

Taiwanese squatters

> BY ROBIN LAURENCE

Walk into Centre A from now until August 31 and you'll see posters neatly stacked on tables around the room. As you look at the colour-saturated photographic images and read the accompanying text, you put together the story of the Treasure Hill Tea + Photo Project (THTP) in Taipei, Taiwan. You also assemble a portrait of the Taiwanese-American artist behind the work, Wei-Li Yeh. Simultaneously, you hear the braided soundtracks of two different video works, shot by Taiwanese artist Yu-Hsin Wu and playing in viewing stations at one end of the gallery.

The videos document the same artist-run, THTP project as the posters: Yeh and his colleagues creating a modest cultural centre in the disputed, semi-derelict neighbourhood of Treasure Hill between 2004 and 2006. But they tell the story in different ways. One video is all hard work, cooperative effort, and cultural endeavour. A tea house, garden, and pond are hand-built out of a falling-down group of small houses; an archive is assembled; poetry readings and performances take place in the reclaimed spaces. The other shows a screaming argument between Yeh and one of his Treasure Hill neighbours, who is furious at him for the way he is clearing a dilapidated shack off the roof of his studio.

Their noisy dispute—"Get off my roof!" "You psycho neighbour!"—plays behind the *Straight's* recent Centre A interview with Yeh. By contrast, however, the artist is soft-spoken and quietly reflective as he talks about the series of events that took him to Treasure Hill. A photographic artist, he was born in Taiwan, grew up in Florida, earned a master's degree at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design,

and then lived for a few years in New York City. Attempting to fit his art practice around his day job, he found himself increasingly disillusioned. "There are so many struggling artists in New York, and I think what that experience taught me was, what work you do, you should concentrate on that job."

It was impossible, he thought, to commit himself to both a vocation and an avocation. At the same time, his father was gravely ill in Taipei, and Yeh wanted to spend time with him. He pulled up roots and, in early 2002, returned to his homeland, imagining he would support himself by teaching English. "I think I always had a curiosity about Taiwan," he says, then adds the unexpected: "Moving there saved my art practice."

The cultural climate in Taipei was conducive to Yeh's concept-driven photography. "There's a lot of funding for the arts, and somehow people found out I was an artist and asked me to make work—which led me to here." *Here* was Treasure Hill, a squatters' neighbourhood built on public land on the outskirts of Taipei between the 1960s and 1980s. In the past couple of decades, attempts by authorities to demolish the illegal settlement have met with strong opposition. While dueling interests and departments tussled over redeveloping Treasure Hill, the Taipei Culture Bureau sponsored brief artists' residencies there. The intention was to respond to what remains of the place and its occupants.

Yeh was awarded one such two-month residency, establishing a studio and darkroom. He convinced the authorities to extend his stay and began to create the arts centre, programming activities in it and photographing the place and the process. "After my residency, I realized the only thing artists could do for the community is to bring in their skills and allow people access



Wei-Li Yeh (right), shown here with fellow artist Yu-hsin Wu, has set up a centre that gives a poor community access to its collective skills and know

to what they knew," Yeh says. "I guess in a way this is kind of utopian, a kind of labour exchange."

Yeh's posters—the "Phase Five" of THTP—provide an overview of what's happened to date. Their text component includes open letters to friends, family, and institutional bodies. Installing this work at Centre A was the idea of independent curator Amy Cheng, a former Vancouver resident now based in Taiwan. She saw parallels between Treasure Hill and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, especially in controversies surrounding urban renewal, the construction of high-end housing, and

the potential displacement of low-income, long-term residents.

Yeh spent time in the town Eastside last fall and was overwhelmed by the complexity of what he saw. "There's no way that I can understand anything about downtown Vancouver," he remarks. The social, economic, and health issues of the Downtown Eastside are completely different from those of Treasure Hill.

"One of the letters [on the posters] is actually to the Downtown Eastside, which speaks about the possibility of making any comparison," Yeh says. "So I'm telling you from another place." ♦