Upon Michael Graves’ passing in March, critics and commentators were quick to submit their favorite version of the architect-designer for dutiful tribute. These conflicting accounts varied in their degrees of generosity, but nevertheless gelled into a singular narrative. The young turk from Princeton (actually, Indiana) and artiest member of the New York Five was pitted against the indulgent Mannerist, then tragically deposed Postmodern father—only to be later redeemed by the thousands of products he designed for popular consumption. These neat polarizations aside, the man was far more complicated and talented than such portrayals will allow. Graves the great architect could be intimate and monumental, iconoclastic and reverential, challenging and coddling—often all in the same building. The designer Graves, who bridged the taste gap between Milan and Missouri, was playful, almost impishly so. Chummy but constructive was Professor Graves, who, for more than four decades, ushered students through their architectural educations.

In the following pages, cherished friends, colleagues, and collaborators remember the many persons of Michael Graves. —Samuel Medina
A coy Michael Graves, not yet 50, poses in front of the Portland Building in 1982, just after the project’s completion. Revisiting the building last fall, Graves recalled the “uplifting” experience to an audience: “I had the biggest smile on my face. It was joy.”
PETER WALDMAN

Michael was always generous, and he always did drawings for me for birthdays, Christmas, or work anniversaries. He was my great teacher, as he was to many who were in his early classes. In his teaching, there was no division between the utility or inspiration of the past and the most avant-garde work we thought we were doing. It was all about an architectural continuity.

After I graduated in 1967 and went off to join the Peace Corps in Peru for two years, I returned to Princeton to work with Michael in his small office, what was really just a janitor’s apartment above a great bank in a Dutch revival building from 1892. It was just the two of us—we worked at a long, thin table in a compact garret room that was both the entry and conference room. On my first day of work, he expected me to make coffee, and I didn’t know how to use the coffee maker—I was never much of a coffee drinker. I don’t know if he was disappointed!

I remember, in 1970, when we were doing the Alexander House project—an addition to a wonderful 1750s stone house we designed a two-story addition for. (Some called it a Cubist Kitchen pretending to be a Garden Facade.) As we worked, he asked me things like, “Peter, on a Sunday morning when you’re about to read the New York Times, what kind of light would you want where you’re reading?” And I answered, “Well, if I start at sunrise, I might not put it down until noon.” So he said, “We’ll make sure you have light coming in the morning from sunrise to noon all year.” Michael was sophisticated in art, literature, and history, but he always brought these interests back to everyday life. Everything he touched—whether in his work, home, or office—was composed with a sense of life.

DONALD STRUM

I came to the office through nepotism. My architect sister had been working with Michael in the early 1980s when a position opened up in the firm. Basically, anything that needed to be done, I’d do. At the time, I was in my last year at the Parsons School of Design. A month before graduation, Michael called me and another colleague into his office to talk about a commission he had just received from Alessi to do an “American kettle,” which he expressed some puzzlement about. “I don’t really know what it means to do an ‘American kettle,’ but I know we need to do something that boils water fast,” he told us. He asked me to stay the summer to work on it, and so I canceled the cross-country bike ride I had planned.

There was me, this young kid sort of toying around, being asked to work on what would become an incredibly iconic design object. I was very excited and eagerly followed Michael’s lead, modeling his sketches and turning them into three dimensions. Of course, it wasn’t that simple, but Michael made it easy. When he drew a line, it was pure expression, and Michael captured everything about the tea kettle’s design very early on. Sometime later, Alberto Alessi arrived in Princeton with his entourage. We gathered in the library of Michael’s house, and they set this black velvet satchel onto the table. Alberto then pulled it off to reveal this beautiful thing, and, after a few minutes of silence, Michael finally spoke up: “Dio mio,” he said in an almost angelic way.

Decades later, after we had done hundreds of products for Target, Michael retained that kind of awe. I remember bumping into him several times at the Princeton Target on Sunday nights, when the store had been completely shopped through. I would find him either straightening shelves of his products, or he would find me. We would stand there in the aisle looking fondly at our products, commenting on them, always rearranging them, and talking about what we could do next.

