

# MONTRÉAL BEHIND THE SCENES

January 2006

Montréal

## New Campus, Old Controversy

Written by Ronald T. Harvie

Here's a little paradox for you. Why do we so often picture the ideal university campus as being a secluded collection of ivy-covered red-brick buildings in the most traditional style? Shouldn't university buildings be on the leading edge of architecture, design and urban development?

Hopefully, a look at the new urban campus of UQAM (the Université du Québec à Montréal), called the Complexe des sciences Pierre-Dansereau, will evoke the reply "yes, of course!" And this major project right in the heart of Montréal is a contemporary manifestation of what some universities have been doing for centuries.

A couple of examples spring to mind: the University of Virginia, for example, whose original buildings were designed by that multi-disciplinary genius, Thomas Jefferson, in the 1820s. Some people call it the most beautiful college campus in the world and it has become the poster child for the traditional red-brick neo-classical college look. But at the time of its conception, it was really quite a radical design. "An academical village" Jefferson called his idea, and laid it out with equal emphasis on efficiency and esthetics.

Fast forward a century and a half to Burnaby, British Columbia, and Simon Fraser University. This suburban Vancouver campus was utterly shocking when it opened in 1965. Perched on a mountaintop like some latter-day Machu Picchu,



Photo UQAM

### IN THIS EDITION...

First, the amazing site...

A tour of the campus...

Finally, meet the architect...

*Tourisme Montréal authorizes you to use and/or reproduce this monthly in whole or in part. If you wish to quote the author, please do.*

*To receive this monthly, please send a request by e-mail to [mdube@tourisme-montreal.org](mailto:mdube@tourisme-montreal.org) and let us know if you prefer to get it by regular mail or by e-mail.*

*For previous issues of Montréal Behind the Scenes, please have a look at our Web site: [www.tourisme-montreal.org/Media/03/default.asp](http://www.tourisme-montreal.org/Media/03/default.asp)*

Arthur Erickson's "instant university" revived and redefined the academic role in large-scale architectural events.

And now, Montréal has its new UQAM campus. Whether it's on par with the work of Thomas Jefferson—or even Arthur Erickson—is open to question. But it is in its own way as dramatic—and to some people as shocking and controversial!

### First, the amazing site...

For years, as you went along Sherbrooke Street, downtown Montréal's most elegant thoroughfare, you came upon a surprisingly large vacant space sloping downwards between Saint-Urbain and

Jeanne-Mance Streets. It always made people wonder, "How come this is still wide open and full of weeds?" Especially, when, at the bottom of the slope, you saw the shiny white buildings of Place des Arts, Montréal's famous cultural complex. And, when you noticed that across Sherbrooke Street was the old Ecole des Beaux Arts, an art school built in the most perfect 19th-century architectural vocabulary.

And, when you saw that on one corner of the space was a coolly elegant pavilion built in 1911 by noted Montréal architect, Jean-Omer Marchand. And, finally, when you spotted, down at the bottom, the Gothic-revival Church of St. John the Evangelist, with its signature bright-red roof.

What fabulous surroundings! What a great site to transform! Well, it took almost thirty years: the terrain had been empty since 1976 (although UQAM had constructed a single and highly controversial building in the southwest corner in 1992). It also took over \$150 million—along with some determined people at UQAM and a daring architect—but now the whole space is up and running as Montréal's most spectacular new learning centre.

## A tour of the campus...

From the start, a fundamental decision had to be made about the overall style of the new campus. Was it going to be built on the centralized, Jeffersonian model, or in the more European manner, where each component has its own separate address, its own "look"?

The latter was chosen, prompting some critics to point out that Montréal is a North American city, not a European one. But, in the final analysis, the UQAM science campus turns out to be a kind of blend of the two traditional types. Yes, each building looks different. And yes, the complex comes off as an integrated unit, thanks to the fact that all the buildings turn in towards a central core. Moreover, a long-forgotten little street was revived as the backbone of the project: now Kimberley Street is the tree-lined, pedestrian and bikes-only "main street" of the campus.

So, as you stroll or pedal around, you can't help noticing all the major "themes" of the place.

First, individual expression—not a bad idea for a university complex! Each of the buildings here looks different. Obviously, the old 1911 building has its calm, confident Edwardian appearance, and its rehabilitation as part of the campus hasn't changed that! But behind it—down Kimberley Street—are two other period pieces: the old ateliers which have been transformed by a sleek glass addition into the Library. And an old forge, tall smokestack and all, which is now the student centre. But, if you look closely, you'll see that the restorations are not slavish imitations of the antique, but rather subtle, modern interpretations of older forms.

But the real impact comes from the new buildings. Each has its own "story." The student residence, for example, sports walls that call to mind a honeycomb in a bee hive. The biological science building itself features an ultra-modern greenhouse on the roof, and walls whose windows are laid out in patterns resembling the DNA molecule. And the building housing TELUS, the university's online educational program, has a facade of undulating glass, in a sort of computer-screen-glowing colour impregnated with pixels to diffuse the light inside.

