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Henry Bowles

Mission Imagery, Introverted Spaces

*San Juan Capistrano Library, San Juan
Capistrano, Calif. Architect: Michael Graves.
By John Pastier*



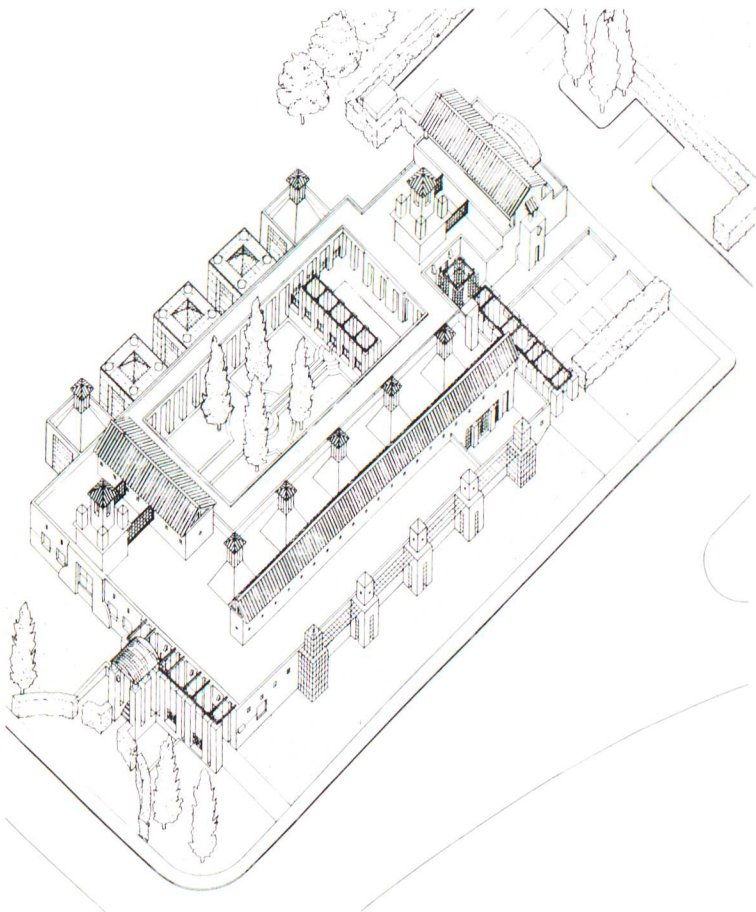
For the second time in as many years, Michael Graves, FAIA, has completed a polychromed public building in the center of an older, tradition-conscious West Coast city. Each commission came about through a national competition in which three well-known architects were chosen from a longer list and asked to prepare designs for the final selection. These are the similarities, or more accurately, the coincidences, for otherwise the two buildings are remarkably different.

Few, if any, architects have been unaware of the Portland Public Services Building, and few have lacked an opinion about its design. The San Juan Capistrano Public Library will not go unnoticed, but it will have neither the renown nor the notoriety of its predecessor. It is a quiet and intimate structure that is also complicated and quirky. Portland's design was mainly externalized and boldly set out to express the pomp and power of municipal government through conscious architectural monumentality. Capistrano looks inward rather than outward, creating a series of internalized worlds and private experiences through carefully differentiated spaces of nicely gauged human scale. In an electronic age when reading is said to be in decline, it draws on the imagery and spatial sensibilities of earlier periods to create a setting that is an effective inducement to read, or at least browse. Judging from its heavy and enthusiastic patronage, the San Juan Capistrano is a runaway popular success.

