

Q&A: Landscape architect Claude Cormier talks agronomy and fun

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Landscape architect Claude Cormier is warm and engaging with a contagious laugh. A self-described troublemaker, Cormier takes whimsy to new heights with creations that push boundaries and get people talking, like Lipstick Forest at Montreal's Palais des congrès and the fountain at Bercy Park in Toronto.

Cormier grew up on a dairy farm in Princeville, Que., at the foot of the Appalachian mountains. When he was 17, his father passed away, leaving a wife and four children. As the eldest boy, it was Claude's duty to care for their 50 cows and sugar shack with help from his 15-year-old brother. The boys got the job done while mourning and keeping up with schoolwork. After two years they decided to sell the livestock. It had been his dad's dream that Cormier pursue agronomy — the science and genetics of plants.

Where did you study?

I wanted to fulfill my father's

wish so I left small-town Quebec for small-town Ontario and completed a bachelor's degree in agronomy at the University of Guelph. But it was not my calling. I applied for the landscape architecture program at the University of Toronto and got my first glimpse of big city life. It was love-at-first-sight. After graduating, I stayed in Toronto for seven years, worked on local projects, and had the good fortune to work on a few in Montreal for the incomparable Phyllis Lambert. She became a mentor and greatly influenced my professional development. Among other things, she taught me about rigour.

What happened next?

I moved to Montreal and worked for architecture firm Groupe Lestage. A couple of years later, I fulfilled my own dream of taking on the History and Theory of Design master's program at Harvard. I developed a new way of looking at things and was transported back to my youth, as a farm boy, deeply connected to nature. At Harvard, I worked at the firm



The half-fountain at Dorchester Square. - PHOTO: JEAN-FRANÇOIS SAVARIA

of my professor, Martha Schwartz, world-renowned for her provocative designs. In 1994, I returned to Montreal and launched Claude Cormier et associés.

Why is landscape architecture important?

Our work concerns the interplay between built and natural environments. Being close to beauty enhances feelings of well-being and optimism. The elements that contribute to this sensation can be subtle; one may feel good at a particular location but not know why. During our creative process, we consider many things including light sources, wind, colours and culture. I believe that too much comfort can be detrimental, so my designs tend to nudge people out of their comfort zones. My concepts don't always receive immediate approval but I am tenacious and never back down from a good fight — especially when I am fighting for my designs. During our redesign of Montreal's Dorchester Square, we were told by the city that the Victorian-style fountain we created invaded space where tour buses had to park. Instead of removing it, we sliced the fountain in half and adorned the flat side with a sculpture of a red-crested pileated woodpecker. It has become a popular attraction.

Tell me about 1 Square Phillips.

This Brivia Group development was designed by architects Anik Shooner and Jean-Pierre Le-



The courtyard at 1 Square Phillips, by Brivia Group.

- PHOTO: © MENKES SHOONER DAGENAIS LETOURNEUX ARCHITECTES

tourneur of MSDL. Its 61 floors include 498 studios, one, two and three-bedroom condos, luxury amenities and a panoramic sky lounge. Completion is scheduled for 2024.

Our courtyard design is a nod to King Edward VII, whose monument is across the street in Phillips Square. He was a dandy and loved fashion, so the pavement features a Prince of Wales pattern, popularized during his reign. This is achieved using light and dark stones, assembled like woven fabric. At the center of the courtyard is a bonsai garden to honour the developer, Mr. Kheng Ly, who is of Chinese heritage. The blending of the two styles is a tribute to Montreal's diversity.

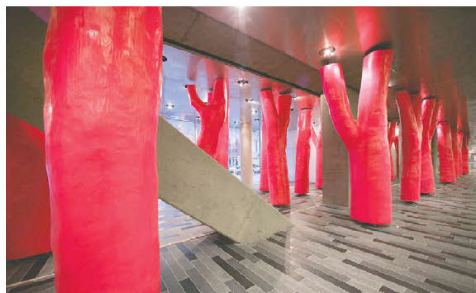
What about other endeavours?

I have received help along the

way and feel fortunate that I can pay it forward. In 2000, I began offering a scholarship to a promising third-year landscape architecture student at the Daniels School of Architecture (University of Toronto). A few years ago, I upgraded it to an endowment, which will provide for a full three-year scholarship, in perpetuity. Recently, I collaborated with writers Marc Treib and Susan Herrington on a book about my work called Serious Fun. It comes out this summer.

What makes you happy?

Being very busy is normal for me, but I make time for my favourite sport. I swim two kilometres, three or four times a week. As for being happy, I was blessed with "the happy gene." Luckily it's coupled with the gene of good common sense.



Lipstick Forest at Montreal's Palais des congrès. -JEAN-FRANÇOIS SAVARIA