VISUAL ARTS

The city, as you'll never see it again

Two artists recreate Toronto's abandoned storefronts in a single warehouse space

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LIA GRAINGER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Standing inside *A City Renewal Project* is like looking at an ageing photograph of Toronto's urban landscape and finding yourself in the foreground.

The colossal art installation, which opens at 39 Lisgar St. tomorrow night, is spectacular; a trippy indoor life-size Toronto street, recreated in brilliant high-contrast black and white, and decorated with real billboards, phone booths, fencing, steps and bus stops.

Inspired by the well-worn chunks of Toronto that have gradually become engulfed by gentrification, two acclaimed Canadian street artists wished to recreate a unique slice of the Toronto architectural landscape before it disappears completely.

Gabriel Reese (street name: Specter) and Dan Bergeron (a.k.a. Fauxreel) have moved Toronto's urban terrain indoors.

"These are spaces that Gabe and I love," explains Bergeron, "because there is such a beauty in their decay."

The project, sponsored by Red Bull and Toronto's Show and Tell Gallery, started with both artists scouting abandoned stores that would fit within the dimensions of the 4,000-square-foot warehouse space just south of Queen St. W. near Dovercourt Rd. where the installation would be built.

Bergeron photographed the old shops – some scheduled for demolition – then enlarged the images, some up to four metres high.

Next he and Reese used scavenged materials to construct a life-size city street inside the massive space. Using wood from pre-existing signage, they built signs and billboards to accompany the storefronts, which Reese hand-painted using original titles and slogans.

Finally, the black-and-white photographs were attached to the structures, each store constructed to perfectly match the size of the image that would be laid over top.

A City Renewal Project is in many ways a natural evolution from the public street art that Bergeron and Reese were already creating.

Both artists were fascinated with the visual and conceptual aspects of abandoned urban spaces. For Reese, this fascination manifested itself in a previous project that involved altering the text on abandoned storefronts to give the disregarded spaces new significance. The tattered, painted plywood atop an old restaurant that once read "Christine's Place" now bluntly states "Christine's Livelihood."

"To most people these spaces are deteriorating the neighbourhood," says Reese, "but I like to think that by doing this, we can reinvest these forgotten places with new meaning."

Bergeron – who last year earned notoriety with a billboard advertising "Quick Lobotomy" across from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health – has a similar appreciation for the disregarded and inexplicably unoccupied buildings in Toronto: "I remember one place near where I lived that had been empty for years," he says, "and yet it still had mannequins with clothes on in the front window."

The hidden narratives implied by these strange absences inspired Bergeron to paste large cut-out figures and faces in the windows of empty shops, imbuing them with a new vitality difficult to ignore.

Bergeron remembers the moment the collaborative project was conceived: "I remember thinking, `He's put up signs, I've put up posters, let's recreate them.' I didn't think about it too much, I just called him, and immediately he was like, `Yes!'"

Inside the warehouse, the meticulously recreated cityscape isn't exactly what you would find in the real world. Signs have been whimsically modified to make a statement – or just to be silly. One storefront advertises "Mech Meats: Fine Quality Mechanically Separated Meats." Outside the Lisgar St. space is the façade of a store called "Mr. Loogie," adapted from the defunct Kingston Rd. discount shop Mr. Loonie.

The scope of the project has required a range of skills as varied as the backgrounds of the artists themselves.

A native Torontonian, Bergeron's primary medium is photography and wheatpaste, which, for those who aren't familiar with street art lingo, is a particularly adhesive method of gluing paper to outdoor walls.

One of his most recognizable wheatpastes, a hipster male with scooter handlebars in place of his head, appeared this summer on walls across the country as part of a campaign for Vespa.

Montreal-born Reese, meanwhile, has been making street art on the walls of New York, thanks to a Canada Council grant. Working with a variety of materials including paint, concrete, wood and cardboard, Reese has benefited greatly from the increased popularity of his style, but still laments the lack of a better scene in the city where he has produced the majority of his work: Toronto.

"If Toronto wants to be like other major cultural centres, there needs to be representation of all creative communities, including street art," says Reese.

The qualities that describe street art – public, free, outdoors, and almost always uncommissioned – are among the reasons it is still considered by many to fall outside the canon of mainstream contemporary art.

Bergeron and Reese hope that *A City Renewal Project* might buck this way of thinking and help make their artwork accessible to a wider audience.

"This project felt like a natural way to bring what we do inside," says Reese. "We're creating a documentation of these spaces, and at the same time it's an effective transition from outdoors to indoors."

Bergeron hopes that the project will also serve as record, and explains that "because these things are disappearing, it's kind of nice to put them all together in a space like this, where you can really see them all at once and realize they are all a part of Toronto."

Both artists believe that the project will encourage the residents of the city to recognize the hidden narratives of these forgotten spaces that exist in the lives of every Torontonian, but go unobserved by most.

Just the facts
WHAT: A City Renewal Project

WHEN: Opens tomorrow, 7 to 11 p.m.

WHERE: 39 Lisgar St., south of Queen St. W.

INFO: acityrenewalproject.com

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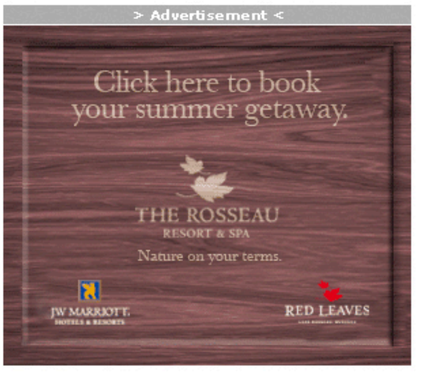

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