The town itself, located halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego, is something of an anomaly. It dates back more than two centuries, making it virtually pre-Columbian by California standards. This antiquity is not much in evidence, save for the famous mission that is widely considered to be California's finest and that has attracted a flock of 20th-century souvenir shops as well as the legendary returning swallows. Most of the town's present character has resulted from its location in the path of Los Angeles' southward expansion and San Diego's northward growth. Being larger, Los Angeles has reached Capistrano first, and although the latter has a population of only 21,000 or so, its fivefold increase from 1970 to 1980 made it one of the fastest growing cities in the state. Topography and casual street patterns have spared it the gridiron form of a typical Orange County suburb, but it has still not managed to avoid the fate of a freeway town on the suburban fringe. Its most visible response to its own history had been, until lately, twofold: Its street signs bear rustic lettering not easily legible to motorists, and it has kept its fast-food outlets near the Interstate while ensuring that they are landscaped and that their signage is discreet.

About five years ago, however, San Juan Capistrano began a conscious effort of addressing the physical issues raised by its rapid expansion. It adopted a growth management ordinance limiting residential construction to 400 new units a year and

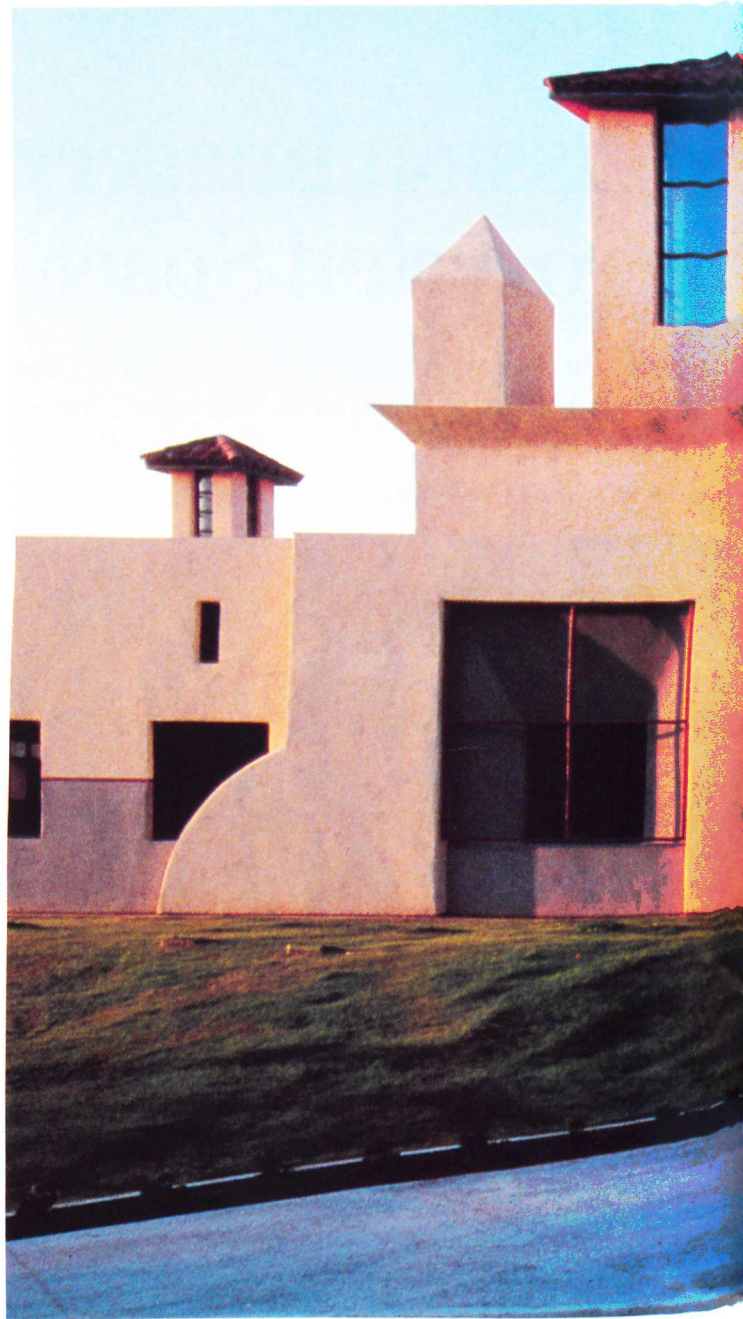
The elaborately articulated and complex library as seen from afar.



