

Excerpt from *Confessions of a Country Architect* By Don Metz

Pigs

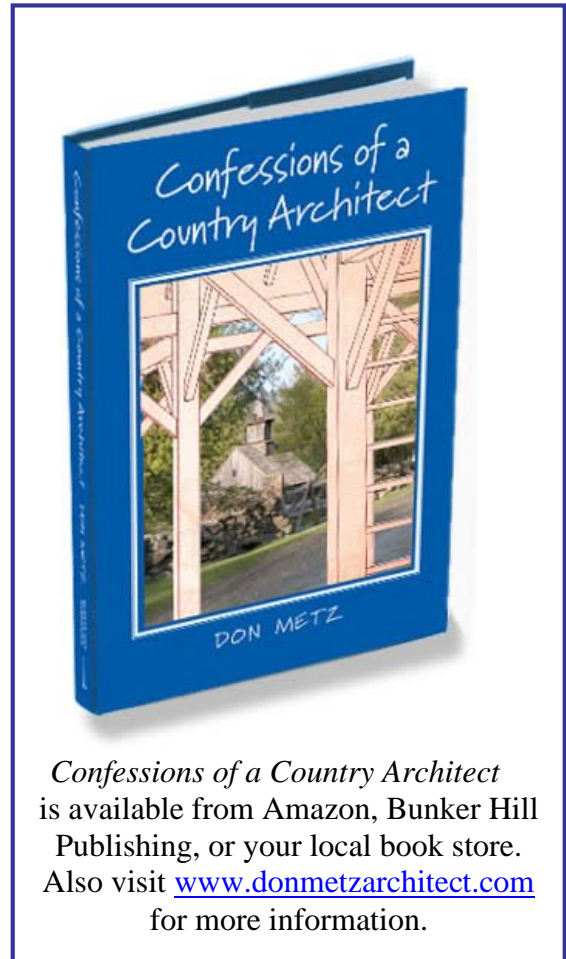
Earning a Master's degree from the Yale School of Architecture involved mastering an immense amount of information about building design, structural engineering and the history of art, but virtually nothing – oddly – about raising pigs.

When I abandoned the Cambridge debacle and moved north, my former classmates thought I was committing professional suicide. Tom thought it was a fabulous idea, of course, but Lamar and the others were aghast. For them, trading a Starchitect's office for the wilds of New Hampshire seemed like reverse acculturation, a renunciation of truth and light. But I couldn't help myself.

Despite its countless attributes, Cambridge suffocated me. In a climate-controlled office with no windows, my necktie became a noose. Each

successive year of internship only increased my yearning for the free-range childhood I'd enjoyed in the rolling hills of Pennsylvania. There had to be a means of practicing sophisticated, creative architecture in a rural setting. It wasn't that I wanted to go barefoot and build log huts. I was hoping to combine what I'd learned with what I wanted to learn, to lead a double life, Vitruvius and Tom Sawyer united with a T-square. And it seemed to be working. My first few houses were surprisingly successful, and within a few years, I had built up a loyal client base. Designing good buildings and living a good life weren't mutually exclusive pursuits after all.

My friend Garrett lived off the grid, way out in the Vermont woods across the river from our home in New Hampshire. He wore his hair in a ponytail and



drove an old truck. Garrett heated his house with wood, used an outhouse and drew water from a spring. He worked forty hours a week as a finish carpenter, played bluegrass guitar like a pro and raised most of his food.

It was 1971, the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Counter-culture icons Timothy Leary, Van Morrison and Ken Kesey were ascendant; bourgeois ambition was not.

Leary's siren call, Turn on, tune in, drop out was in the air, and the back-to-the-land movement was filling the north woods with pilgrims. I was too straight-laced to be tempted with the self-conscious high jinks of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, but I was also a pilgrim, looking for mentors in the tradesmen I met, looking for a context for my work. Imitating everything Garrett did wouldn't suit me, but he embodied the possibilities of living outside the limits of the city, and that was appealing.

He also raised pigs.

I loved the idea, not so much for the pork (which would prove to be so plentiful that we gave much of it away to friends ("Hi! How about a home-grown picnic ham!")), but for the pungent metaphor: Raising pigs would be deliciously contrary to anything I had done during my painful tenure in the fair City of Cambridge.

