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It's All a Front

The first project of the Cultural Olympiad has its official opening today. For The Western Front Front: Another False Front, Vancouver artist Reece Terris has created an architectural intervention that builds on the already-false front of East Vancouver's Western Front building, home to the Western Front Society and other arts groups. The changes are subtle enough that they might go unnoticed; but there's something that makes the building appear not quite right. The installation is scheduled to remain in place until March 27, 2010

Before

The building that houses the Western Front Society was constructed almost 100 years ago for the Knights of Pythias, a fraternal order, and is one of a handful of wood-frame buildings still standing in Vancouver with false fronts. Western, or commercial, false fronts were ubiquitous in the urban pioneer west in the mid-to-late 19th century, with the practice continuing into the early 20th century. The ornamental structures were erected on the front of frontier-era buildings to make hastily built boomtowns - mountain mining towns, prairie agricultural communities and early railroad centres - appear more like established cities. Sometimes the front was all there really was to the building; behind would be a primitive log cabin or shack, or even just a tent. The idea was to project an image of stability and success without having to invest in a more permanent structure during uncertain boom-and-bust periods. On this Vancouver building, the false front rises higher than the building's roof, its falseness detectable only from the side. "It has an outward appearance of something more grand than it is," says Terris.

After

Terris constructed a new top and bottom for the building. At the top, he extends the false front with a new, larger facade: about 16.5 metres long, 2.5 metres high, and weighing about 2,000 kilograms. (Terris had to rent a special studio to build and house the enormous structure.) It includes a parapet and cornice, which exaggerate the architectural bravado. It's built at one-and-a-half times scale and is installed on top of the existing facade at a slight angle, tipping outward as it rises. It looks precarious, but Terris assures that it's been engineered to withstand a "Stanley Park wind," as he puts it. (The massive piece fits onto the building like a giant IKEA project: Six columns installed in the building's exterior wall point up through the first false front, and fit into six hollowed-out points on the new addition. Cables hold it in place as well.) At the bottom, he's covered the concrete sidewalk with a saloon-type boardwalk, made with reclaimed telephone poles. It's a critique of Vancouver as boomtown, a state of being that has only been heightened by the 2010 Olympics. "For me, it's quite poetic that the piece is up for the Olympics and down when the Olympics are over," says Terris. "It's kind of like you puff up your chest and hold your breath, and then you slump back down to your old, slack self."

