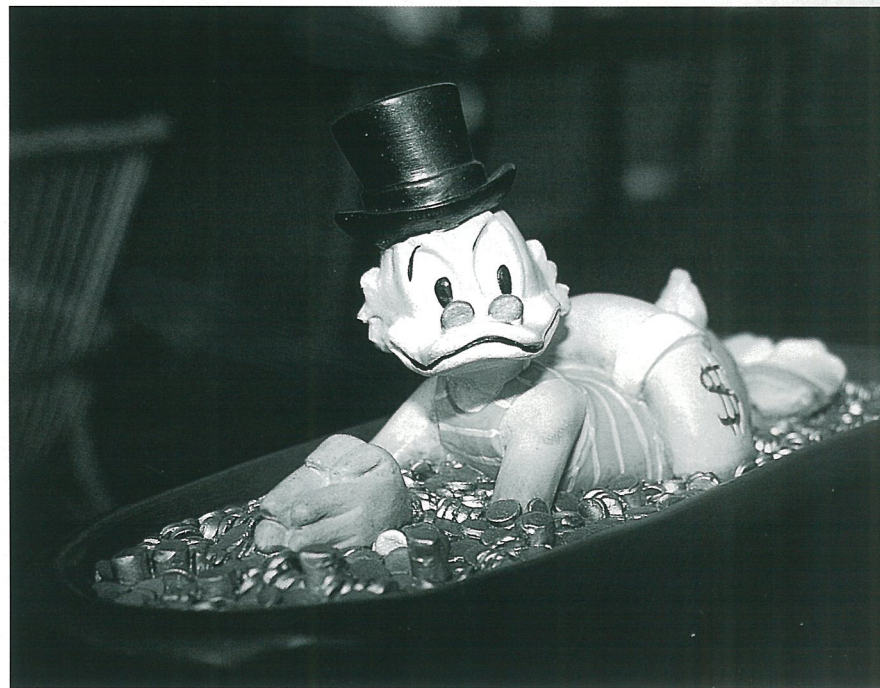


On the Work of Michael Graves
The Eye Takes Command

If there is one architect who has contributed more than anyone else to the general reevaluation of the architectural image since the late seventies, surely it must be Michael Graves. With the intellectual backing of star author Charles Jencks, whose *Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977) announced the death of Modernism, Graves has made a sterling contribution to undermining the Modern iconoclasm that has dominated the built environment for so long. Modernism's hate of ornamentation was originally meant as a way of spreading Kant's 'condition of the possible'. After the war it became clear that this condition was also a money saver. So, largely for economic reasons, the visual value of architecture was given bottom priority. In the seventies, however, architecture woke up to the cry of 'power to the imagination' that was already resounding in other quarters. It shook off its sombre cloak of visual abstinence and went in search of a richer vocabulary. Michael Graves was the first to do justice to this aspiration with his now famous Portland Building (1980). This work brought him international renown and a flood of commissions. During the eighties many people came to regard his hybrid, collage-like wealth of forms as a *pars pro toto* for Post-Modernism. Once the strict barrier between high and low culture had been levelled, architecture could devote itself to its task of communicating with the masses. Here it was not the esoteric references of Modernism that were now appropriate, but the kitsch and clichés of mass culture – the ingredients which according to Milan Kundera keep the world turning. Michael Graves and his recognisable architecture brought back aesthetic and psychological certainties to a humanity which had suffered so long under the stern neutrality of an ornament-free world. The captive audience felt reassured and everyone was happy.

468 **From White to Grey to... Kodak Gold**

For an inquisitor of Modernism, Graves' own record is far from clean. Prior to the Portland Building, he boasted a lengthy career as a henchman of Modernism. As one of the local architectural avant-garde, the *New York Five*, Graves had been interested in the Modern Movement's exploration of geometrical themes – abstract form, space, intersections, the grid, the corner, the plane, the line, the point – since way back in the sixties. Not that this was a token of respect for Mies van der Rohe's 'less is more' dictum, but a way of livening up Modernist abstraction with post-war complexities derived from philosophy and linguistics. In a certain sense this approach could still be termed 'Modernist' because of its emphasis on the autonomy of architecture and, in particular, on its *syntax*. The work invited the user – or rather the connoisseur of architectonic vocabulary – to trace the coded references and symbolic relationships. Graves combined the ground plans of Le Corbusier with variants on Giuseppe Terragni's and Cesare Cattaneo's apportionment of elevations and of space, thereby dramatising the tensions between surfaces, grid structures and volumes (e.g. the Snyderman House, 1972). The important thing was to reduce architecture to its fundamentals and so give insight into the mutual relations of isolated design elements. The cleaving of mass and



the dynamic interplay of columns, openings and surfaces, resulted in a mysterious spatial transparency. The metaphoric strength of these works was supposed to make the intellectual user aware of himself as being embedded in a linguistic structure. All this, however, took place within the familiar idiom of Modernism.

During the seventies, Graves took his leave of academic research and the cubist repertoire (e.g. the Schulman House, 1976). Owing to the esoteric nature of his methods, only a small group of initiates were still able to follow his development. He tended more and more to a populist approach. In this respect, the Post-Modern reevaluation of history proved particularly opportune. The result was a rapid rise in the recognisability of his work – and an increasingly well-filled portfolio of commissions. Henceforth the ground plan had to embody a volumetric concept and enter into a mutual relationship with the demarcations formed by walls, floors, ceilings, columns, colonnades, doors and windows. An arsenal of classical forms – headstones, round arches, pyramids, porticos, posts, columns, colonnades, pylons, steps, stairs etcetera – replaced the whole biscuit tin of cubist quotes. The cube itself was reinstated, placed on the axis of symmetry and apportioned in the classical rhythm of basement, middle and top. The cube no longer had to be hollowed out, but was given a surface treatment. *Exeunt* tectonic and technical elements. The wall regained its traditional iconographic role. For Post-Modernist Graves, items like the floor and ceiling might well be horizontal surfaces in the formal sense but the dramatic difference in their signification – the ground and sky respectively – called for a distinction in material, texture and colour. He no longer used the primary colours of Mondrian but colours evocative of the natural world: brown and yellow (earth), various greens (vegetation), and blue (the sky). The underlying thought was that these ingredients were needed to recount *our own* myths and ritu-

The Disney town is a kind of stage based on architectural symbols for romanticised, stylised human interaction (...) The example of the parks may provide an alternative vision of what people seek in urban environments: everyday life as an art form, with entertainment, fantasy, play-acting, role-playing and the reinstatement of some values which have been lost in the megalopolis.

