

ON SOME UNEXPECTED AFFINITIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
MODERN ARCHITECTURE

Symposium on Architecture and Education to Celebrate

Michael Graves' Twenty-Fifth Year of Teaching

Princeton University School of Architecture

February 20, 1988

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Needless to say, I was extremely flattered to be asked to participate in today's symposium on architecture in the last quarter century. I confess, however, that I feel rather like the little new car salesman in the television ad who ends his spiel somewhat sheepishly with the question, "Why me?" Although I have dabbled a bit in the highly volatile marketplace of architectural history, I am not primarily an architectural historian. Moreover, in my professional capacity as an art historian, I rarely venture beyond the seventeenth century. Apart from my having been—until today, at least—a good friend of Michael Graves, one can only explain my presence here by my almost total ignorance of the subject. All I know is what I read in the newspaper.

In fact, I would like to introduce the discussion this morning by offering a few reactions of an amateur to an article that appeared recently (February 4, 1988) in *The New York Times* on Deconstructivism, which I take to be the *dernier cris* in the architectural arena (Figs. 1, 2a-d).

I want to preface my remarks by reporting that after I had composed them they reminded me curiously of what may well have been the first comments ever offered by a truly modern observer, that is, one with an historical perspective similar to ours, also an amateur, on the architecture of the recent past. I refer to the astonishing appreciation expressed in the mid-fifteenth century by Leon Battista Alberti for the Cathedral of Florence, built nearly a century earlier (Fig. 3). The passage occurs not in the famous treatise on architecture, but in a little read dialogue devoted, significantly, to the tranquility of the spirit (*Della tranquillità dell'anima*). Alberti gives the highest praise to a combination of qualities that one would think irreconcilable: in positively sensuous terms, he says that the Cathedral incorporated grace and majesty (*grazia e maestà*), that in it he saw joined together a charming gracefulness (*una gracilità vezzosa*) with a full and robust solidity (*una sodezza robusta e piena*) (Fig. 4). The last thing we would expect from the man whom we regard as the greatest Renaissance protagonist of the revival of

classical antiquity, is such unbounded admiration for a building we regard as a prime example of Italian Gothic architecture. Yet, it is clear that Alberti was deeply moved by the design and acknowledged the profound relationship, indebtedness even, which he felt to the values of his predecessors, however different they were in some respects from his own.

I must begin my remarks—which, in deference to the theme of today's symposium, might be titled "How I have been Educated by Modern Architecture"—by making another confession (**Fig. 5**). I belong to a generation which, in its youth, regarded Modernism as the savior of mankind. Modernism has gotten such a bad name in recent years that I feel obliged to remind the younger generation among you that for us, Modernism was the embodiment of man's noblest ideals, to which we cleaved with great fervor and utter intolerance. We who came of age in World War II regarded that carnage as the monstrous creation of all that was evil in the irrational mystification and symbolic obfuscation of Old World Fascist imperialism. Modernism represented the triumph of liberalism, democracy, rationality, efficiency, simplicity, and honesty; it was the architectural equivalent of a new social order in which people would honor and respect each other as equals, rather than seek to subject, or even exterminate each other as inferiors. You must understand, in other words, that Modernism was a passionate *cris de guerre* in a righteous cause on behalf of all mankind—everyman, indeed.

You must understand that in order to understand why many members of my generation could not bear the advent of Postmodernism (**Fig. 6**). (I think particularly of Ada Louise Huxtable, whom I had admired almost without reserve until then.) Postmodernism seemed like a decadent epigone, an effete betrayal of the noble social and human values for the sake of which millions and millions of lives had been sacrificed in the greatest horror the world had ever seen. Postmodernism wanted to reintroduce that greatest of all esthetic and moral abominations, ornament—an unforgivable waste of precious materials and human energy for frivolous purposes. Postmodernism wanted to reintroduce that greatest of all intellectual and moral abominations, historic reference—which required an elitist education and belied the cultural values of a social aristocracy that was passé.

This antagonism, ethical no less than formal, prevented many people from perceiving, let alone acknowledging, Postmodernism's own embrace of human values, values very different from but no less fundamental than those of Modernism. I refer above all to the value of communication, including the heritage of a common formal vocabulary and syntax inherent in all communication. If culture can do bad things, culture can also do good things. After all, culture is what makes human beings human; indeed, man may be defined as the culture-producing animal, and Postmodernism may be said to reconstruct that ancient legacy.

Postmodernism, however, is not archaeology; the vocabulary may be derived from Greek and Latin roots, but it is used in unorthodox and disconcerting ways that bespeak a modern language. It is precisely the common ground between these two polar opposites of Modernism and Postmodernism that the violent and fragmented images in *The New York Times* article permit us to see—just as Alberti saw the common ground between Renaissance classism and Gothic style. The common ground lies in the domain of rationality, proportion, harmony, balance, and even symmetry.

