



A rendering shows Brazilian artist Jose Resende's plans to turn shipping containers into public sculptures during the Vancouver Biennale.

FEATURE

In New Public Art, Three Visions of Vancouver Collide

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POSTED: MARCH 26, 2014

In many ways, Vancouver is the ideal city for public art. While Winnipeg excels at wintertime installations [like its idiosyncratic “warming huts,”](#) and Toronto’s public art often feels grittier and more urban due to its main greenspaces being ravines—tricky places for exhibitions—Vancouver benefits from a warmer year-round climate and abundant parkland.

And beyond [the recently installed “Dude Chilling Park” sign](#), the city itself often feels like an installation; it’s as if some giant with a Hollywood-meets-*Fitzcarraldo* sensibility had decided to lay down a “city of glass” on a land-locked peninsula at the foot of a mountain range and said, “ta-da!” The cinematic showiness of the Vancouver vista can make it feel slightly unreal; a film set masquerading as a metropolis.

Three up-and-coming approaches to public art in the city provide added layers of meaning to the civic *mise en scène*—and ultimately explore three different visions of Vancouver.

Last week, [city officials announced that new projects—10 in all—now or soon to be installed in honour of the city’s Year of Reconciliation](#) will explore Vancouver’s colonial legacy through art about residential schools, First Nations culture and “healing.” Undeniable visual evidence of our past and present will haunt public spaces, libraries and bus shelters.

As part of the Year of Reconciliation project, the City Centre Canada Line entrance will host a large photo-mural by Krista Belle Stewart called *Her Story*. It’s based around a production still—one evocative of residential-school histories—from a 1967 CBC documentary about Stewart’s mother, who was the first aboriginal public health nurse in BC.

A companion video by Stewart—drawing on footage from the 1967 documentary and tracing her mother's history from residential school to university and into the city—is being shown on two screens at Robson and Granville through the end of March, and later at the CBC Plaza and the Vancity Theatre.

Likewise, a video by [Jeremy Borsos](#) focusing on a handwritten excerpt from Stephen Harper's official residential-schools apology to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada is being shown on the same public screens this spring.

Elsewhere, the third [Vancouver Biennale](#) of public art—organized by a non-profit charitable organization—plans to present a hopeful, internationalist vision of Vancouver as a cosmopolitan port city in the coming months, with work from art superstar Ai Weiwei as well as the UK's Andy Goldsworthy, American Jonathan Borofsky, and Brazilian Vik Muniz.

Starting at the end of March, some 20 biennale sculptures will be installed in parks and open spaces in Vancouver, while New Westminster, North Vancouver and Squamish will host another 10. (Already, [Brazilian artist Hugo Franca is working with pieces of found wood in Squamish](#), transforming them into sculptures.)

The biennale's public art is organized around the utopian theme of Open Borders/Crossroads Vancouver, and a related residency program is inspired by Martin Luther King's I Have A Dream speech, which envisions a time when "we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood." [As biennale artistic director Barrie Mowatt told the Vancouver Sun](#), part of the hope is that Vancouver, Richmond and other area cities will be able to install some works permanently, extending the elevating effect over the long term. (This was the case with [Yue Minjin's A-maze-ing Laughter](#)—installed during the 2009 biennale and now at home on a patch of greenspace near English Bay.)

Perhaps the most genuine expression of current Vancouver reality, however, is found in a new public art and condo development bankrolled by Ian Gillespie of [Westbank](#). If real estate—the ultimate currency in North America's most expensive city for housing—has made Vancouver its company town, then this is its town hall.

As a 21st-century Medici/merchant prince, Gillespie, like other developers across North America, has been commissioning and funding public art in recent years, [often as required or negotiated offsets for rezoning considerations](#). In 2009, his company launched the [Shangri-La complex](#), which includes space for the [Vancouver Art Gallery's Offsite program](#), and in 2010, he opened [the redeveloped Woodward's building](#) featuring a mural by [Stan Douglas](#). Now, he has announced that an 18th-century-style chandelier by [Rodney Graham](#) is due to be suspended under the Granville Street bridge in 2018 as part of Westbank's [Vancouver House](#) condo complex. Based on Graham's 2005 film [Torqued Chandelier Release](#) (which was inspired by Newton's experiments with the physics of rotational motion), this new public sculpture proposes to include an elaborately engineered mechanism that will see the spinning chandelier rise and fall daily in a manner, it would seem, not unlike the real-estate market. [A time-lapse animation](#) indicates that a slow ascent is envisioned for each morning and afternoon, followed by a dramatic descent every evening at 9 p.m. (Beyond Graham's chandelier, Westbank is also touting High Line-inspired greenspaces on the bridge and lightbox installations by Emily Carr art students.)

The post-industrial landscape under the bridge—a place where the homeless have traditionally slept—should be the ideal vantage point from which to contemplate various visions of Vancouver, not to mention the role of public art in Terminal City. It is at once a neglected space ripe for innovation (as has been successfully exploited in Mexico City) and a last, shrinking refuge of the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Yet Vancouverites don't have to wait four years to get a sense of how Gillespie's vision for the area will unfold. Right now, as citizens traverse the Granville bridge, they can see a concrete, cube-like structure, rising from the bones of an old storage shed, that displays the neon word *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It houses a new exhibition of the same name curated by Vancouver House's Danish starchitect [Bjarke Ingels](#)—and in an odd mix of architectural history and salesmanship, the show includes a 1955 [Arthur Erickson](#) sketch of an imagined future Vancouver, links it to examples of work by Erickson protégé and Vancouver House consulting architect [James Cheng](#), points to Cheng's "invention" of the tower-and-podium "Vancouverist" typology, and champions Vancouver House as a neo-Ericksonian vision. In

addition to large-scale architectural models of Vancouver House—to be built on the same site in a new, development-driven “Beach District”—the exhibition also contains renderings of Graham’s chandelier.

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* exhibition is a hybrid of sales showroom and gallery on the site of a future twisted tower. While [the project's website](#) interprets the exhibition's titular phrase—first coined by Wagner and then adopted by the likes of Le Corbusier and Gropius—as “total design,” it seems rather bold to use a term usually applied to describing an artistic and architectural ideal to, instead, market condos. But it seems such a usage is appropriate to this city, where the 400-square-foot domicile has become our new lifeblood and dominant aesthetic expression.

Regardless of the sins of our past, or our internationalist aspirations, Westbank’s project reflects the current reality of Vancouver, one measured in price per square footage. And so Gillespie, with his ambitious plans to create not only a Bjarke-designed, twerking tower, but also a whole “urban village” of retail and residential underneath the bridge (upscale trollism for a new age, perhaps?) has spawned the ultimate Vancouver fusion of art and commerce—as much *gestalt* as *gesamtkunstwerk*.