Margaret King

It is an extremely intelligent and well designed model, a kind of definitive urban planning. It's a people's place. (...) A place for the people to interrelate, to have a sense of closeness, pleasantness, like the great European cities. I feel similar walking through Siena as I do through Disneyland.

Michael Eisner

We have gone mad. But that is what Carnival is for. We have got to disorient ourselves once a while. Life is altogether more real than we can take.

Vincent Scully

I have tried to walk the line between the whimsical and the jokey. (...) or to navigate between the chasm of the cute and the abyss of easy irony.

Michael Graves

This is a landscape for the eye of the child in the mind of an adult. (...) A Disney landscape replaces the narrative of a socially constructed place with a fictive nexus derived from the market products of the Disney Studio, the whole representing the jealous cultivation of the common mean.

Sharon Zukin

It should also be said that the components of architecture have not only derived from pragmatic necessity, but also evolved from symbolic sources. Architectural elements are recognised for their symbolic aspect and used metaphorically by other disciplines. A novelist, for example, will stand his character next to a window and use the window as a frame through which we read or understand the character's attitude and position.

Michael Graves

als in our buildings. But running like a thread through all Graves' work there is a continuing love of aesthetic play. Another obvious constant is his use of collage techniques, a game of fragmentary quotations devoid of any deeper meaning. The gulf between architecture and the public at large has undeniably been bridged but the autonomy of the visual language still predominates. Behind the decorative Post-Modern façade, modernity hurtles on.

Cut and Paste

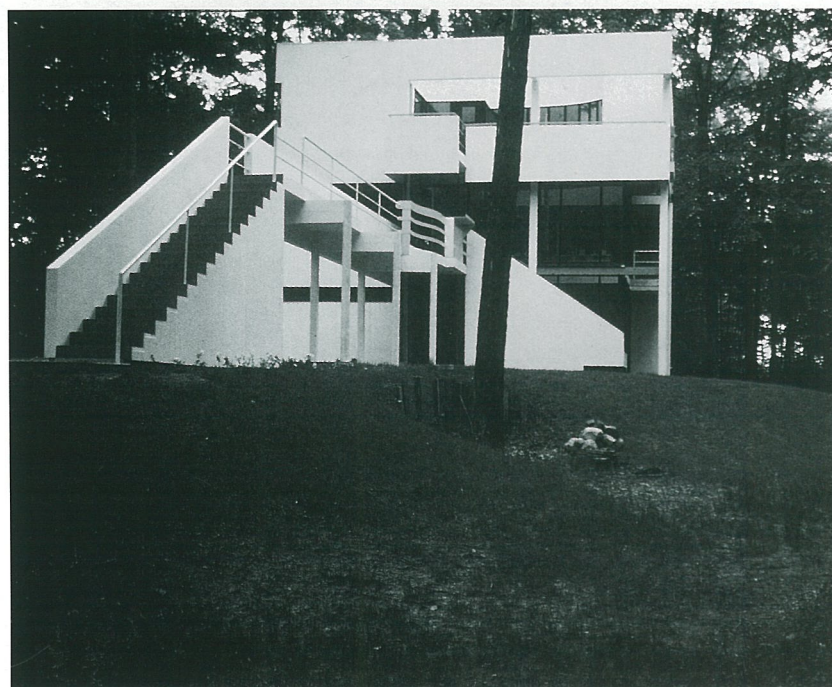
In Graves' architecture, various functional activities are concealed beneath the surface of the standard box, i.e. inside the building. We use the word 'concealed' because the programme as such hardly matters. On his way to a design, Graves rambles through the archaeology of form, easing all kinds of historical references free of their original context, scale and material. He combines the fragments and moulds them into a new, collage-like totality. Memory and association are inextricably interwoven. An a-historical symbolism surfaces on the building's outer skin – a-historical, because the relatively arbitrary pasting method blocks any real historicising action. But the abstractions remain identifiable and offer a form of urban collective memory. For instance, the little huts on the roof of the Portland Building are meant as a reference to the houses on the surrounding hills. Graves hopes to contribute a meaningful building to the environment by these two-dimensional façadist methods. But since Graves decouples Substance from Phenomenon, and concentrates on the surface, meanings become assigned in a (literally) superficial way; the result is reminiscent of the gigantism strategy of the closed but dressed-up box, familiar from contemporary shopping malls. The internal organisation remains a prey to Modernism.

This radical distinction restricts the architecture to a two-dimensional, or, in a philosophical sense, a one-dimensional reality. While we find ourselves confronted with an endless series of updated neo-historicist references (with corresponding cultural suggestions), the architecture forms the perfect counterpart to the state of the art, the requirements of the users and the demands of the project developers. From that point of view, Graves' recent buildings are catalysts for the amusement-cravings of today's money market.

Medium = Message

If we are to fathom Graves' metamorphosis from geometrical abstraction to figurative tinsel, we must pause briefly to consider the growing absolutism of the 'architectural language' concept. Graves' main reason for stressing language is his wish to communicate with as many people as possible. ★ By his exceedingly free interpretation of the Classical canon, he hopes to call a halt to the Modernists' visual (or visual-linguistic) impoverishment, which was once meant to help maximise individual self-realisation. Now that the Modern project has collapsed and its visual diet of starvation has lost its *raison d'être*, architecture would be better off going back to speaking a language everyone can understand. On the basis of that agenda, the his-

★ See Graves, Michael, 'A Case for Figurative Architecture', in *Michael Graves, Buildings and Projects 1966-1981*, New York 1982.



