

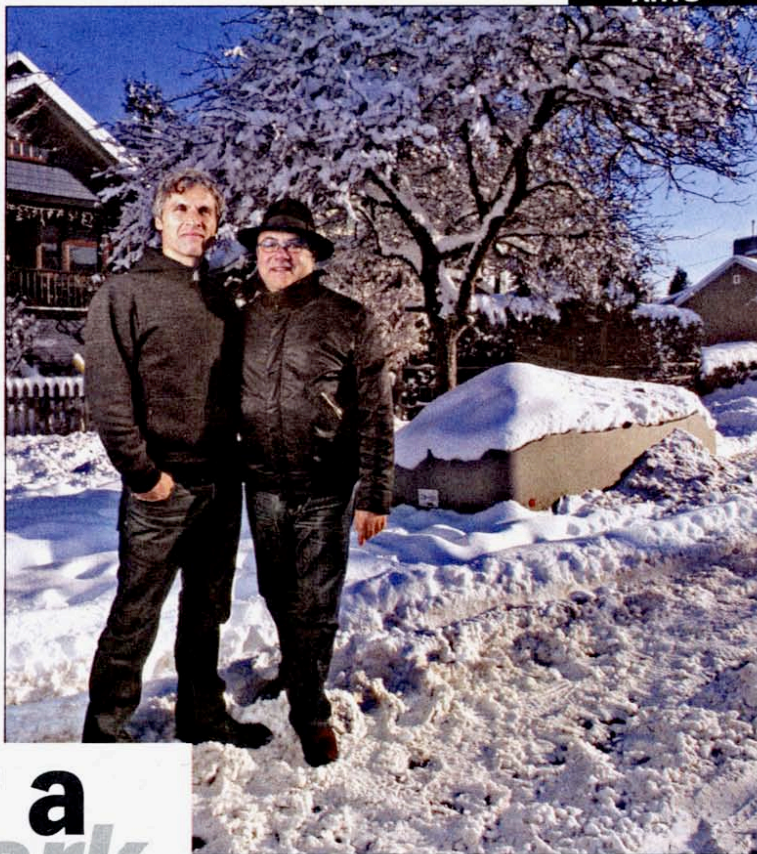
BY ROBIN LAURENCE

Snow has muted the art's contours, creating a subtle white topography of peaks, plains, and valleys in the 3900 block of Ontario Street. Still, whether the sandblasted stainless-steel forms are draped in snow, sprinkled with leaves, or fully exposed, they resonate with meaning and mystery.

The design of Marko Simcic's new public artwork, *Park*, and its temporary site, in curbside parking lanes on either side of the street, suggest ways we negotiate space in our residential neighbourhoods. The two movable sculptures are car-sized and mounted on wheels, but they're definitely not cars. Their organic forms are both present and ghostly, suggestive of fabric stretched and draped over lawn furniture—the stuff of our homes and gardens. *Park* creates a tension, Simcic observes, between the public and the private. Between our sense of sharing and our sense of entitlement. Between car culture, domestic culture, and visual culture.

Sitting at a wooden dining table in his Heather Park-area home, the artist and architect recounts the long process by which *Park* came into being. In early 2002, he responded to a call for submissions from the City of Vancouver's public-art program. The competition was for art designed to be placed somewhere along the newly created greenway on Ontario Street. Almost immediately, Simcic had the precedent-setting idea of putting the work on wheels and siting it on the street, in a number of temporary locations, rather than permanently in a park or on a boulevard or traffic circle. "I started to consider that the art proposal would be for a vehicle of some sort, something that moved and that could occupy the street itself," he says.

Simcic saw the street, and especially the parking lane, as "ambiguous or contested in terms of the public and the private". People tend to exer-



Tom Cone (right) let Marko Simcic put *Park* in front of his house for the winter; below left, in sunnier weather. Alex Waterhouse-Hayward photo (above).

Looking for a place to Park

After months seeking of approval for his roadside public art, Marko Simcic works with residents to roll out his creation

cise a strong sense of ownership over the parking spots in front of their homes, he observed. When scouting the neighbourhood, he was also intrigued by transitional spaces between the street and the houses and yards. And he noticed the myriad ways residents presented the public faces of their private properties—with care or indifference or something in-between.

He noticed, too, the abundant use of tarps to cover cars, boats, trailers, furniture, and piles of dirt, or to extend architectural space around doors and stairways. The ubiquitous tarps again spoke to the meeting place of public and private, exposure and concealment.

Simcic's finished designs are hybrid forms: vehicle, architecture, still life, landscape. "I was conflating those, thinking of them as topography," he says. The cast steel sculptures show traces of their origins as still-life arrangements covered by taut fabric: two Adirondack-style chairs facing each other in one; a picnic table with barbecue and implements in the other.

Simcic had previously created three public artworks, two in Richmond and one in Vancouver. None fully prepared him for the bureaucratic labyrinth that became part of the *Park* project. After conditionally winning the Ontario Street Greenway commission, Simcic spent a year and a half presenting his idea to the city's engineer-

ing department for technical review. "We [Simcic and public-art consultant Barbara Cole] would sit down and have a meeting and then they would say, 'You really need to talk to Tree Trimming' or 'You need to talk to Parking Enforcement' or 'You need to talk to Traffic, you need to talk to Sewers,'" Simcic recalls. "There wasn't a single division that wasn't implicated in artwork being in the street."

Much as Simcic's ideas intrigued various engineers, there were also attempts to persuade him to give it a more conventional location. "Keeping it on the street to me was really central and I kept trying to make that clear," he says. "One of the things that interested me was placing the art in a way that symbolically displaces the car." Eventually, his designs—and his social and environmental message—prevailed.

"After some early disappointment, I started to see the bureaucratic anxieties as somehow part of the project, part of the piece," Simcic reflects. "The focus was less on the object itself, for me, and more on putting the things I became interested in into motion." Part of that motion involved delivering surveys to residents along the six-kilometre stretch of Ontario Street to gauge their responses to the proposed work. The brochures also invited them, if interested, to host the sculptures in parking spots in front of their homes for different lengths of

time, varying from one week to six months. "We got four years' worth of programming," Simcic says, holding up 28 reply cards.

Among those eager to host *Park* were playwright Tom Cone and costume designer Karen Matthews, who helped launch it in early December. For the next few months, one of the sculptures will continue to sit in front of their house, the other across the street. "When Marko first approached us, it was with some of his original ideas, which had to do with territory and possessiveness over parking spaces," Cone says in a telephone interview with the *Straight*. "And that kind of public-private tension interested us."

He remarks that, since Ontario became a greenway and bike route, its community dynamic changed. "The whole street has a different social sensibility, and we thought it would be wonderful to have *Park*...on the street." Cone also talks about public reaction to the art: many passersby photograph it, touch it, walk around it, pose questions if he or Matthews is nearby.

"They first want to know what it is and why it's there," Cone says. "As soon as you get into the area of public sculpture, the conversations become quite different." Then he adds, "The people on Ontario Street, the ones that I've chatted with, feel kind of honoured that it's there."

Simcic reflects on the necessity of community involvement in *Park*. "Its presence in the public realm depends on individuals, on their interest in it," he says. "It's got an open-ended future—and that is really of importance to me." ♦

