



Dogville in Hamsterdam

Vancouver's downtown east side in late 2009
is the setting for ALEXANDER JORGENSEN's Bohemian period

Illustration by Jason Botkin

Room for rent. Available now! Illegal residency in commercially-zoned, 4th-floor loft with over 6,000 sq ft of open, unfinished floor space! Room fits a double bed and has two large, glass-free windows with incredible views of the inside of the loft. Shared live/work space with three live in roommates and a rotating cast of about a dozen artists. Great workspace for painting, sculpting, fashion design, photography and printmaking. Amenities include dark room, studio space and coffin/guest room. No stove, crack adjacent. Ideal roommate is artistically inclined, open-minded and comfortable lying to fire marshals. Call now!

WHILE BOTH unexpected and accidental, my lapse into the Bohemian lifestyle proved slightly less difficult than slipping into a hot tub. As with the onset of post-adolescent schizophrenia, the perfect storm of conditions required for one to make the leap is best observed in retrospect.

Artistic disposition? Check. Lack of steady employment? Check. Gleeful, deliberate shirking of social mores? Check. Absinthe dependency? Close enough.

There was some magic to the moment when I reached the top of the bile-green staircase, turned the corner and caught my first view of the sprawling creative space that made me know instantly that I wanted to be a part of it. Maybe

part of it was the relief in knowing that the stranger I'd just met via Craigslist wasn't about to knife and rob me in a stairwell. Maybe it was the simple vastness of the space that lay in front of me. Maybe it was the joy of finding a place to live with 48 hours left on my previous lease, without resorting to cohabitation with a passive-aggressive shut-in resembling an ogre from Norse lore. Ultimately, I believe it was the relief of seeing a genuine artistic hub in a city that had until that point seemed so culturally sterile.

Vancouver, British Columbia is a city of glass and clouds. It's a *nice* place. Its beauty is unimpeachable, its demeanour is kind and its personality is absent. A blemish in the austerity is the Downtown East Side: a once

vibrant commercial hub, vacated during the suburban flight of the mid-Twentieth Century and repopulated by transients, drug addicts and others who look like what might fall out of a Cormac McCarthy novel if you shook it too hard.

This loft space was, and still is, located in what's known as the Woodward's block on Hastings Street: formerly the home of a once-successful department store and now to a condo high rise and shopping court. My tenure here began in the transitional period between the abandonment of the department store and the opening of the new Woodward's. During this time, the block's massive construction site provided an obvious border between the good and bad parts of downtown, earning it the title of 'the worst block in Vancouver.' Such neighbourhoods tend invariably to attract creative types looking to establish workspaces at minimal cost and who don't mind working shoulder-to-shoulder with some of the city's seedier elements. More often than not, it isn't their first time collaborating.

The loft itself was on the fourth and top floor of a commercial building owned by a trio

of Chinese sisters who ran an Asian furniture import store on the ground level and hadn't made a sale in four years. I suspect that's the way they liked it. The building was their inheritance and they were waiting out the steady eastward sweep of gentrification that was affecting the neighbourhood to sell it at a higher price. Those of us on the upper floors benefited from their tenacity.

Between the sisters' store and our loft were a second-floor design studio; and a third-floor apartment, whose occupants' presence we could often feel through the slatted floorboards. They had an amazing capacity to fill my room with the wafting smells of marijuana and bacon, and a barely muffled soundtrack of Aphex Twin and intercourse. I didn't know who these people were but we can assume they were content in their existence.

The loft itself was managed by Ronan Boyle, the man who was kind enough not to knife me in the stairwell. The most industrious artist in the space, he produced hard-edge design-oriented paintings at an incredible rate, often putting out five in a week. This was largely how he paid

the bills, selling them through a partnership with an interior designer. He also made pop art collages working with repeating prints of photographs: this more anarchic bent was closer to the countercultural spirit found in many of Vancouver's best artists. This rift seemed like an uncanny embodiment of Vancouver's cultural output as a whole. A lot of people made a lot of money playing it safe for the glass skyscraper crowd, while seeking out a venue to splash some life, vibrancy and originality back into the city's culture.

I was never able to find out how many people officially worked in the loft and I doubt there was ever a consistent answer. I could have asked Ronan how many checks he took per month, but that probably wouldn't have been an accurate indicator, considering the number of absentee artists who paid each month and the number of present artists who didn't. The place always became suspiciously empty around the first of the month. I later learned there were a few artists who'd been renting space there for years, who I never met during my time there. Some people were there far more often than others:

one permanent fixture was Andrew Tong, whom you can and should Google. He had an amazing ability to combine the innocent and the awful in ways that were both playful and unsettling. One of my favourite pieces of his involved a giant bug in a sun dress, frying a little fat boy with a magnifying glass.

