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Author

Chew, Jeffrey Brian

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MICHAEL GRAVES AND THE PORTLAND PARADOX

Jeffrey Brian Chew

Ever since the Portland Public Services Building first began surfacing from the floor of the Rose City, like some monstrous grey whale in search of air, attention has been focused on the building and its post-modern Ahab, Michael Graves. The subsequent application of paint to the concrete mass put the building and its architect front-row center in the minds of architectural critics, philosophers, students, and sidewalk gawkers.

Looking somewhat like a giant unsolved Rubik Cube, the new building seemed a radical departure from the voluminous facades constantly redefining the Portland skyline. Pastel colors, sprayed into geometric designs, evoked memories of childhood play rather than government at work. Not since Pietro Belluschi unveiled the smooth-skinned Equitable Building in 1948 had the city been so radically shaken in its tradition of building design.

What is this object of attention and what, if anything, does it mean? Is it a public building as the name suggests, or a private intellectual whim? How should one perceive such a building, as an individual, and as a member of society?

Vincent Scully, the noted architectural critic, has said, "Graves, like T.S. Eliot in his literary criticism, is searching for an objective correlative--a particular image--to convey an idea."¹ This lofty comparison of Michael Graves with T.S. Eliot is obviously meant as a compliment by Scully, but actually describes the fundamental shortcomings of Graves as an architect and the Portland Public Services Building as a public building. For, although the domain of the poet can remain in the realm of private monologue and imagination, the architect must translate imagination into a dialogue and ultimately into a public language. Unfortunately, Graves has overloaded his building with a symbolic language and a narrowly conceived ideology, at the expense of public understanding. The result is what I call the Portland Public Building Paradox, a private building with a public name and public pretensions. Let's examine this condition in more detail.

As professor of Architecture at Princeton University, Michael Graves is obviously a man of substantial curiosity. However, it is the translation of curiosity into imaginative intellect, capable of being understood by the public, which has eluded Graves in the Portland Building and which is the central issue of this paper.

Graves believes the Portland Building to be "a symbolic gesture, an attempt to re-establish a language of architecture and values that are not part of modernist homogeneity."²

Graves is right, but only to a certain point. The Portland Building is indeed a symbolic gesture, and it does attempt to establish

its own distinct architectural language, but unfortunately, it is a language as homogeneous as that which describes its modernist predecessors. The great unifying factor between post-modern and modern architecture is that they are both securely mired in a narrowly conceived ideology, an ideology so dominant in the architect's mind that the wedding of function, art, and history is almost totally overlooked.³ The international-style buildings have so stressed functionalism and the efficient use of modern materials, that they have failed to provide the public with any historical references which might suggest a continuum between the present and the past. The result is buildings which possess little personal identity, have almost no relationship to a particular geographic location, are defined with a limited understanding of the culture in question, and are so lacking in artistic detail as to make their parts almost totally interchangeable. On the other hand, post-modern buildings are so overloaded in historical symbolism and so preoccupied with references to the past as to overlook the problems and opportunities confronting modern urban man.

If ideology is to be the basis for designing buildings and cities, and I am not sure that it is, then it should at least be a rich ideology founded on an understanding of man's multi-faceted nature. History, art, imagination, and practical considerations are all important elements necessary to capture the sensual, intellectual, and emotional moods of men.⁴ This kind of pluralistic curiosity is lacking in the Portland Public Services Building. In limiting his curiosity to an ideological framework based almost exclusively on historical allusions, Graves has created a symbolic gesture which *hints* at a synthesis of man's many moods but which, upon close examination, falls far short of the mark. His work lacks at least three characteristics which, if incorporated into his design, could have propelled the Portland Building into the realm of truly public architecture. These characteristics are: *lack of sufficient detail, insensitivity to the public realm, and proportion abstracted beyond useful function.* Let's examine each of these points.

The Portland Building is full of historical references to a classical past. Keystones, pilasters, belvederes, arcades, and flying garlands festoon the building like the cover of an architectural history book. These classical suggestions have recently been praised as "the re-introduction of detail onto the facades of modern buildings."⁵ However, in order to debunk this assertion, one has only to look at the Graves building juxtaposed to one of its neo-classical neighbors. Compared to the elegant and unpainted detail framing the windows of the City Hall Building, the flying garlands of the Portland Building look flat and two-dimensional. The shadows which play hide-and-seek and add visual interest to the cornices and window mouldings of the City Hall have nowhere to go on the Portland Building. This is because most of the detail on the Graves building is paint--and paint is not form. It is form,

expressed as detail, which catches and bends light and leads the eye on an imaginative journey over, under, and around the visual image. The "painted form" of the Portland Building only works as detail when viewed from a substantial distance, such as from across the river or from the perspective of an airplane. The building then begins to establish a sense of detail in the mind of the viewer, especially when contrasted to the smooth modern buildings surrounding it. But the city dweller, with his feet, hopefully, planted on the ground, and without the benefit of this generalized sense of scale and detail, can see that Graves has substituted paint for form and sacrificed detail to illusion. In doing so, Graves has demonstrated that his ideology of historical eclecticism is rooted more in graphic form than in architecture.

Had Graves not used paint on his building, the integrity of his historical language might have had an opportunity to be revealed. But even then, his attention to form and detail are weak. This can be seen when the early prepainted concrete shell is compared to the fine unpainted detail of the two neighboring buildings. The Portland detail "reads" as crude molded form. Just as the molded plastic hull of a fiberglass sailboat resembles the sleek lines of a hand-made wooden hull to some, to others it conjures up images of "Fido" pushing his sturdy plastic dog dish across the kitchen floor. The point is, the plastic hull is neither a wooden hull nor a dog dish, but an allusion in danger of becoming an illusion. The Portland Building has a difficult time explaining what is real, because the translation of ideology into architectural terms has really never been made. This private ideology with its inaccurate interpretation through the use of paint has left the public out in the rain.

