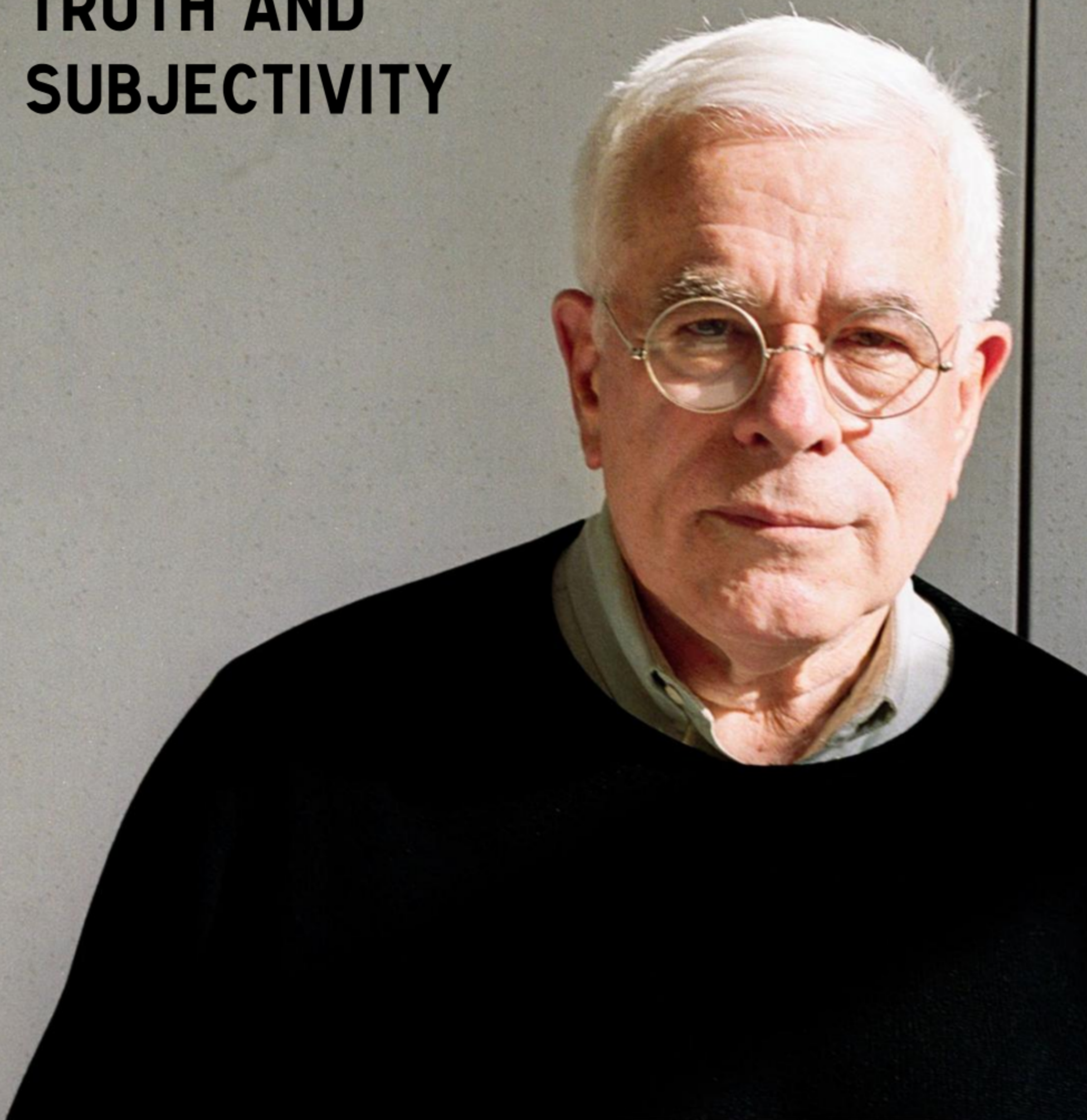


TRUTH AND SUBJECTIVITY



¹ Peter Eisenman. Photo by Chris Wiley.

In a conversation with IA&B, Peter Eisenman gives an overview of his process of design by discussing his early inspirations, beliefs, and by drawing interactive parallels with connoisseurs of philosophy, architecture and film-making that have informed his building, writing and teaching.

