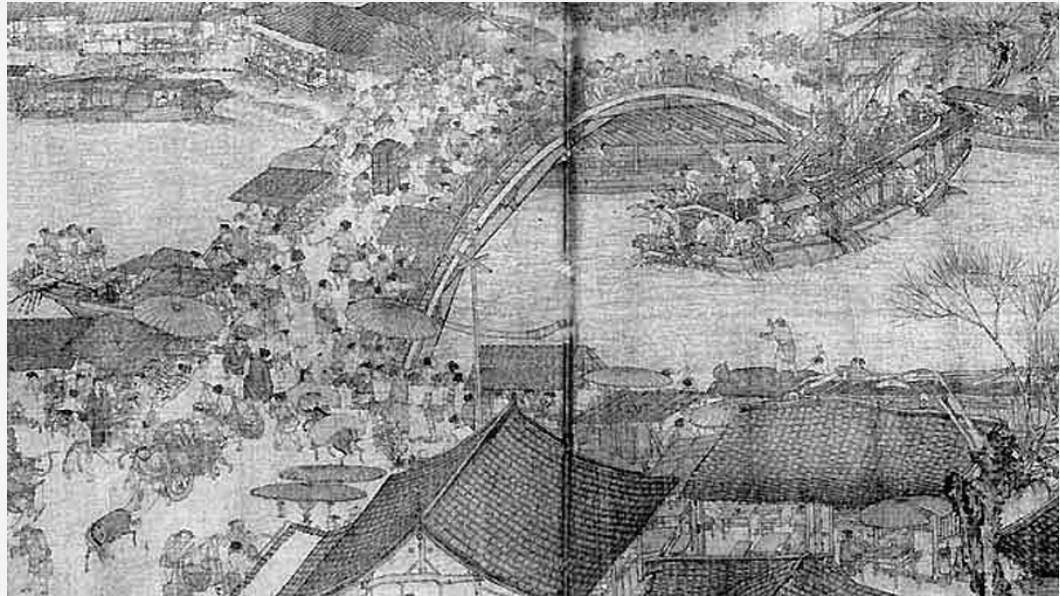


Broadsheet published in association with Presentation House Gallery, for opening of the installation *Bridge* by Reece Terris, 1763 McSpadden Avenue, Vancouver, BC, October 7, 2006.

## REECE TERRIS: THE SOCIAL BRIDGE

*The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.*

“The Richard Mutt Case”, *The Blind Man 2*, May, 1917, New York: Marcel Duchamp, H.P. Roché, Beatrice Wood, eds.



In a city like Vancouver, where the spectacular view *is* the spectacle of nature (blurring the resource economics of its base), *viewism* counts highly in the architectural market. Properties are priced according to their view potential and sold before another is built in front; trees are cut illegally to improve the view, especially in high-end neighborhoods. Access to view is the operating principle. This regime of visibility, with its Panoptic Benthamite undertone, is the driving force behind the city's real-estate market. Reece Terris' *Bridge* enters this conversation, providing the hierarchic focus of an overview, seeing from above, with its suggestion of omniscience, the 'big picture', and attendant corollaries of pleasure, control and authority. (This privileging of the point of view was made literal in Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, where the prince's box located the focal point of the scenic perspective; and in the indoor circular Panoramas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where the spectator was placed at the centre of an all-encompassing view.) *Bridge* retains an imprint of the *belvedere*, the *buena vista*, the beauty of looking from a height across a landscape or cityscape. It combines an image of scopophilic visual delight, like flying in a small plane, with a trace of the watchtower or lookout, of



surveillance and defensive preparedness. It is related to the goal of the mountain peak itself, to the romantic natural sublime, without the transcendence.