These violent and fragmented images (the architects quoted in the *Times* article actually use those terms to describe their work) reveal another unexpected and paradoxical connection, this time between Postmodernism and its alter ego, Deconstructivism itself. The commonality here seems to me two-fold. The images insistently recall, besides Russian Constructivism, from which the name derives, an aspect of the Modern movement that was quite distinct from the rationalist functionalism of the Bauhaus (**Figs. 7, 8**) I refer to the Expressionist movement of the 1920's and 30's that produced, in the framework of abstraction, similar effects of tension, conflict and arbitrary disorientation. In other words, one thing Deconstructivism learned about from Postmodernism is the past. Although the framework is indeed different, historicism is a link with the past, which Deconstructivism evokes in equally meaningful and disconcerting ways.

The second correspondence between Postmodern and Deconstructivism is the counterpart of the first, namely, communication (**Fig. 9**). In neither case is architecture just about construction and functionality, it is also about expression, about the conveying of meaning, whether that meaning refers to man's eternal search for a noble ideal of

harmony, balance and perfection, or to his equally eternal struggle with irrationality, instability and chaos.

It seems to me, then, that architecture during the last twenty-five years has been about communication and expression, about the relation between meaning and message, about how to integrate the environment we create outside ourselves with the environment we feel inside ourselves.

