

The cover of Canadian Architect magazine features a photograph of a modern building with a dark, angular facade and large glass windows. In the foreground, there is a large, rusted metal sculpture consisting of several geometric blocks. The sky is clear and blue.

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Academic Achievement in Quebec
The Blob Biennale



Collège Gérard-Godin, Sainte-Genève, Québec
Saucier + Perrotte/Desnoyers Mercure et associés
architects in joint venture



The bold extension and transformation of a Jesuit monastery into a modern college emphasizes the ephemeral qualities of architecture to create an elaborate luminous machine.

Miracle in Montreal

by Kurt W. Forster

Because buildings require many forces to come together, conditions for architecture are seldom favourable and the results rarely of exceptional quality. Both the circumstances of a recent project in Québec and the building itself, the Collège Gérard-Godin, must be considered virtually unique. Institutional commissions are notoriously fraught with problems, and this one had its share of them, but what might have been impediments turned out to yield rare benefits.

The suburban site in the village of Sainte-Geneviève on the West Island of Montreal was occupied by a Jesuit monastery that had been built in the early 1930s according to the plans of Lucien Parent. This basically modern building, heavily garbed in neo-romanesque stonework, dominates a hillock between the village and the Rivière-des-Prairies. Its beautiful exposure to the water on the north side and its austere closure toward the village presented the architects—Saucier + Perrotte working in joint venture with Desnoyers Mercure et associés—with a difficult task, for what the site offered in character, it threatened to take away from its new identity. The streets leading to the college are closely ranged by nondescript houses and shops, but the gentle slopes of the monastic site still mark the territory and mask the view to the river.

The former novitiate is a somewhat forbidding structure with an exposed ferro-concrete skeleton under a ponderous mantle of regional stone. Having to accommodate the large spaces, classrooms, labs, and offices of a Cégep (*collège d'éducation générale et professionnelle*), the architects needed to find a way of doubling the volume of the existing monastery while renovating and integrating it with their addition.

They hit upon a strategy which acknowledged the predicament while enlarging the problem still further, but it also helped them to reach an exceptional solution. With funding available for the establishment of cultural sites in the far-flung communities of the region, a sizable theatre was added to the college. Housed below grade, alongside a sunken gymnasium, but opening onto an outdoor area on the riverbank, this facility establishes both a link between the existing monastery and the new wing as well as laying an almost invisible axis across them. Led by chief designer Gilles Saucier, the architects turned one of the calamities arising from the conversion of the monastery into a modern college to singular advantage and to lasting benefit for the entire community. Moreover, their new wing turns the tables on the old, accomplishing the difficult task of matching the existing monastery, while creating a virtually unique structure of its own.

Upon approaching the site from the village, a twin row of scraggy pines—said to have been planted as a windbreak for the novices pacing the grounds—hold the line against the curving roadway that leads up to the college. Two light monitors tilt up from the ground and alert the visitor to the subterranean space lit through their canted cubes. To the rear, an open amphitheatre matches the auditorium below ground and, in good weather, allows the public to be accommodated both in front and back of the stage. As the theatre is intended to serve the community as well as the college, additional funding permitted its size and equipment to reach a professional level. Saucier + Perrotte's idea to orient the theatre crosswise to the axis of the new wing has several advantages: placing the auditorium and stage below grade relieves

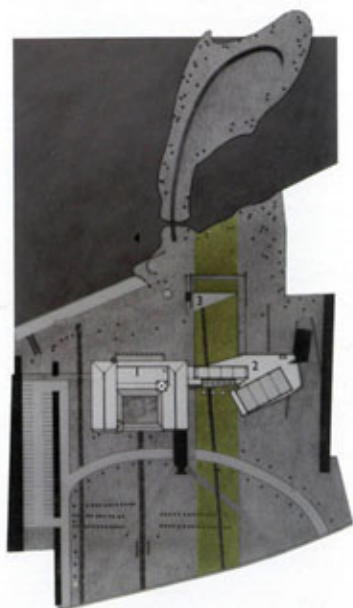
Facing page: a dramatic helical stair accentuates the verticality of the multi-storey library. This page: the addition and linking bridge establish a clear distinction between the existing monastery and the new wing.





