new, fresh way by putting them to work in a spatially complex composition. I am interested in the sequence of spaces that one moves through. The sequence can be unusual: twisty and turny and delightful, but that doesn't mean that one has to make weird spaces. In fact, I am increasingly



PARTIAL EAST ELEVATION OF SHOWROOM

interested in very regular spaces. Once one gets into a richer and more complex language, even regular spaces take on a rich life. The realization that walls and alcoves and bay windows and layers can make up a thing we call a room or a sequence of rooms, that is incredibly rich, without being tortured, is wonderful. That's the trick, not to torture. A lot of tortured spaces... We just left a tortured sequence of spaces called a hotel.

TFC: In a tortured world called Don Mills.

Stern: Yes, Toronto — or at least Don Mills — is Corbusier's wish for the American continent... Or the perversion of Corbusier's wish, in which there are millions of buildings and no city.

TFC: Have you been to Toronto before?

Stern: Once.

TFC: The downtown core is different.

Stern: I know. This is my first time to Don Mills; it's like Houston without palm trees.

TFC: In what way do you choose one story or one fact or one precedent over another, since memory is particular and history interpretable?

Stern: My job as an architect is to interpret, so I don't pretend to say I'm telling the only story on any given project that's possible. My first set of references is always taken from among the available building stock in a locale, already an evaluation. Because there are very few places that have a cohesive, unbroken tradition, and even where there is such a cohesiveness, one always finds certain references that one prefers to others. Of course each person has his own collective experiences and memories to colour even the most obvious perceptions. So it's subjective. But the context of the place is very important to me, how the buildings were made, what shapes they took, what their attitudes to the site were and so forth. The second layer of reference is to a generalized context or typology: what is a house as opposed to an office building? Or what is the problem raised by placing two hundred units of housing on a very old golf course? What kind of urbanism can one imagine? Every architect knows lots of buildings that addressed similar issues in the past and the question is whether he or she tries to make new buildings like buildings from the past, or tries to break with the type. I'm always very comfortable with not breaking with the type, but with reinterpreting the type.

TFC: Does your work in your opinion confront history? I'm thinking of the Best Products concept that you did. Here you say you 'challenged consumerism'.

Stern: I tried to. I try with every building to make a confrontation with history. Of course *confrontation* reminds me of the Sixties, self-righteous political gangs stalking each other in the streets. I try to 'address' history. I'm very self-conscious about history. I think that anybody practicing architecture in the modern world, which is to say the Western influenced world since the Renaissance, who isn't self-conscious about history is asleep. We're all aware of our position in the passage of time. That's what it means to be Modern. I like to think that I use traditional forms in a somewhat sly and subterfuge-like way. I think the only radical thing you can do in architecture is to be very straight about form, about the past and in that straightness there is today more than a little irony, given the mad jumble of our physical environment. This belief in *straightness* represents a development based on my experience with Best. The very idea of Best on the edge of a highway by an intersection with another highway, anywhere and therefore, nowhere, distributing goods that have more often than not been pre-selected at home out of a catalogue, is astonishing. The notion of catalogue shopping and warehouse consumerism, drove me crazy in a nice way. I loved it. My proposal was meant as a challenge, to the viewer, and owner, a challenge to ordinary conceptions about the commemorative capacity of building... By the way, I'm not against consumerism, or for consumerism. Consumerism is... One day I'm a consumer and the next day I'm a stoic in my attitude toward it. My beliefs are not the point. That you *think* about consumerism, is. I want the observer to make up his or her own mind. My design is a provocation — or maybe it would be better to see it as an art of stimulation...

TFC: So then you present it *as it is* in the facade of the Best Products building.

Stern: I hope I did. I wanted to make the building have two readings at the very least. One was a temple by which consumerism is elevated. It was intended to say that in our society we don't go to a temple to celebrate the triumphs of war, as the Athenians might have; we just go to enjoy buying a television set. On the other hand, I wanted the consumer to enjoy buying a television set. You won't get half as much pleasure from the junk on the tube as you will from the act of selecting the particular set you want — and driving up to my building to pick it up in your car. So I accept the consumerism, but I kind of want you to think about it just a little bit...

TFC: Against the idea of *American style* you've talked about a continuity of architectural composition and culture as an international movement *in which every place has a particular genius*. Do you see a regional genius or genii working in Canada at the present?

Stern: That's an unfair question because I'm no expert on Canadian life. I've been to Montreal, and in Montreal there is a very definite architectural tradition. I love the greystone buildings there that Phyllis Lambert and Peter Rose have shown me. I've been to Vancouver. Architecture is hanging by a thread out there; but there is a wonderful kind of Mediterraneanism to that city. And I've been to Calgary. That's the wild west, but boy they serve a dreary, uninteresting architectural meal there. So diffuse. Every building is done by an architect from someplace else. But that's the least of it... What is really sad is that every building looks like it was built somewhere else first, and that Calgary's got just a copy of it. Calgary is as architecturally inauthentic as Algur Meadow's painting collection... That's too bad. Canada is so much newer a country in terms of its urbanism, and in terms of its growth than the States. It's that much harder to discern the traditions... but that much easier to