I talked to a few pig-raising neighbors and read a United States Department of Agriculture pamphlet on how to be a patriotic pig farmer. The first thing I learned was that two or more pigs will gain weight faster than one alone. Companionship is probably part of the equation, but being a pig is all about eating, and competition for food boosts the weight gain for all. Pigs are clean. Pigs need shade. They seek the coolness of mud holes because they can only perspire through the skin on their snouts. Pigs defecate neatly in a specific area of their pens. Pigs are smart. And raising pigs might (I hoped) help convince my neighbors that I was more than just an over-educated, college boy flatlander. All of the above convinced me to proceed with my pig farming folly.

Garrett bought his pigs that year from a commune in Wentworth, NH. I'd never been to a commune before, and I was curious. The person who first welcomed me was a quiet walrus of a man who called himself Zero. A giggly two-year old boy sat atop his huge, disheveled head, pulling on Zero's ears.

The sound of a tentative violin wafted through an open window of the nearby house, accompanied by the musty-sweet incense of marijuana. Out in the garden, a ragged flock of communards pecked at the rocky soil with shovels and hoes. I saw a rib-rippled mule with a painful limp, browsing on bushes at the edge of the clearing. Half-a-dozen cannibalized vehicles were strewn about the yard, two of them crippled VW vans splashed with paint box colors. The tattered house, the cars, the farm tractor – the mule – all seemed to be in a static state of dysfunction. Zero led me around and showed me the chickens, goats and guinea hens and a teepee covered with tattered polyethylene plastic.

Everybody at the commune seemed friendly enough - and tediously slow and earnest - as if they were trying to blend psychedelia with a Hollywood version of farm life, circa 1885. With the exception of Zero, the men tended towards scrawny, pale and bearded in their muddy overalls, while the women were healthily plump and mostly naked, as though a party of agrarian strippers had been airdropped into the backyard of a backwoods Bachelors' Home.

Zero talked about organic gardening and the concepts promoted by Scott and Helen Nearing in their back-to-the-land books. He made it sound seductively simple, but I'd spent enough childhood summers in a vegetable garden, coping with woodchucks, slugs and potato bugs to make me wonder if Zero had grown things before. I later learned that his given name was Irving. He had grown up in New York City and was a recent Vietnam veteran. I'd demonstrated against the war, and was spared the draft due to the birth of our daughter in 1967, but I always felt guilty when I met someone who had nobly served our country and returned so visibly damaged, trying so hard to survive. Living close to the land at the commune was Zero's chosen therapy -- a good choice, I'm sure. One could only hope that he'd soon find the peace he deserved.

Overall, what I saw that day seemed lugubrious, except for the children, who were gloriously alive. I wondered about the adults, most of whom were college graduates from advantaged backgrounds, like me. Where were the working-class communards? Actually working? Did the prerequisite of a collective mindset automatically deaden individuality, or was everybody just too stoned to stand up straight? All by himself, Garrett managed to do everything well that they were trying, and all but failing, to do as a commune. Lamar thought of commune living as, "Digging-a-hole-with-a-

spoon”, but that seemed too harsh. Something good was happening here – wasn’t it? Tom Luckey would have loved the unfettered freedom and the naked ladies, but he was far too inventive and industrious to tolerate the deliberate regression to 19th-century gratuitous hardships.

At the time, I wanted to admire communes more than I did. We all knew that America was polarized by the war, lied to by its leaders, struggling with issues of women’s rights, race and poverty -- but was dropping out the solution? I thought not. I had no perspective; I was too close to it all to see that we were in the midst of a cultural revolution, and cultural revolutions begin with extremes.

Zero led me to the back of the commune’s barn, where a huge sow and her weaned piglets were shading themselves under the ravaged carcass of a Mercedes Benz. The piglets I chose weighed about 30 pounds each, frisky and cute as puppy dogs. One was black with a white belt around his middle, the other was two-toned tan. I paid thirty dollars for the pair, said my farewells, and put the squealing Oreo and Pig Newton in the trunk of my car.

The majestic quarters I’d built for them was cobbled together with selected scraps of lumber liberated from various jobs. The floor plan measured four by eight feet, one sheet of plywood. A mason’s discarded formwork used to shape a brick archway made a cunning Romanesque entrance. The walls – embellished with one port hole each -- soared upward to at least three feet above the floor, and the pitched roof was crowned with a discarded cupola topped with a flying duck weathervane – 100% recycled materials. I sited my creation in a shady grove beyond sight and smell from the house, and attached to it a thirty foot-square yard surrounded by a four foot-high fence. It amused me to imagine that this goofy little folly precisely represented the nadir to which Lamar assumed I would tumble. I dubbed it The Hambone Hilton.

