We Dig Graves—All Sizes

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We Dig Graves—All Sizes

Abstract
In small-town Missouri, for amusement, on Sundays, we shop. So several weeks ago, needing nothing but having heard rumors of the arrival of a new line from the East, I aimed my RX-7 at the town's only Target. There, to my delight, household accoutrements from the onetime "Cubist kitchen king" abound. Tastefully packaged in blue and white cartons, all items are titled and come complete with a square photo of the designer, his signature, his bar code, and the following credo: "The Michael Graves product line is an inspired balance of form and function. At once it is sensible and sublime, practical and whimsical, utilitarian and aesthetically pleasing. Michael Graves creates useful objects, which not only carry their own weight, but simultaneously lift our spirits." How very hardworking and communal, I thought; and in need of spirit-lifting of the sensibly sublime sort, I began to buy. Wine glasses, measuring cups, tongs, table clock, pizza cutter, scrub brush: all eventually assembled themselves that afternoon on my dining room table.

Disciplines
Architectural History and Criticism

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In small-town Missouri, for amusement, on Sundays, we shop. So several weeks ago, needing nothing but having heard rumors of the arrival of a new line from the East, I aimed my RX-7 at the town's only Target. There, to my delight, household accoutrements from the one-time “Cubist kitchen king” abound. Tastefully packaged in blue and white cartons, all items are titled and come complete with a square photo of the designer, his signature, his bar code, and the following credo: “The Michael Graves product line is an inspired balance of form and function. At once it is sensible and sublime, practical and whimsical, utilitarian and aesthetically pleasing. Michael Graves creates useful objects, which not only carry their own weight, but simultaneously lift our spirits.” How very hardworking and communal, I thought; and in need of spirit-lifting of the sensibly sublime sort, I began to buy. Wine glasses, measuring cups, tongs, table clock, pizza cutter, scrub brush: all eventually assembled themselves that afternoon on my dining room table.

Not until the next morning, however, did I fully understand the import of “carry their own weight.” It was 7 a.m., and as I squinted half awake at my new Michael Graves alarm clock, its hands and their shadows conspired both to conceal the “12” and to complement its face with a Nixon-like nose. At the time, too, its “3” and “9” metamorphosed
Table Clock, 1999. All designs by Michael Graves for Target. All photographs by Vito Alula.


into eyes (their gray rectangular fields suggesting corrective lenses),
while the “6” offered itself as a slightly open mouth. Clearly, Table
Clock was squinting back at me, and only then did I notice his soft­
shoed feet and mittens, cupped to support his ever-so-swollen face.
Poor TC, I thought, perhaps he has been stricken by mumps or fallen
victim to Marathon Man dentistry.

It was then that the others presented themselves. Morning light
transformed Pizza Cutter to a shimmering, albeit big-headed, balle­
rina. With outstretched arms and a banana biomorphic body, she dons
leotards of blue Santoprene—dishwasher safe and stylishly cut to re­
veal her stainless steel naval.

Scrub Brush, by contrast, appears pleasantly plump yet always in
a state of distraction. Wearing an overly round countenance and a
baseball cap with upturned beak beneath a hemispherical hood, he
would pass for a not-so-distant relative of Southpark’s Kyle or Kenny
were it not for the cylindrical garden of white bristles sprouting from
his face.

The Measuring Spoons are a family of four—papa, mama, baby
sister, and big brother. With their hollow hemispherical heads, elon­
gated necks, and oval bodies, they are refugees from a Max Ernst
painting. Curious dressers, they go bottomless but sport blue T-shirts
with “Graves” embossed on the back.

Like the others, Wine Glass has a distinctly tripartite corpus-com­
posed exclusively of discreet geometric shapes. All glass and an essay
in circular sections, his huge head sits atop a cylindrical piloti trunk,
itself supported on feet in the form of a glass circle. He is reserved
and aloof and a bit too transparent, and hovers rather distantly above
mere utensils.

