Maplewood Mudflats, a 96-hectare area of mudflats two kilometers east of the Second Narrows Bridge in North Vancouver, was the site where in the 1960s, professors, dope dealers, and craftspeople squatted alongside the more traditional inhabitants, retired fishers and driftwood sellers. When artist Tom Burrows returned to Vancouver from London in 1969, he became a part of the mudflats community. Politicized by the events of May 1968, he considered squatting an art form open to everyone.

In general, BC landscape art had celebrated nature from a Euro-Canadian perspective: a vision of the area as an utopian site. The critic David Thompson described Vancouver's place in this vision as

> set, or rather spraw[ling], like no other city in Canada, in the midst of that Canadian tourist cliché, spectacular scenic grandeur. The coastline of British Columbia is of a kind which brings pre-history in the shape of untamed nature, pressing up to the suburbs of the twentieth century.[1]

Burrows altered the romanticism of the setting by incorporating the functional or formerly functional materials found on the mudflats along with pilfered plumbing supplies, metal hoops, and old water barrels. His strategy was to embody the entropy or destructive aspect of nature and the community in the work. The language that Burrows used in his article "only take for granted the things that you can touch" expressed this dialectic of functionality and aesthetic thought, passive acceptance and omniscient observation: the flats were a "source of material" and the window of his cabin was "an observation point." The "lifestyle on the flats" provided him with "some idea of what was around, of a form that would evolve." His artwork applied conventional aesthetic notions—"viewing point" and "spatial pattern"—on to the otherwise disorderly landscape. Burrows also viewed human activity on the flats through this dynamic of order/disorder. He linked community with the notion of site:

[1] David Thompson, "A Canadian Scene 1," *Studio International* (Oct. 1968): 54.

> The broadest community is its site. All that is in it is unified by the fact that it is within it. The individual elements within the site are further unified by their material surface appearance.... Sometimes all of us take an attitude towards things that can become functional objects within our lifestyle, like chopping a log for firewood or shakes, or deciding about a certain board: I'll leave it there, it has some sense of aesthetic meaning to me if I leave it there."[2]

The squatters' actions were equated with the movements of nature, in an idealization of the state of nature, and their place in it: "the anarchy of the squatters, [their] free non-recognition of the sanctified art object; pragmatically removing glass for a window and wood for the fire . . . ."[3]

Burrows' aesthetic was therefore dependent on the movements of the community *as well as* nature. The pervasiveness of western interpretations of Zen Buddhism also contributed to Burrows' undercutting of functionality to emphasize the formal and experiential qualities of the work. His observation of the community's appropriations of elements of his sculpture was detached, Zen-like, reiterating the Zen belief that all things are impermanent.

Justine Brown describes the anarchistic character of the mudflats community as "possessed of a lucky spirit, the spirit of fortuitous order which springs up unplanned and unregulated."[4] Although Burrows called this equilibrium of human and natural elements "anarchy," he mediated it through the aesthetic framework of the grid; the grid of the window framing the view from his studio and the grid of modernist thought. His "repulsion by the pure romance" of the mudflats setting, and a reluctance to intervene in its natural and social aesthetic economy, was a rejection of the romantic landscape tradition and a reconciliation with the uncontrollability of nature.

The mudflats, in the suburbs of North Vancouver, were socio-politically and geographically liminal to the wilderness and the urban: an intertidal zone in a suburb, a marine and land environment where people lived without property rights and building codes. Burrows represented the place as a site of human

[2] Tom Burrows, "only take for granted the things that you can touch," *artscanada* (Feb.-Mar. 1972): 42.
[3] Ibid., 41.
[4] Justine Brown, *All Possible Worlds: Utopian Experiments in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Transmontanus/New Star Books, 1995), 79.

activity, recognizing the products and evidence of habitation as elements of the landscape. Burrows was informed by the emerging art form of earthworks sited in the environment. While interested in Robert Smithson's approach to industrial ruins on the landscape, Burrows was closer to artist Richard Long whose demarcations of his walks in the countryside consisted only of lines worn into the ground from walking, or stones piled rune-like. Both Burrows and Long saw the earth as an acculturated, productive environment.

