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Reece Terris Renovates the Art World

By Robin Laurence



Photo: Mark Mushet

Sitting in his salvaged '50s suite, local visual artist Reece Terris takes a brief break from constructing the six-storey Ought Apartment in the Vancouver Art Gallery rotunda.

Reece Terris's towering new installation traces the discarded styles of past decades and questions our throw-away culture

You could be forgiven for thinking Reece Terris looks a lot like a building contractor. Walking across the foyer of the Vancouver Art Gallery, wearing faded blue jeans, an old T-shirt, a ball cap, and kneepads, sprinkled with plaster dust and harassed by a constantly ringing cellphone, this interdisciplinary artist might have just stepped out of a construction site. In fact, he is stepping into one—his six-storey architectural installation, *Ought Apartment*.

Located in the VAG's neoclassical rotunda, the work comprises six different residential interiors representing six different decades, from the 1950s to the 2000s. The kicker is that the apartments are stacked one on top of the other, from the gallery's main floor towards its domed ceiling. This astounding tower of design power will open to the public on Wednesday (May 6).

Each apartment has a full-size kitchen, living room, and bathroom, with authentic building styles, materials, fixtures, appliances, and furniture. "Each floor is emblematic of that period's interior design and domestic living," Terris explains. And yes, there are the valances, the pink bathroom tiles, and the red-slate hearth in the '50s apartment; the teak cabinets, wrought-iron railing, and green shag carpet in the '60s space; the fern-patterned wallpaper and "harvest gold" fridge of the '70s; the heart-shaped Jacuzzi and pseudo-art-deco wall flourishes from the '80s; and on up the tower to our own age. And almost everything here has been saved from the dump. *Ought Apartment* isn't one of those high-end design shows beloved of gallerists and furniture collectors. Instead, Terris, who supports his art practice working as a general contractor specializing in residential renovations, is building an immense and labour-intensive work of social and environmental commentary. His art examines what he has gleaned—both materially and conceptually—from his day job. The rapid cycling of interior-design styles reveals how the postwar production-and-consumption machine has fuelled our society's compulsive desire to "update" our domestic spaces, to constantly renovate and discard, knock down and take out. Home renovation related to overconsumption is socially prescribed, Terris says, and it's accelerating.

Sitting now at the Formica-topped kitchen table in *Ought's* '50s apartment, Terris maps out the road that took him from carpenter to contractor to sculptor, installation artist, photographer, videographer, performance artist, and draftsman. Drawn into the construction trade immediately after graduating from high school in 1986, the Vancouver-born Terris honed his skills and his eye through hard work and wide travel. He had always had an interest in art and architecture, and this was stimulated by trips through Europe, Asia, and North Africa. In 2000, after a year of building houses in Cairns, Australia, he enrolled in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University. "That's when they had this phone-in registration and I registered from a payphone in the outback. It was pretty crazy—I had a bucket full of quarters and picked my courses out in the desert in Australia." Initially, Terris thought he might use fine arts as a springboard into architecture. "But the more I stuck with the program, the more I enjoyed it," he says. He also recognized that art offers a greater freedom of expression. "There are a lot of compromises in making a name for yourself [in architecture]," he says. He found he could apply his interests in the built environment more effectively in the realm of visual art.

His smart and engaging projects to date have included *American Standard*, a public indoor fountain of 15 water-spouting urinals mounted in a pyramid form on the wall of a men's washroom, and *The Bridge*, an extravagantly curved wooden arch he built from the balcony of his East Vancouver home over his neighbours' house, ending on their upper back veranda. (Terris's photos of homes under renovation and a set of his astounding architectural drawings for *Ought Apartment* may be seen when he delivers a public talk at the Jennifer Kostuik Gallery on May 16 at 2 p.m.)

Through it all, he's been collecting items from the interiors of homes that he's been contracted to renovate. Fridges, stoves, microwaves, stereo systems, cabinetry, plumbing, electrical fixtures, carpets, doors, windows, wall panelling: he's gathered it all. Stuff his clients wanted gone from their lives, stuff, he emphasizes, that would otherwise have been discarded. Instead, Terris stored it in a former turkey barn in Langley. The quarter-mile-long structure served as his warehouse and studio while he figured out what to do with its ever-increasing contents. What to do turned out to be *Ought Apartment*, where floors, doors, cabinets, and etched glass panels have been meticulously reconfigured to fit into the rotunda Francis Rattenbury designed in 1906 for what was then the provincial courthouse. Two of the apartments are designed as walk-ins and the remainder have cutaway walls and ceilings so that they can be viewed from the gallery's stairs, escalators, and upper-storey foyers. All testify, again, to our compulsion to upgrade, discard, and generally conform to a notion of "good taste".

Viewing *Ought Apartment* from bottom to top, it's hard to comprehend that all this birch, teak, oak, mahogany, and granite might have disappeared into landfill. "I was frustrated by the environmental negligence and wastefulness involved in this never-ending home-renovation process," Terris says. Still, he hastens to add, he's in no position to preach. "I'm certainly complicit in the whole process.... A lot of stuff has passed through my hands."

As for the stuff that didn't go directly to the dump, he points to the oak floor he and his team carefully took up, board by board, from a client's 1950s home, then reinstalled, board by board, at the VAG. He also talks about how high labour costs and low government incentives make it prohibitively expensive to recycle wood, cabinetry, and other construction materials removed during a renovation. "Nobody's going to pay somebody to take it out so that it can be reused when they can smash it out in a fraction of the time," he says. "We're bound by these economic factors.... The way we've structured our whole industry has sort of hamstrung everyone."

Overconsumption, calculated obsolescence, and lack of comprehensive recycling programs aren't the only themes built into *Ought Apartment*. Grant Arnold, the VAG's Audain curator of British Columbia art, says Terris's work opens up many other issues. "When you look at the domestic spaces, you have a sense about how they imply something about who lives in them," he observes during a telephone interview. "If you look at the bottom one, from the '50s, compared with the top one, which is from the current decade, the '50s [set] is more modest, which implies the potential for a one-income household or family unit. None of the material in it is super-expensive. Whereas if you look at the kitchen appliances on the top floor, those are fairly upscale...and they suggest a certain level of income on the part of the people who live there."

Then Arnold adds: "There's also the whole notion of how design implies something about the future. In all of these [decades], there's some notion of the spaces being used to make life better." That modernist utopian ideal—better design for better living—has been debunked by postmodern artists and theorists. Yet it's still being used to flog new and ever newer building styles and home décor.

Despite the shriek of buzz saws, the pounding of hammers, and that persistently ringing cellphone, Terris seems relaxed, even oblivious to the urgent activity around him. It's a gracious act. He and his seven-person team have been labouring day and night for the past four weeks to complete *Ought Apartment* on schedule. Every so often a deep, racking cough signals the physical toll the project has taken on him. "I kind of worked myself sick about a week ago," he admits, then changes the subject. He talks about the loss of vernacular styles and materials, the impact of globalization, and the shifts in design values. "I don't begrudge anybody their choice to go ahead and renovate, especially when stuff wears out—because things do wear out," he says. "But it seems a lot less about utility and living with what you have than keeping up with what you think you need. They're different things."