Images: courtesy Eisenman Architects

Peter Eisenman is an internationally recognised architect, author and educator. Prior to establishing a full-time architectural practice in 1980, Mr Eisenman worked as an independent architect, educator, and theorist. In 1967, he founded the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS), an international think tank for architecture in New York, and served as its director until 1982.

Among other awards, in 2001 he received the Medal of Honour from the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

IA&B: When were you first introduced to architecture, and what inspired you to pursue it?

PE: I was first introduced to architecture by an older student at Cornell University, where I was enrolled as a science major. I watched this student making models and drawings while I was in science labs, and I realised that I wanted to do architecture. I loved making models and drawings. This meant starting over with a new major, but I never looked back, and in the end I was awarded the design thesis prize when I graduated.

IA&B: You have quoted Derrida - a post-structuralism theorist and Le Corbusier - a modernist, as your influences. Could you explain how their differing principles have collectively influenced your ideology?

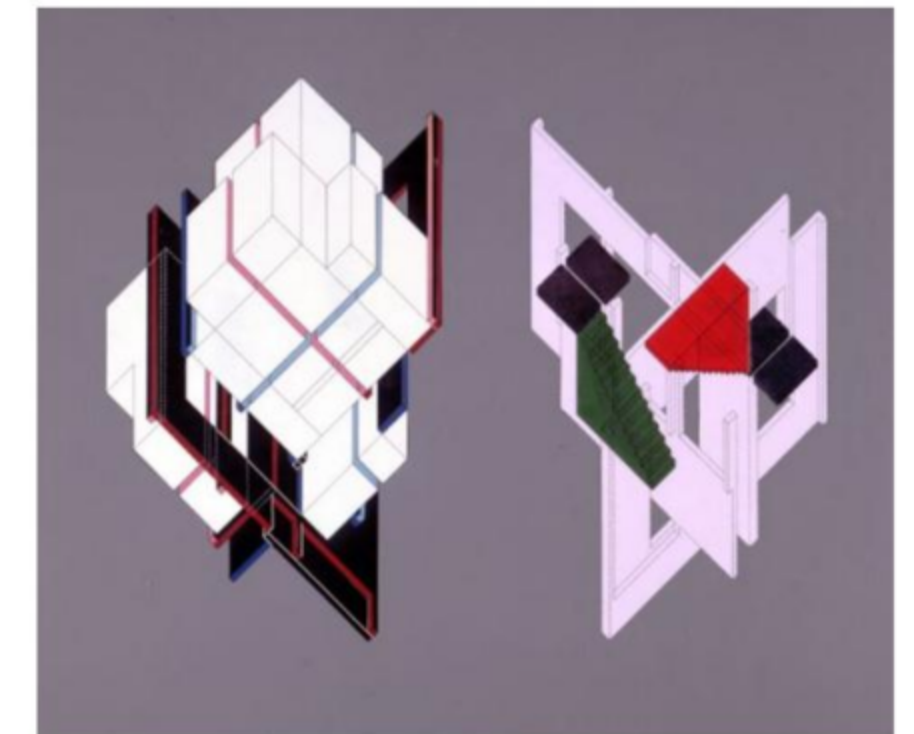
PE: Derrida is a philosopher and Corbu is an architect. There is no collective overlap between the two. One's thinking changes as one grows, and I am not as much interested in Corbu as I perhaps was 50 years ago, and I am less interested in Derrida today than I was 15 years ago. All influences change and modify over time, but ultimately there is no single collective series of principles that derives from either Derrida or Le Corbusier that influences my thinking. Derrida was important to me for the idea that there is no one-to-one correspondence between signs and their objects, which is an idea that always interested me. Corbu was interesting because of his setting out of the five points in 'Towards a New Architecture', and the four compositions in architecture, which for me still have enormous validity today. Coincidentally, there is a major Le Corbusier exhibition now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which I think will have a profound effect on the teaching and production of architecture in the next five years because of the passion, range and commitment to drawing and building that is exhibited.

IA&B: You have referred to the time we live in today to be rooted in passivity, as we increasingly appreciate architecture only as a spectacle. How do you attempt to make your work engage the audience better?

PE: Passivity is a general cultural malaise not necessarily only to do with architecture. This is due to the surfeit of information and communication that we have through Facebook, Twitter, etc. There is just too much information and very little of what one would consider of value. I can only continue to develop my work, and as in the past, I do not worry about how people use, read or interpret what I do. That is not my role. I am not a sociologist.