My favorite, though, is Tongs. Obviously Asian (with a name like
that), at first he appears only as silhouette, a two-dimensional paper
doll of stainless steel, sensuous in his sleekness, radiant yet irresolute
in his reflectivity. When taken in hand, however, he is rotund, a buoyant
body that begs to be clicked like castanets. He, too, wears a T-shirt,
but of a minimalist sort: nine blue Santoprene balls displaced in square
formation across the abdominal zone. One can imagine Tongs as a
kind of Futurist gingerbread man cut from a vast sheet of stainless
steel, sprinkled sparingly with delectable dots, then neatly folded into
a springy doppelgänger, both silhouette and shadow. One can imagine
him, too, as a streamlined toy soldier or an Asian Charlie Brown, or
even a metallic bowling pin—this latter association being particularly
possible in mid-MO, where many an evening’s entertainment is found at “the alley” (and where any mention of cuisine art almost surely will provoke commentary to the effect of “Why quiz Art? He never did know nothin.”). The most polyvalent of the group, Tongs might also be seen as a surrogate hand with beefy forearm, or looking “inside” of him from above, an illusory mirrored landscape of sinuous lines and evocative forms.

Now it is certainly true that “Missouri Loves Company,” so such delightful guests are always welcome. Nevertheless, I suspect a rather spotted pedigree for this task force of gadgets: cartoons and Max Ernst, of course, but also Man Ray’s anthropomorphic imagery of now-primitive kitchen accessories, the exquisite “plop-drop” teakettle handles of Josef Hoffmann, Miro’s effervescent dancing moons, and perhaps the stretch-neck figures of Picasso’s late-1920s portraits. And since in Michael Graves we have a born-again designer, the family tree might be enlarged to include the two Corbus: the young “machine à habiter” Le Corbusier, as well as the matured, post-Hiroshima, “faire une architecture c’est faire une créature” cosmological Corbu. But nothing in this ancestry seems as puppy playful as its Target protégé. Graves’s objects follow us home, amuse us when we least expect it, relieve the tedium of the mundane, and occasionally permit us an aggressive moment. (How I love to grasp the chunky ballerina in hand and push her headfirst into a deep-dish pizza, to twiddle between thumb and forefinger the fragile neck of Wine Glass until he squeals in anguish, to ruthlessy rub Scrub Brush’s face in it, or to callously plunge Tongs into a big vat of boiling oil, whistling while I work!)

So Michael Graves—prolific not only in the production of architecture but more importantly in the making of icons that alter one’s way of thinking about things—has offered in these objects not the ugly and the ordinary but rather the extraordinary. Useful, inexpensive, available to all, open to suggestion, and imbued with an indomitable optimism, his working toys of wit and whimsy epitomize the age of image in which we live. They transcend class barriers. Their essence resides in their purposeful ambiguity, and it is this artistically calculated quality that permits nonelitist mass production some vague yet palpable sense of authenticity.

Or does it? And are these “presences”—undoubtedly amiable and amusing—really as innocent as they appear? The question is provoked by two remote but resonant concerns. First is the vague resemblance
of Graves's anthropomorphic items to those found and framed, not so long ago, by certain Surrealists as well as by Le Corbusier. In this older work, such presences suggested anything but frivolity and entertainment; rather they recorded a somewhat sinister otherworldliness. Does the "fun" nature of these new millennium figures render them innocuous, or should we regard them as even more suspicious because of this guise? Second is the realization that the Target implements, cuddly and cute as they are, are also the result of a carefully constructed theory of architecture, a theory intent on the production, or perhaps more accurately, on the resuscitation of representation. That is to say, the Target toys embody, in a miniature and distilled fashion, Graves's theory for a built environment. Yet unlike his buildings, they are ubiquitous, working their "sublime, practical and whimsical, utilitarian and aesthetically pleasing" selves into the everyday lives of everyday consumers.

