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MICHAEL GRAVES

TFC: What are the projects currently underway at your office?

Michael Graves: The Matsuya Department Store in Tokyo, a corporate office building in Louisville, the end of construction for the San Juan Capistrano public library in California, the end of construction for an environmental education centre, an enormous house in Houston, Texas, for Jerry Himes, the developer, a tiny house in Dallas, Texas, for a gentlewoman farmer, a competition at Ohio State University for a \$17 million job with 4 other architects involved in that, and, under construction, a new outdoor concert hall for the Cincinnati Symphony, on the Ohio River in Cincinnati. It's a lot.

TFC: You said in an interview with this magazine two years ago that two early projects of yours "*Hanselmann and Benaceraff suffer a bit because their language is primarily geometric and abstract, and later works like Portland and Fargo-Moorhead are more figurative*". Do you feel completely divorced from the Cubist and free-form interplays that you worked with in your early years — or do the disciplines of that time still in fact have some use for you in your recent work?

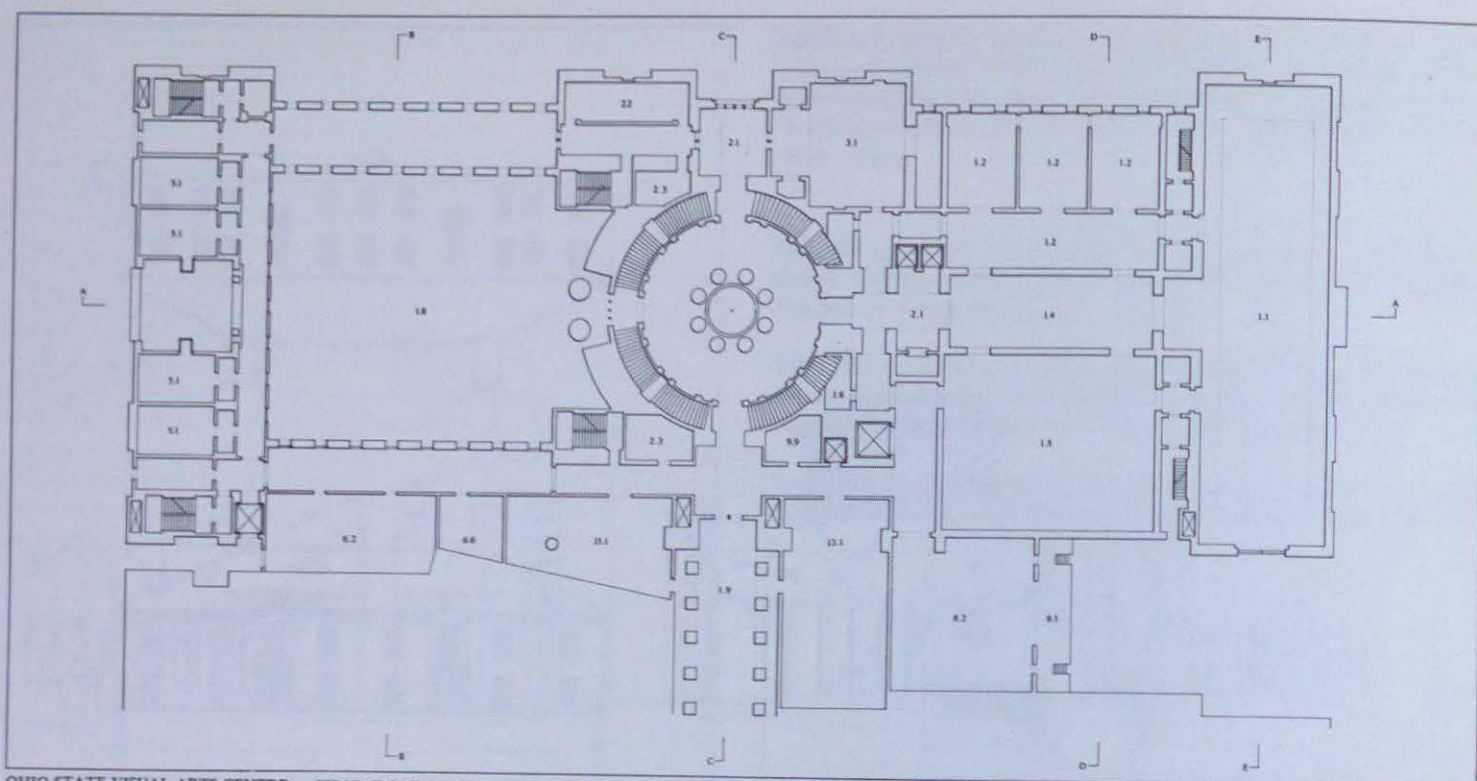
Graves: Oh, absolutely. The whole level of ambiguity as a theme in the work, and the double-reading, triple-reading of various compositions, I think is still existant in the work. It's just that the work is more figurative, and you do it in a way that allows other

than the cognoscenti into the work without making it populist. You have to find a way that allows the man on the street in and if he wants to read the deep structure of the work he can do that, but he won't be alienated by the reversal of language that is seen in some ultra-Modernist compositions.