KAREN NICHOLS

I joined the office in 1977, a year after I met Michael, right as he had just won the Fargo-Moorhead Cultural Center Bridge commission. It was a critical time for him because he had heard criticism from commentators and historians like Charles Jencks about his architectural language being abstract to the point of alienating people because it needed to be explained. With Fargo-Moorhead and also the Plocek House, which we were working on at the same time, he came to an important realization: In order to make his architecture
In 1974, Graves purchased an old Princeton storage facility and spent the following decade renovating the property into an Italianate villa. The home, which Graves renovated again after he became paralyzed from the waist down in 2003, was undoubtedly the most idiosyncratic of his 350-plus built projects—a kind of laboratory of living that fused painting, statuary, and Graves’ own domestic products.

“Often, heroes are lonely figures who challenge accepted norms of behavior by what they say and do. Think of Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis Kahn. Or Michael Graves.”
—Peter Eisenman
“Michael was sophisticated in art, literature, and history, but he always brought these interests back to everyday life. Everything he touched was composed with a sense of life.” —Peter Waldman
more intuitive and relatable for a broader audience, he needed to make it figurative enough to let them in—and abstract from there.

The impetus behind this development toward a “figurative architecture” was to give the spectator or passerby the opportunity to empathize with the world of buildings and objects around them. We would have very long conversations about the shape of a door or a window—that’s how vital this idea became for us. You could see it in Michael’s drawings, where he sketched out various elements of architecture such as arches, vaults, or keystones in an iterative way. They would begin as very geometric before gradually growing more and more figural.

But more than that, drawing—and making things—was something that brought us together as a practice. When the Portland Building was under construction, the staff compiled a collection of Michael’s collages that we sold to fund a trip to Portland for the entire office. We wanted to celebrate something we had done together, and Michael was very supportive in building that sense of camaraderie and artistic spirit. All this formed the foundation for what we do, and who we are.

ROBERT A. M. STERN
I got to really know Michael after what you might call his “Saul-Paul conversion,” when he began to change his style and look more carefully at the broader traditions of architecture. In the late 1980s, Michael and I were both doing work for the Walt Disney Company, and so we saw each other fairly often. He did marvelous work for Disney, and I had also done projects for them, while serving on the company board. We talked a lot then, and there were plenty of delicious opportunities to gossip about other architects, who shall be nameless. I’m a pretty witty guy, if I must say so, but Michael had a really caustic wit, and he could come out with amazing zingers—amazing.

Of course, Michael was one of the leading lights of the international Postmodern movement. He was a great leader and the capstone of the movement in a way. He didn’t write a lot of things, but when he did, he wrote most beautifully and intelligently. He was very heroic when that terrible affliction hit him, and he took to his wheelchair. His bright spirit endured, and, in fact, he was nicer. He realized how lucky he was to be alive, and we all realized how lucky we were that he was.

But mostly Michael was a great artist-architect—one of the best of his generation. There aren’t so many of those around, nor is there another one coming down the track behind him that I see. Maybe my vision is blurred, but I don’t think so.

FRAN LEBOWITZ
Ours was an instant friendship. It happens sometimes, not frequently. Later, he became my landlord. I was living at the Osborne on 57th Street, one of the oldest apartment buildings in New York, and it was always falling down and needed to be built back up. I was always fleeing in terror because it was incredibly noisy. One summer they were putting on a new roof, and I wanted to get work done, but I couldn’t do it. Michael found me an apartment in Princeton, and sometime after, I rented a house he owned—the one that is in front of the house he lived in.

It was there that I wrote a children’s book that was eventually published in 1994. Michael’s girlfriend at the time said to me, “You know, Michael is very hurt that you didn’t ask him to do the drawings for your book. Why didn’t you?” And I said, “Because it never occurred to me that he had time!” I’ve known a lot of hard workers in my life—and I’m not one of them—but he just worked around the clock. I would see him Sunday afternoon, and then I would see him Wednesday, and in the interim he had been to Hong Kong. Meanwhile, I had been to the supermarket. He was a very hard worker, and lots of hard workers don’t do very good work. But that wasn’t the case with Michael.