Accessible, intricate array of spaces.

retained Charles Moore's Los Angeles office to help develop architectural design guidelines for new nonresidential development in critical geographic zones. Moore Ruble Yudell's response was a sensitive but common-sense document that could be followed by the laypeople who would have to implement it. It defined the existing historic styles in the city as primarily California coastal and mission, identified their salient elements, and gave illustrated examples of their proper and improper use. Its goals were to foster intimacy, layering of views and spaces, arcades and small courtyards, richness of building surface, and a play of light and shadow.

Soon after these guidelines became official policy in 1980, they were put to use in the design competition for the library sponsored by the city and the Orange County Public Library system, on a site just a block north of the mission itself. Here too, the city showed considerable initiative, not only by holding a national competition for a relatively small building, but by funding the design process and augmenting the construction money provided by the county government. After screening 42 submissions of architectural qualifications and then interviewing five designers, the selection panel invited three to prepare designs for final judging 30 days later. The finalists were Robert A. M. Stern, FAIA, Moore Ruble Yudell, and Graves. Each



responded conscientiously to the building program and the design guidelines, but Graves' scheme embodied the guidelines less literally than the others. Its plan was more like a monastery or mission with outbuildings than like a unitary structure, and its forms were clearly Gravesian rather than being directly referential to early California. Indeed, the building bears a strong kinship to the architect's earlier New Jersey Environmental Education Center, but the design seems more naturally at home in California than it does overlooking New York harbor. The Graves proposal quickly became the favorite of most of the six-person jury, although Moore's submission also had some support within that body and in the community. Ultimately, the jury endorsed the Graves design by a four-to-two margin.

Because of the complexity and elaborate articulation of the library plan, it was clear that its construction budget of \$1.3 million would be exceeded. Once again the city of San Juan Capistrano showed its commitment to architectural quality by supplementing the original city and county budget to the tune of another \$500,000 in order to keep the design intact. In the end, the library came in \$200,000 under the revised budget, at about \$115 per square foot.

The realized building is somewhat modified from the original competition entry, mainly in the disposition of functions near its entrance and in the treatment of its open atrium, but it is still an unusually complex entity for its 14,000-square-foot size.



There are roughly 60 separate indoor spaces, not counting those for storage and utilities, and another dozen outside. They fall into a supple and well worked out matrix that is most evident in plan or axonometric drawings. Every major element has at least one cognate in another part of the building, and what seems at first to be a casually picturesque building composition proves upon closer inspection to be a rigorously organized concept.

Almost all of the building's many spaces are accessible to the public, an arrangement that would be anathema to one school of library science that stresses large open floors, central control, and security. The competition program reflected some of this philosophy and certainly did not mandate the intricate breakdown of space that now exists, but the order and symbolism of the Graves design made converts of most of the jury members. On the one hand, the library has the comfortable scale and familiar quality of a private house; on the other, it is as rich in organization as a small city. There are at least 20 axes, indoors and out, that give the building a decidedly processional quality and an almost urban sense of order. At the same time, its colonnades and galleries are so agreeably scaled that this tour-de-force of planning is intriguing rather than intimidating.

Graves' civic metaphor was not originally confined to the library proper. He proposed virtual closure of the street that runs between his building and the mission property to the south,

Above, the entrance canopy of lath atop a double colonnade, with overscaled window on its left. The interior spaces fall into a well worked out matrix, as seen in axonometric, above left.

and a clear pedestrian connection to a new church on that site. (This structure is a steel-framed simulation, at somewhat enlarged scale, of a stone church that collapsed in an 1812 earthquake, and whose ruined apse still stands a few dozen yards from its copy.) The connective site work, which would have also included avenues of trees and other landscaping, was not undertaken.