Collège Gérard-Godin, Sainte-Geneviève, Québec

Saucier + Perrotte/Desnoyers Mercure et associés architects in joint venture



Site plan

1. existing monastery
2. new classroom wing
3. subterranean theatre
4. Rivière-des-Prairies

pressure on the volume of space and the bulk of the building, while maintaining the gentle slope of the site. It also takes advantage of the steep drop in level toward the river, where outdoor seating has been located. Furthermore, the open view to the landscape can greatly enhance certain kinds of performances.

With the light monitors emerging from the ground and the new wing clad in dark metal and clear glass, the theme of light is heralded right from the start. The monitors cast wonderfully diffuse light into the foyer and underground passage to the new wing, whose lantern-like qualities shine brightly at night and glow in a vague and intriguing manner during the day. There is rhyme and reason to the conjunction between architectural parts and the conditions under which they are experienced. Opting to envelop the large new wing in black aluminum, Saucier + Perrotte further canted the facades, giving way to constantly changing reflections behind and through the metal hood of the building. The license they took with textures, volume, and light qualifies all of the primary manifestations by secondary ones: slotting their openings like *jalousies*, piercing the dark volume of their wing with bands of light, and stopping the facades short of the ground, they turn their building into a mirage of itself. Even the subterranean passageways lead to light-filled spaces, such as the cafeteria, because the site is sloping in their direction. The entire building is an elaborate luminous machine, deflecting and shielding its varied sources of light.

Over the years, the atelier of Saucier + Perrotte has become synonymous with theatre architecture in Montreal. From modest renovations, such as the Théâtre du Rideau Vert (with Lemay & associés, 1990; *CA* October '92), to major conversions like the Usine Carbone 14 Multi-Media Centre (1993-95; *CA* March '96), they have found clever solutions for the crush of people in the foyer, the integration of highly diverse functions, and the technical demands of the stage. Even in narrow spaces, and on tight budgets, they manage to indulge their imagination by orchestrating different materials, especially plaster and



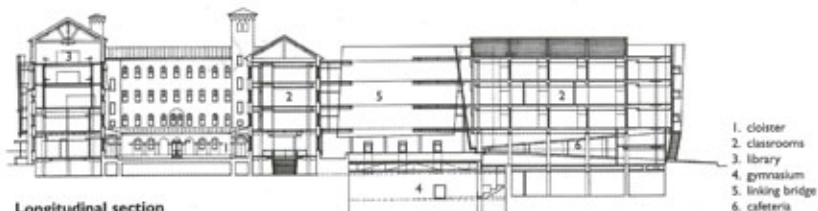
Facing page: the Collège, set well back from the road, is approached through a screen of coniferous trees. This page: a view from the riverbank, looking south.

metal, with subtly variegated lighting. The *entrée*, foyer, and downstairs bar at Carbone 14 are exemplary in their architectural story line, providing glimpses of what the public can expect and reminders of where they have been. Saucier + Perrotte's recognition that theatre is chiefly atmospheric and lighting its very pulse has made them virtuosos of Montreal theatre design. Their *régie* extends naturally to many other aspects of building, with particularly felicitous results in all those areas where the circulation of the public and the enjoyment of spaces come into their own, as at the Cinémathèque québécoise (1994-97; *CA* March '99). Among public and institutional buildings, they have weighed in with a complex project for the Faculty of Music at McGill University that has been languishing since 1994 (with René Menkès; *CA* December '94), whereas their School of Architecture at the University of Montreal was realized a few years ago (with Menkès Shooner Dagenais; *CA* May '98). That their outstanding project for the Canadian Embassy in Berlin (with Dunlop Farrow; *CA* June '99) was the jury's first choice, but not that of the Department of Foreign Affairs, is not only regrettable, but perhaps even more worrisome as an instance of bureaucratic patronage.