Even though he was a very sophisticated, cultivated man, Michael retained a kind of midwestern quality. Not a naiveté, but a lack of snobbery. I mean, his favorite food was Peeps—not favorite candy, but favorite food. Of course he had his usual professional snobberies (I, myself, have many), but there was still something nicer about him. Michael didn’t have contempt, which is a quality very common in architects.
ALBERTO ALESSI
In January 1980, I traveled with Alessandro Mendini to Princeton to visit Michael as part of our research for what became the “Tea & Coffee Piazza” project. We visited his new home, which he was finishing around that time. It was like entering a Pompeian villa. Michael was proud of the water basin that had come from a Le Corbusier building. And how can I forget his “man purse” that he carried with him? Creased and lived in, it was a meaningful clue to his personality. I was surprised at how busy he was with some big architecture projects. Nevertheless, he told us that from that moment on, he planned to devote half of his time to product design. I saw this as a good opportunity to propose the collaboration with Alessi.

I last saw Michael in Philadelphia, where we had been talking about our new collaboration for 2015, the “Tea Rex Kettle.” He was very energetic. Graves had been our design hero during the 1980s and 1990s because he was able to tune in to the tastes of the public. This is his contribution to twentieth-century design history, the clarity of “popular taste” in high-end industrial design.

RON JOHNSON
I had wanted to work with Michael before we were ever introduced and I had traveled to Europe several times and saw how good design generally equalled high-end luxury products. At the time, I was an executive at Target and thought, why not bring this kind of design to middle America, but make it affordable? When I did meet Michael, in Minneapolis, in 1999, and shared the idea with him, he immediately supported it, noting his frustration about how most of his designs were out of reach, price wise, for his Princeton students.

I remember early on in our partnership when we spent two days walking the halls of the Frankfurt Ambiente trade show. It was so energizing, talking the whole time about what we could do—Michael with Target and Target with Michael. At the end of the second day on the bus ride back to our hotel, I asked Michael if he enjoyed the show as much as I did. He looked at me and said, “No. I would have preferred to spend two days in my hotel room imagining what we could create rather than looking at the work of others.” That insight—that great design is born of the imagination—taught me more about design than anything had before. Design must be created; it can’t be copied. And at that Michael was a true genius.

DAVID MOHNEY
Michael did a lot of projects at a lot of different scales—hundreds of architecture projects, thousands of furniture pieces and products, and who knows how many paintings. I think what gets overlooked in all of that productivity is how much teaching was every bit the equal of practice to Michael Graves. He was my teacher at Princeton in the late 1970s, and we reconnected five years ago when I moderated a debate between Peter Eisenman and Michael. We had such a good time we decided we should make a book together, which required years of interviews with the two of them, both together and separate.

From these conversations, Michael got to really know me, and a year ago he asked me if I could get involved with the new school of architecture at Kean University, which was named in his honor and whose advisory board he chaired. That summer, we traveled to Wenzhou, China, where the school’s second campus is based. On the last leg of the trip, we went to Hangzhou to meet with Wang Shu, the Pritzker laureate who designed the campus for the Academy of Art there. Wang showed us the school’s most recent building, which is thoroughly modern, with minimal detailing and a giant undulating roof and a perforated facade—basically, the opposite of Michael’s work. But after three or so minutes, Michael turned to me and said, “This is a wonderful work of architecture.” It wasn’t about style, it was about something being good and of having quality and values. Michael’s appreciation for that building—for all honestly good buildings—made it clear how strongly he was committed to not just teaching an aesthetic or style, but to teaching better architecture.