As befits a Southern California building, the library forges a strong connection between indoors and out. On the east, three small, square, reading alcoves project streetward from the main bookstack area, flanked in the same row by two similarly sized and shaped wood lath gazebos attached to the building. On the west side, the sequence is reversed; there, two large enclosed pavilions form the ends of a row that also contains three equally large lath houses covered with flowering vines and intended for outdoor reading. A walled outdoor garden anchors the northeast corner of the building, while a colonnaded atrium lies at its center. There, an independently colonnaded raised deck, central fountain, and quartet of cypress trees give this main outdoor space the formal order of a monastic garden—more literally than first planned, for Graves' original and somewhat asymmetrical scheme of a symbolic stream and pool in a metaphoric

Pyramidal light monitors and tiny clerestories.

landscape has become a rigid, foursquare arrangement with an off-the-shelf imitation stone fountain placed dead center. The reasons for this change are threefold: The jury was put off by Graves' original courtyard design (which was one of the high points of his proposal), its detailed design was the work of a local landscape architect, and cost ruled out a Graves-designed fountain. Although the resulting space is banal when it could just as easily have been lively, it is nonetheless pleasant.

Two sides of the atrium colonnade shade windows and glass doors that bring softened light into the children's and adults' reading rooms. An unusual proportion of the daylighting, however, comes from above via 12 light monitors and perhaps six times that number of tiny glass-block clerestory windows. The latter are atmospheric devices, but the monitors are major design elements. Outside, they pop up above the roof line to give the building much of its external animation and character, while inside they create distinctive pyramidal ceilings and a soft, diffused illumination, artificial as well as natural, since the sloping monitor sides also distribute light from suspended pyramidal incandescent fixtures. The interiors are not bright, but neither are they dark, and the handling of light here reminds us that in a Mediterranean climate the time-honored architectural response to sun and heat is to introduce them indirectly and sparingly. There is little doubt that the library evolves from Mediterranean tradition. Its organization is strongly Roman, as are some of its specific forms. Graves was also deeply interested in Spanish colonial architecture at the time of Capistrano's design, and his competition presentation included reference sketches of Central American architecture of both Spanish and pre-Columbian origin that served as sources for many design elements.

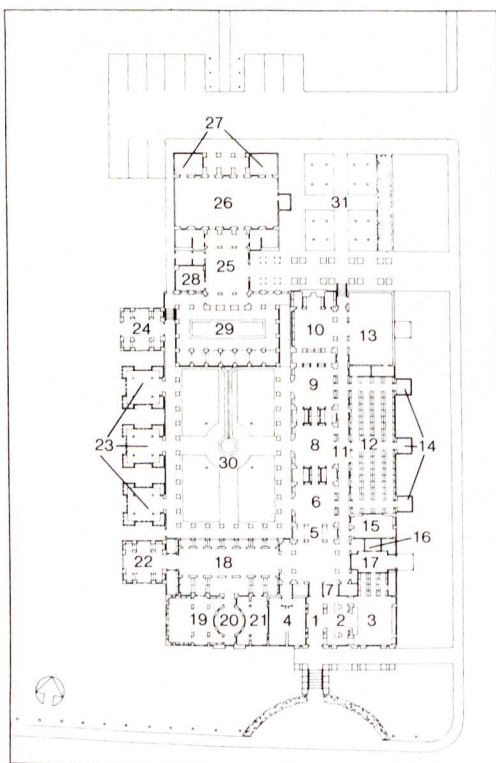
Of course the library also has conventional windows, but they have been largely concentrated in the children's wing since bookshelves demand wall space. This last consideration points up the ingenuity of the light monitors, for they require no wall openings and introduce strong spatial character as well as illumination. The diversity of natural and artificial light adds a dimension to Graves' well-known abilities as a colorist. To date, most

of his public work has not benefited from good natural light. His Sunar showrooms have been artificially lit, as are many of the public spaces in Portland. In the latter building, even the naturally illuminated spaces and the exteriors are usually dulled by the city's notoriously overcast climate. But in Capistrano the sun is accommodating, and the design takes full advantage of that circumstance. The strongly three-dimensional wood and stucco forms are put in bold relief by the light, and the exterior colors are ones that are flattered by the warm illumination: The dominant tone is a light golden beige (the color of old paper, perhaps), and there are accents of lavender gray, red stripping, terra cotta tile, and lath painted charcoal gray. Additionally, there are stenciled decorative patterns painted on the atrium walls.

