OBIT> MICHAEL GRAVES, 1934-2015
Ed Gunts remembers the strong willed provocateur and change agent.

He was a master of invention, and his ability to adapt propelled him to become not only a household name, but one of the most influential architects of his time. Over a 50-year career, he produced a body of work that both reflected and raised questions about the transitional era of which he was a part. In a global market increasingly driven by social media and visual imagery, he showed a way for architects and designers to distinguish themselves through branding, and to help their clients do the same.

Architect Michael Graves, who died on March 12 at 80, started as a wipe-the-slate-clean modernist but grew dissatisfied with the sterility of modern design and eventually embraced history and precedent as a way to add richness and meaning to architecture. He became one of America’s leading representatives of the architectural movement known as postmodernism. He was part of an early wave of “starchitects” who were recognized and won commissions because they had a distinctive, identifiable style. Some of Graves’ best work evinced a warmth and playfulness that echoed the exuberance of the 1980s and captivated clients, such as Michael Eisner at Disney.

Graves was equally well known for designing toasters, tea kettles, and other household products for
manufacturers and retailers including Alessi, Target, and JCPenney. He promoted his designer housewares with such aplomb that he became as well known as the stores that stocked them. His showmanship helped pave the way for other celebrity designers to create product lines for retailers, including Martha Stewart for Macy's, Diane von Furstenberg for GapKids, and Karl Lagerfeld for H&M.

Confined to a wheelchair for the last 12 years of his life due to a spinal cord infection, Graves reinvented himself as a "reluctant healthcare expert." In that capacity, he focused on improving products and healing environments for the sick, the elderly, and the disabled, including America's "wounded warriors" returning from military service.

In one area Graves did not change over time: As a Princeton University architecture professor for 39 years, during the advent of computer-aided design, he remained a staunch advocate of freehand drawing as the best way to think about and design buildings. His own lavish drawings and paintings offered a beguiling counterpoint to AutoCAD. He also refused to cede the job of designing building interiors to interior designers and space planners, preferring to design the whole building whenever possible.

Through it all Graves remained a strong willed provocateur and change agent, who gained an almost cult like following at Princeton and came to national prominence by questioning the status quo. Why can't buildings be more welcoming? Why are hospitals so depressing? Why can't good design be for everyone, at every scale? His timing was impeccable, in that he began his career at a time when modernism was no longer new and many architects were ready to explore other directions. Though he is associated with postmodernism, a label he resisted, Graves might more usefully be remembered as a proponent of humanistic design, an approach rooted firmly in the awareness and study of the human body, historic precedent, and context.
Graves became acquainted with the limelight early in his career, largely because of his education and connections. Born in Indianapolis in 1934, he studied architecture at the University of Cincinnati and Harvard University in the 1950s. He won the Rome Prize in 1960 and spent two years studying at the American Academy in Rome. After returning to the U.S., he began teaching at Princeton University in 1962 and founded his architecture practice in 1964. Early in his career, along with Richard Meier, John Hejduk, Charles Gwathmey, and Peter Eisenman, he was named one of the New York Five, a group of architects who adhered to modern design tenets. By the late 1970s, he had broken away from that approach and began designing buildings known for their color, ornament, and classicist forms.

Graves' breakthrough project, and one that clearly signaled his shift away from modernism, was his competition-winning design for the 15-story Portland Municipal Services Building, which opened in 1982 and was considered the first major postmodern building in the United States. Colored in blue, green, salmon, and cream, and featuring ornamentation that some likened to gift wrapping on a holiday package, the building spoke in a new language for architecture and put Graves at the forefront of the postmodern movement, with which he was thereafter inextricably linked.

Over the course of his career, Graves designed more than 350 buildings around the world and more than 2,500 products. Besides the Portland Building, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2011, his portfolio included the Humana Building in Louisville, Kentucky, the Denver Public Library, the San Juan Capistrano Library in California; the Michael Eisner Building in Burbank, California for the Walt Disney Company, featuring the Seven Dwarves as caryatids; the Swan and Dolphin hotels for Disney in Orlando, Florida; and scaffolding for the Washington Monument while it was undergoing renovation. He drew widespread attention for his renovation of “The Warehouse,” his residence in Princeton. In the 1980s, he designed an expansion for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, but it drew strong opposition and was never built.

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