The cycles of human activity and materials on the mudflats evoked utopian hopes and goals. Burrows' sculpture on the mudflats [part of his multifaceted project *Skawt Dog* begun in the late 1960s and finished in the early 1980s] incorporated industrial materials that were manipulable by hand. Elements of an old water barrel, for example, were already present in the landscape; others—mainly plumbing materials—were brought from a construction site. The sculpture was inextricably involved with its environment, not imposed on it. Its visual effect varied with environmental conditions, like the height of the tide. The thin, linear, and square elements of the sculpture framed off the landscape, integrating the aesthetic and the natural. Invoking Kasimir Malevich's abstract drawings and minimalist tenets, Burrows envisioned the site as a "visual field": "One is caught up in searching for the spatial pattern the individual elements form in relationship with one another. A relationship in constant flux according to the viewing point, the seasonal changes of the site and its background."[5]

Despite the fact that the sculpture was made of industrial (or de-industrialized) materials, it was not functional. Burrows' imposition of the aesthetic grid edited out the visual and viscous entropic effects of industry on the mudflats: the effluent from Hooker Chemical and Imperial Oil emitted into Burrard Inlet. The Electric Reduction Company was also ignored. The neighbouring Burrard Band's (now known as the Tseil-Waatuth Nation) productive interaction with the environment in the form of a food fishery outside their reserve was also not part of Burrows' vision.

Burrows' experiential approach to aestheticizing the natural landscape countered a picturesque, or sublime apprehension of nature as a material resource for human life and a stage for playing out human psychology. Instead, the lived landscape of human and natural action was represented as integrated with

[5] Tom Burrows, "only take for granted," *artscanada* (Feb.–Mar. 1982): 127.

nature. Even the discarded materials in Burrows' sculpture became beautiful as they were assimilated into the landscape. "The most beautiful sculpture is the sandstone cobble, the heavy square cobble, the cobble you throw at the police." This slogan was scrawled by the Situationist International on Paris palisades during the massive general strike of workers and students in May 1968. The Maplewood Mudflats shacks were covered by shakes or shingles. Burrows transformed the Situationist cobblestone into mudflats driftwood or cedar shakes in a strategy based on both the resistance that squatting poses to property rights and the active use of available materials.

Having built his mudflats shack partly to provoke the argument over property rights and building standards, Burrows knew it would not last. The squatters' occupation and activities on the mudflats were curtailed when the District of North Vancouver chose to consider the Grosvenor Plan, a major commercial development for the mudflats proposed in 1970, which included a multi-purpose town centre with apartment blocks, marina, shopping centre, hotels, theatres, office buildings, and other amenities. The plan was never implemented, but the inhabitants were nevertheless forced to leave. Burrows' court battle resulted in the bulldozing of his and other shacks. Although most shacks were razed on December 18, 1971, some on private land remained until March 1973; the commercial development that was the premise for the expulsions never happened. It seemed that the issue was really that squatters were not ratepayers and the proposed development served as an excuse to remove them. Burrows made a performance event out of the razing of his shack. He hauled it over to a piece of disputed land and documented its destruction by fire.

The Grosvenor Plan met with overwhelming opposition from residents of North Vancouver and from planning authorities due to its scale in area and density, its environmental impact, and its lack of respect for the Burrard Band's territory and economy. The only complaints by residents about the squatters that would be displaced by the development seem to have been made by the Districts' bureaucrats: the land was owned by L & K Lumber and the National Harbours Board, who expressed no objections to squatting. The lumber company

was forced to evict the squatters on instructions from the municipality because of purported "unsanitary conditions," but their willingness to sell the land to the district for development indicates their economic interests in clearing the squats. The charges of unsanitary conditions were trumped up according to reporter, James Spears, who noted the cleanliness of the flats despite the lack of sewage outlets or garbage collection service. An architect who was reported taking pictures of the mudflats houses said it was the last interesting architecture left in this area. No shanty town, the shacks were

> two and three storey homes, fashioned with proper beams and covered by shakes or shingles. Light pour[ed] into the high-ceiling rooms paned with glass. The rooms have all the usual furniture. Four of the nine houses have electricity supplied by BC Hydro to run their fridges, radios and lights. All have cold water piped in from a nearby well. For sanitation, the inhabitants use lime pots which convert sewage into compost.[6]

This fusion of architecture, everyday life and eco-sensitivity was an affront to the ideologies of consumption and taxation. In its official community plan in April 1990, the District of North Vancouver council designated the Maplewood flats for conservation—after another battle with residents angry with council's plan to designate the land as multi-use. The area is now mostly a permanent sanctuary for wild birds.

The squats occupied the liminal intertidal zone of the mudflats. Defined either as land or sea, depending on the map, they were in effect in a no man's land. This work "positioned itself at the critical heart of social change," overriding the boundaries between politics and art, and the social and aesthetic. If the "goal of revolution [was] the revolution of everyday life"[7] as Murray Bookchin hoped in 1971, the Maplewood Mudflats squats were the most beautiful, and revolutionary, of its sculptures.

[6] Robert Sartie, "Sun Investigation Finds: Mud Flats no Shanty Town," *Vancouver Sun* July 27, 1971, n.p.
[7] Murray Bookchin, *Post Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971), 11.