I’d like to believe that Oreo and Pig Newton were impressed with the architecture, but as pigs will do, they immediately began roto-tilling the yard with their amazingly powerful snouts, ripping up roots and dislodging rocks the size of soccer balls in their search for edibles. I fed them pig pellets and table scraps constantly. The water bucket was regularly tipped over until I nailed the handle tight to the inside corner of the fence.

As they settled in to their new home, Mr. Newton devised a brilliant competitive eating tactic: He would lie down lengthwise in the trough, covering all the food except the portion under his snout. Oreo was frustrated at first, but quickly learned to root for his supper under Pig Newton, and consistent with the two-pig theory, they both gained weight fast and equally. By the middle of June, they were twice the size they were when they arrived.

It's always been a mystery how Oreo escaped. When I came to the pen one morning, Pig Newton was lying in the trough, as usual, fast asleep, and Oreo was just plain gone. I checked the fence and found no holes in it, no holes dug under it; there was no gate to be nudged open. Had Oreo jumped or climbed over a four-foot wall? I'll never know. I scouted the woods around the house for hours and found no tracks, no traces of rooting, no pig. It was the fourth of July, and Oreo had declared his independence.

He lived out in the wild for weeks. I found where he'd foraged – hillsides that looked as if they'd been ploughed up by a drunken farmer – but Oreo himself became a phantom. During the first week, a neighbor called to report a sighting, but by the time I arrived, Oreo had disappeared. The second and third week brought more callers. Some of them were justifiably irritated as the increasingly infamous fugitive was found to have excavated a vegetable garden or a patch of cornfield. Each time, I apologized effusively, rushed to the scene and made amends I saw him on three occasions, but when I tried to sneak up on him, he'd lift his head, sniff the air and bolt through the woods as if he had wings. As the weeks went by, it was my neighbors I worried about far more than the pig. My desire to assimilate was backfiring. I was the new kid on the block – an architect flatlander, at that – who couldn't even build a working pig pen.

I gave up chasing and entertained other options. A lasso? A snare, a net? A tranquilizer gun? How about a blowgun with soporific darts? Aerial bombardment with hypnotic smoke bombs. Drugs? But then, where did one find such things, let alone the pig for whom they were meant?

A close neighbor, Tony Foster, called one evening to report that he'd seen Oreo among his Herefords. "Little guy must be getting lonely," he ventured. Oreo was following Tony's cattle on their daily rounds of grazing. "You can see them along the roadside fence around noon," he said, "Like clockwork."

Tony knew where his cattle were every hour of the day. “Kind of cute how they let little piggy tag along.”

Now that I knew where and when to find Oreo, how would I capture him? I poured myself a glass of wine and looked up at the stars – and down at the glass in my hand. Eureka! I would set a trap -- using food -- soaked in alcohol. Jack Daniels and slops in a tub. Perfect. A pig’s nose is almost as fine-tuned as a dog’s. If a pig could smell underground truffles from twenty yards away, Oreo could smell this concoction from across the county. No need to take the trap to him; he would come to it.

The next morning, an hour before noon, I laced a tub of slops with a fifth of Tennessee’s best and drove over to Tony’s where I left the tub just outside the barbed wire fence, beyond the Herefords’ reach.

The telephone rang at one-thirty. “Don,” Tony said, “You can come get your pig,” Pause “And you don’t have to hurry.”

The Herefords were gone when I arrived, but I found Oreo lying on his side next to the half-emptied tub, passed out cold. As I hefted him into the trunk of my car, I could tell he’d had plenty to eat these last four weeks. He was every bit as big as Pig Newton, almost too heavy to lift. He was also crusted with dried mud and his breath stank, but I thought he looked beautiful.

Back at the Hambone Hilton, I opened the trunk lid with extreme caution, imagining that he would burst out and escape once again -- but I needn’t have worried. Oreo was snoring. His front hocks were crossed in the manner of a delicate ballerina sur pointes. Now and then, his legs twitched, as if he were dreaming about being on the run again. His eyes fluttered and closed. I imagined he’d had fun being a celebrity, a free-ranging bandit dodging me at every turn. A smart, fast pig he’d been indeed. As I lay him down inside his pen, the grin on his stubby pink snout was simply beatific.

Confessions of a Country Architect is available from Amazon, Bunker Hill Publishing, or your local bookstore. Also visit www.donmetzarchitect.com for more information.