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MALIBU COMPOSITION
A PLAY OF GRIDS AND CIRCLES EMBRACES ITS OCEANFRONT SITE.



OPPOSITE: A house in Malibu, California, by Michael Graves is on "a constricted site," he says. "There needs to be a kind of decompression

from the highway to the beach." The entrance courtyard provides privacy from the road. ABOVE: The entrance hall/rotunda. Steuben vase.

*Architecture and Interior Design by Michael Graves, FAIA
Text by Paul Goldberger/Photography by Scott Frances*

The oceanfront in Malibu, California, is among the most enticing, yet frustrating, places in the world on which to build a large house. The Pacific spreads out before you in all its glory, but many of the choicest sites are tiny, with a public beach at your back door and the Pacific Coast Highway at your front door. Though at the water's edge, the place feels strangely urban, since houses have no front yards and are nestled close together right on the road. It would feel like an Italian seacoast village rather than one of the most sought-after parts of Los Angeles if only the road weren't six lanes wide and full of traffic.

But the attractions of Malibu have long outweighed its difficulties for numerous entertainment industry figures and other Angelenos, who have made it their weekend getaway of choice for years and have commissioned ambitious villas by such architects as Charles Gwathmey and Richard Meier. Michael Graves was invited to design a house for an entertainment executive and his wife, who wanted to produce a piece of architecture that could hold its own in such serious company but would have a relaxed, informal quality. "They didn't want to use anybody their friends were using, but they cared very much about architecture and wanted a special house," Graves notes. The clients chose him because they liked the architect's own house, "a perfect blend of contemporary and



In the oceanfront living area, as in the rest of the house, Graves designed most of the furniture and lighting. The French doors open onto the terrace. On the far wall is *Voice 2*, 1982, a lithograph by Jasper Johns; his *Two Maps II*, 1966, is over the mantel. Carpet by Stark.





THE ROTUNDA, WHICH IS PANELED IN RED OAK, IS A SERIES OF PLAYS ON CIRCLES.



LEFT: The rotunda rises to the second floor, where double doors open to the master bedroom. "It's also a central element that leads to the oceanfront living/dining room," Graves explains. "Then the views are revealed." RIGHT: In an adjoining structure is a screening room.

traditional," the wife says, and because "we wanted to do it the way architects did houses long ago—when they designed the furniture, light fixtures, everything," she adds.

Graves's architecture is probably best described as a series of abstractions of classical elements, and he took quickly to the unusual challenges of building in Malibu. "It's difficult because you need a gate or a wall to protect the house from the road, but then you go through the wall and it hits you—boom—it's all there, there's no room for a gradual approach," says Graves, whose office is based across the country in Princeton, New Jersey. But he saw in the tight configuration the opportunity to create an entrance that would have something of the feeling of a courtyard house in a European city, where you move from the street first into an enclosed court and then, once inside the courtyard, you see the façade.

"The clients wanted the house to be surrounded by a wall, and I realized that would give me the chance to do the kind of façade I might not have done right on the street," the architect says. Indeed, the front elevation is grand, formal and symmetrical, and, like all of Graves's work, it suggests an original synthesis of classicism and

LEFT: The dining area features a built-in bar/cabinet in figured maple. "It balances the fireplace in the living area at the opposite end of the room," says Graves. On the wall is an undated etching by Matisse, *Nadia au Profil Aigue*. Tiffany's china; Steuben vase. Stark rug.





modernism. It manages the trick of being both serene and powerful: two large rectangular masses project out from a recessed center, vaguely recalling Adolf Loos's celebrated 1910 Steiner house in Vienna. But where Loos was severe, Graves has made his villa almost fanciful. The side masses are bigger—each one has a huge, six-part gridded window upstairs; below are the garage and maid's quarters—and he shortened the distance between them to

just ten feet. In this narrow center, set back under a striped canopy, is the front door.

The symmetry of the façade is reflected in the interior, in part because of Graves's love of classicism and in part because of the husband's desire to see the ocean immediately on entering the house. "He said, 'I want to come off the Pacific Coast Highway, park my car and get the whole thing right away.' His wife and I both thought we should move a

little more slowly, especially since the house faces west, right into the sun," Graves explains. But clients and architect were in agreement that the house had to "address the water," in Graves's words, and that the formal and relatively closed façade facing the entrance court had to have a counterpart on the ocean side that was almost all glass.

The transition from one side of the house to the other is through a rotunda, featur-

ing a lantern skylight. The rotunda serves triple duty: It is an entrance hall, a central organizing space for the entire house and a way of limiting the views of the ocean from the front door. The rotunda doesn't block the view when you enter, but rather narrows and frames it and saves the full panorama until you have moved all the way into the living/dining room, which runs along the rear of the house, facing the

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ABOVE: The master bedroom has northern and western exposures. "The round window was designed to frame the view of a peninsula up the coast," the architect points out. Off-white and soft green were used for the buildings as a cool counterpoint to the strong sunlight. Stark carpet.



LEFT: The beachfront façade. "I wanted light to be reflected inside as much as possible," says Graves. He placed the house at the same level as the seawall and chose copper roofing and cedar siding for their resistance to the effects of salt air and humidity.