A few examples should suffice as elaboration on the first point. During the Second World War, Le Corbusier, exiled in the Pyrenees but still painting daily, decided to "set aside for a while the figure of man" in his work. Instead, he took stones and pieces of wood as his subject for somewhat abstract pictures. Reviewing these abstractions several years later, he came to the surprising conclusion that the "wild rumblings" of this difficult wartime period had "filled the atmosphere with obsessive presences." He was astonished to find that the fragments of nature that he painted then had, as he put it, "led [him] on involuntarily to draw beings who became a species of monster or god." In recounting this episode, he stressed that while making these paintings he had no knowledge whatsoever of "beings" residing in them. Only after some four years did he find the figures, calling them "Ubus." Ubu was "a powerful and ludicrous person created by Alfred Jarry," he later explained, a figure "reincarnated in a thousand places in our present world."3

Finding such figures changed Le Corbusier's understanding of painting. He now saw this undertaking—always for him a precisely controlled act of presentation—as an involuntary externalization of a hidden interior, a creative act in which a hidden stratum buried deep in the subconscious was uncovered. Painting might serve to exorcise the portentous spirit of the time or unconsciously to re-present another artist's (Jarry's) earlier creation. Following this revelation, Le Corbusier began to cast his work in cosmological terms, invigorating
his architecture with a dimension that spoke not of the Machine Age of the 1920s and early 1930s but of a psychological continuum, a kind of substratum, of mythic ages of past millennia.  

Le Corbusier was hardly original in uncovering such presences; rather, he followed the work of certain Surrealists—of the photographers Man Ray, Maurice Tabard, and Brassai, for instance, who in the interwar years captured on film “reality contorted into signs.” Carefully cropped and lit, a man’s torso with upraised arms bore uncanny resemblance to the head of a bull, or the shadow from a pilaster base took on the appearance of the silhouette of man’s face. Phenomena of this sort were discussed regularly in Surrealist journals by Max Ernst, Georges Limbour, Georges Bataille, Carl Einstein, and others, perhaps most explicitly by Salvador Dalí in his 1931 “COMMUNICATION: Visage paranoïaque.” There Dalí recalled how he was “looking for an address in a pile of papers when suddenly I was struck by the reproduction of a face I thought was by Picasso.” Subsequently, the face disappeared. What Dalí had seen was a magazine photograph of “natives” sitting in front of a domed hut with hills and clouds in the background. The photograph was intended to be read horizontally, but he had viewed it vertically. His essay included three images: the horizontal photograph, the same image turned vertically, and the vertical image enhanced to convey its likeness to a Picasso portrait. For him, this apparition served as a revelation of the inner psyche of the viewer, and he consulted André Breton, who interpreted the face not as a Picasso portrait but as belonging to the Marquis de Sade.

In Dalí’s and Le Corbusier’s descriptions as well as in those of their contemporaries, it is suggested that the world is not at all obvious and absolute but rather composed of many layers, some hidden. Special perceptive faculties are necessary to access or “receive” these hidden layers. Artists were considered especially adept at translating such signals into legible signs. And certainly, twentieth-century developments in psychology, physics, and technology reinforced this outlook. Freud postulated a mind distinct from, yet residing within, the body. Einstein declared the physical world not absolute but relative. The invisible medium of electricity, with its capacity to do work at a distance and seemingly without effort, began to replace noisy, muscular, and highly obvious mechanization. X-rays recorded hidden interior structure. Radar and sonar constructed what Le Corbusier later would call “acoustical space.” Radios and eventually televisions transformed
signals that surround us into audible and visible formations. Time and space coalesced, and with each new decade, new worlds were awakened.

Such radical re-formations, I suspect, did not alter the soap-box-derby, suburban Indiana world of the young Michael Graves; rather, they were that world. In America, in the prewar decades, moving pictures, high-speed travel, radio broadcasts, and rapid and remote communication began to distance humans from the material reality that for centuries had been the basis of existence. Ultimately, these and other innovations ushered in an “age of image,” a distinctly different brand of “reality” that reached cruising altitude in the 1980s. It was then that Graves—who had begun his career in the late 1960s by dropping the neo-Corbu Hanselmann house into a middle-class Fort Wayne neighborhood of Phony Colonials and French Provincials—wrote “A Case for Figural Architecture.” His view of architecture as text and his strategies for resuscitating its representational presence were very much of their time.