Hanselmann House, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1967

toricising and populist architecture of Michael Graves ought to be one hundred per cent democratic. But the question is, what is this architecture actually trying to communicate? On the one hand, the colourful metaphors, the apt historical references and similar representational devices, the importance accorded to a richly landscaped look and the revaluation of architectural history, combine to help us identify with our surroundings and thus foster urban (or even social) cohesion; for surely the ability to recognise figurative references must give us a feeling of closer involvement with our immediate social milieu. But, on the other hand, the ground plan and the idea underlying the design lose their critical value. That becomes especially clear in connection with the position of the body and the intellect. Physical movement has become irrelevant, the eye takes command. We are not referring here to the free eye of the free citizen, but to the eye that already 'knows' how it is supposed to see things, the programmed sense. Graves panders to the eye that craves the recognisable, the look of something familiar.

Graves' present work seems at first to refer to matters outside itself, to the world of ordinary people. But it soon becomes clear that the stress on the figurative places the architectural language in a new isolation – this time not within the discipline itself, but within the linguistic conventions. To stay with the jargon: specialised research into architectural syntax makes way for equally specialised research into architectural semantics. Admittedly, the public recognises much more of itself in the new semantics, but these fail to rise above the level of cliché. The 'research' on which the semantics are based remains as esoteric as ever. No sooner does it open up than the semantic universe implodes. Architecture no longer leans on language as an analogy but sees itself as being at one with language. The medium is the message. The Moderns wanted

Human life takes place between earth and sky, and architecture as an art is the means to render this condition visible. An architectural figure is a nameable thing which gathers earth, sky and between of human life in a certain way. It reveals how life takes place and helps man to understand and master his condition. The basic figures are archetypes, which have to be interpreted over and over again in ever new ways.

Christian Norberg-Schulz

We as architects must be aware of the difficulties and the strengths of thematic and figurative aspects of the work.

If the external aspects of the composition, that part of our language which extends beyond internal technical requirements, can be thought of as the resonance of man and nature, we quickly sense a historical pattern of external language. All architecture before the Modern Movement sought to elaborate the themes of man and landscape. Understanding the building involves both association with natural phenomena (for

example, the ground is like the floor), and anthropomorphic allusions (for example, a column is like a man). These two attitudes within the symbolic nature of building were probably originally in part ways of justifying the elements of architecture in a pre-scientific society. However, even today, the same metaphors are required for access to our own myths and rituals within the building narrative.

Michael Graves

The codes are too esoteric, the meanings too private to Graves and architectural scholars, to communicate the depth of reference intended. For those willing to go through the above analysis the bridge is, no doubt, a multivalent work sending out a criss-cross of elaborated meanings quite marvellously complicated in their inter-relations. But for the unformed beholder there are not enough explicit cues for this rich interpretative process to take place; in this way the scheme is characteristic of the private language games of Late-Modernism.

Charles Jencks

their abstract syntax to steer the actions of the individual in the direction of a better future. Ironically, the decoding (and then decoration) of this system by Graves seems only to prolong the iron rule: now the image is prescribed, too. Thus language becomes the new straitjacket and criticism is forced to start again from scratch.

Disney, the Unbearable Lightness of Being

According to Graves, Modernism's unceasing production of non-figurative architecture has led to the dilapidation of the cultural language of the past. The machine aesthetic is the major culprit here, for it proffered a metaphor that referred not to the bounty of culture but to the sterility of technology as an end in itself. No real poetry lay at its root, no ritual gesture, no symbolic riches, no literary moment, no mythical aspiration. Apart from the design of several unique spatial configurations, the outcome had by and large been a dismal decay of the architectural tradition's historic capital; in the end architecture lost its anthropomorphic character, its human face. In contrast with these darker

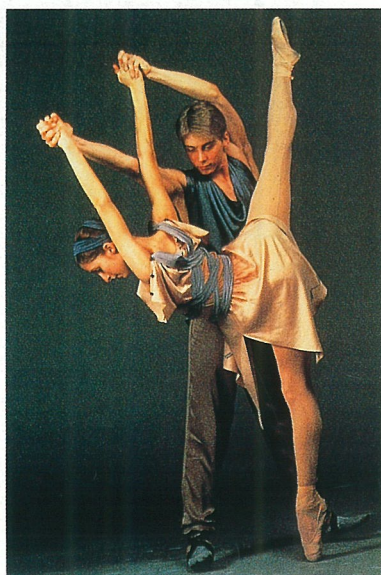
ture as a distinctive social institution. Architecture only manages to keep going by dis-tending its power of *design*. Once that inflation has taken place, leaving architecture itself correspondingly deflated, the architect can expect a warm welcome at the bureaux where commissions are handed out.

With a client like Disney, there is no need for complex appraisal – the kitsch of criticism should be good enough for the criticism of kitsch. Critical analysis of the Disnification of society is a long-familiar theme, but it is still relevant. Disneyland, Disney World and Disney Universe unite everything the independent spirit despises:

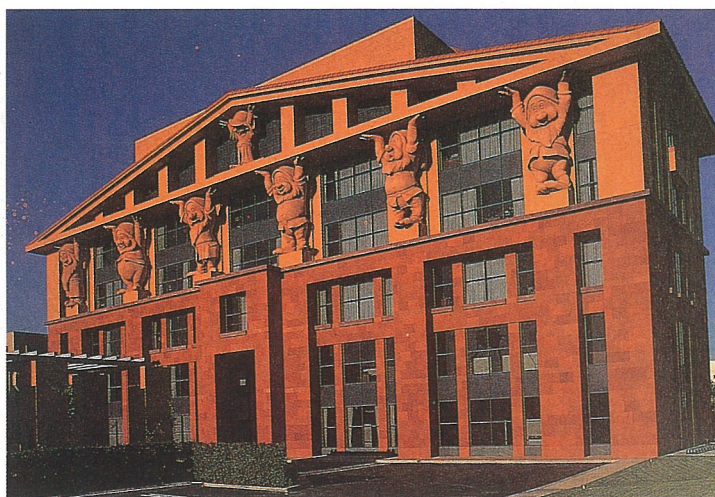
'This is a landscape for the eye of the child in the mind of an adult. (...) a Disney landscape replaces the narrative of a socially constructed place with a fictive nexus derived from the market products of the Disney Studio, the whole representing the jealous cultivation of the common mean.' ★

★ Zukin, Sharon, 'Postmodern Urban Landscapes', in Lash, S. and J. Friedman (eds.), *Modernity & Identity*, Oxford 1992, p. 233.