At the Collège Gérald-Godin, the metal sheathing of the facades is perforated by horizontal slots, so as to bring constantly shifting segments of the surroundings to the eyes of its occupants. If there is a single unifying aspect to its numerous phenomena, it may well be Saucier + Perrotte's interest in ceaselessly shifting perceptions, perceptions *through, in, and of* the building. With deftly chosen materials placed under constantly varying light conditions, and with their knowing play between glimpses of things to come and hints of those seen previously, they convert the static qualities of buildings into dynamic experiences. As an example of what they are able to do, take the conversion of the plain monastic church into a college library. The nave is divided into library floors connected by a circular stair. An atmosphere of colored light filters in through stained glass windows, dappling the

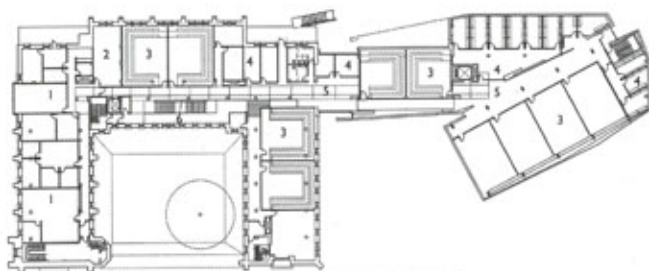
walls and contributing to the state of mind as necessary to study as the occasional pauses punctuating its calm. In the layout of laboratories, offices, and study areas, the new wing benefits from its orientation (extending the existing northern front of the monastery and along the wide southeasterly flank of the addition), its varying patterns of fenestration, and its easy circulation through corridors leading from the existing building toward the eastern prow of the new.

Students at the Collège Gérald-Godin will be spending time in a building that has truly a life of its own, susceptible to gradual as well as sudden changes. What better condition to sharpen one's sense of reality and learn a thing or two about one's perception and the tricks it can play? Finally, it seems nothing short of miraculous that a building of this kind could be realized in Québec. Its unorthodox qualities suggest a link with recent European rather than North American examples, and its subtlety and elegance contrast markedly with a certain heavy-handedness that prevails in Montreal since those fabled "Brutalist Sixties." On the occasion of the project receiving an Award of Excellence, it was criticized in this journal (December 1999, p. 26) for betraying "deconstructivist formal strategies prevalent a few years ago." These doubts about its rationale and its originality can now be said to have been put to rest by an impressive, even an accomplished, as well as formally inventive, piece of architecture. To quote a distinguished Montreal colleague of Saucier + Perrotte, the architect Jacques Rousseau, from a recent article in *La Presse* (25 June 2000): Saucier + Perrotte "do not convey depth by means of the mass of things, but through the filters that separate them." [*"Cbez eux, la profondeur n'est pas exprimée par la masse des choses, mais par les filtres entre les choses."*] This is a very perceptive remark, doing justice to Saucier + Perrotte's search for a kind of vibrant state of their buildings and corresponding nuances in the way they can be experienced. As a milestone of public patronage, the Collège Gérald-Godin is way ahead of its competitors and, it stands to reason, a harbinger of things to come.



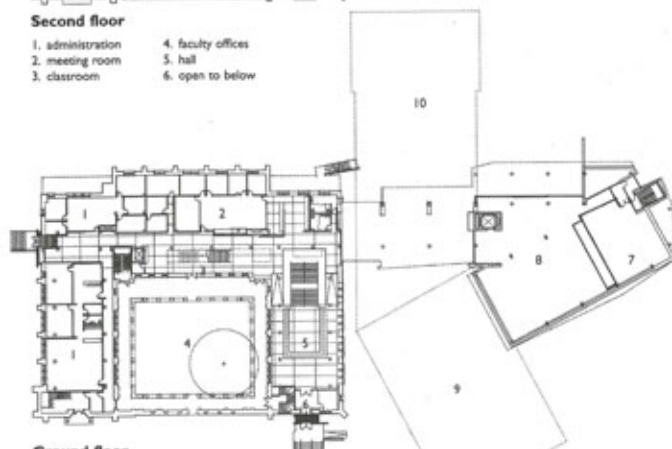
Longitudinal section

- 1. cloister
- 2. classrooms
- 3. library
- 4. gymnasium
- 5. linking bridge
- 6. cafeteria



Second floor

- 1. administration
- 2. meeting room
- 3. classroom
- 4. faculty offices
- 5. hall
- 6. open to below



