

EXHIBITION



LEFT In *Urgencies of Modesty*, viewers can spy a family sitting around a kitchen-table bonfire.

TOP RIGHT *The Big Ideas ... Small Footprints* installation nods to Victorian-era ingenuity.

ABOVE RIGHT Martin Liefhebber's 'high-touch' felt and newspaper wall system. PHOTOS BY DAVE LeBLANC

Taking on global realities closer to home

A new show of tactile, interactive installations allows architects to explore what it means to build in a collapsing economy



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Two little girls, perhaps 8 and 10, navigate Lilliputian walls. Amused, they find a light switch, flick it up and down a few times, notice a shrunken window frame, chuckle, then begin to walk to another part of the gallery when the younger one squeals with delight: "Wait! Go back, you're on TV!"

The older girl steps back and her feet appear onscreen. "Bend down, so I can see your face!" the younger one says. The older one aligns her smiling face with the pinhole-sized lens. "Now do something silly!" she says.

When the girls finally tire of the camera and find the taxidermic squirrel hiding inside a

different wall, they can hardly contain themselves.

Spurred on by the giggling girls, adults are now crouching and peering through peepholes in the walls to see a dysfunctional family sitting around a kitchen-table bonfire, a McMansion moored in acres of grass and, yes, a furry critter living between layers of dry-wall.

Welcome to the *Building for the Economy* exhibition – at Harbourfront Centre's York Quay Centre – meant to educate, challenge and question the philosophies informing contemporary architecture, particularly in the face of global economic realities.

Watching from a far corner of the room, architects Adam and Katja Thom, partners in Agathom Co., are clearly pleased their installation, *Urgencies of Modesty*, is generating such interest. They hope, too, that by allowing gallerygoers to interact with the silly shrunken walls and meandering floor plan they will convey the subconscious message that

all of us need to get serious about our personal real estate consumption.

"You're not able to afford the square footage that you used to be able to afford," Ms. Thom says, with a mild Danish accent. "You can still build, but you have to be more modest and understand that the scale has to be different; putting the right effort into the design will create for you just as lovely a home, if not an even better one."

Another way to better your home is by lowering energy consumption through "energy management," says architect Martin Liefhebber of Breathe Architects. In his corner of the gallery, he has created *Big Ideas ... Small Footprints* to remind visitors that to learn how to do this they need look no further than their own grandparents.

An old bicycle points the way to Mr. Liefhebber's installation, a room filled with Victorian imagery, a fireplace, a few pieces of furniture and a wall system made out of thick grey

felt and rolled-up newspapers.

"Instead of high-tech, it's high-touch," he says with a laugh. He explains that rather than using complicated and expensive double-skinning on the exterior of buildings and installing argon gas windows, a heavy set of drapes can keep the heat out in summer and icy drafts at bay in winter. The Victorians, he points out, created personal microclimates by wearing slippers and housecoats while curled up in sheltering wingback chairs; they covered cold surfaces such as tabletops with cloth and doilies, and cold wooden floors with thick carpeting.

"Instead of cranking up the furnace or cranking up the air conditioning, it's all to do with what you wear and what you surround yourself with," Mr. Liefhebber says, gesturing to some of the pictures on the walls, one of which shows his own bundled-up grandmother in 1964.

The felt-and-newspaper wall system (which has an insulation value of R-7 and, Mr. Lief-

hebber hints, could go into production if there is enough interest) can just be rolled up in the spring once it's done the job of keeping the house warm. And, since a homeowner could incorporate any sort of graphically bold or interestingly coloured paper into the system, it would work for sleek modernist houses or commercial spaces.

"You don't have to have the experts to do what we need to do to be comfortable," he finishes.

Rounding out the show is a mock-up of a structurally innovative outdoor pavilion for Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Co., which is located in Prince Edward County, Ont., done by Lapointe Architects. A visual timeline of its construction, which used "found, reclaimed or donated materials" to reduce costs by 75 per cent, runs along three walls. Finally, *Home Economics* – a grouping of found textiles that were embroidered by artist Thea Haines – is an installation that harks back to "a time when

housekeeping, which included preserving and canning, laundry, sewing and mending, was achieved without the conveniences of modern appliances and supermarkets."

Not content to produce an average show relying solely on the typical (and sometimes boring) wall-mounted photographs with text blocks underneath, in *Building for the Economy*, curator Patrick Macaulay has found a winning combination: Give thinking architects a forum where they can playfully explore what it means to build in a collapsing economy, then give them room enough to construct tactile, interactive and fun installations that appeal to all age groups.

And, most importantly, make sure soapboxes are checked at the door.

» Admission to *Building for the Economy* is free and the show runs to Sept. 7. The *Architecture Gallery* is located on the second floor of the York Quay Centre, 235 Queens Quay W., Toronto. For more information: harbourfrontcentre.com.