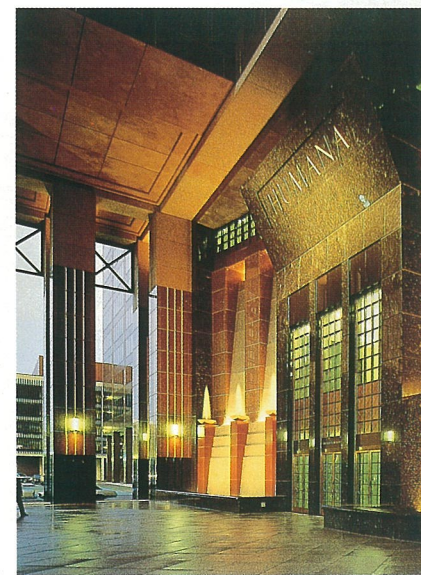
This kind of criticism is practically a foregone conclusion, if we are to judge by the



Costumes for the ballet 'Fire', choreographed by Laura Dean, 1982



Disney Office Building, Burbank, California, 1990



Humana Building, offices, Louisville, Kentucky, 1982

aspects of the Modern Movement, Graves' contribution must seem overwhelming. It has been elevated to become practically an exemplar of the new mentality. Graves is not the only one to have charged architecture with this culture-critical task, but few have gone as far as Graves in pursuing this criticism to its logical conclusion in form: the design of buildings for the Walt Disney Company. The need for metaphors richer than that of the machine culminates in the new (stage-managed) naivety of the amusement park, where there are clichés to answer your every need. Unlike the cliché of the Modern, the Post-Modern cliché of Graves' work makes it quite clear that 'top-ranking' architecture needs cliché to hold its position at the summit. The kitsch, the reduction of architecture to a recognisable and seductive show, is essential for rescuing architec-

words of those who initiate these megaprojects. 'What we create,' one of the project developers frankly revealed, 'is a "Disney realism", sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully programme out all the negative, unwanted elements and programme in the positive elements'. 'Obviously there's no homelessness in Disneyland,' concurred Michael Eisner, chairman of the Walt Disney Company. 'We don't deal with the social problems. Maybe Disneyland is an idealised version of the city.' Stop whining, in other words, 'Disney is Fun' (Robert Stern) and hence not open to any serious criticism at all. The synthetic feeling of homecoming, the total control and predictability of the amusement, the exclusion of everything alien to white middle-class culture, the ultra-conservative values preached, the absurdly feverish pace with which the maximum number of

Individual voices speaking a commonly understood language.

Robert Stern

Here is the theory: anywhere in the world around us there is a lot of truths for humans to go by, and all of them are beautiful - the truth of passion and love, the truth of honesty and soberness, the truth of patriotism, the merit of individual self-reliance, etcetera.

However, if people try for self realisation, they go by their own principal truth, excluding others. And when this happens, the moment somebody does that - clinging on to one truth with desperate tenacity - this clenched truth becomes a lie and turns this individual into a grotesque character.

E. L. Doctorow

The striving for individuality tends to express itself in adornment, for by adorning anything, be it alive or inanimate, I bestow upon it the right of individual life.