Now, as for togetherness of design, all the buildings have one big thing in common: they're clad in yellow brick. This was another source of criticism—to put it mildly. Some saw it as too European, too weird for downtown Montréal. Others detested it because it reminded them of so many institutions in Québec's past sheathed in yellow brick: hospitals, religious schools, government offices. In other words, it didn't convey a warm, collegiate feeling.

Defenders pointed out that the 1911 pavilion was in yellow brick, and looked fine. And wasn't it a good idea that the new campus honour its past? What was the alternative? Grey concrete? Brushed metal and dark glass? Hardly!



Photo UQAM

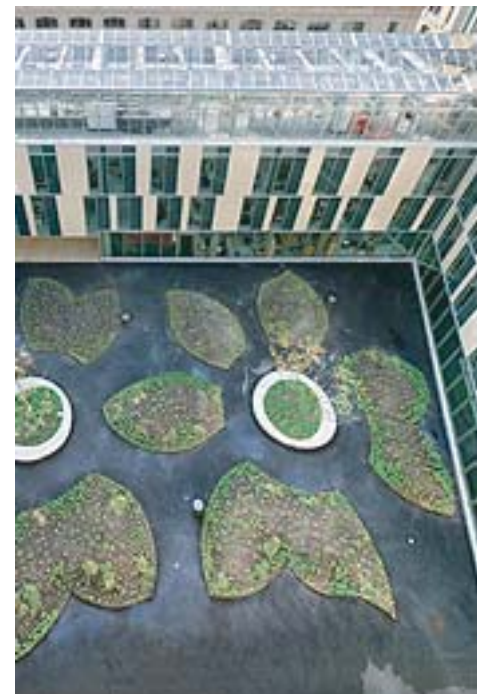


Photo UQAM

Which leads to a third component of the campus' design: its environmental friendliness. This is particularly apt for a modern science centre—even more so for one named after Pierre Dansereau, the 94-year-old Professor Emeritus at UQAM who is often called "le père de l'écologie" in Québec.

Apart from the trees (166 in all!) and grassy spaces of the main public areas, the complex contains several garden spaces besides the spectacular rooftop greenhouse. They've all been planned by landscape architect Claude Cormier to create "not a private enclave, but rather an urban woodland, an oasis of greenery in a downtown setting."

The courtyard of the biological sciences building, for example, contains a garden in a classic French formal style. Here, raised beds of over 5,000 plants are arranged in symmetric shapes—in this case, the petals of a huge flower—which show best when seen from windows above.

In the atrium of the old Sherbrooke pavilion is a surprising little Japanese-style garden: bamboo poles, slabs of black granite and gravel paths inlaid with ginkgo leaves made of slate!

All this has received more than local attention, too. Recently, the OECD (International Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) awarded the complex its Prix Florilège for outstanding environmental achievement.

## Finally, meet the architect...

The Complexe des sciences Pierre-Dansereau is the work of Montréal architect, Mario Saia, his firm Saia, Barbaresse et Topouzanov along with Tétrault Parent Languedoc & Associates.

A native Montrealer, Saia is probably the architect most other Montrealers love to hate. Sure, he can talk suavely in public about "urban oases" and "crucibles of learning" and "modern interpretation" when asked about his plans. Then, he goes ahead and builds with yellow brick and pixellated yellow glass along Sherbrooke Street!

But Saia thrives on controversy. Ever since he founded his firm in 1968 (he studied architecture in Montréal and Edinburgh), he's been the bad boy of building around here. His previous project for UQAM, a huge edifice in the form of a ship, was called the "Titanic" by its detractors when it went up in the 1990s. And his recent super-colourful extension to Montréal's Palais des congrès caused a lot of people to see red!

Saia shrugs it all off, pointing out that both projects have been lauded widely in prestigious architectural circles—and so now are increasingly seen as Montréal's future "heritage buildings." And you know, he's probably right!



*Photo UQAM*

## Sources:

Laurence Clavel, "Le patrimoine de l'avenir," *Le Devoir*, Montréal, Nov. 27, 2005.

Stéphane Baillargeon, "Comme un jardin," *Le Devoir*, Montréal, Nov. 27, 2005.

Angèle Dufresne, Claude Gauvreau, Pierre-Etienne Caza, Dominique Forget, "On a maintenant un campus très vivant," *L'UQAM*, Vol. XXXII, No. 7, Nov. 28, 2005.

Tourisme Montréal authorizes you to use and/or reproduce this monthly in whole or in part. If you wish to quote the author, please do.

To receive this monthly, please send a request by e-mail to [mdube@tourisme-montreal.org](mailto:mdube@tourisme-montreal.org)

For previous issues of Montréal Behind the Scenes, please have a look at our Web site: [www.tourisme-montreal.org/Media/03/default.asp](http://www.tourisme-montreal.org/Media/03/default.asp)

Production: Bobby Branchaud