RICHARD MEIER
I was introduced to Michael in 1962 by a mutual friend who was working in the office of George
Nelson. She said to me, “There’s someone working here who I think you’d really like to meet.” We struck up a friendship very quickly, probably because we were both architects who painted. We did a competition together that we worked on in Nelson’s office. After that, we rented a studio on 10th Street, in what was the Tanager Gallery, where we painted after work and on weekends. Michael did wonderful paintings with a palette knife, and I did large abstract expressionist paintings. Willem de Kooning’s studio was next door, and one day he walked by and poked his nose in. I looked at him and back at what I was doing and thought, “I better stick to architecture.”

Michael and I also taught together. It was the mid-1960s, and I would travel down to Princeton for class and, after, dinner with Michael. When he came up to New York, we’d get together to talk. It was all very usual for a close friendship that lasted more than 50 years.

Just the week before he died, on March 3, I was sitting next to Michael at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, where we had a meeting to decide on this year’s awards. He was unusually quiet, but engaged nonetheless. Then he passed away. It’s amazing and very sad. But it was nice to see him get the kind of appreciation he did in the last few months of his life.

PETER EISENMAN

Michael Graves lived a heroic life. Today, when “starchitects” are denigrated openly—not only in the media, but also, absurdly, in the profession—to be called a hero is to receive a badge of courage. Every discipline needs heroes—film, sport, literature, music, science, even architecture. When I was a student, I needed heroes to learn from. And today, my students need heroes. Often, heroes are lonely figures who challenge accepted norms of behavior by what they say and do. Think of Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis Kahn, or Michael Graves.

I first met Michael at Harvard in 1959, and joined him at Princeton in 1963 to teach. We spent many an evening drawing on the same boards for competitions, I on plans and he, drawing upside down, on elevations. We did projects like the Jersey Corridor together, and also started the...
“Michael was a great artist-architect, one of the best of his generation. There aren’t so many of those around, nor is there another one coming down the track behind him.” —Robert A. M. Stern
CASE (Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment) meetings, which later led to the book Five Architects that Paul Goldberger dubbed “The New York Five.”

Back then, Michael was the whitest of the so-called “White”—or modern—architects. When Le Corbusier died, we stayed up all night to mount every page of the Oeuvre Complete on the walls of the school’s gallery, over which we laid two giant Xs of black crepe. Michael was such a Corbusian that he even changed his signature to mimic Le Corbusier’s. He was a straight-line Modernist, albeit with a flair—witness his Benacerraf, Hanselmann, and Snyderman houses.

Then, suddenly, a few years after Five Architects, he produced something radically new: the Fargo-Moorhead Cultural Center Bridge. This was no ordinary Postmodernism in the way architects and critics used the term. This was an originality honed by the authority of the modern. Michael’s unique command of art and architecture allowed him to imagine arches with no keystones and a column made of water.

In 1980, after winning the Portland Building competition, and with the success of the Venice Biennale “La Strada Novissima” exhibition, Michael was king of the hill. Numero Uno on the world stage. But later, after losing the three-year struggle to gain approval for his brilliant and eccentric diptych proposed for the Whitney Museum expansion (1985–1988), Michael’s hegemony, like Postmodernism itself, began to erode. He no longer held architecture’s center stage. Yet he persisted, in his own way, to turn out more design, big and small, than any architect of our generation, just as he would do again following his debilitating illness in 2003.

Michael couldn’t abide students who didn’t take their work seriously. But he was especially generous with those who did, and unlike most other teachers, he could draw every building he taught them. He was a consummate talent, an artist-architect, and a teacher who challenged how we think by how we see. Very few can do that. Very few ever try. Michael did try, and therein is the mark of a hero, a master of the discipline who passed on everything he knew.

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PETER WALDMAN is an architect and professor at the University of Virginia. He was among Michael Graves’ first students at Princeton in 1963 and, later, one of his first employees.

DONALD STRUM is principal of product design at Michael Graves Architecture & Design. He has been instrumental in developing the firm’s brand partnerships with Alessi, Target, and more.