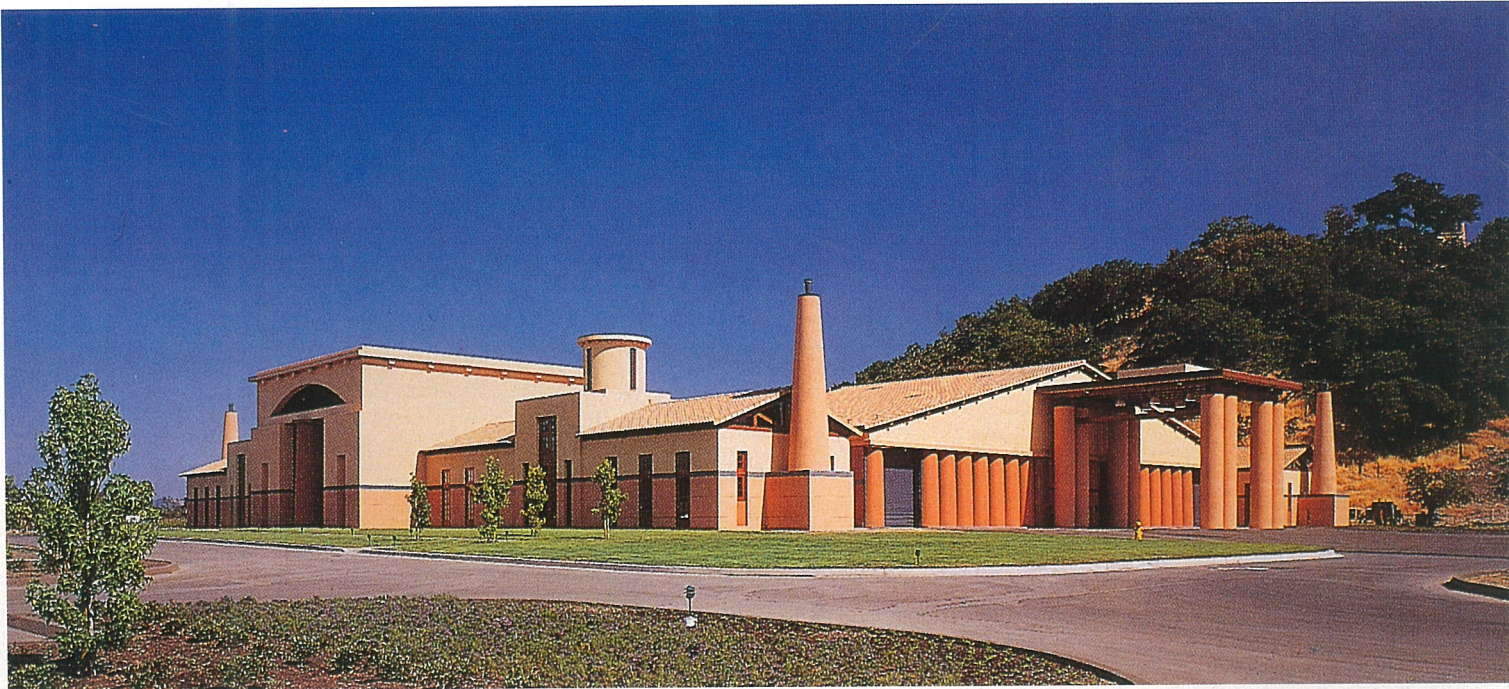
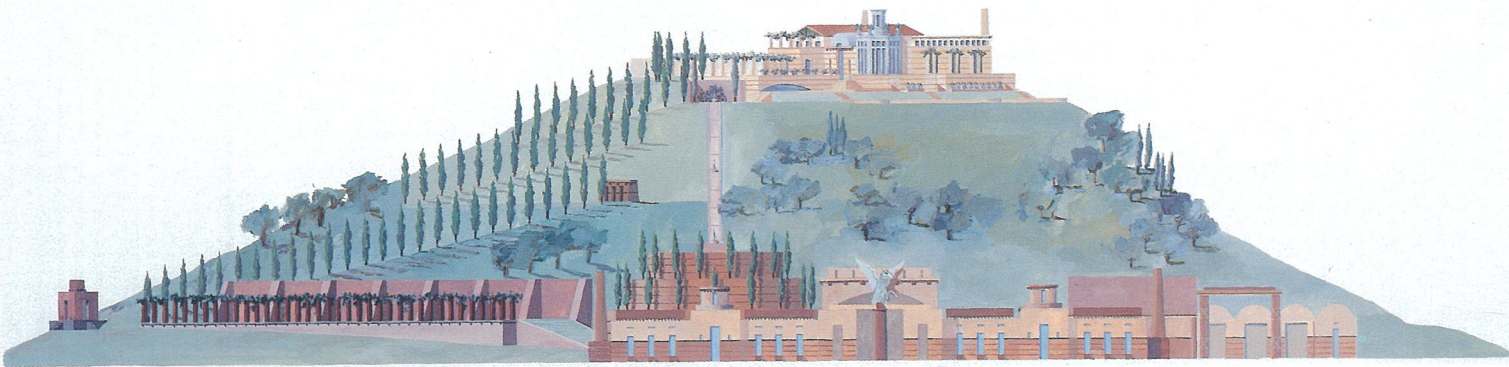
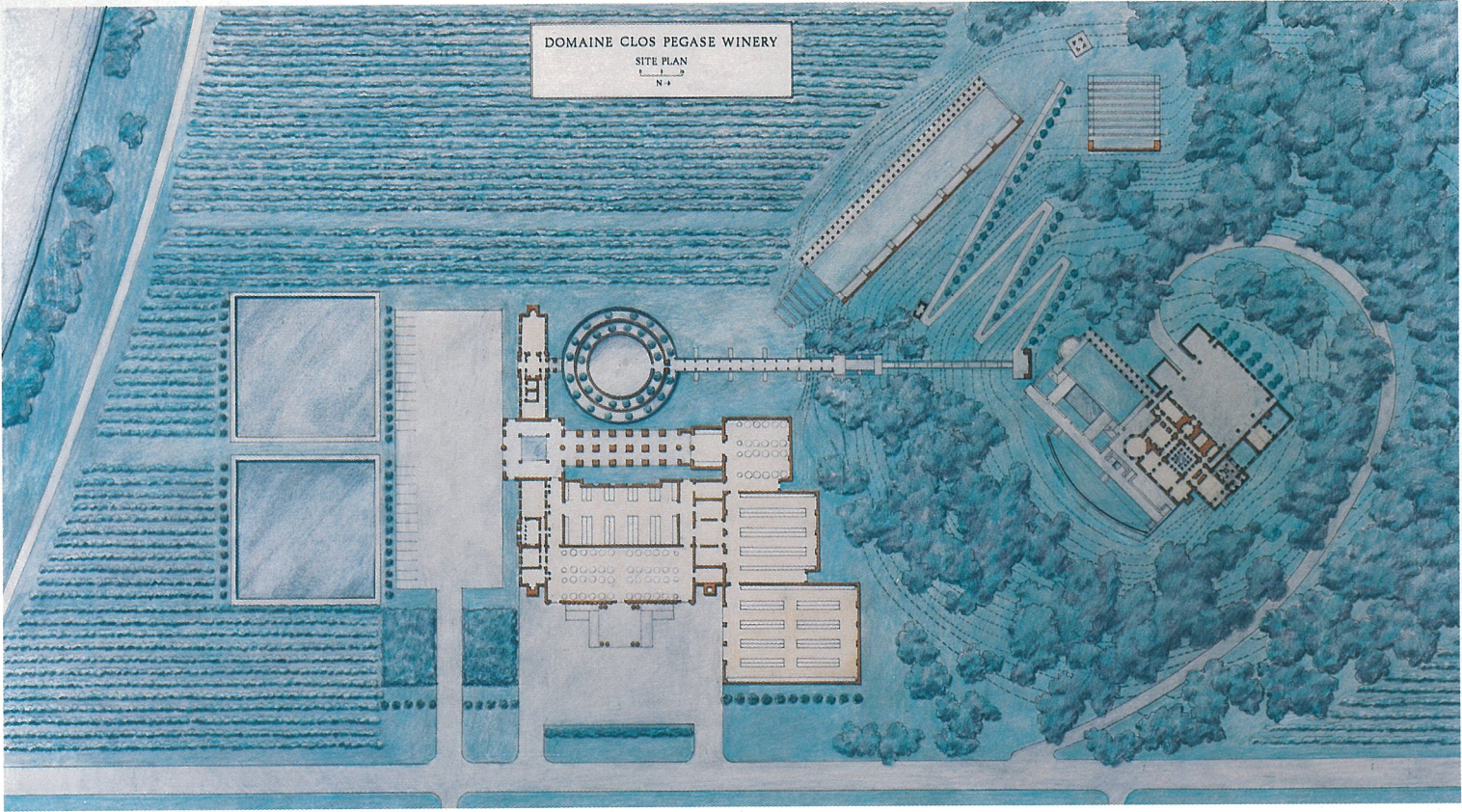
Gottfried Semper