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A guesthouse, with copper awnings, was added after the acquisition of the adjacent property. "The guesthouse is recessed to give the main living pavilion views of the garden and coastline," notes Graves. "The vaulted screening room acts as a buffer between them."

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ocean. Graves managed to satisfy both the husband's desire to maximize the view and the wife's desire to parcel it out more slowly.

The rotunda, which is paneled in red oak, is a series of plays on circles. A central stair circumnavigates it, and on the second floor, the walls are interrupted by round openings with metal railings in a wave motif. Beyond his fondness for inventing his own imaginative abstractions of colonnades and porticos and towers and vaults and verandas and cupolas—many of which find their way into some part of the house—Graves is known for his lavish, deep and subtle colors, particularly terracotta tones. He made a sharp break from his typical palette here, but not in the direction many architects who love color do when they work beside the Pacific. Graves chose not brighter, more intense colors than usual but instead simplified his palette to the point of using only one real color, a soft, pale green that echoes the color of the ocean and yet has the subtlety, if not the richness, of Graves's more renowned hues. Every surface in the house is either paneled in red oak, painted in some variant of this color or painted off-white.

"This isn't like one of those eastern cities, with different kinds of light," Graves points out. "The sun is intense and bright, and I wanted the house to feel cool, simple and open, a presence on the water."

The rotunda also serves as a stair hall, leading up to the master suite, which runs across the second floor above the living/dining room, and to a pair of bedrooms. Both the master bedroom and the living/dining room have large verandas facing the water; the bedroom's is detailed with the same wavy railings as the rotunda. The two stories of verandas turn the oceanfront façade into a stacked porch, making this side of the house look like a version of a southern double-decker frame cottage. But like so much of Graves's architecture, the allusion to the past is gentle and playful. The scale of the rear façade is large but is articulated in a way that is graceful and slightly abstracted, so it feels neither fussy nor pretentious.

When the house was completed, it was actually a composition of two struc-

tures, since beside the main house, and connected to it by a short corridor, is a barrel-vaulted pavilion used for informal entertaining and as a screening room. "The owner said he and his colleagues—other movie people—all like to get together on the weekends, and someone always has to show everyone else their latest release," says Graves. "This room had a purpose beyond just the family, but the owners wanted it to feel domestic, not like a theater." With that in mind, Graves covered the vaulted ceiling and the walls with fabric and arranged some chairs on the French limestone floor. When the screen and the blackout shades are retracted, there is no hint that the room can be used to show movies.

The tightness of the property didn't allow for much more than a small lawn and pool between the structures and the beach, and from the day they first bought the land, the owners had been trying to acquire an adjacent parcel. Not long ago they managed to buy it, opening up the ocean side of the property. They asked Graves to add a second pavilion that would serve as a guesthouse, as well as provide additional entertaining space adjacent to the swimming pool. The new pavilion, which was completed a couple of years ago, turns the house into a more complex assemblage of buildings than before, and it acts as a pleasing and restrained counterpoint to the original sections. The guesthouse is more like a conventional beach house and less purely Gravesian, as if it were intentionally deferring to the existing wings. It is more frankly modernist than any other part of the residence, low and horizontal where the other buildings are high and more aggressively sculptural; its only conspicuous architectural elements are simple round columns supporting a pergola and three large copper awnings.

"The owners didn't want this one to shout—they just wanted it to be low and to face the ocean," Michael Graves remembers. "I've been going to Malibu since the seventies, and I have memories of just hanging out right next to the ocean, relaxing in the water and on the sand. I wanted this house to capture that." □

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sic Lutyens benches beneath the giant beech trees and elms nearby. The seats, painted in sumptuous custom colors by Donald Kaufman—purple, ice green and what is best described as a terracotta coral—are part of the composition. "They're three separate points of excitement in the middle distance," Johnson notes. (Additionally, teasing glimpses of this intervention can be had from the owners' Richard Meier house.)

The ordinariness of the chain-link fencing belies the complexity of this enterprise. The architects hired a special fabricator and boat builder, as the construction problems of the pavilion's unusual shapes and forces were similar to a ship's. The supporting corner columns and interior bracing had to be elegantly thin; if they were too attenuated, however, the structure would collapse. Johnson claims that the built forms were something of a surprise. As for the client, his first sight of the model left him intrigued with regard to scale. "It could also have been for a city space, like Lincoln Center," he says. "It could have been a hundred feet or a thousand feet."

The observation was well taken. Just as Johnson has applied the skewed forms of his own property's small visitors' pavilion, the notorious Monsta of 1995, to projects as large as Madrid's paired Puerta de Europa skyscrapers, the Chain Link Pavilion's sharp-angled triangles have provided the architect with a new vocabulary that is also infinitely expandable. One of the firm's current projects, a renovation and additions to Manhattan's 1930 Chrysler Building, includes three glass-and-steel pyramids that will soar to heights of over seventy feet. Johnson claims that the new Chrysler Center complex gave him "an excuse for a folly on Forty-second Street, bringing the tower's spiky metal crown to street level." This one, however, will have a function: a two-hundred-seat luxury restaurant, to open next year.

Wherever he chooses to apply his new idiom, the result will undoubtedly be marked by the same playfulness that informs the *folie*. Lest we forget the importance Philip Johnson accords to this aspect of his design, he is planning a book that addresses the issues of architecture and play in his own work. □