IA&B: How does the distinction you make between Project and Practice influence the way you teach and practice design? Is there really such a distinct line between project and practice?

PE: I would argue that 99 per cent of what is designed and built by architects and clients is purely practice; that is, something without a conceptual or cultural framework from which to evaluate the work. This is because very few clients want ideas. They are merely interested in practical solutions to their problems. For an architect, to have a project requires a different attitude toward the profession, toward education, and toward one's work, and very few architects are willing to consider that difference.



¹ HOUSE VI AXONOMETRIC DRAWING (ONE PAIR FROM A SERIES), 1972-1975



¹ House VI, South Façade, 1975. Photo: Dick Frank.



¹ Eisenman Architects with Degli Esposti Architetti, Pinerba Condominium, Milan. Aerial collage. 2008–ongoing.



¹ Pinerba Condominium.



¹ Eisenman Architects with Aytaç Architects, Yenikapi Gateway proposal, Istanbul, 2012. Aerial perspective of site organisation.



¹ Eisenman Architects with Aytaç Architects, Yenikapi Gateway proposal, Istanbul, 2012. Archaeological museum and park.

IA&B: As an academician, what is the most important lesson you try to impart to your students? Can architecture really be taught?

PE: One cannot teach design, one can only teach precedents and the means for transforming precedents into projects in the present. What one can teach is a passion for the possibility of a project, the necessary passion required to have a project in architecture. The one unique thing about teaching architecture is that architects need to see differently than critics or clients, so my main objective is to teach aspiring architects how to see as an architect. I do what Colin Rowe did to me; put them in front of a Palladian villa and ask them to tell me what they see that cannot be literally seen.

IA&B: How do new technologies affect/transform our conception of space today and has it changed the way you design?

PE: Alberti in the 15th century changed the way we conceived space, and we have been modifying that crucial change for the last four centuries. New technologies do little to change that trajectory and have very little to do with the way I design today.

IA&B: You have appreciated the films of Bergman, Antonioni, and Haneke. Their movies do not allow the viewer to relax into a state of conditioned expectation,

thereby challenging the notions of time, being, and existence. Is there an analogical similarity in your approach to designing buildings?

PE: First of all, I am in no way interested in the films of Bergman. I would like to think that there is an analogical similarity in the films of Haneke, and maybe in the films of Antonioni, and in the way I design buildings. What that is, would take hours to explain, but I will try to give one small example. In the films of Haneke, much of the work is not visual but aural, and I would like to think that much of my work is not visual but related to other aspects of experience.

IA&B: Your Cardboard Architecture houses were a conceptual derivative of your writings. Could you tell us a little more about how you find a balance between theory and building?

PE: The way I find a balance between theory and building is by dividing my activity in three parts: 1) teaching 2) writing, and 3) designing and building. I have never stopped teaching or writing in all these many years. In fact, my contact with young students is one of the more important aspects of my practice as an architect because young people challenge accepted ideas.

IA&B: You have described stadiums as community centres. How did you incorporate this idea in the Arizona Cardinals' stadium?



¹ Eisenman Architects, Max Reinhardt Haus, Berlin, 1992, model 1:200. Unbuilt.

PE: The stadium has a playing field that can move in and out of the building within an hour's time to allow for multiple functions like trade shows, rock concerts and other such large scale meetings to occur without interruption to the sporting events. In other words, our stadium has the potential for 24/7 occupation and activity far beyond the game itself. This makes it a facility for a much greater community than sports' fans.

IA&B: Among your contemporaries, whose philosophy or buildings do you admire?

PE: Michael Haneke and the author Thomas Pynchon are the two contemporaries I most admire. Both Pynchon and Haneke suspend the traditional narratives in their disciplines in ways in which I find a corollary in my own work.

IA&B: What is your firm working on currently and what work are you looking forward to in the future?

PE: We are working on a large urban intervention in Istanbul that includes an archaeological museum, an archaeological park, and a transit centre; we are working on a large multi-use development North of Naples, Italy, which includes a shopping centre, housing, hotel and waterfront park; and we are working on a competition for a library and museum in Taichung, Taiwan, which we would like to build if we are declared the winner, and we have a condominium project in construction in Milan. I would still like to build a tower. I have designed many towers, but I have yet to build one. ■