Inside, the colors are even richer and more varied, especially in the long, narrow galleria that forms the adult wing's ceremonial circulation spine. There, dark blue doors and niches combine with a puce wainscot, light blue trim, pale gold upper walls, and a warm natural wood ceiling to form what may be the building's strongest space. Some of that strength lies in its undiluted architectural quality—this is a pure circulation space with no bookshelves, magazine racks, microfilm readers, or reference tables to distract the eye. In the reading and reference rooms, where such paraphernalia abounds, the colors are generally lighter and simpler: pale gold walls, light blue-gray pyramid ceilings, some natural oak chairs and desks, and overstuffed blue camel-backed armchairs and sofas. Here, some of Graves' subtle effects are drowned out by the inevitable clutter of occupancy: Compared to his quiet order, it is surprising to see how motley and visually raucous a normally arranged wall of book spines really is.

In the children's wing, the proportion of books to wall space is lower, there are more windows, and the architecture is even freer, especially in the cylindrical story-telling tower that materializes unexpectedly in the midst of otherwise strictly rectilinear geometry. Graves calls his architecture "anthropomorphic," and his sketches often seem inclined to stroll off to another part of their page. This design walks a fine line between being solemnly ceremonial and good-naturedly tongue in cheek. In the children's wing, the balance seems tilted appropriately to the side of intimacy and whimsy.

- 1 Foyer
- 2 Charge desk
- 3 Work room
- 4 Toilet
- 5 Information
- 6 Reference
- 7 Study carrel
- 8 Young adults
- 9 Spanish collection
- 10 Adults' lounge
- 11 Gallery
- 12 Stacks
- 13 Garden
- 14 Reading nook
- 15 Librarian
- 16 Kitchenette
- 17 Staff lounge
- 18 Children's lounge
- 19 Primary room
- 20 Storytelling
- 21 Conference
- 22 Children's fiction
- 23 Outdoor reading
- 24 Friends of the library room
- 25 Auditorium foyer
- 26 Auditorium
- 27 Storage
- 28 Kitchenette
- 29 Reflecting pool
- 30 Fountain
- 31 Orchard



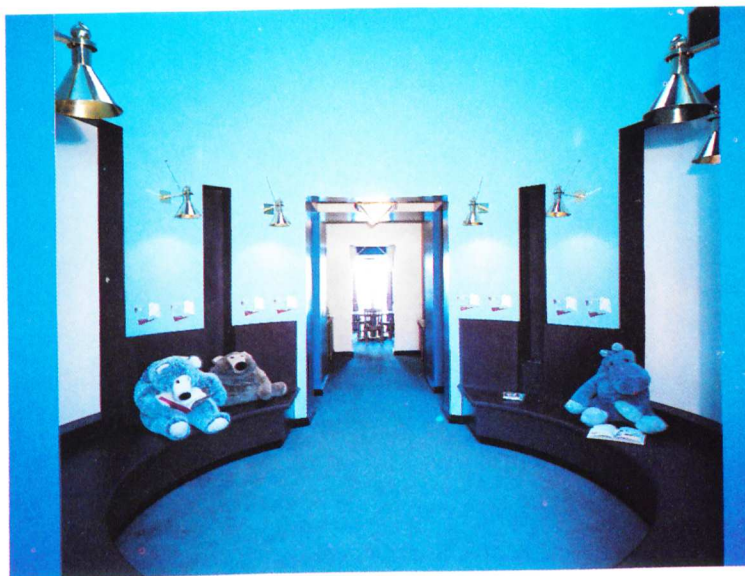
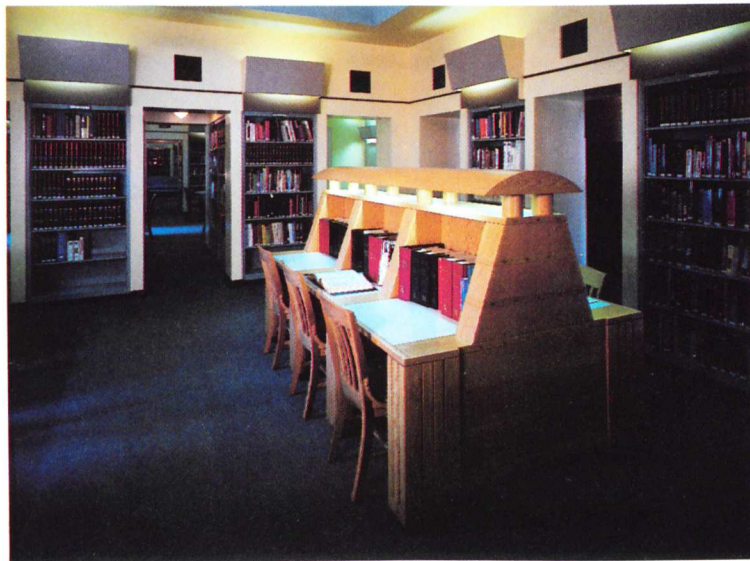
Opposite page, the long, narrow galleria, the adult wing's ceremonial circulation spine. Right, the children's wing reading room.