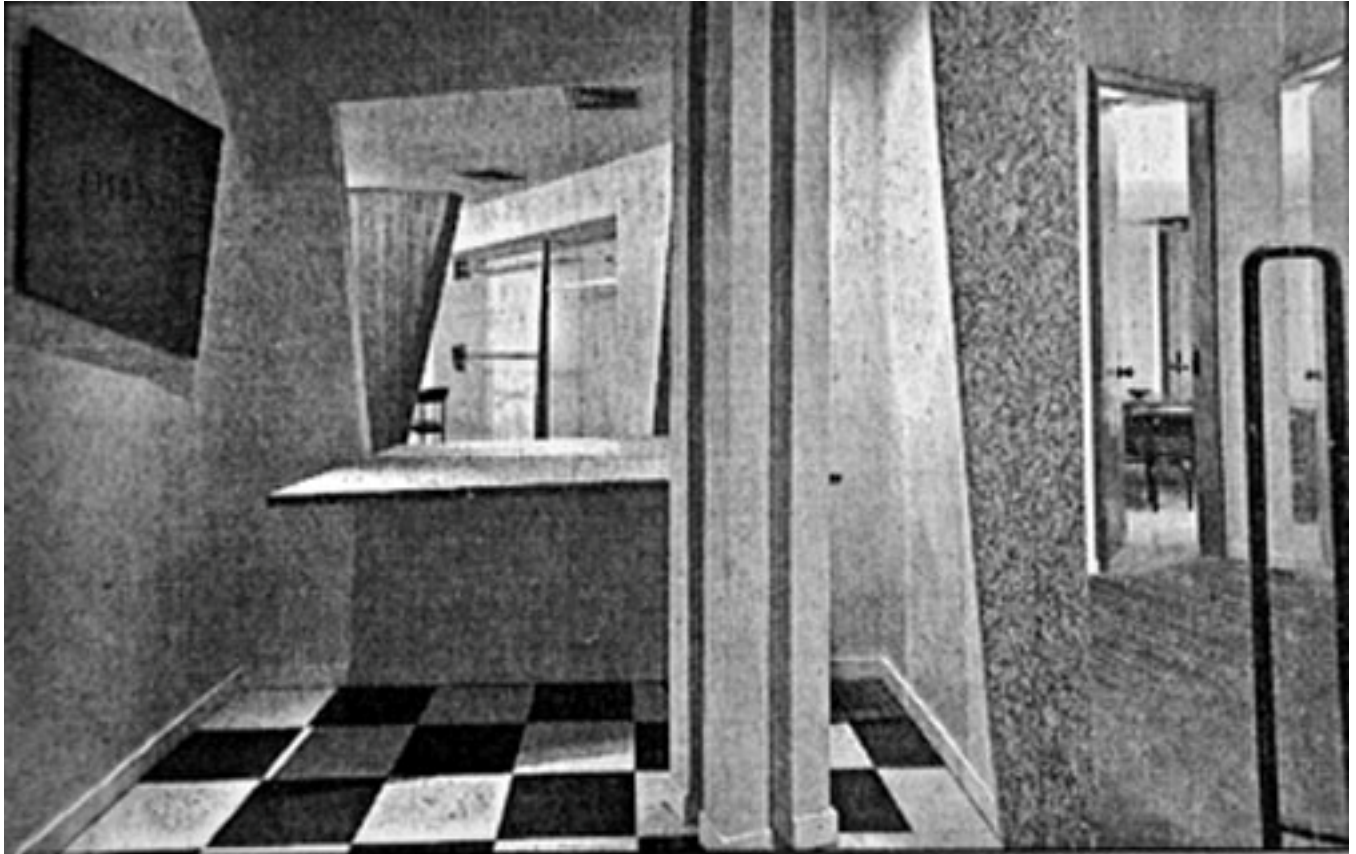


Fig. 1 Margaret Helfand Architects, Jennifer Reed Fashion Showroom Manhattan (New York Times, February 4, 1988)

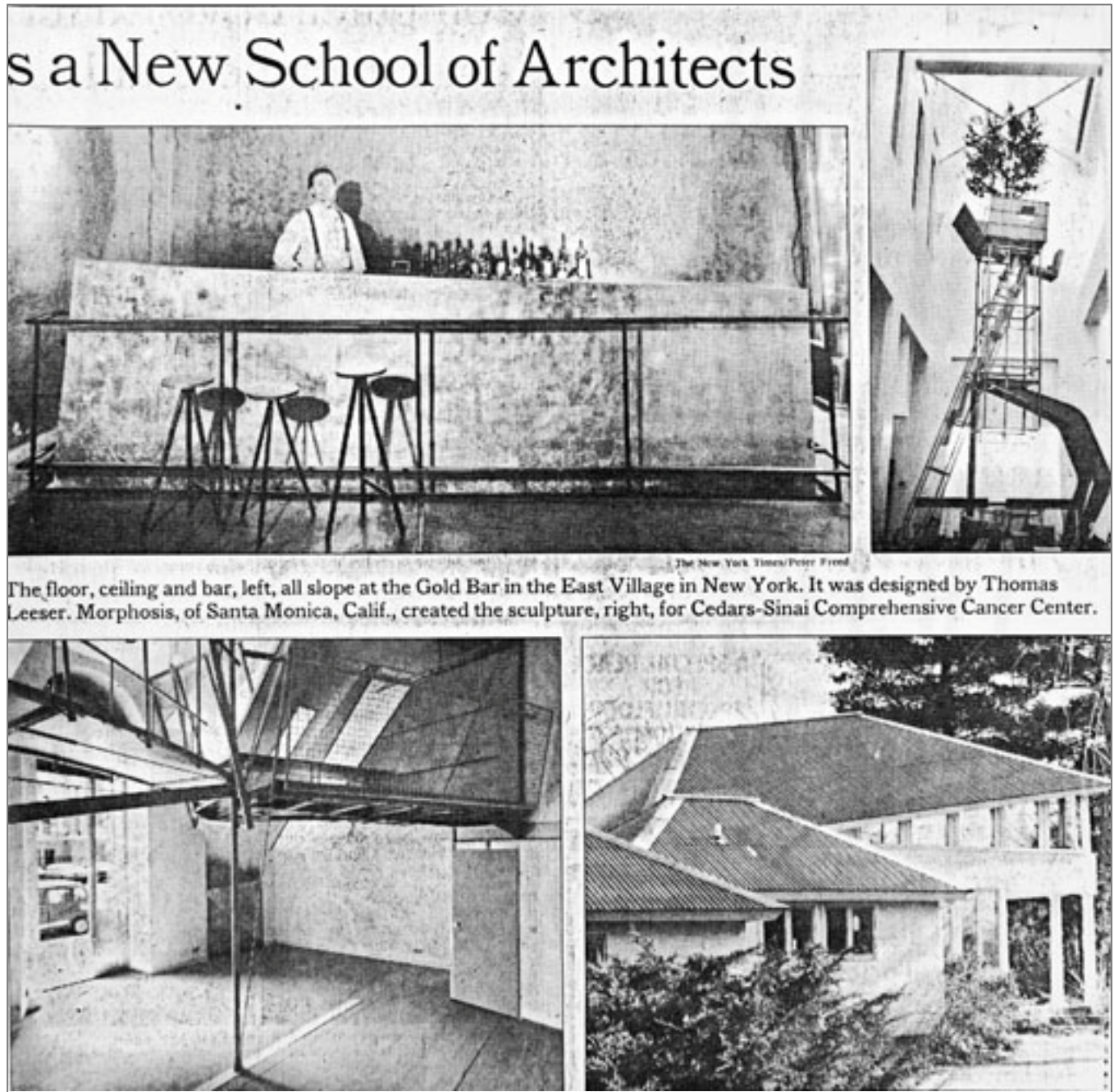


Fig. 2 a. Thomas Leeser, Gold Bar, New York; b. Morphis, sculpture, Cedars-Sinai Comprehensive Cancer Center; c. Coop Himmelblau, footbridge; d. Roger Bennet, house, Wilton, CT, (New York Times, February 4, 1988)



