

ART ATTACK PAYS A HOUSE CALL

Project Turns a Condemned Structure Into an Off-the-Wall Vision

By Benjamin Forgey
Washington Post Staff Writer

Last year it was an abandoned wood frame farmhouse. This summer it is a sturdy brick cottage due for extinction. Art Attack, an artists' collaborative, has worked its magic again, temporarily transforming another ordinary Arlington dwelling into... something else.

The attack this time took place upon a condemned corner house at 3286 N. Fairfax Dr., although attack may be too strong a word. Now shuttered and painted entirely black, the house sort of disappears into the background of a setting that includes a church, a school, a gas station, a used car lot, a '70s commercial building and a couple of very wide streets.

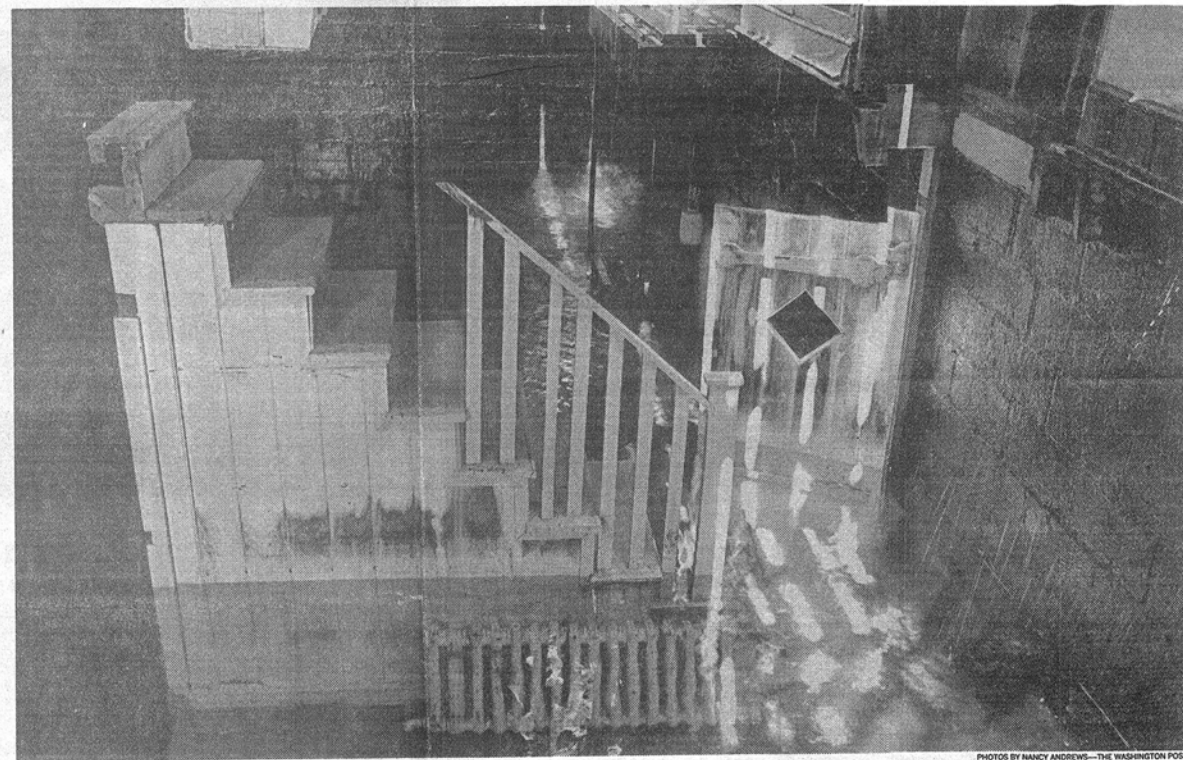
The little black building does look a bit strange, but no more so than many things you come across in contemporary cities—particularly in areas as fast-changing as this one, located on the redeveloping Red Line Metro corridor between the Clarendon and Virginia Square stops. To see the art work whole you have to get up close to it, and peer inside.

To say the interior has been dramatically transformed is both to understate and overstate the case. Understatement, because the place has been radically changed in look and meaning. It is a new thing, a shock. Overstatement, because the new interior still looks eerily familiar. It's made almost entirely with the original materials: the structural walls, of course, and a fireplace, a kitchen sink and other beleaguered stuff.

Houses are our cozy retreats. We think of them as being both safe and private. We make the front yards nice and we put some things on display in windows for others to see: a pot or a plant or a souvenir next to the clean white curtains. We greet others from the front porch or speak to neighbors over the fence, but they get beyond the front door only if we invite them in.

Houses also are the containers of our memories. Anyone who has spent a good bit of time living in a particular house—and, despite the famous mobility of American society, most of us have done so—can recall the floor plans and the rooms and the idiosyncrasies with astonishing veracity, even decades after the fact. The breakfast nook with the view to the vegetable garden. The corner chair Dad usually sat in. The hallway where the pine chest was, with its mothball odors. And so on.