Photographs © Bruce Boethner



Strong acceptance by the public—and librarians.

The feeling of ceremony is strongest in the gallery, in the repetitive colonnades and gazebos along the exterior, and at the entrance. In the last case, the ceremonial quality is contradicted by a segmental canopy of lath atop a double colonnade. Its awkwardness, which may be ironically intended, is obtrusive, but a lath pediment might have turned the trick. Similarly, an odd facade element to the left of the entrance, enframing an overscaled window and perhaps symbolizing a hearth, seems exaggeratedly prominent in the composition. This south facade is the most problematic passage in the library design.

Back inside—and it is inside where the building's principal achievements reside—there is a distinct sense that this is truly a community building. The semidetached auditorium at the rear, whose form and placement suggest a chapel in a monastery or royal compound, widens the library's purposes and constituency. Flat-floored and unencumbered by permanent seating, it is used for exhibits as well as films and lectures. The adult wing has the comfortable air of a small student lounge, or perhaps a private club. Much of this feeling is due to the intimate scale of the spaces, the lighting and colors, small touches such as brass

Left, the periodical reading room with faux marble hearth. Clockwise from upper right: the reference room; the cylindrical children's story-telling tower; the flat-floored auditorium; and the auditorium's lobby.

table lamps that look like nascent Graves skyscrapers, and the overstuffed living room seating in reading areas. (So comfortable is this furniture that one normally Philistine newspaperman became an advocate of the building after sitting in it.)

The periodical reading room even has a hearth of faux marble aligned with the central entrance axis. Originally this focal point was to have been visible anywhere along the string of reading rooms and even from the front door 170 feet away, but magazine shelving installed in a central passageway thwarted that intention. Despite this lost opportunity, there is a strongly hospitable ambiance in this wing, and consequently it is well used. Part of the phenomenon can be credited to operation—in addition to standard books, there are tempting displays of magazines, cassettes, and Spanish-language titles—but the lion's share is a product of Graves' unusual architecture.

The design of their workplace has made the librarians increasingly aware of appearance, and pains are taken to respect the structure's spirit in the countless acts of operation and house-keeping that have visual dimension. The library has been an extraordinary magnet for readers, and new cards are being issued at the rate of a thousand a month. (This in a town whose adult population is perhaps 12,000 to 15,000.) Worker morale is high, and the county library system has received many employee requests for transfer to Capistrano from other branches. Such strong popular acceptance is rare in the case of any new building, and more so when it is granted to one as unconventionally cast as the San Juan Capistrano library.



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Above, the centrally located plaza with fountain and cypress trees and surrounded by colonnaded arcades. Top, the eastern facade has three small reading alcoves flanked by two lath houses; the auditorium is to the right. Opposite page, a reading alcove. □



Henry Bowles