Ground floor

- 1. administration
- 2. student services
- 3. hall
- 4. cloister
- 5. agora
- 6. main entrance
- 7. mechanical
- 8. open to cafeteria below
- 9. gymnasium below
- 10. theatre below

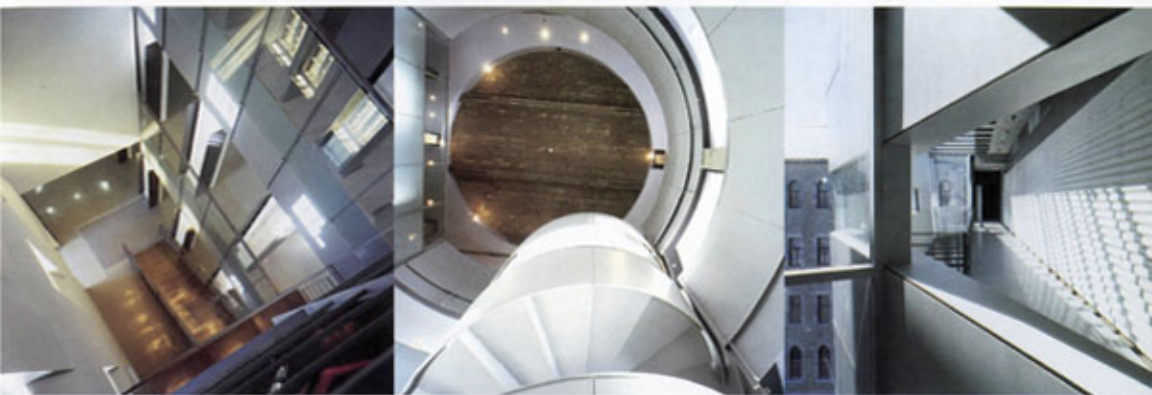
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Client: Collège Gérard-Godin
Architect team: Gilles Sauvier (design architect), André Perrotte, André J. Mercure, Yves Bouchard, Martin Bouchard, Rober D'Errico, Jean-François Lapsick, Jean-Olivier Nadeau, Marc-André Plourde, Pascale Tétrault, Yves Legris, Thanh Liem Nguyen, Luc Boivin, François Hogue, Ted Markis, Bernard Mercier
Structural: Génivel-BPR, Inc/Sala, Dasturiers et associés
Mechanical/Electrical: Soprin-ADS
Landscape: Saint-Denis architectes paysagistes
Budget: \$18.3 million
Completion: February 2000
Photographer: Marc Cramer (except photos on pages 22 and 23 by Maxime Frappier)

When new buildings need to be connected with existing ones, recent experience in Québec hardly makes for a vital and varied impression. As a fresh take on a notorious problem, the Collège sets a new standard: the architects achieve a result that is as felicitous in transforming the former monastery as it is in shaping their addition. What is more, the complex as a whole acquires a distinctive character and an architectural coherence that few recent landmarks have attained. The new wing is largely black in surface, but nevertheless conceived as a light volume. Its contradictory character allows it to hold its own against the stately mass of the monastery during the day, while reversing the nature of its presence at night. This produces an incessant interplay between daylight and illumination, both inside and out. As night falls, the new wing almost melts into darkness, leaving

only its long horizontal bands to radiate light. But the building does more than just produce varied effects in the course of day and night. The aspects that confer life on an otherwise inert object also suggest that buildings are always immersed in an atmosphere, tempered by conditions as fleeting as the clouds that momentarily filter the sunlight. Students at Gérard-Godin able to gain an intuitive sense of this ephemeral side of architecture—which proves as unpredictable as it is indispensable to the art of architecture—must be considered fortunate, and the architects capable of creating such a building nothing less than masters of their art. ■

Kurt W. Forster is the Director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal.



Top row, left to right: the harmonious juxtaposition of new and existing interior details; the exposed existing concrete frame of the monastery establishes a strong structural rhythm in the corridors; daylight penetrates through several levels of the linking bridge.

Middle row, left to right: the main circulation stair is used to create a dramatic vertical space; the library's cylindrical circulation space; corridors offer views through, in, and of the buildings. Bottom row: the new addition's bold formal moves emphasize architecture's shifting, ephemeral quality.