



**Mind the gap** The wooden expanse Reece Terris built between his own back yard and his neighbour's allowed visitors to steal a view of the landscape they were never meant to have. *Bridge* became a focal point of community even as it ignored the standard traffic grid that communities rely on

# ONE M



Reece Terris

## ART

By Michael Harris

Reece Terris has created guerrilla artworks around town for years. Now he's invading the Vancouver Art Gallery with a six-storey high-rise of castoffs

**T**HE NIGHT AFTER Christmas, three feet of snow blanketed a barn outside Langley. Reece Terris, a contractor and sometime installation artist, had spent years dragging castoff appliances, cabinets, and rugs there, hoarding whatever caught his eye from reno clients around Vancouver. He had become a salvage artist, saving naugahyde chairs and Kermit-coloured shag rugs; with painstaking care, he was refashioning them into six decade-specific miniature apartments. The Vancouver Art Gallery had commissioned a 60-foot tower for its rotunda—six floors of architectural intervention, a core sample of home-décor history that would drill from the present down to the 1950s. Terris was about to start trucking his masterpiece (the heaviest, largest work ever installed at the VAG) into town.

But then the roof of the barn began making popping sounds. The rafters started to bend. He called his uncle, who lived next to the building, in the morning, and was assured that the barn (once a turkey farm) was still standing. By the time Terris got there, the quarter-mile-long structure had been levelled—taking a year's worth of assembly with it.

Terris, 40, is the opposite of the precious conceptual artist Vancouver has become known for. He drives a pickup, wears a yellow baseball cap, tends modest sideburns, and uses words like “stuff” and “yeah” while discussing his few monumental works. There's a hockey net and sticks in his new studio at 1000 Parker Street—an old parking lot where Terris and a couple of dozen friends lugged what they could save from the collapsed barn. He's been working at 1000 Parker, Sisyphus-style, on what he calls “the bankruptcy trek.” (The VAG ponied up \$200,000 for the

# AN'S TRASH

## ART One Man's Trash

installation, but Terris's own mortgage is suffering to pay for it.) *Ought Apartment* opens (barring further catastrophe) this month at the VAG. Terris may have been calm when he saw the collapsed barn but he broke down midway into the rebuild. "I had to salvage everything twice."

If Terris is little known in his home city, it may be because he deals in destruction as much as creation; his major works are as physically ephemeral as they are psychologically indelible. When he was taking a fine-arts degree at Simon Fraser University in 2004, he got a bona fide contract to work on a men's bathroom there; rather than fix the place up, he ripped out one wall and replaced it with five rows of urinals, positioned like a pyramid of champagne glasses, each one spilling over with water—a shock-and-awe revision of a banal space, and a riff on an old Marcel Duchamp classic. It was a guerrilla installation—more exciting, more radical, more cool than anything on a gallery's sterile wall. Someone rang up Grant Arnold, a curator at the VAG, and said, "Get down here. There's something you need to see." Arnold still shakes his head at the finesse with which Terris pulled it off. "This wasn't just an



**Ought not** Above, one portion of the collapsed turkey farm where Terris had been storing elements of his *Ought Apartment*

**The fountainhead** *American Standard* turned an ordinary bathroom into a participatory work of art. Not shown here is the trail of stepping stones that led to the toilet



intervention in the bathroom. It was design. It resonated as original architecture.” The piece, which Terris called *American Standard*, lived just a few months before Terris himself returned the bathroom to its original.

Two years later, Terris produced *Bridge (Wooden Arch)*, a Japanese-style structure spanning the distance between his own East Van back yard and his neighbour’s. He worked on it a few hours each night, with friends popping by and lending a hand. Once it was erected, locals (and Arnold again) came to cross it and steal a view of the city that was never intended to be seen. By simply doing away with the normal traffic grid, Terris ripped a seam in our ordinary perception of the built environment and let strange new light through. The bridge, constructed without a permit, was dismantled in a few months. But the *Ought Apartment* commission followed.

Terris, in other words, is in the habit of transgressing our notions of space. He explodes the places we are overused to inhabiting (a bathroom, a back yard) to make us see the world anew. Having fired these shots across the bow of the as-is world, he now swaggers toward a hallowed space in the city. His monumental VAG installation, by collaging six decades of interior castoffs, is simultaneously an indictment of the ruthless hype and wasteful fashion that contemporary real estate has relied upon and a love letter to the momentary attitudes so thoroughly imbued in our furnishings. (Could any decade other than the relentlessly clean-cut 1950s have produced the Eames chair? And could any decade but our own be so covetous of its sculpted optimism?)

Terris may seem an unlikely artist, hauling seafoam bathtubs and wall-paper peeled from West End crack-houses. But his work is a deft and poignant expression of where we are now. In a city that spent decades ripping up its past and building homes without thought, a city renowned for art that requires a lecture before you are permitted to enjoy it, in walks a contractor, measuring tape slung at his side like a gun. **vm**