KAREN NICHOLS is a principal at Michael Graves Architecture & Design. From 1977, she worked closely with Graves on his most well-known architectural projects, including the unbuilt Whitney expansion.

RON JOHNSON is an executive who masterminded the Michael Graves Design Collection for Target. Johnson, who has worked for Apple and JCPenney, is now founder and CEO of Enjoy.

ROBERT A. M. STERN is founder and senior partner of Robert A.M. Stern Architects and dean of the Yale School of Architecture. Alongside Graves, he has designed several buildings for the Walt Disney Company.

FRAN LEBOWITZ is a writer and social commentator. A longtime personal friend of Graves, she collaborated with him on the children’s book Mr. Chas & Lisa Sue Meet the Pandas. In 2010, she introduced Graves at his induction ceremony at the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

ALBERTO ALESSI is president of Alessi Spa and head of the company’s marketing strategy, communications, and design management. He initiated Alessi’s decades-long partnership with Graves.

DAVID MOHNEY is acting dean of the Michael Graves School of Architecture at Kean University in Union, New Jersey. Mohney is preparing a book on the early professional and academic collaborations between Graves and Peter Eisenman.

RICHARD MEIER is managing partner of Richard Meier & Partners Architects. In the early 1970s, he was a member of the so-called New York Five, along with Graves, Eisenman, John Hejduk, and Charles Gwathmey.

PETER EISENMAN is founder and principal of Eisenman Architects. He taught with Graves at the Princeton University School of Architecture in the early 1960s. Their joint architectural ventures include the Jersey Corridor Project from 1965.
A few years after graduating from Harvard, Graves joins the faculty at the Princeton University School of Architecture. Coinciding with this move, he founds his own practice in 1964, inaugurating a decade of formal experimentation.
Graves settles in at Princeton, permanently, in an old storage house he renovates over the next ten years. His firm expands at the end of the decade, when his work takes a dramatic turn.

Clockwise from top left: Graves, pictured in his mid-40s, stands at the entrance to his home, which he calls the Warehouse; Graves' personal library contained thousands of volumes on architecture, history, and literature; the garden facade of the Shulman House in Princeton (1976); the Shulman House living room; the design for the Fargo-Moorhead Cultural Center Bridge (1977) marks a shifting point in Graves' architectural career, when he begins to fuse abstraction and neoclassicism into a striking synthesis.
1980–1990

The Postmodern era. Graves’ architectural vocabulary grows more eccentric and gigantic, while new partnerships with product manufacturers lead to the formal opening of Graves’ design practice.

1990–2000

The buildings multiply, as the architecture grows simpler, almost toy-like — perhaps a byproduct of the Disney collaborations. At the close of the decade, Graves enters into a pivotal relationship with Target.

Clockwise from top left: Graves, in his mid-60s, admires a piece of his chess set (2000) for Target (right); the Malibu House (1992) reflects Graves’ architectural mood at the mid-decade — playful, generally unadorned, and calming; preparatory sketches for a telephone, which launches as part of the first Michael Graves Design Collection for Target in January 1999. Later in the year, Graves is presented the National Medal of the Arts by President Bill Clinton. “He gets as much pleasure planning a large building as he does designing a spatula,” Clinton says at the awards event.
In 2003, having been stricken by a spinal cord infection, Graves is paralyzed from the waist down. His architecture and design practices begin to concern themselves with problems of accessibility.
In the final years of his life, Graves emerges as a passionate advocate for universal design. He receives numerous recognitions, including an appointment to the administration of President Barack Obama, for his five decades of work.

Clockwise from top left:
Wall Clock (2013) for JCPenney, with whom Graves partners after his 13-year relationship with Target is dissolved; Graves, pictured in his Princeton office in October 2014, dons a bow tie for a fundraiser for the University of Cincinnati, his undergraduate alma mater. The Resorts World Sentosa (2010) in Singapore features the 470-room Hotel Michael, named in honor of Graves, whose paintings and murals decorate its lounge spaces; an elevation study (2014) for the Michael Graves School of Architecture in Wenzhou, China.