TFC: Elsewhere in that interview you said "*I also think that one of the reasons that there is an interest in architectural drawings today is that in the painter's world, which is primarily non-figurative, there is very little to love. People are looking at architects' works as something that has both content and identity to it, in a way that other elements of the art world do not.*" Do you still believe in this statement?

Graves: Yes. I think it's disappearing as more sculptors especially are engaged in site specific work and context, but certainly for a very long time the level of abstraction in painting was equal to that of the Modernist abstractions in steel and glass minimalist towers. If I never had to look at another field painting in my life, I couldn't care less. I really do think it's the emperor's new clothes. That sounds a little bit glib, but I find what intrigues me about some of those field painters is the criticism about the painting. I would rather read Rosalind Krauss on a particular painting than look at the painting. At least the painting is providing the vehicle for critical debate, and for that I have to applaud, but it's not enough. I want the artifact as well, and they aren't mutually exclusive. There's no artifactual life. It's another attempt at space, and for me it's one that is singular, and a one-liner, and ultimately very boring.

TFC: Jencks says "*since about 1975 you have moved away from a Late-Modern abstract style toward a more accessible language with historic references ... a more explicit coding.*" Is it really?



OHIO STATE VISUAL ARTS CENTRE FIRST FLOOR PLAN

"I'm a freak and spend so much time on architecture. I don't know what else I can do."

Graves: If Jencks and others saw early buildings as white, that's pretty abstract, and whether they were intended to be white or not is not the question. In fact, the Benaceraff house and the Hanselmann house were intended to be fully polychromed, and I wasn't able to do that because of pressure from the client. Nevertheless, they were abstract, they were neutralized by the cardboard character that they got by being painted white. In later work I've been able to not only make things more figurative, but also to convince the clients that life is polychromed and therefore buildings can be too. The only issue I would take with Charles Jencks in that is that I know what he means by "use of classical references", or "historical references", and that may be true that I use them, but it isn't my intention to do that. My intention is to get to archetypal sources. It's very difficult obviously. Even a reader like Charles Jencks isn't seeing it that way, therefore I haven't found a way to get to a kind of basic formulation of composition that he will see beyond 'style'. Maybe it's Charles, maybe it's me, maybe it's both of us, but it's something I'm looking at. I don't want to borrow from the past, because a quotation is very short lived. If I do quote something, or somebody, I would like to quote them thematically, rather than formally.

TFC: Do you believe in a semiotic method of strict historical reference, however manipulated or undercut to layer the meaning of the building?

Graves: Semiology has an overlay structure, but it has an enormous latitude. Semiotic thinking, or thematic thinking, is one that is endemic to meaning. Therefore, yes, I think buildings do mean, but all the layers of historical references are not understood by the society they're for. Some of it is lost. If, however, the reference, whatever it is, has a subliminal content, or a subliminal sense of it, I'm not wholly concerned that everybody always 'get it'. I don't 'get' all the deep structure in

Mozart, but a musician would. I'm the poorer for it. If I knew music the way a modern composer might, my world would be denser and more lively and more interesting. I don't spend my time there, because I'm a freak and spend so much time on architecture. I don't know what else I can do, but a part of that is true in architecture. The more we know about architecture, the more interesting it becomes, both as a critic and a reader, of its composition and its intentions and its meaning.

TFC: If you accept the term, what do you define as 'post-modern space'?

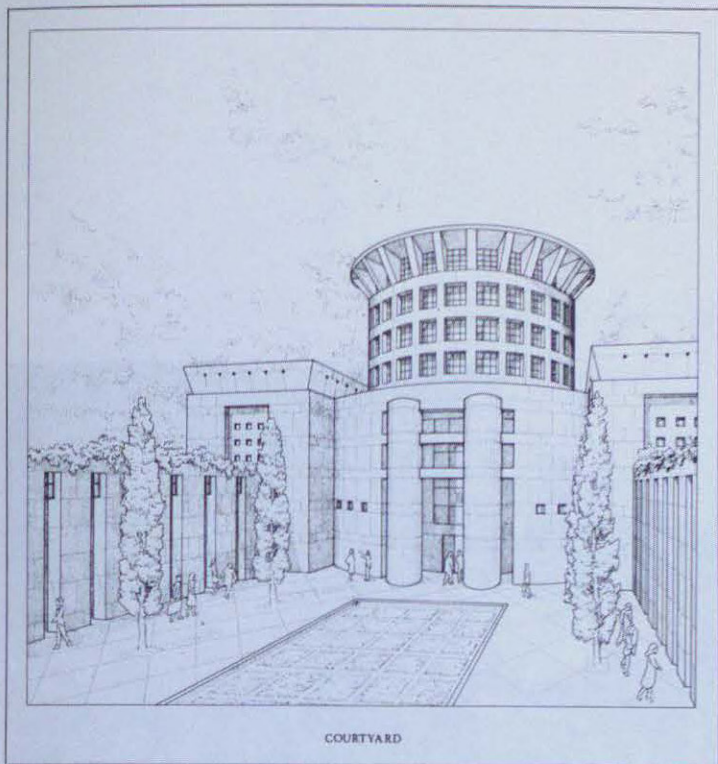
Graves: If I accept the term?

