

# An Architectural True Confession

*Madison Spencer*

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*How a young architect who had fallen under the influence of modern technological concepts, materials, and techniques, was rescued from his delusion by the woman he loved, who enabled him to see the light and return to traditional values.*



House VI, designed by Peter Eisenman

As an architect it has taken me a long time to master the limited palette of materials I have grown fond of—stone, brick, lime mortar, plaster, timber, wrought metals—and to understand fully the advantage they have over building systems often referred to as “new” and “modern.”

Why, might one ask, would schools of architecture not be interested in those simple, ancient materials of which the greatest cities of the world were built? First and foremost their lack of interest is due to the fact that any knowledge of these materials is sorely lacking within university faculties. The craft of building is no longer part of most curricula (rejected outright upon the demise of the old Beaux Arts traditions) and is relegated to preservation and architectural history programs. Within the esteemed schools of architecture in this country those studies have evolved into “building technology” courses where the ability to calculate structural capacities of steel, concrete and manufactured wood construction is the focus simply because that is what one must study to pass the requisite license exams for the national architectural review board. Beyond that, building materials are well off the radar of most aspiring young architects’ minds. While in law school an aspiring attorney learns the fundamentals: how to write a brief, the



full aspects of the major divisions of the law. In medicine, an aspiring doctor learns to deliver a baby, diagnose infirmities, secure vital signs and understand the entire human anatomy. In architecture, aspiring architects for the most part embark upon design studies with little or no concern for the nature of building elements at all—and we wonder why things have gone so seriously wrong. I too began my career with starry eyed optimism and a naïve disregard for the craft of building per se.

What saved me was the opportunity to restore and rebuild what was considered to be one of the great icons of modern architecture. No, not something from the early Twentieth Century, but House VI by Peter Eisenman, built in the 1970's and generally recognized as one of the important *late modern-works* of contemporary architecture. This house, which spawned much of the intensely complex and aggressive architectural fashion that confronts us today, was falling apart—just fifteen years after it was built. As one of Eisenman's designers I was charged with directing its resuscitation before it became a press nightmare. When I first visited it I found to my astonishment that the decay was overwhelming. Most of the roof had failed—it was flat, of course. The caulk around the siding joints, there seemed to be miles of it, was no longer weather-tight and the walls were rotting as a result of damp insulation within them. The humidity inside the house approached that of a greenhouse. The air conditioning had failed and because the house had settled unevenly the few

operable windows no longer worked while the large sheet glass windows and skylights sent the temperature through the proverbial roof. I began the repairs in earnest, but with the nagging suspicion that there was something fundamentally wrong with designed construction that had such brief durability.

When the work had reached a point of substantial completion, I dragged a gal I was dating out to see it all, and with boastful pride pointed out what we had done. I then went on to explain how critically important this house was to the advancement of modern architectural theory, that from this design most of the great advances in architecture today could be traced. She looked about and said she thought it all rather ugly, that she was shocked that a house in the country would have virtually no working windows in it, that it related not at all to its surroundings. She couldn't believe I had spent the better part of nine months trying to put it back together again. At first I offered several esoteric, fumbling responses but I came to see the truth in what she said (and soon thereafter, married her and left New York).

We moved to Charlottesville where there is an important architectural heritage manifest in an astonishing array of structures, in particular those of Thomas Jefferson, who designed and directed the construction of the University of Virginia. With its buildings linked by columned arcades ringing a stately lawn, this is one of the greatest classically inspired campuses in the world. Brick and stone abounds in this living architectural laboratory from which much may be garnered. There remains a sense of the craft that it takes to achieve such greatness. I took the time to visit many of the structures I had known in passing since my childhood, but this time around I studied them in all their exquisite detail. What makes our beautiful capitol building in Richmond, those magnificent stone barns at Breemo Plantation and the idyllic "Lawn" seem so timeless and appropriate today. How have they so admirably, gracefully and easily fulfilled, not only the functions envisioned when they were first built, but all of our modern needs as well?

Over time I have become convinced it is due to the level of craft—the mastery of the artisans responsible for the building itself—coupled with architectural intent that secures these works a permanent place within our communities. When we think of what makes our little community nestled here at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains so charming and livable, those fine structures and others like them are immediately called to mind. Imagine our nostalgia being based instead upon shopping malls with broad market variety, quickly built subdivisions on what was once pristine farmland and multiplex theaters with convenient parking. This strikes us as ludicrous, so then why do we willingly accept the destruction of all that is near and dear to us and accommodate these modern eyesores? The excuses frequently given are that "it costs too much to build so well", or that "the craftsmen simply don't exist that can do the work", and "that is an impractical way to build for modern uses", and worst of all, "this is what public wants!" I, and many of you that read this, know that those are hollow excuses and that the expertise and craftsmen capable of executing such work do in fact exist and stand ready to serve their communities. And no, *The public does not necessarily want this.*

[Back to Table of Contents](#)  
[Stone Foundation Home Page](#)