

Many times at COD conferences I've experienced a general, to be polite, lack of enthusiasm for Michael Graves and his work. I know the windows in Portland are a disaster and some of the projects are bombastic. I also know that Graves (not to forget Venturi) inadvertently spawned a great deal of paper thin (often both materially and conceptually) postmodern kitsch. Post-modernism committed not nearly the injuries to cities in America as did the dismally cheerless modern visages unintentionally unleashed by Gropius, Mies and Le Corbusier.



photograph by Dusty Reeder FAIA

That said, I think Graves is one of most original architects of the 20th century. FLW, Goff, Birkerts, Gehry, and early Eisenman are also notably original 20th century architects. They all created walls on the street of a character that we had not seen before. Kahn, PCF, BCJ, LWA, exemplify instead an exceptionally skilled practice in the mainstream. Each is important, of course.



these and all subsequent photographs by Mense

Why are so many architects are so negative about Graves? It might be a matter of taste, but taste is for decorators. As architects, we need to be ready to avail ourselves of every possible move. Don't we need to embrace and celebrate those who show us another way, rather than isolating and disparaging them?



Recently I was in Washington DC and visited St. Coletta of Greater Washington, an organization that provides services to those with intellectual disabilities. How can anyone deny the value of this work? What kind of an urban scrooge is unhappy upon encountering this presence?



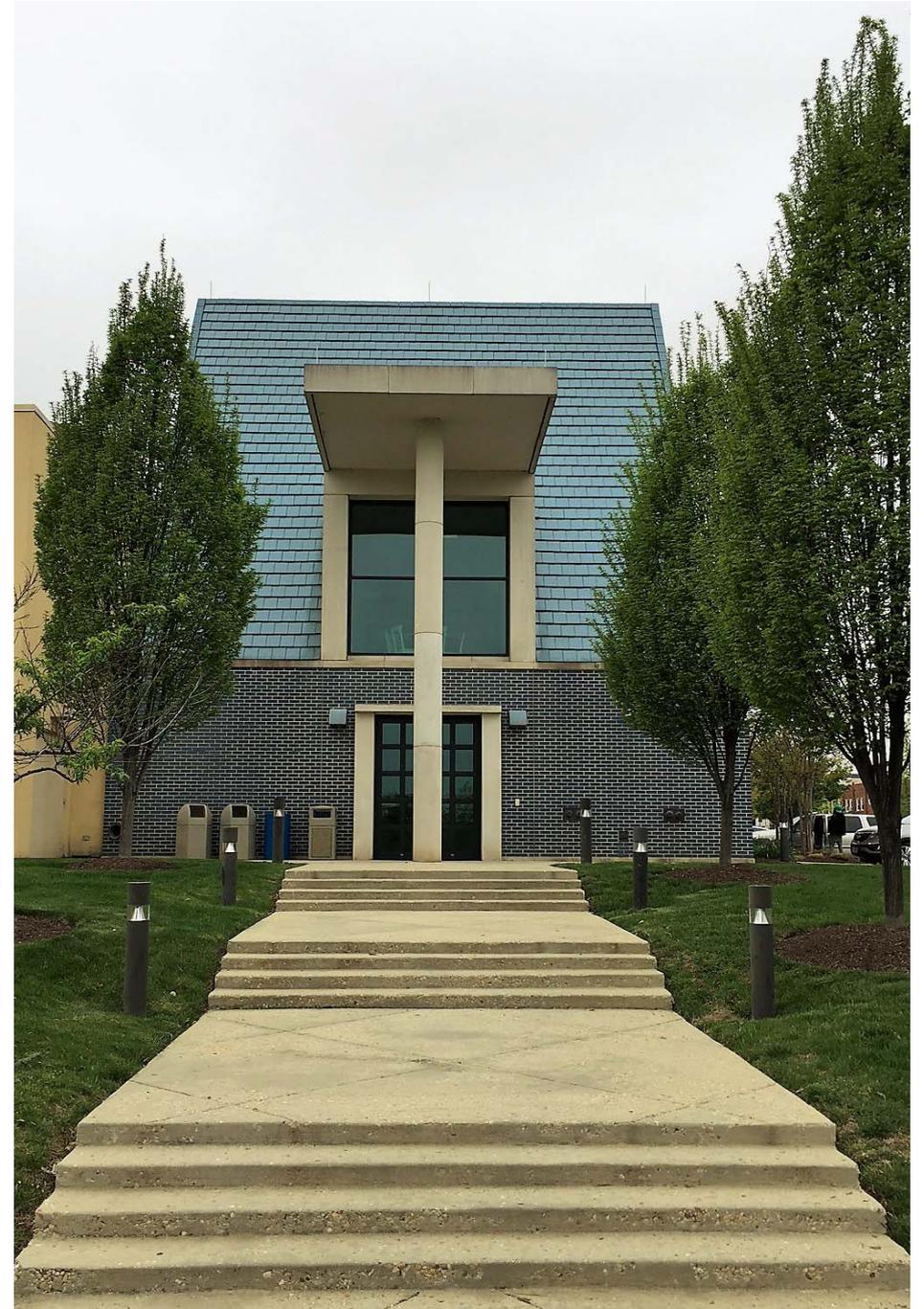
Any historicism or revivalism present is brought by the beholder. The building is more reminiscent of Ledoux and late Boullée than it is of colonial America.



It is wonderfully contextual in its mimicry of the adjacent row houses and the DC Armory, both formally and in terms of materials.



Some of the vignettes here are almost archetypal. One can claim, I suppose, that they are consequentially boring or trite. Instead, they present an enjoyable vision. They are embedded in the composition with exceptional grace.



Many architects inspired by the ideas of Louis Kahn talk a lot about their work arising from the specifics of the case. Nonetheless, too much of their work ends up having a similar appearance*, no matter the program or the location. Cities like Denver, Louisville, yes, even Portland, are blessed to have a Graves building to relieve the relative monotony of everything else. It's also worth remembering that the hegemony of a straight jacketed modernism was much more evident when most of Graves' buildings arrived in their cities. To what extent did Graves open the doors for "open-collared modernists" like KPF?



*For a long time, I've wondered whether guys like Thom Mayne and David Chipperfield would respond to this criticism by downplaying the importance of a building's appearance."