The walking bridge that Terris has chosen to build, between his house on McSpadden in East Vancouver and his neighbor's house, makes a physical passage where previously none existed, from one private property to another. The bridge lofts into the sky above everything, a real bridge in real space, offering views of the surrounding neighborhood – its houses, streets, kids, dogs, parks and greenways. The bridge does not join the two properties simply; spanning nearly 40 feet, it starts from the deck off the back of the second floor of Terris' home, then with respectful grace arches completely over the second house to land on his neighbor's deck. Constructed of unfinished 2x4s, it is joined together in an ingenious structural technique. The principle was locally developed by Frank Petersohn of Sechelt, who has built a number of these "rainbow" bridges based on studies of a Northern Song Dynasty painting by Zhang Zeduan from about 1127. This 30-foot long Chinese hand scroll entitled "The Spring Festival Along the River" shows such a bridge, crowded with people, in the Northern Song capital of Kaifeng. The bridge's framework locks together in a simple and efficient system, allowing an economy of materials to achieve a structure of great strength. *Bridge* is nearly semi-circular in shape, as steep as a dome, with built-in stairs at both ends ascending to where the arch flattens off at the top to a walkable slope. The bridge deck becomes its own tensile load bearing membrane, unlike most early bridges of simple compression-arch type, where stone on stone carried the weight of construction down to piers on either bank. Compression bridges were built over 'false-work', temporary wooden bracing removed when the arch was completed (by the insertion of the final 'keystone') and made self-supporting. The Chinese wooden bridge takes advantage of the resilient strength of its material to achieve a lightweight arch of similar span; *Bridge* is a contemporary adaptation of this construction method.

Private property, on which the modern city developed, has its infrastructural works regulated by local building codes, variations on a national code, which outline acceptable standards for how structures are to be built to ensure safety and predictable regularity, to avoid having to engineer every building separately. But with equal effectiveness, the code regulates what *cannot* be done; it simultaneously acts as a set of negative prohibitions. Civic codes are administered through a municipally regulated permit system overseen by city-employed building inspectors whose job it is to ensure compliance, to arbitrate on-site deviations from the written code and to sign off on work completed. In a city like Vancouver, an endless construction boom means that the number of projects needing inspection far outstrips the number of available inspectors, resulting in the occasional non-conforming structure.

The code also regulates adjacencies, separations, clearances and heights within the building lot footprint; it determines the actual envelope of any proposed structure. Through a careful scrutiny of the code, developers have learned to maximize the buildable square footage within a given property, ensuring greatest profit. The Vancouver Special of the 70s, for example, is a form of local domestic architecture produced by developers looking for the largest, simplest possible structure that could be fitted into the imaginary envelope of the code. Distances from property lines, and therefore between adjacent buildings, establish the physical separation of people from their neighbors. By



outlining the limits of personal territory it conditions social interaction. Although never its direct mandate, the code regulates social space and human behaviour.

The legal separation of one surveyed property from the next is indicated by triangular white stakes driven into the four corners of the lot, and properties are registered with the land-title office of the provincial government in New Westminster. This sub-division in *law* is visibly played out in *fact* by individual property owners, who typically articulate the edges of their estates with walls, fences, borders, hedges, lattices, trellises, rockeries and other conforming demarcations. The character of these separations varies in direct proportion to lot value; they become more durable as land values increase. In East Vancouver, historically one of the poorest city neighborhoods, property separations seem less distinct than in WestSide/WestEnd/WestVan neighborhoods. The Eastside has been shaped by the deeply social character of a predominantly Italian and Portuguese working-class community for whom blood and kin recall earlier European city formations. East Vancouver's varied patterns of immigration and shifting demographics has resulted in a greater variety of building forms here than elsewhere in the city. Non-conforming structures have been grandfathered in, commercial and residential construction is more densely mixed, and new post-modern additions have appeared in a conglomeration of styles. Recently an older unimproved, no-view, under-1000sf bungalow on a 25-foot lot sold for \$560,000.

*Bridge* is the fluid exchange between two sites, crossing the dry riverbed of a property line that runs silently beneath (echoes of those brooks, creeks and streams that once coursed through the city, now long-buried in corrugated culverts underground). Although a property line is invisible, a legal fiction, its delineation is real enough to keep people apart. But here, with *Bridge*, for a moment the privations of property are overcome; a physical leap conjoins two territories creating a temporary public space. While this bridge can literally bring people together, its true function spins out in allegories of vision and connection. As metaphor, a bridge is a sign for linkage and passage, a space of transition (the Venetian Bridge of Sighs: from life to death; the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, the misunderstood harmonics of which caused it to oscillate to destruction in 1940: from being to non-being), an overcoming of physical obstacles, a conduit between heterogeneous territories. It enables the transfer of people, goods and services, eases communication and encourages co-operation. *It allows movement in either direction.* Constructing a real bridge is a collective activity, a social engagement of individuals working to common purpose; it is in effect a leap of faith, a projection into a possible future.