Graves opens this carefully considered treatise by postulating two kinds of forms that “exist in any language or any art”: standard form and poetic form. He applies this distinction to architecture, noting that the “standard form of building is its common or internal language,” and 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.” From this he concludes that “if one’s goal is to build with only utility in mind, then it is enough to be conscious of technical criteria alone. However, once aware of and responsive to the possible cultural influences on building, it is important that society’s patterns of ritual be registered in the architecture.”

Graves notes that the Modern Movement “based itself largely on technical expression” rejecting the “human and anthropomorphic representation of previous architecture.” In so doing, it “undermined the poetic form in favor of nonfigural, abstract geometries.” Its promotion of aesthetic abstraction was beneficial in that it “contributed to our interest in purposeful ambiguity, the possibility of double readings within compositions.” But, by and large, the Modern Movement’s overwhelming interest in technical expression—that is, in its own internal language—resulted in the failure to develop a true external language, a language that “engages culture at large,” a language “rooted in a figurative, associational, and anthropomorphic attitude.”

Inferred in all this is that the Modern Movement achieved only a
“standard form of building” and that a superior architecture will actively cultivate an external language. Graves offers examples of ways in which one might accomplish this. Windows, for instance, should not be walls but instead should meet our expectations by somehow being “coincident with the waist of our body.” The “thematic differences between various parts of the whole” should be clearly identified by changes in “material, textural, chromatic, and decorative inferences.” Building should involve “association with natural phenomena (for example, the ground is like the floor), and anthropomorphic allusions (for example, a column is like a man).” Graves goes on to suggest that a “larger, external natural text within the building narrative” might be developed, and he observes that the soffit is commonly thought to be celestial and that other elements of the building might “reinforce such a narrative,” thus cultivating “the full text or language of architecture.” He further suggests a “tripartite division of the wall into base, body, and head,” not to imitate man literally but rather to stabilize “the wall relative to the room.” Finally, Graves calls for an architecture, like that of Palladio’s Villa Rotunda, “comprehensible in its objecthood” and with an interior volume that “can be read similarly.” In closing, he insists—here employing the Barcelona Pavilion as example—that the “lack of figural reference” in Modern Movement architecture “contributes to a feeling of alienation in buildings” and that the “cumulative effect of nonfigurative architecture is the dismemberment of our former cultural language of architecture.” Unless architecture once again begins to represent “the mythic and cultural aspirations of society,” he warns, its cultural continuum is at risk.8

In this treatise, Graves never states why Modern Movement architects dismissed representation and the “objecthood” of Palladianism, or, indeed, why they focused so intensely on technique. It is assumed that they embraced both a machine aesthetic as well as a Darwinian notion of progress, and that such persuasions clashed with the representational and figural; certainly there is much to support this view. But given the “material world” into which these Modernists were born, and given the subsequent trend throughout western Europe and America toward a reality comprised more and more of imagery and simulacra, it seems entirely plausible that their motivation was more conservative than progressive. There is, for instance, Paul Klee’s 1920s observation that “the object is surely dead. The sensation of the object is of first importance.”9 Could it not be that one reason for shunning the representational, the figural, and Palladian “objecthood” was that
such allusion suddenly seemed part and parcel of an unreal world of illusion—of a "sensational" world that was everywhere replacing "reality" and in so doing threatening the very essence of architecture? And could it not be that one reason for underscoring technique and for "dismembering" the "former language of architecture" was a fervent desire—conscious or unconscious—to counteract the threat of representation replacing reality? And wouldn't making the materiality of buildings as obvious and indisputable, as palpable, real, and present as possible serve this cause? Which is to say that rather than working against "cultural continuum," Modern Movement architects and their followers might have been working for the preservation of reality as they knew it. Insisting on a nonreferential architecture, they sought to resist the apparent frivolity of an illusory world, a world so often associated with the highly suspect entertainment industry.