Ultimately, houses are the repositories of our values. Financially, they are the biggest



At 3286 N. Fairfax Dr., Arlington, the mailbox is used for visitor comments; floors and interior walls have been removed and water sloshes in the bottom; and a shower gives the address.

investment most of us will make during our lifetimes. We rely on them for monetary as well as physical security. Striving to own a house is a big part of the American dream, and the house we own signals our status, maturity and dignity as individuals and as families.

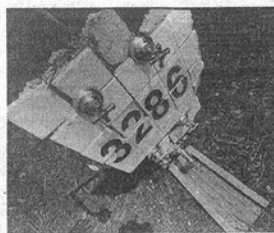
By operating on a private house, then, the artists of Art Attack tap into a mother lode of American symbolism. By working on an empty older house in an area of rapid change, they

emphasize not only the poignancy of passing time—houses, like people, age and die—but also the fact that houses don't always die of natural causes. In a way, the house they rebuilt is about the dynamic, ceaseless change that courses through the modern city.

When you look into the cottage on Fairfax Drive, this is something of what you see: a big, almost empty chamber, dark even during the day. All the interior partitions are gone. The main floor and attic floor have been entirely removed so that, looking up, you see the roof's interior. Looking down, you see the basement floor. The basement is filled with water to a height of about three feet. Still standing are part of the wooden basement stairwell and plumbing pipes to a now nonexistent bathroom. Many of the fireplace tiles remain on the wall. So do the fireplace and mantelpiece and a couple of built-in cabinets. On one of these, there's an old bowling trophy.

There is a repetitive, amplified, whirling sound, like a ghostly siren, generated by the moving water; because the house leaks a bit, the water supply must be constantly replenished. A house that weeps.

The sounds contribute greatly to a strange, mesmerizing mood. So do the sights. Under a high sun, shards of light pierce the gloom; they penetrate the water's surface and are reflected by it, so that the space multiplies itself in reflections, either as the cabin of a bus or a train does at night. In addition to the



water, there are other reflective surfaces: mirrors cannily moved from their original locations, glass from the windows now suspended beneath the roof's ridge. A house that sees itself, always empty.

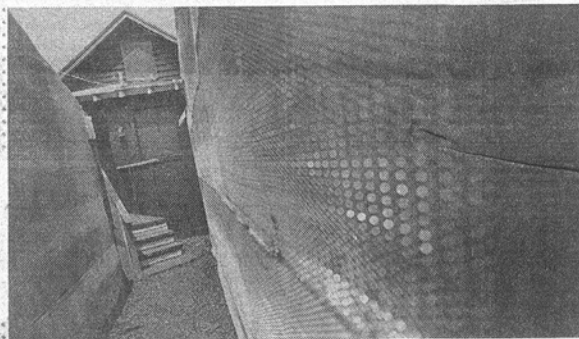
At night, with everything subtly lit, things get even eerier. They get downright scary—evil, even—at 9:45 p.m. when water pours down the interior walls: Thrice (also at 12:45 and 5:45 p.m.), the house becomes a sort of fountain when water pipes are programmed to open, creating an even flow along the walls. A house that weeps.

It took six weeks of subtracting, adding and reconfiguring things to complete the house's transformation. Clearly, it was six weeks of hard work. In addition to the backaching labors on the interior, Art Attack also sliced

through the garage to make a path for a viewing platform in the back (it's in the former kitchen). And, using boards from the partial destruction of the roof, they built a new front "porch." Now, when you climb the steps, you end up in a tiny, windowless, triangular room. To see the interior, you must follow narrow passageways on either side of the "porch." Thus, entry appropriately becomes a slightly mystifying ritual.

"Vessel" is the work's apt title. It carries the artists' persuasive, cogent, not entirely reassuring views of the ways of the world. It holds the silent dreams of its former inhabitants—including the broken dreams, as if to remind us that many of our memories have a sad or terrible or tragic side. Most importantly, as a work of public art, it has become a vehicle for the immense variety of thoughts and emotions visitors leave with.

Privately funded, the art work was sponsored by Arlington County's department of parks and recreation as part of this summer's Arts al Fresco festival. Art Attack, founded in Los Angeles in 1979, has been based partially in the Washington area since the mid-'80s. The team for this project included painter Rebecca Cross, composer Alberto Gaitan, cabinetmaker Evan Hughes, painter Jeremy Jeleny, graphics designer Lynn McCary and sculptor Peter Winant. "Vessel" will remain on view through Labor Day, after which it will make way for a public park.



Art Attack sliced the garage in two to make a path to a viewing platform.



PHOTOS BY NANCY ANDREWS—THE WASHINGTON POST