

# The Blue Cabin

Jeremy Borsos

*As Vancouver's grunt gallery explains, "Representing the last vestiges of a cultural tradition of artists and others living in squatter's shacks along the foreshores of this region's waterways, Al Neil and Carole Itter's Blue Cabin was one of many structures that dotted the shores of Burrard Inlet. Recently, the land adjacent to the cabin, MacKenzie Barge and Shipbuilding, was sold to Polygon Homes for redevelopment ... The cabin was moved five kilometres west to a secure storage lot for repair and remediation." grunt gallery has been working with Other Sights for Artists' Projects and Creative Cultural Collaborations to restore the cabin, with plans to offer it as a floating artists' residency space, located "on the waterways of the Lower Mainland."*

*The following photographs and captions represent the work of Jeremy and Sus Borsos, as they restored the Blue Cabin during 2017 and 2018.*

Sus and I have worked together building three houses and restoring two different flats in Europe. We are obsessively driven by our interests in architectural design and the very personal histories contained and expressed by the built world.

The Blue Cabin Committee asked us to assess the structure after it had been moved to a secure site. We thought they just wanted our opinion. After we finished a project in Athens, we thought about the Blue Cabin, now and then, and how much more we liked wood (sawdust is always clean) than cinder block and concrete. Maybe we could do that, we thought. It didn't look that bad. We wondered if work had already begun. The day we sent an email saying we were interested was the same day they sent an email asking if we would like to take on the project. Later that year, we began living, working, and photographing our way through the project, seven days a week.

The cabin gave up a multitude of artefacts, an extraordinary design, and a stream of stories from living memory. "A Norwegian built that cabin," the man said to Al. "The cabin was built on Coal Harbour." That's all we know. We think it was built in 1927, and then floated over to the North Shore in '32. Perhaps the Norwegian built it to live in beside his employment—the cabin was situated beside a barge company.

A union man lived inside for a while—we know it was 1937–38 because that winter he stuffed the letter slot in the door (and the keyhole) with a copy of the *Labour Statesman*, a paper for the brotherhood along the West Coast. He may have stayed several more years or quit his job after the long winter. We won't know. We won't know how long he worked at the shipyard. Neither will we know his name or the colour of his hair.

The 1950 Family—we call them this because “he” added a shower that year to modernize the place, and stuffed the hole around the wiring with a newspaper from 1950. One article had the headline, “City’s Creative Talent Must be Appreciated.” We have heard about two children, a husband, and wife. We know she had more than one pair of shoes (because Carole found the shoes stuffed in a far corner of the closet, years after).

Al made the move to the cabin from his digs in Vancouver in 1966, the year before the Summer of Love. By the time Carole arrived in the latter half of the '70s, he was fully ensconced, surrounded by his creative efforts. The shower filled the role of newspaper archive, with a stack of papers that teetered unnervingly.

When we began work, the cabin scared us—it was so daunting a task being the arbiters of historical currency. Six months later, the cabin occupies our own histories and is ready to meet the next hundred years.



*It Almost Burned Down*—Consecutive images show burn area filled with cinders then cleared to reveal the damage through almost three inches of floor.

As we removed the plywood that covered the original floor, we noticed a small patch nailed down with four big nails. Removing it disclosed a pile of cinders. Removing these revealed that a small fire had smouldered its way through almost the entire thickness of the floor, fuelled by layers of tarpaper between the floorboards.