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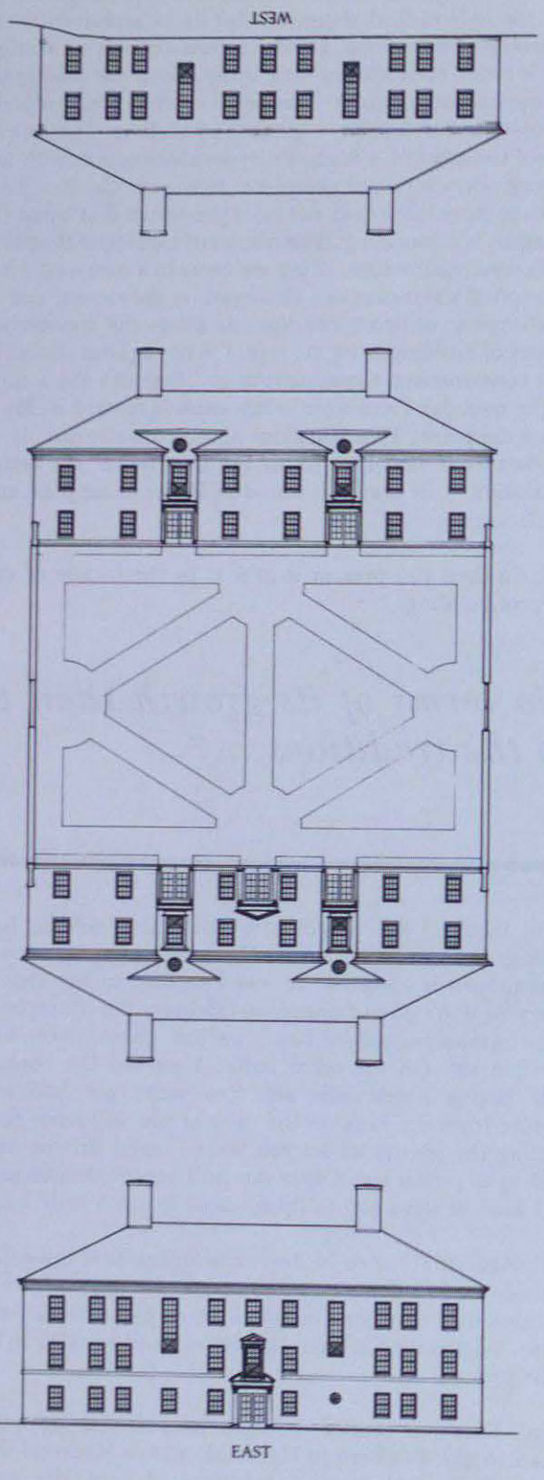


ELEVATIONS

SPRIGG LANE DORMITORY

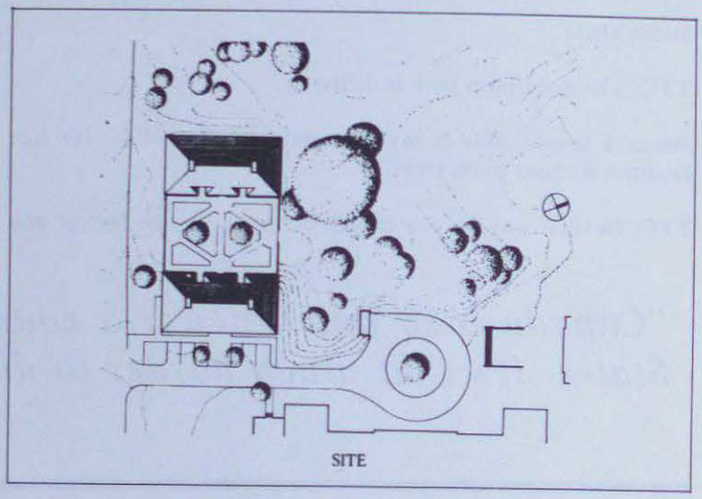
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA AT CHARLOTTESVILLE

establish standards of excellence. All I want the readers to know is that I came to Toronto only to see Jacques Carlu's rooms in the Eaton building and they are scandalously locked away behind a sheriff's padlock because some insensitive developer wants to tear them apart.

(At this point the car stopped and we went for a walk in the Eaton Centre, and a tour of the Winter Garden at the Elgin theatre on Yonge Street.)

TFC: We've just had an interesting juxtaposition of two interior spaces which have to do with fantasy; the Eaton Centre, and the Winter Garden. Would you like to talk about that?

Stern: That's an interesting question the way you put it. I never thought of the Eaton Centre as fantasy, except if you think that



SITE

the brave new world of industrialization is Fantasy. The Eaton Centre is like McLuhanism. Who remembers McLuhan? In the Eaton Centre, the only things that are interesting are things that are brought to the architecture, not the architecture itself. It's an occasion for people to come together. You have the crowds, and you have all the different signs. If you removed either or both from the inside of the Eaton Centre, you wouldn't be left with very much. The building is just a kind of armature to which you bring your fabrics, your plants, whatever, your signs. Clip it on, slip it in... Fantasy maybe but very little that is fantastic. I think the architect has abrogated his responsibilites at the Eaton Centre long before he should have... he stopped his work.

The trip to the Winter Garden's roof top theatre, on the other hand, was like a first visit to Tut's tomb. What a privilege to have been one of the few people to have been there in fifty or sixty years. And what a room. Pure magic that surely speaks to everyone, even in its ruined state. What a wonderful room, with or without a play on the stage. The play on the stage can only add to the magic of a room that is complete in itself, that makes its own statement, that is architecture with definite structure, an organization of physicality and ideas. Architecture is used scenographically, as well as tectonically. It's a wonderful room, and it was made by an architect. The Winter Garden was not exception. There were many other theaters like it. For example the interior of the Fox Arlington in Santa Barbara is in an Andalusian village. Okay, these theatres could be silly, but they were convincing, and they did set you up for something special to happen on the stage or screen. Now it doesn't mean that all architecture should be like theatre, a kind of institutionalized stage set. But I think that every architecture we admire, or at least that I admire, is based in significant part on another architecture, and not only on the technology that made it stand up or on geometry: a three and not one or two to the exclusion of the mind from the conceptual armature of design...