You are really decorating, which is the adjectival condition of the theming of a building. (...) In Modernism, the theme was technology or function, which was more mute. When you start putting flowers on the wall how can that differ from all that Modernism fought against? Modernism was singular in its pursuit of the machine metaphor. Traditional architecture acts more like literature; a lot is said simultaneously, and unpredictable combinations are made.

Michael Graves

Having established a system of limitations and of exclusions, Graves can manipulate his materials in a limited series of operations; but at the same time, this system permits him to demonstrate how a clarification or explication of his own linguistic procedures exerts an indirect control of the plan, always from within the system of predetermined exclusions.

Manfredo Tafuri



Clos Pegase Winery, Napa Valley, California, 1984

attractions must be consumed in the minimum possible time (what a relaxation!) and, finally, the impertinent paradox of the ultimate in public-friendliness combined with an unmitigated regulation by a central apparatus: but this catalogue of affronts to sensibility hardly exceeds what critics have already muttered on the sidelines. It won't harm Disney anyway, nor Michael Graves, although he did find it necessary to explain why he accepted the commissions: working for Disney has earned him

'as much criticism from my architectural colleagues as almost any building I have done. (...) All of us worry a little bit. It's very hard for most architects to overcome the kind of Gropius morality. But could you imagine Lutyens saying no? Bernini saying no? Or Michelangelo? Not on your life!' ★

For Graves, the Michael-angelo of our time, the Disney cycle was a wonderful opportunity to put his insights of the preceding years into practice. Having wrestled free of the ethics of the Modern, he found the time had now dawned to maximally explore the amorality of language for its purely expressive, ornamental value. There were so many combinations still to be tried, and life is so short... 'My life isn't empty, it's quite full. I can't wait to get up tomorrow morning.' ★

Façadist Weight-watching: Architecture Without Gravity

The façades of Michael Graves are worth their weight in guilt when it comes to research into the values they represent. The image has an incontestable sensory potency and possesses a strong coherence which enables it to embody apparently conflicting meanings side-by-side. Historical shapes of every variety, Modern plans and Post-Modern elevations: they all cohabit affably in this architecture. The work is moreover unambiguous in its representation of the architect's ideological choice. Without intellectual legitimisations, it offers an excellent metaphor for the turn late capitalism has taken. It unashamedly displays the social conditions of the present day – as a realised but selective Utopia. Graves is candid about a stage-set democracy, a politics of tourism, which colonises life itself with its new dictatorship. From that point of view, his work is uncommonly transparent; the hidden agenda behind the formal profusion remains instantly legible, in spite of his highly individual expressiveness, because Graves' language refers to that redundant banality to which intellectuals are always so averse – namely, kitsch. In that sense Graves is unusually honest. Through his literally paper-thin decoration, Graves demonstrates (via the roundabout route of criticism) how modernity scurries on with unabated energy in spite of – no, thanks to – its snappy new suit. The tourist model of Graves' work fits in perfectly with this process. He offers an adequate *Ersatz* to every passive spectator: as a tourist, the idea is to remain uninvolved without actually feeling like an outsider. On the contrary, the irresistible visual quality of the imagery, the simple coding and the unceasing explanations of an army of commentators give us a sense of standing close up to it. Yet at the same time, we are so near to it that the distance needed for critical reflection has disappeared. You let yourself be taken in and at the same time you don't. What you gain on the swings ...

★ Michael Graves quoted in Abrams, Janet, 'The World According to Mickey', in *Blueprint 2* (1991), p. 34.

★ Games, Stephen, 'Digging Graves', Interview with Michael Graves, in Games, Stephen, *Behind the Façade*, London 1985, p.44.



Peter Speeth, Women's Prison, Würzburg, 1981

In recent work, Graves seems to have chosen definitively in favour of the tourist experience. In a sense it is a new religion, where the objects of devotion can be seen as self-depicting idols. What actually takes place is that a highly effective interface, which most users do not experience as an interface at all, is used to manipulate technological and other (future) developments in such a way that we can or may undergo some of them but not others. In the use of traditional forms, a very specific strategy is being defined for the future and for the present. It is an interface like a mask, which the client and the architect use to fine-tune the message and/or the experience.

Disney as *Genius Mundi*

The general acclaim for the beautiful image, which was originally meant to welcome the reincarnation of architectural communication, turns out to act as an inducement to mere sightseeing as well. The historical development from the discovery of architecture-as-language to the application of linguistics in architecture, can be boiled down to a simple category error. Even if architecture is language, language isn't necessarily architecture. We can see a somewhat similar process at work in research into what language 'people' actually prefer: the sociologists concluded that a particular taste-culture belongs with a particular social group, and this was transformed by the marketing boffins into a plan for the future. What sociology proved *a posteriori*, must apply tomorrow *a priori*, or so the market researchers dictated. In Graves' architecture, too, we can recognise a similar inversion of description and prescription. We owe our gratitude to this marketing trick for what is perhaps the most charming paradox of the late twentieth century. The arrogance of those who would programme the language of the future with compulsory meanings ultimately leads to a sublime honesty in that it divulges the cultural logic of the American Dream democracy: what the people want is what the people are persuaded to want.