TFC: Yes. You may choose not to accept it.

Graves: For me, whether it's 'post-modern' or not, I don't know. I think it's making it instant history to call it something like that. Whatever it is that I do, I think it uses a fuller palette. I can have the open Homogeneous spatial characteristics of Modernism, but I can also allow the room, the other end of the scale, to be made. The Modernist can't do that, or doesn't do that normally. Even though we have public and private institutions, the Modernist requires space everywhere. It's free and open and part of the open society. Society isn't like that.

TFC: You've said that the post-WWII architecture has lost its socio-political life. Do you see your work, or anyone working at this time, as re-establishing that?

Graves: No. I don't think it's a conscious effort the way it was in Modernism. In fact, I'm not sure any architecture can establish a socio-political sphere. They certainly tried to. They had better luck at the technical. But that flies in the face of everybody who says that architecture is a social art. Well, architecture is a social art in the sense that we live in it, we thrive in it, *etcetera*, but more than the culinary arts? More than painting? Any more than music? I doubt it. I really do. We put a great load on architecture to be more than it probably is capable of being. I'm saying two things. One, it doesn't have the ethic of early Modernism, but I would also question whether Modernism should've in the first place. If I said that in 1968, as I did, people were very upset. The quality of a room, and what you feel in it, and the sense of space and light, has more to do with genuine



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quality, more to do with the society, than abstract Modernism can provide. The correlation is very difficult for me, to think that one leads naturally to the next, simply because we live in it. I'd be glad to talk in urban terms. I'd be glad to talk in formal terms. I'd be glad to say the street meets the building, the building makes a paradigm, makes a model in the city for commerce, for work space, for institutions, the way it understands the city, the social life of the city. All that is part of what we do, but it isn't consciously social.

TFC: Do you do all of the presentation drawings for your office?

Graves: No, I don't. I do a lot of it. I do most of the colour drawings. We have other people in the office who are trained as painters who, working with my palette, are essentially *hands*. They are thinking and they are critics and they debate, but if I want it a certain way that's the way it's done. Usually there's a level of agreement in the office. Options are presented by doing several schemes within a rather tight range, and we look to see the thematic options in one versus the other. We don't make presentation drawings, we don't make renderings ... drawings that I make for myself are shown to the clients. The client doesn't often understand an elevation, but I show them anyway. I don't show ambience around buildings so much. I want that to be understood from the more strictly measurable attitude of the building, rather than showing a rendering of prams and balloons. I show it in a way that they might be able to get into the act of participation, in the membrane of the wall, the movement, the passage into the building, rather than more superficial aspects of changing the character of something, or contributing to the character, by drawing kind of funny people in it. I want the scale of people to be realized in my buildings by virtue of the buildings themselves, by the attitude of the elements within the building, giving the size of us to be read back.

TFC: In the past you've been excited by the work of Ledoux, Lutyens, Asplund, Le Corbusier, and others. What architects are on your mind lately?

Graves: Oh my. I look at so many things. Our library is pretty full. There's an architect by the name of Jože Plečnik who most people have never heard of. I was alerted to him by Leon Krier. He's a Yugoslav, working at the beginning of the century. A very good architect. Not publishing very much. I like Tessenow, Schinkel, but all of that is in the air. A lot of people are looking at those architects as the sensibilities start to change, and other people become important. I will always look at Borromini. I will always look at Michelangelo. I always look at the Greeks. I always look at the Egyptians. I've never been to the Nile, but I'd like to go soon. I've not been very influenced by the Japanese, or by Oriental thinking in architecture, but I suppose it's a matter of familiarity with it, and my Western eyes don't see that way. I get back to Rome as much as I can. All of those buildings, whether they're the vernacular, or whether they're the monuments of Rome, are terribly influential to me. I also like contemporary architects such as Leon Krier, Bob Venturi, others who have become important to me by good and bad things that they do, things that I learned from.

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Interviews conducted by Katherine Dolgy, who is the regional editor and a student at the University of Toronto for THE FIFTH COLUMN.