A city is often known for its bridges: Brooklyn Bridge, Golden Gate, Tower Bridge. Vancouver has the Lion's Gate (built by the Guinness family in exchange for the British Properties), the Ironworker's Memorial (which is simultaneously a bridge and a memorial to the 25 men who died making it); the Arthur Laing, the Alex Fraser; the Oak Street, the Granville Street; the Burrard Street; the Cambie Street; the Knight Street; the Pattullo; the Port Mann: these are the divides and joins between the city and suburbs. Thousands of 'bridge and tunnel people' pour into the city every day, dependant on these crossings, and their lives are made hell when there's an accident on any one of them: the backup at the bottleneck. (And then there are the leisurely tourist spectacle bridges: the Capilano Suspension, the Lynn Canyon.) The word 'bridge' includes reference to the site of a



ship's command-and-control deck, a popular card game, a dental device and a critical component of stringed instruments.

Vancouver is a city built on wood, of wood; a wooden city, even if most of its larger buildings are no longer that. The economy of the place got its first impulse from this vast natural resource surrounding it, beginning with its aboriginal inhabitants who had their own long-established relation to wood and its possibilities. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, ignoring the presence of hundreds of resident natives, the British Navy claimed what is now Stanley Park as a source of mast timber for the Pacific Fleet. Local domestic architecture continues to be almost entirely of wood and wood products, in spite of early attempts, by Clayburn (appropriate name!) and others, to develop a brick vernacular from the abundant clay beds of the Fraser River. Wood made up the pilings and piers of the old docks of Burrard Inlet and False Creek; it built the square-rigged ships that once moored here to load wood for Europe and Asia; it produced the massive timber construction of the city's industrial buildings, mostly burned down; survivors like the vaulted clerestories of the American Can Building from 1925 are increasingly rare. The skeletons of Versatile Pacific Shipyard, east of Lonsdale on the North Shore, have been mined for their timber and are mostly gone; the abandoned wooden railroad trestles up the valley, a hundred feet high and three hundred feet long, were built of first-growth timbers more massive than existing trees – two foot by three foot by fifty feet long. Stories survive of the streets of early Vancouver paved with boards five feet wide, cut off the north shore slopes of Mount Seymour and Hollyburn, long rotted into the mud. Main Street, the traditional divide between east and west, was once a long wooden bridge across the tidal flats of False Creek, with a three-story birdcage public market in the middle near where Science World now stands. A wooden flume from the dam at the top of Brewery Creek on Scotia Street (not far from the present Western Front) ran across this bridge down to the waterfront sawmills of Gastown, bringing fresh water to the boilers of the steam engines powering the head-saws.

Along the Fraser, mills of all types – saw, pulp, shingle, plywood, chipboard particle board – still stretch deep into the Valley, beyond Hatzic, Mission, Whonnock and Silverdale, along with their greenchains, dry land sorts and sawdust piles. The river is still the industrial foreground of the timber trade, the traffic in wood. Raw logs are still wrangled by gyring boomboats at Annie Camp – where once the entire confiscated Japanese salmon fleet was chained up and left to pound itself to driftwood – then slung from the water into bulk traders bound for southeast Asia. Languid diesel tugs still drag massive booms of fir and cedar, hemlock and larch through the waterways, past New West and Poco and the massive cement factories of Lafarge and Heidelberg, suppliers of the new material of choice for the highrises of Yaletown. Meanwhile, in the province's interior, they can't cut fast enough to keep up with the pine beetle's quiet slaughter of countless hectares of prime timber (blighted Ponderosa Pine now marketed as *Blue Denim*, the colour of its afflicted wood). In backwater booming grounds of the river more silent timber floats, watched over by the stillness of Great Blue Herons, while sluggish barges of sawdust and chips toil in the arms of the Fraser delta. The beachcombers and salvage tugs still work the edges, collecting the loose logs; the shores collect the rest. Wood is so much a part of the landscape that it has become picturesque, our second nature. But this picture has become hazily obscure, as if seen through the smoke from a forest fire. Is this





Home Depot 2x4 from here or was it trucked across the border from a mill in Oregon as part of some free-trade deal on softwood lumber? Are these characters reeling down the streets of Gastown loggers? Have Dayton and Paris given up timber cruiser's high-top corks for motorcycle boots and fancy urban cowboy packers?