The poetic form of architecture is responsive to issues external to the building, and incorporates the three-dimensional expression of the myths and rituals of society. Poetic forms in architecture are sensitive to the figurative, associative, and anthropomorphic attitudes of a culture.

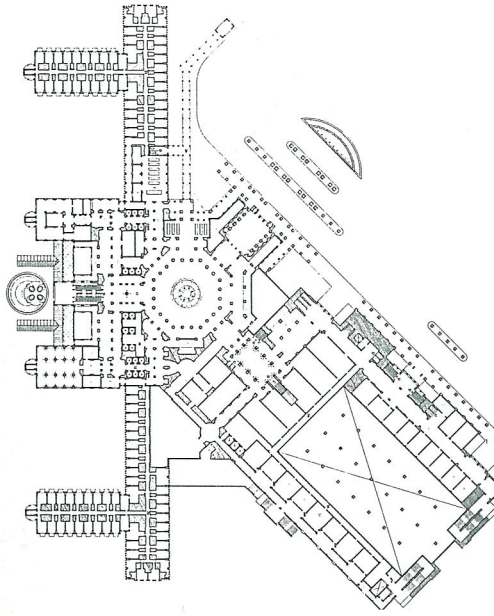
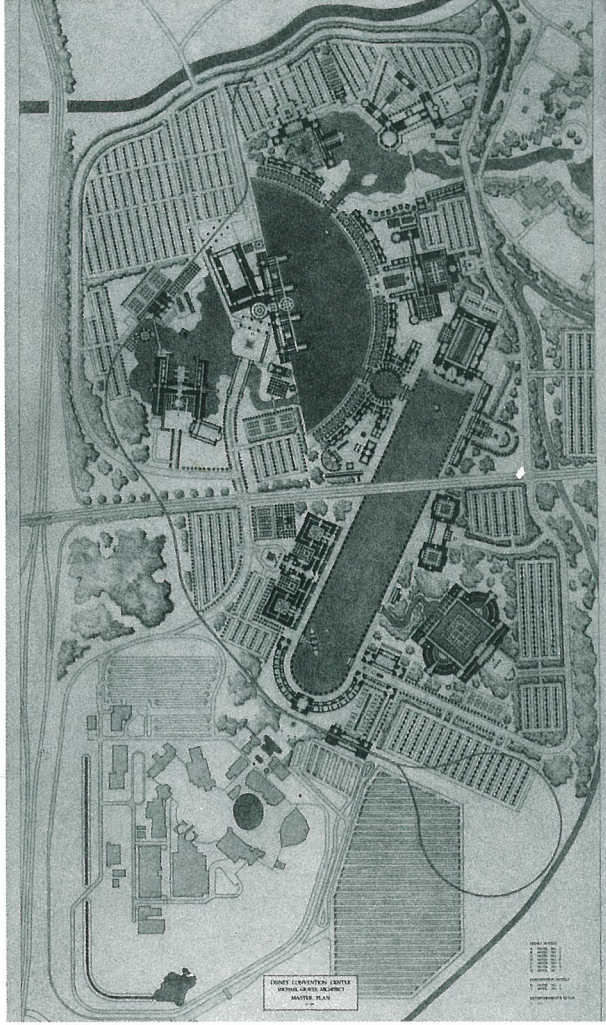
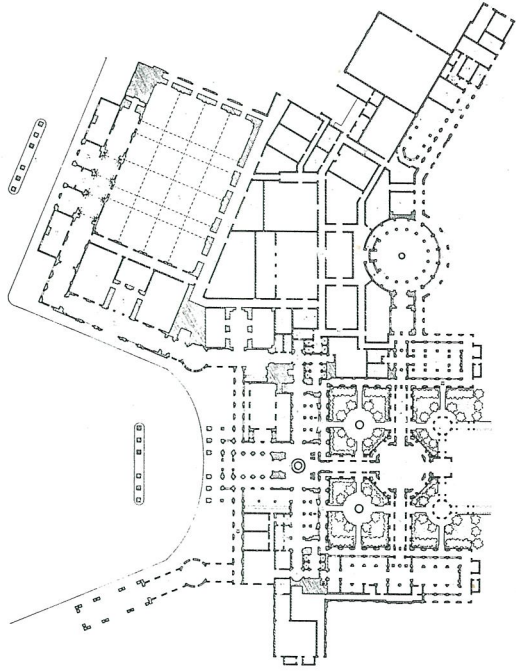
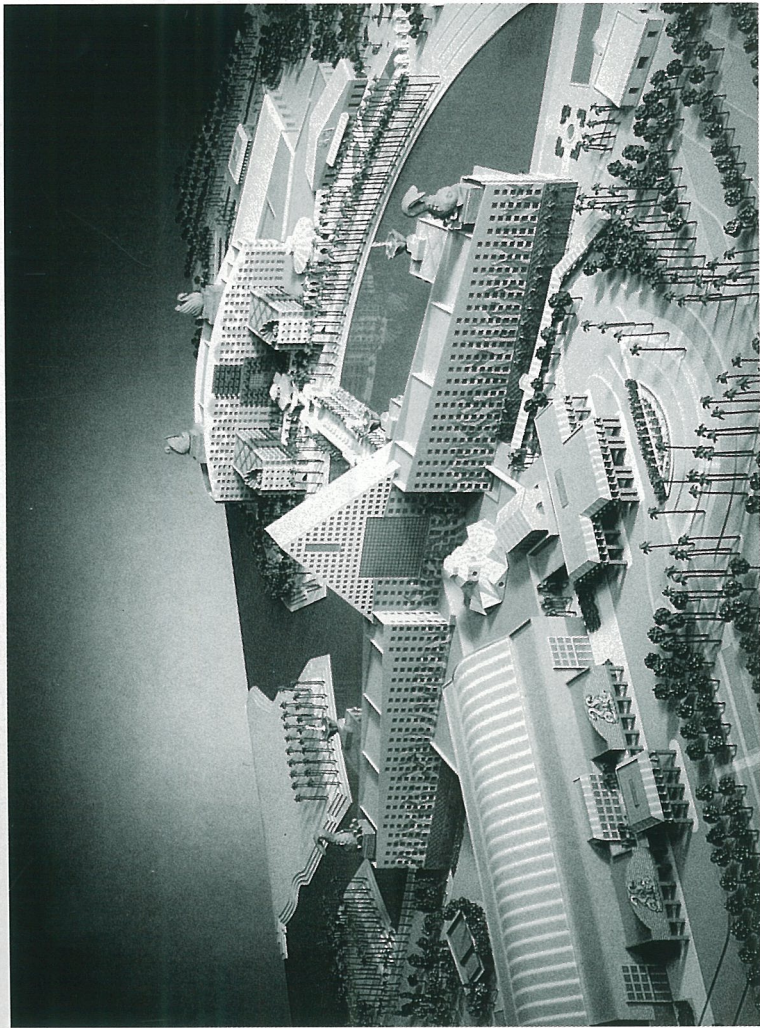
Michael Graves

