

An Architect's World Turned Upside Down

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WEST ORANGE, N.J.

WITH pumpkin-toned linoleum floors, red brick walls and a clutch of metallic blue balloons at the reception desk, the color scheme at the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation here has none of the subtleties of a Michael Graves palette. But in the clinic's cafeteria on Monday, Mr. Graves was wearing a polo shirt in the cerulean blue he has made famous on everything from high-rise apartment buildings to Target spatulas as he lunched with a band of elderly ladies in wheelchairs.

Mr. Graves was in a wheelchair, too, jammed up against the table, a pair of black golfer's gloves by his tray. "They make it easier to lift the weights," said Mr. Graves, 68, referring to his physical therapy. Paralyzed from the waist down as a result of a recent spinal cord infection, Mr. Graves, the agile architect and designer, has spent the last 10 weeks at the Kessler Institute, relearning how to live and work, and revising his notions of day-to-day functionality.

Universal design, once just a matter of complying with an abstract code, has become a personal reality. His dining chair now has wheels, and his shower has support bars.

In late February, while Mr. Graves was visiting Germany, a sinus infection turned virulent. It now appears, said Dr. Steven Kirshblum, associate medical director at Kessler, that Mr. Graves developed either myelitis, a viral

infection, or bacterial meningitis. Whether he will ever walk remains to be seen.

Realization, Mr. Graves said, "comes on slowly."

"If you think positively, it will be a slow recovery and you're happy," he said. "If not, it will be a different life and you'll learn to live with it."

The timing of his illness could not have been worse for an architect who may have left some critics unchallenged and unmoved, but was embraced by the public. Mr. Graves was busy with projects for Target, which sells his affordable teapots, dustpans and chessboards. His office of 105 architects and designers, Michael Graves & Associates, was working on dozens of private houses and new buildings, including the United States Embassy in Seoul, South Korea. Moreover, his first Manhattan skyscraper - a 67-story mix of retail, office and luxury condominiums - was going up at 425 Fifth Avenue, at 38th Street.

In his room at the Kessler Institute, Mr. Graves recalled falling ill on what was a routine business trip to see clients. He packed two vials of medicine, both marked "Take two a day." Thinking the second bottle (an antibiotic) was a refill of the first (a decongestant), he took only the decongestant. He did not improve. Five days after returning to his home in Princeton, N.J., Mr. Graves was driven by severe back pain to the emergency room.

Mr. Graves, who lives alone with his dog, was accompanied to the hospital by two partners in his firm, Karen Nichols and Susan Howard, who became increasingly alarmed as he described a numbness creeping up his legs. The women spent

the night in his room, waiting for results from tests, which proved inconclusive.

"I remember the first night," Mr. Graves said. "It was so gruesome and so painful you want to die. I don't say that lightly; 14 hours of pain is a lot. Your legs are going numb, but you don't think paralysis."

By morning the paralysis had spread, and Mr. Graves was moved to New York-Presbyterian Hospital, where antibiotics and other treatments were administered.

The paralysis stopped at his midsection. After a six-week stay in New York-Presbyterian, Mr. Graves was sent to the Kessler Institute - the same clinic where Christopher Reeve went for rehabilitation. He has been living at Kessler since early April.

The goal of therapy now, Dr. Kirshblum said, "is for Michael to achieve independence at the wheelchair level."

While family, friends and clients were kept informed of his condition, news was withheld from the public until he was well along with rehabilitation.

Mr. Graves's private room at Kessler is a study in mealy beige with metal details. Personal touches reveal the architect in residence: his grandson's crayon drawings aligned in a neat row; a hand-painted poster from Disney with a note scribbled on it by a happy client, Michael Eisner: "I'm sitting in your building thinking of you." (Mr. Graves designed the Team Disney headquarters building, with a frieze of the Seven Dwarfs, which opened in Burbank, Calif., in 1990.)

Target supplied a DVD player, folding table and chairs, and a refrigerator. Framed photographs on the table include one of the office dogs, including his Labrador, Sara, and several of his new baby, Michael Sebastian. The baby, who was born in August to a former girlfriend who lives in Florida, was photographed with a pile of colored pencils; he will visit Mr. Graves at the clinic on Father's Day.

Mr. Graves is expected to remain at Kessler through the summer. Mundane activities like pulling on pants are still a major chore. He recalled that Bette-Ann Gwathmey, the wife of the architect Charles Gwathmey, "once described how she used to wear blue jeans so tight she had to lie down to get them on. I can really appreciate how that works now," he said.

Visitors come every day - most often one of his six partners, smuggling in a gourmet meal. He is already plotting how to get to meetings in Manhattan, by van with the big wheelchair, or by car with the collapsible one. On Monday, John Diebboll, who was once a student of Mr. Graves's at Princeton University and who has worked for the firm for 19 years, came by with a stack of drawings and some Benjamin Moore paint samples for the facade of the Art and Sciences Building at New Jersey City University.