One could read the movements of Modernists in this way. In the early teens, for instance, Frank Lloyd Wright left the artificiality of suburban Chicago for the farm fields of Spring Green and eventually for the more feudal culture of Japan. He began growing buildings of fieldstone and raw wood, carving them of lava rock and later weaving them of concrete block—techniques that resulted in rooted, inert, and above all "honest" building. In Berlin, in the early 1920s, Mies van der Rohe called for an "organic" architecture of "uncompromising truthfulness." He sought a "renunciation of all formal lies" and housing "clearly dictated by function and material." He illustrated this plea with a tepee, a leaf hut, an Eskimo house of moss and seal fur, an igloo of snow and ice. His villas lost their frontality, shed the pose of Palladian objecthood, to relish in the Sachlichkeit of brick and concrete construction. In France, in the mid-1930s, Le Corbusier abandoned the machine-age metaphor and the slick vocabulary of Chareau's Maison de Verre in favor of the vaulted, bermed, and primitive. His tiny Maison de Week-end and Maison aux Mathes were Depression-era preludes to the brutal and starkly natural mode of concrete construction that he discovered in Entreprises Limousin's colossal wind tunnel of Chalais-Meudon, the perfect model for his coarse, elephantine, postwar buildings at Marseilles, La Tourette, and Chandigarh. In America, beginning in the mid-1950s, Louis Kahn insisted on a natural palette, on rooms that reveal how they were made, on an absolute order and a tectonic directness, and on a heaviness that made his buildings seem like immutable blocks—entities older than their sites, older than the light that illuminates them. Each of these
overt expressions of "technique" was intended, one might surmise, to root man's existence in material reality, or conversely, to counter the rapidly approaching age of image. Each, I suspect, was construed to reject the fabrication of "an external natural text within the building narrative" in favor of a more immediate, less mediated rapport with nature. 11

Graves, of course, is not of the age of resistance and reality but of the age of acquiescence and image. He equates architecture with literature and thus with mediation. Architecture is allusion; its component parts, simile. The "ground is like a floor." A "column is like a man." 12 His view is toward a decidedly non-present "presence"—the sensation of the object—and the buildings that he builds of this sensation seem the very essence of this era.

Unlike in the far more "modern" work of Robert Venturi (whose buildings are wrapped in representation but still flaunt, through their layering, the manner in which they are made), in Graves's buildings there is no "it" to wrap. His is a thoroughly integrated and homogeneous manner of re-presenting representation. Graves builds buildings that are like representations of buildings; he paints a building into which we can walk. The 1980 Portland Building, for instance, seems so much like a graphic that it effectively calls into question the "real" buildings that surround it. And when Graves designs a commemorative cookie tin that resembles the Portland Building, he represents representation (à la Duchamp's Boîte-en-valise), distilling his strategy to essential but simple components: a conventional objet-type, the canister; a simple cube; the appliqué of stylized color to form a facade. In this souvenir reproduction, Graves underscores the essence of what one senses at Portland: that here stands not a building but the idea of a building "comprehensible in its objecthood."

Graves's later works elaborate and refine strategies and sensations introduced at Portland. All are comprised of simple, fundamental shapes (circles, squares, triangles) that define simple volumes (cylinders, cubes, pyramids). Like forms found in a de Chirico painting, these volumes already exist in our imagination. They are as much diagrams or ideas as they are material entities. Timeless and abstract, they can be employed at the scale of a tea service or a twenty-six-story office tower, found in plan as well as in elevation. Though rotundities and overt volumetric "solids" abound in this architecture, it is the infra-thin layer of color that impresses itself most on the viewer. Graves builds with color; his materials are phenomena. His coloration
does not dematerialize the building so much as it etherealizes it. In no way natural or specific to a particular building, Graves's color palette is instead his signature, the inescapable presence of his style. With it, Graves represents Graves.

Unable to eliminate the factor of firmness, Graves cultivates a technique that hides technique. His buildings are like full-scale models but intentionally so. To straddle the line between representation and reality, he conceals how and of what his buildings are made, thus effectively elevating representation to an aesthetic plane exclusive of material concerns.