Fig. 3 Florence Cathedral, interior

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Fig. 4 Leon Battista Alberti, Sant'Andrea, Mantua



Fig. 5 Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park, Detroit

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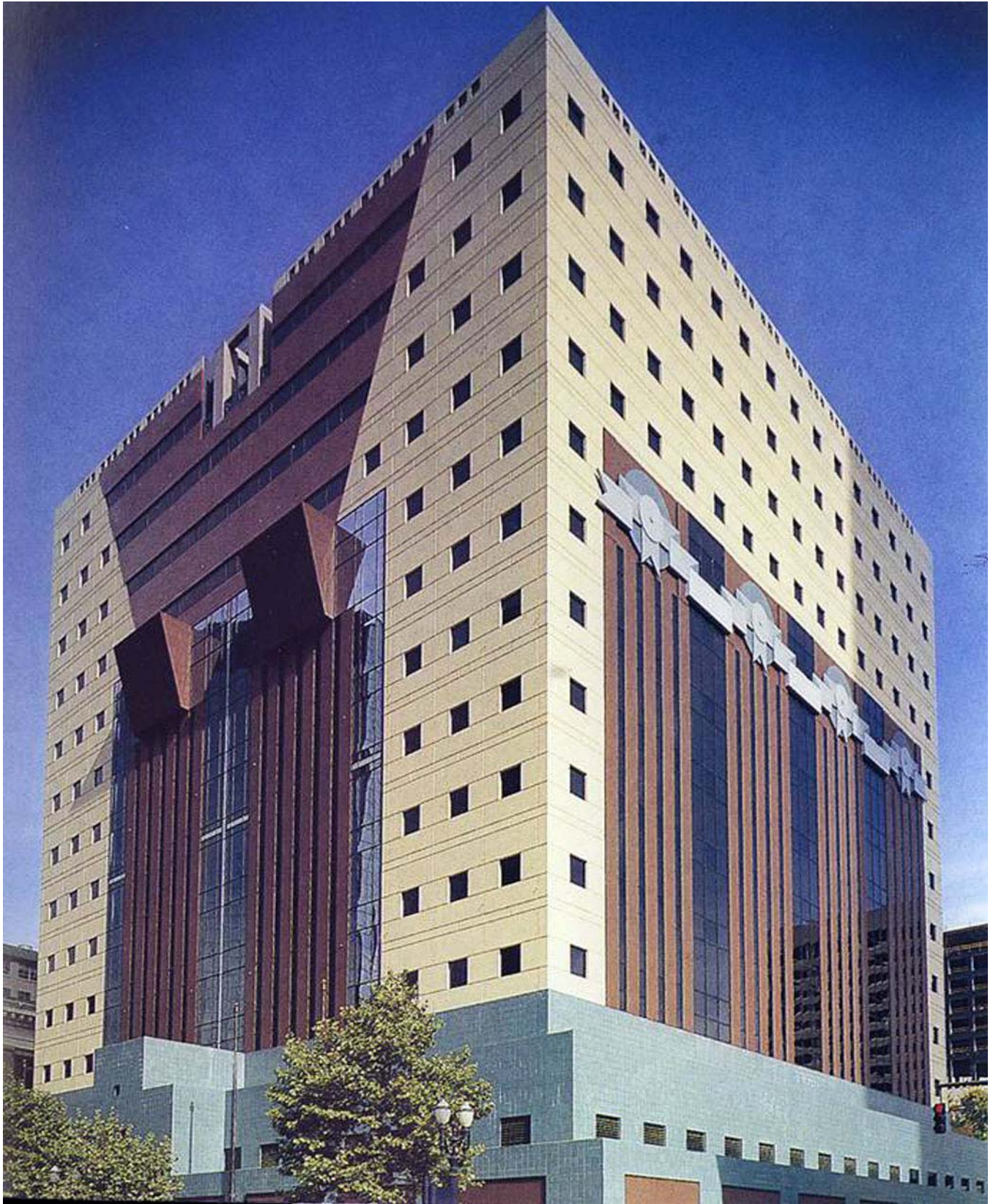


Fig. 6 Michael Graves, Portland Building, Portland Oregon

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Fig. 7 Scene from the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari



Fig. 8 Kurt Schwitters, Merzbau

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Fig. 9 Michael Graves, Humana Building, Louisville, Kentucky

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