The classical allusions to the past, which Graves had hoped to convey in his building, might have been more fully realized if he had put greater emphasis on aedicula and less on paint. Classical allusions represented in miniature three-dimensional form could have been substituted for Classical illusions represented in color, and Michael Graves could have expressed his feelings of time and place as an architect rather than a painter.

Although, as we have seen, the Portland Building is designed around a limited ideology, and fails to honestly convey a sense of historical continuity through the use of pure form and elegant detail, one can, nevertheless, see the *intent* of Graves to accomplish these objectives through symbolism. However, by no stretch of the imagination can one see any attempt by Graves to establish rapport between the "public building" and the public realm. I believe this to be the major criticism of the Portland Building as public architecture.

Rearing its post-modern head above the tree tops of Loundsdale Park, the Portland Public Services Building confronts a public place in the most visible and yet inaccessible way. The paradox of

inaccessibility and visibility so apparent in a televised society has established itself here in the field of city planning and design.

Over 250 feet of horizontal wall space line the public park, with only two standard size door openings inviting the pedestrian to enter. The middle of this great tile wall is gouged by a concrete tongue which disappears into the blackness of an underground parking lot. Of the two doors present, one leads into a small windowless restaurant, the other to an enclosed fire escape which then climbs two floors and eventually empties out to a back lobby inside the building.

Public visibility is not matched with public access. The building has "turned-on" its visible charms to the pedestrian, but like the homely man in pursuit of the beautiful woman, illusion must substitute for relations, while warm complexions turn to cold stares. On the park side of the building, Graves has defined public access to mean only visual access.

On the remaining three sides of his building, Graves has invited people into the shelter of the building by providing arcades for pedestrian use. Unlike his illusionary treatment of detail, Graves has actually used form to shape the arcades. Unfortunately, his dialogue with history once again breaks down, for while he has incorporated the arcades into the building facades, he has removed them from the public street and in so doing has forgotten the historical meaning of the arcade.

Historically, arcades have been designed to protect pedestrians for the natural elements while at the same time providing opportunities for promenading, shopping, or eating outside. They are usually well connected to the street or square and are consequently well used, providing an inside-outside, public-private relationship between pedestrian and the total city.

With the exception of the area immediately in front of the Portland Building's main entrance, the arcades are raised above the level of the surrounding streets and are connected to them with only two entry points. The result is that the commercial-retail spaces found inside the arcades are removed from the street level, both visually and topographically, leaving the pedestrian confronting a blank wall and the building's landlord looking for commercial tenants to fill vacant retail spaces.

The "value of the arcades as public places" can best be described by observing the early morning ritual which takes place along the building's north facade. Each day, a man dressed all in white carries a portable sign down to street level and places it on the sidewalk, thus announcing to the hungry pedestrian that a lone restaurant, in a lonely arcade, awaits their patronage somewhere above and beyond the cold blue tiles of the building's facade. Even the nearby Morrison Street Structure, with the shops and restaurants surrounding its lower floor, presents the city with a public face, a face almost totally lacking in the Portland Public Services

Building. Once again, Graves' incorporation of history into architecture has been given only cursory attention and has limited the building's title of public service to a purely bureaucratic definition.

Finally, it is the absence of useful proportion, relative to users and clients, which fails to displace architectural pedantry with the functional needs of the public. The massive references to history which adorn the exterior of the building take on an almost puny quality when one first confronts the main lobby. Granted, the exquisite marble floor and effective use of deep blues and pastel pink colors hark back to the art deco and images of F. Scott Fitzgerald (or fighting) Zelda across the floor, but the lobby is small, almost an afterthought, when contrasted with the dominance and order implied in the exterior. The lobby comprises only a fraction of the building's ground floor and causes one to wonder, where does the building go? The mezzanine, surrounding the lobby, attempts to relieve the unknown with suggestions of openness, and in this respect it succeeds; but the narrow corridor leading to the elevator doors soon compresses one's hopes of a grander space.

A glance beyond the corridor reveals a room filled with a stage, dressed in tables and chairs and in search of patrons who wish to eat, elevated, and in full view of the building's commuters. The space remains mostly empty.

Had Graves given as much attention to the size of the lobby as to historical detail, the room could have more adequately reflected the importance of this building as a meeting place and as a decision center which connects Portland's past with the present and the future.

The story of the Portland Public Services Building continues to confront the architectural profession. It is a story without an ending and one which will be told over and over for different purposes and with different meanings. I have tried to shed some light on only one aspect of this important work of architecture. I have tried to show that by limiting himself to an ideology based almost exclusively on an historical dialectic between modern architecture and the past, Graves has produced a building which is more private than public, more illusory than allusive, and less functional than its title implies. But these shortcomings are not meant to say that that the building is a failure. In fact, it is a grand success. For, although Graves has replaced a one-dimensional tradition in architecture with another, he has also created a juxtaposition of lessons to be learned in the mind's imagination. Sitting beside its international neighbors, the Portland Building shows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the need to incorporate more than history or function into our buildings and cities. Together, these contrasting styles show that we are not one-dimensional people; and the many comparisons and debates about style and tradition, which these buildings jointly nurture, confirms that observation. Whether he intended it to be or not, Michael Graves has done us

all a valuable service by helping us to focus our attention on who we are, as architects and as people.



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NOTES

- 1 See *Skyline, The Architecture and Design Review*, Jan 1983, for discussion on the Portland Building, Rizzoli Communications, Inc., New York, January 1983.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (New York, 1979), Ch. 2-3.
- 4 P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York, 1949), pp. 67-69, pp. 106-108.
- 5 *Skyline* (January 1983).

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