Graves's buildings bear little direct relationship to the natural world, to their specific sites or to cosmological movements. This is not to suggest that his architecture is failed or flawed, rather that he has convincingly created a kind of phenomenal, referential environment, one appropriate to the world of image in which we so often dwell. His best works are those in which function coincides with fantasy, works intended to evoke a theatrical or imaginary world—Disney's Swan and Dolphin Hotels, Cincinnati's Riverbend Music Center, Napa Valley's Clos Pegase Winery, showrooms and boutiques, even libraries and gentrified gymnasiums. Indeed, Graves's architecture makes us aware of how much of contemporary life demands overt representation as setting. His works offer a picture frame or proscenium. They effectively separate fiction from reality but place everyday activities on the fictive side of the frame. In an age of image, all the world is a stage, and where Modernists once found meaning in remaking reality, we ourselves find it largely in making appearances.

I have tried to answer by example not only the question, "What happens when architecture becomes representation?" but also and more specifically, "What happens when architecture becomes representation in the age of image?" Modernists uncovered and framed reality as coded. Graves, on the other hand, creates a coded world to complement an already illusory world of synthetic sights and sounds. His Target line—with its anthropomorphic representation, purposeful ambiguity, tripartite division, and parts differentiated by material, color, and texture—goes beyond the mandate of "A Case for Figural Architecture." At Target, one buys not the Portland Building but the commemorative tin. Any semblance of originality, authenticity, or even exclusivity is lost with mass production and coast-to-coast department store distribution. But origin and authenticity are rooted in old-world reality. That Graves allows them to evaporate is not surprising.
In the current age of hyperreality, an architecture that represents representation might be seen to serve as cultural continuum, for it embodies the very essence of the age. But is this the continuum that Graves had hoped to achieve? That we dig Graves goes without saying. But in a time when one employs a telephone receiver to “reach out and touch,” or “visits” a “site” by staring at a computer screen, such an activity certainly involves nothing so real as a shovel.

2000

Notes

1. Shortly after finding myself in Missouri, thinking it imperative that tourists be told about this state, I wrote the governor to suggest that the state motto be changed from the decidedly doubtful “Show Me State” to the more congenial and descriptive “Missouri Loves Company.” My letter remains unanswered.


4. Le Poème de l’Angle Droit, begun in the 1940s but published in 1955, is the primary written manifestation of this new perspective, Ronchamp and the Brussels Pavilion the primary built manifestations.

5. See, for instance, Max Ernst’s “Du danger qui existe pour un gouvernement d’ignorer les enseignements du surréalisme” in Documents 34, 1, June 1934, 64-65, in which he finds the face of Lenin hidden in la propagande communiste camouflée, and various obscene images hidden in renowned works of art by Leonardo, the Elder Lucas Cranach, and others. See also in Documents Ernst’s “Beyond Painting” in which he tells of an incident when, alone at an inn on the coast, he “made from the [floor]boards a series of drawings by placing on them, at random, sheets of paper which [he] undertook to rub with black lead.” While “gazing attentively at the drawings,” he was “surprised by the sudden intensification of [his] visionary capacities and by the hallucinatory succession of contradictory images superimposed, one upon the other.” Finally, his “eyes discovered human heads, animals, a battle that ended with a kiss ...”; Max Ernst, Beyond Painting and Other Writings by the Artist and His Friends (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), 7.

6. See, for example, in Documents 1, 1929: Carl Einstein, “Pablo Picasso,


11. While all architects described in this paragraph are not strictly speaking Modern Movement stock, all, in some way or another, subscribed to Modern Movement tendencies, and all understood architecture not simply as building but as a way of life and a prescription for a good society. In an April 2000 interview, Michael Graves noted what some of these masters and their tendencies toward “total design” had meant to him, explaining his interest in product design by recalling: “When I was growing up in architecture school, my heroes were people like Charles Eames, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Eero Saarinen, Mies van der Rohe; in other words, without any style inference. All of those people were engaged in production of not only architecture, but of things that would make the character of the room: the furniture, the carpet, the lighting. I always thought that’s what architects did.” See Rita F. Catinella, “Michael Graves: Man of the House,” Architectural Record, April 2000, 179.