The space itself served as something between a blank canvas and a playground. It could serve as a gallery, a factory, a theatre or a performance venue and was all of these things at one point or another during my stay. The walls dividing spaces were temporary, fluid, hastily erected, and largely meaningless. They scarcely blocked sight or sound from one area to the next. As in Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*, the walls may as well have been chalk lines to be erased and redrawn at a moments notice, serving only to provide some unobtainable sense of privacy. The massive 'windows' in my room provided a constant radio play of all that was going on in the loft at any moment, most audibly the sewing circle dialogue from the fashion design area immediately next to it.

Including myself, there were four permanent

residents in this day-to-day panopticon. The room next to mine was taken up by Kevin, a painter and model-maker for whom time had stopped somewhere around 1935, and even then seemed nostalgic for the decade before that. He was a strong conversationalist and a talented artist who had an impressive gift for crafting tiny, evocative dioramas onto used vinyl LPs, and had, for a time, made his way by painting commissioned portraits of celebrities' dogs. He was the truest embodiment of contemporary Bohemia in the group, or at least the most dedicated to it. The other two permanent residents were Reg, a musician, and his girlfriend, Kashia. Reg had been in the loft longer than anyone: a claim that became more impressive when I learned that he was several years my junior, and had probably been inhabiting that cavernous space since long before he'd finished puberty. The couple shared the largest private area in the loft, with a bedroom and a semi-enclosed living area that doubled as storage for an incredible horde of photographic equipment and mixing boards.

Hoarding was easy to get away with in the

loft as you never felt like you were running out of space. Digging through storage areas would yield endless surprises, but after the first few months I stopped being shocked by anything I found. A dismantled stage, a safe filled with Zeiss camera lenses, stacks of pornographic magazines, mannequins, television cameras from the 80s, old synthesizers, endless piles of paperbacks, a coffin filled with wood planks, a scarecrow, more pornographic magazines, birds' nests, art from previous tenants, previous tenants... The list goes on.

Reg's band often played gigs around the downtown east side. They were a live act seemingly intent on revealing the maximum level of aggression that could be distilled from long-forgotten analog synths. Reg spent much of his time at home practising, gleefully producing eardrum-immolating sounds on a modified Commodore 64 and singing love songs to Isabella Rosselini in *Blue Velvet* that sounded like dancefloor renditions of the theme music from *Terminator 2*. There are probably not many variations on the way human beings are awoken at 2am by the repetitious bellowing of 'DADDY

WANTS TO FUCK!' so I should probably count myself lucky that my experience with it occurred only through song.

On the subject of being awoken at 2am, the loft kept no promises of a good night's sleep. I would often fall asleep at 1am to be awoken an hour later by the sound of an entire bar's worth of people funnelling up the staircase to continue their party at our place. On a Tuesday no less. Most Vancouver bars close around midnight, so the quest for after-hours parties would involve exhaustive treasure maps and secret handshakes. Our loft would often be on such treasure maps. After-hours alcohol was among the illegal substances that could be purchased in the alley across the street. When woken at ungodly hours by a party's sudden eruption I usually did the sensible thing: I'd join in, socialize and drink until I could sleep through the noise.

My favourite loft nights were more low key, with the extended family of artists that worked in the loft bringing a few friends to paint and enjoy a few beers. The ability to talk about art and culture with people who were talented and knew their shit, was was the lofty highlight of the loft

high life. An added bonus was never being certain to whom you might come home, and what they may be working on. On one memorable evening, I walked in on a veritable factory in preparation for an upcoming gallery show in which a dozen local artists were altering wood panel prints of dumpsters in their own individual style. There was a wide range of styles present, though most everyone tended to veer towards having a wry and satirical bent. It was an enviable gathering of amicable weirdoes.

Despite enjoying the company and the atmosphere, I'm not sure how well I could fit in with the loft lifestyle. I was more of a digital vagabond than a true Bohemian, and I'd occasionally feel more like a reporter than an artisan. The majority of my work was done at my laptop, although I did make use of the space in sparse bursts, building sets for short films and using parts of it as a photography studio. Regardless, it was a perfect spot to spend what seemed like a necessary limbo period of my life. Bohemia, for many, is not an end goal but an in-between. It is the land of the undecided and the aspiring. Impermanence and transience are

among its most important qualities.

While I'm fine with having paid my dues to such a lifestyle, my current fear – given the changing face of the neighborhood – is that the space itself may soon become as much of a memory as my time there. The Chinese sisters will get their asking price and Vancouver is a

city unsentimental about its older buildings.

The feeling was never absent that I was a participant in a unique time as well as a unique space. The true Bohemians live in the process of romanticizing their present. It is a sculpting of nostalgia in which any present misery takes a back seat to the beauty of the story it will make.