The tree, a natural thing, having survived lightning, forest fires, predatory insects and herbaceous animals, becomes *standing resource*, an economic thing: timber – cut, felled, yarded, trucked, (in short, logged) floated, boomed, sawn, milled, stacked, bundled, shipped; and after transcontinental meander of curious devise, finally stands patiently, in crude nail-built assembly, in some house for 30 years. Then the gray dawn of reckless demolition, and downhill trucking to the landfill. This temporary permanence, as a drawn out form of conditionality and contiguity, is like our common fate: gone today, and here tomorrow is the next; a life lived.

In its raw colour, the nominal 2x4 stands as a sign for the possibility and potential of the unrealized: a work in progress. It was developed as a standardized module in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in response to massive migrations to North America and the consequent demand for fast, cheap housing. Balloon-frame construction, nailed up from dimensional lumber, replaced the older, more labour intensive post-and-beam construction, both were replaced by platform construction after several catastrophic fires, like those in Chicago (1871) and Vancouver (1886) and San Francisco (1906). Lumber standardization allowed for a tumult of pattern-book building styles over the next 150 years – Victorian, Queen Anne, American Gothic, Edwardian, Tudor revival, Arts and Crafts, Georgian revival, Spanish Colonial, Mission, Craftsman, Bungalow, Deco, Italianate, Ranch, Split Level, Moderne, West Coast, Postmodern, Monster – all sharing the same sub-structural frame based on 'two-by' lumber. But it remains a provisional material, as are the buildings it produces. It is the hidden construct behind a panoply of domestic housing types, made to endure the life of the mortgage.

*Bridge*, like its materials, is also provisional, like any expedient structure built of necessity and urgency, against time and law. In this it reflects characteristics of marine juryrigging and paramilitary assault engineering. It recalls the work of Gordon Matta-Clark (now known only as photographic reproductions, like many of the major works of the 60s and 70s: the fate of *in situ* works of limited duration) whose bridge-works and guerilla incursions into urban architecture worked back into the given: existing structures were willfully compromised, through subtractive cutaways, to render transparent the opaque and obscuring functions of private domestic and public commercial spaces. Terris' project, in an additive way, has a similarly didactic and expository function, serving (like Thomas Hirschhorn's early architectural extensions of cardboard and packing tape) to occupy spaces of indeterminate status with a view to causing some ripple in the social fabric. The cognitive bridge between object and viewer, by which artwork continues to be measured, is here rendered physically real, carrying its critical load and its adventurous percipients through a sky of previously inaccessible space.

At a height above the allowable building limit, *Bridge* permits us to see from above, rendering the familiar uncanny, and thus new. It offers a prospect previously only partially imagined, providing for a closer examination of the surrounding territory in all its macro



and micro details. Patterns emerge not seen before. A systemic logic of constraint and imposition appears, of individual and idiosyncratic choice, of the self-sufficient fiction of consumption. Everything is the same but completely different. Features and functions are repeated down the block in their differing manifestations. The distinct separation of private properties becomes the salient feature of this aerial landscape, each lot containing its own house and garden, each identical footprint a variation. Everyone builds into their own enclosed environment, their endless personal modifications and alterations chosen from the phantasmagoria of commodities. DIY-based homeowner renovation is premised on consumption oriented toward property enhancement but often with the unexpected effect of increasing separation through the consolidation of enclosure. Looked at from the vantage point that *Bridge* provides, this tightening of containment arouses our ire, our dissatisfaction with the limits of the given. Then a nautical lurch, as its tethered instability yanks us into consciousness, waking us up to the possible. A certain *exhilaration* suggests a potential future still to be made.

Greg Snider  
October, 2006