The Modern Movement based itself largely on technical expression - and the metaphor of the machine dominated its building form. In its rejection of the human or anthropomorphic representation of previous architecture, the Modern Movement undermined the poetic form in favour of nonfigurative, abstract geometries. (...) While any architectural language, to be built, will always exist within the technical realm, it is important to keep the technical expression parallel to an equal and complementary expression of ritual and symbol. (...) This language, which engages

inventions of culture at large, is rooted in a figurative, associational and anthropomorphic attitude. If (...) that part of our language which extends beyond internal technical requirements, can be thought of as the resonance of man and nature, we quickly sense a historical pattern of external language. All architecture before the Modern Movement sought to elaborate the themes of man and landscape. Understanding the building involves both association with natural phenomena (for example, the floor is like the ground), and anthropomorphic allusions (for

example, a column is like a man). (...) The cumulative effect of non-figurative architecture is the dismemberment of our former cultural language of architecture. (...) It is crucial that we re-establish the thematic associations invented by our culture in order fully to allow the culture of architecture to represent the mythic and ritual aspirations of society.

Michael Graves



The Walt Disney World Swan Hotel and Dolphin Hotel are organised around a common crescent-shaped lake. Though their size, services, programme, and operators are different, the two hotels were designed as an ensemble with consistent character and similar themes. A covered causeway for pedestrians and trams traverses the lake and connects the two hotel lobbies. The Dolphin Hotel is a 1.4 million square feet convention centre with circa 1,510 rooms, a ballroom of 57,000 square feet, and an exhibit hall of 50,000 square feet as well as meeting rooms, restaurants, shops and recreational facilities. It is organised to take advantage of the waterside views. Four nine-storey wings containing guest-rooms project into the lake, surrounding a restaurant court with a waterfall fountain supported by dolphin statues. The large vaulted entrance foyer leads to a tented octagonal lobby with a central fountain. From this lobby, visitors gain access to the rest of the complex. The lakeside façade of the Dolphin Hotel is decorated with murals depicting large banana leaves resting on a trellis base. Wave

patterns and dolphin murals adorn the long convention hall façade. Two gigantic dolphin statues mark both ends of the hotel roof. Roofs visible from guest-rooms above are shaped and striped to appear like tents, reinforcing the hotel's festive resort themes. The Swan Hotel is a twelve-storey, 615,000 square feet hotel and convention complex containing 758 guest-rooms, a 23,000 square foot ballroom, meeting rooms, restaurants, shops and recreational facilities. It is organised around a landscaped courtyard defined by two projecting wings of guest-rooms. An octagonal lobby in the centre of this courtyard connects the hotel, restaurants, and other facilities with the causeway that crosses the lake to the Dolphin. Two swans, each 47 feet high, rise above the roof of the hotel. The façades are painted with large wave patterns, and clamshell fountains mark the ends of the two guest-room wings. The colours and decoration of the hotels and their surroundings suggest the character of Florida resorts and provide a thematic context consistent with Disney's programme for 'entertainment architecture'. *Michael Graves*

Location Lake Buena Vista, Florida, United States of America **Assistants** Mr. Macarty, X. Menu **Client** Walt Disney World **Design** 1986-87 **Completion** 1990

Michael Graves Architect *Walt Disney World Resort Hotels and Masterplan*



Swan Hotel Fountain Lobby



Swan Hotel 'Palio' Restaurant



Dolphin Hotel



Swan Hotel



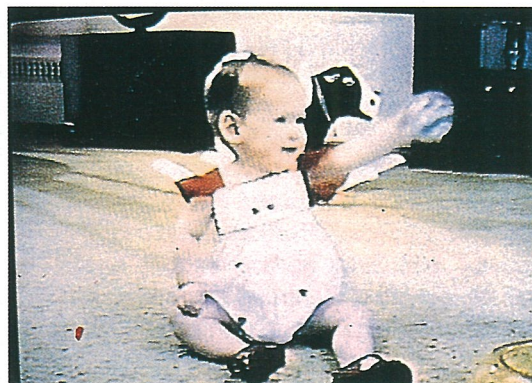
Swan Hotel Lobby Foyer



Swan Hotel Prefunction Corridor



Let's play "Peekaboo."
Peekaboo! Peekaboo!
Wave to grandma!
Smile for mommy!
Play us a song.



Have the fun but not the trouble. 'Video Baby', 8 minutes interactive videotape with manual, birth and health certificates