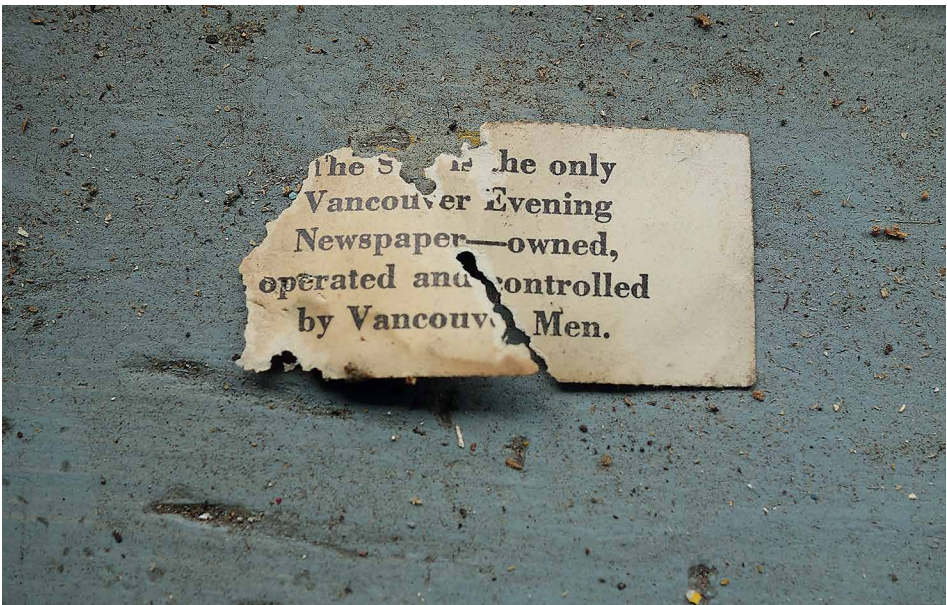






*Paint*—Wall section with trim removed revealing white underpainting.

The Norwegian fellow painted everything white first. This was after he had nailed in all the decorative trim. So the white paint crept behind each board, and fossilized in titanium stalactites that defied gravity (but succumbed to chemical drying). Upon removing the trim, they were revealed: completely random but looking fully orchestrated.



*Control*—Back side of a receipt for a 1939 newspaper subscription.

This is the reverse side of a 1939 receipt for delivery of the *Vancouver Sun*. Its message is meant to say that it is locally owned, but by any standard it describes patriarchal control. In the end it becomes a fragment reduced by silverfish and today its existence is faltering.



*Beginning*—View from kitchen into main room with tape ready to label all the dismantled pieces.

Looking out into the room from the kitchen, our tools, face masks, and masking tape seemed alien in the interior landscape. We used many rolls of tape and many pens to label and number all the parts, which became more numerous every day.





*Ceiling*—Removed twelve-inch-wide ceiling board shows various layers of paint.

Here is a one-by-twelve-inch ceiling board. There is white, orange, another white, grey, and red oxide, all within five inches of one another, divided by a rafter. On one side of the rafter, the kitchen—on the other, the parlour. On the roof side of the board were layers of tar—and then, the Milky Way.



*The Arch*—Multi-coloured paint defines different rafters. The distinct arch formed a decorative motif repeated inside and out.

The Norwegian who built the place in 1927 decided to cut an arch on one edge of a two-by-ten-inch by eighteen-foot-long piece of wood, forming the shape of the roof line. He repeated this arch motif over a hundred times inside and out, applying it in decorative wooden pieces in various sizes.



*Twist-ties*—Domestic archive of twist-ties still on their nail.

They don't use these much anymore to close bags of bread or rolled oats. As they hang on their dedicated nail, the twist-ties equate to the consumption of several loaves of bread or even more bowls of porridge. This kind of archive is seldom seen, especially when it is right in front of us.





*Particular Astonishment*—Shelving from kitchen removed and labelled.

Every part of the small kitchen was carefully dismantled and labelled. The process scared us because the kitchen took an extraordinary form, and had been constructed in a questionable manner. The motif of the arch was used for every shelf—all were painted brightly and besmirched by the funk of cedar smoke and cigarettes and years of simply existing.



*Threshold*—Disintegration of the doorway evident after removing the sill.

As we began to discover the state of things, we noticed that a host of fungi, insects, mice, and rot had conspired to take over the place. Only the lower red-painted door frame remains in the original—the rest we copied and replaced.



*Ants*—Rafter removed by Al Neil to drive out carpenter ants.

Carpenter ants don't eat wood, they build a home by chewing it hollow. The chewing sound drove Al half-mad as it telegraphed through the hardened Douglas fir. One day he took a saw and cut the damned thing out. But the ants stayed.