"Work is the easiest thing to think about," Mr. Graves said, "The difficulty is living in a way that gives privacy, or whatever you're used to, without being demeaning."

"Everyone around here asks me if I'm going to design a wheelchair," he said, "but what about this stupid room?" His list of design abominations is long: the wheelchair arms are too high to slide under the sink; the shelves are

so deep he cannot get at anything toward the back. There are only two drawers within his reach. The window blinds are too high and on the wrong side. Ms. Howard turned a strip of gauze into a rope so he can reach the light over his bed. Each night, he has to make a list of things to be retrieved, windows to be operated, drawers to be closed before the last visitor leaves for the night.

"These are simple things," he said. "I'm not even talking about how ugly it is."

While his eyes have been opened to a new dimension of design, Mr. Graves is clearly not going to let his condition slow him down. In contrast to those movies where the hard-driving workaholic suddenly comes up against the fragility of life and takes up watercolors, he is not about to retire. "Michael has always placed a high priority on work and has often sacrificed aspects of his personal life in favor of his work," said Ms. Nichols, who joined the Graves office 26 years ago.

"In a way, it's fortunate that this disease hasn't compromised what he cares about most passionately, his design work," she said. "What's sad is that the things he loved doing outside work - golf and all his trips to Italy - aren't going to be possible under current circumstances."

Mr. Graves said he plans to cut back on the 30 or so lectures he gives each year and to work in the office rather than on the road. But he will continue to meet with clients at a new space, accessible by ramp and elevator, up the street from the present Michael Graves & Associates office, which is tucked into the picturesque but narrow rooms of two Colonial-era houses.

"There was a period of intense stress and strain," Mr. Diebboll said. "No one knew what was going to happen in the first month. We're in a routine now, and it's very clear it's going to work."

Mr. Graves developed a plan of succession five years ago, when he named six partners. Other notable architects of his generation have not yet made such plans. Richard Meier, one of Mr. Graves's oldest friends, said, "I have been thinking it's something I should be thinking about, but it's the kind of thing you put off until you have to face it."

Mr. Gwathmey of Gwathmey Siegel, who had lung cancer surgery in 2000, was more blunt: "We don't talk about succession. The associates are all very good but not really in that role. We encourage them to leave to do their own thing."

Meanwhile, Graves Design, the product design arm of Michael Graves & Associates, is expanding; 70 percent of its product design is for Target. "Michael is the dean of design for us," said Michael Francis, Target's executive vice president for marketing. "He showed us - and our guests - that you can take ordinary items and make them extraordinary."

Mr. Graves will design a house for a pair of Texas newlyweds as a promotion for the company's "Club Wedd" bridal registry. The house will be built by Lindal Cedar Homes, a kit-house manufacturer in Seattle. Lindal will also produce Mr. Graves's series of prefabricated Pavilion home additions, priced from \$8,000 to \$30,000. If the Pavilions succeed, Target may proceed with more experiments in affordable prefabricated Michael Graves houses.

Retrofitting his own home in Princeton, known as the Warehouse, has proved to be an aesthetic challenge. Two consultants from the Kessler Institute have made a checklist in anticipation of his return. But in a house where every grain of bird's-eye maple veneer has been carefully matched, and with a resident as opinionated as Mr. Graves, ripping out walls and adding grab bars will not be easy. More Tuscan villa than the 1920's furniture warehouse it once was, the Graves residence is the work of three decades of lavish attention. There is a double-height atrium and an antiquarian library that would be impressive in Alexandria. Luckily, the place has such generous proportions that almost every door is wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair. An elevator will be added, but in a way that will make the facade elegantly asymmetrical. The French doors leading to the dining room will be removed to make it easier to get to and from the kitchen. A circular railing in the second-floor hallway will also get the ax. And then there is the mountain of marble statuary, including a bust of Napoleon, that will have to be moved out of his way.

Mr. Graves's private bathroom will require the most readjustments. In order to install a shower wide enough to allow for a wheelchair to enter and turn around, the bidet must go.

"It was only used by one girlfriend once," Mr. Graves said. But the twin neoclassical pedestal sinks will stay for now. The guest bedroom on the second floor was long ago converted to an exercise room. It will be simple to change the type of equipment.

Mr. Graves does not know yet how he will accommodate Sara, the 11-year-old Labrador, at bedtime. For the past two years, he has been lifting her onto the bed. Now she will probably sleep on the floor.

The guesthouse will be outfitted for a caretaker or perhaps a couple to help Mr. Graves, who has been married twice and has two adult children but has lived alone since 1975. Now, he says, with evident emotion, "I wish I had a partner, somebody to help with this. I don't want a partner who is a servant but someone who is happy to be in there helping."

Every night, Mr. Graves dreams of walking again. The other day, he dreamed he was watching a Mets game and there was an advertisement for a futuristic film. "There was a superwoman with a 24th-century gun," Mr. Graves recalled. "She looked at me. I was walking. And she said, `The amphibian walks!' "

Mr. Graves laughed. "You really have to keep your sense of humor," he said, "or you're cooked."

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