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Scenes from  
Saucier+Perrotte Architects

London Loft  
Minimalism to the Max

Cecconi Simone  
Interior designers  
turn problem solvers

Area Rug Revival



# cinémanoir

The constant in every project by the Quebec architectural team of Gilles Saucier and André Perrotte is the sensation of drama: the stage, the screen, the motion, the manipulation of light. Even their non-theatre projects have a scenographic feel, as though you're on a stage or in a film studio. With their penchant for transparency and predominantly black and white palette, observing their work you often feel like you're peering into a television, a movie screen or an aquarium. Although everything Saucier + Perrotte has built to date is in Quebec, the duo seems poised to move onto the world stage. BY ADELE WEDER



Gilles Saucier speaks like a man obsessed. "Architecture is, for me, a transmission of emotion, like cinema. Is cinema real? Or are these arts that represent reality?"

He also drives like a man obsessed. Sailing down rue Saint-Denis in downtown Montreal, he frequently takes both hands off the wheel to gesture rapidly as he speaks. Yet his vehicle glides effortlessly through traffic as though on a sprocket-wheel, while townhouses, vacant lots and glassy buildings reel past. He parks his car in the muddy lot beside the almost-completed Université de Montréal Faculté de l'aménagement, a joint venture project with Menkès, Shooner, Dajenais Architectes. He pauses to behold the giant glass façade.

with a purplish hue. Walking around inside, knowing that everyone outside can see in, but you can't see out, you can't help but feel you're on candid camera.

It's a typical example of the way the firm manipulates form and colour and illusion, at times eerily challenging our notion of reality. They work with a predominately black, white and silver palette: black paint, concrete, steel. They use colour in rare and strategic moments to prick the senses: electronic-green on the rear wall of a hair salon change-room or a sheath of wood abutting a wall of cold-rolled steel. As an analogy, Saucier cites a scene in the mostly black-and-white Wim Wenders film *Wings of Desire*, in which the central character suddenly changes into colour. "It's like a person going from one world to another, from the real to the unreal."



"We want people to capture the young designers in the process of creation," says Saucier. The four storeys behind the façade house the schools of architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning and industrial design, each on its own level. You can watch the activity inside like you would watch a giant projection screen.

Along with his partner, André Perrotte, Saucier creates an ingenious kind of architecture of transmission. Watching the silhouettes of students working late into the evening, a spectator in the parking lot gets the visual effect of a split-screen television documentary with no commercial breaks.

From inside these student workshops, the outside world is practically invisible at night as the curtainwall glazing transforms into a mirror-like sheath

Saucier speaks in rapid-fire French salted liberally with *junal* and anglicisms like "le salesman" and "le look" and "très clean." Perrotte is a man of fewer words, and when he does speak up, he murmurs in a languid and contemplative manner. It's like listening to the right and left hemispheres of the same brain.

Perrotte, an introvert, tends to hang out at the office, manning the phones and poring over drawings. "I deal more with the public," says Saucier, now settled in their compact office on *branché* Boulevard Saint-Laurent. "I'm theatrical, and people love that." Perrotte quietly concurs: "Gilles assures and I reassure."

They both contribute equally to the design process, says Saucier. "But we always hear, 'Who's the designer?' We complement each other. When I see a problem, I go crazy, and André says: 'Stay calm, we can change this or that.' I'm

There's always a cinematic sense in Saucier + Perrotte architecture. The recently completed Faculté de l'aménagement of the Université de Montréal, shown on this page, is just one example of their ingenious use of curtainwall glazing. The building houses the schools of architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning and industrial design. Large glass windows allow the spectator to observe the students working within. The visual effect is that of a split screen television documentary with no commercial breaks.



more the angry sort. But I never carry anger over from one day to the next." They argue "every day," concedes Saucier. "But less and less," adds Perrotte.

They both love movies, and their personas are cinematographic studies in black-and-white. Both dress in black from head to toe. Raven-haired Perrotte, the son of a Frenchman, bears a startling resemblance to Catherine Deneuve's rogue lover in the movie *Belle de Jour*. Saucier has a thatch of salt-and-pepper hair and small François Pinton spectacles. He looks like a filmmaker, a bit like Marcello Mastroianni in *8½*.

His credo is: life is instantaneous, a moving picture. Events happen, you move on. "I only try for something once in life," he avers. "I'm proud."

took safe but dull jobs with Montreal firms, while their ambitions fermented inside of them. They incorporated in 1988, six months shy of Saucier's thirtieth birthday.

Everything they've ever built is in Quebec. But the project that established their reputation was vintage Ontario: the 1989 Kitchener City Hall competition. In the pool of talented finalists (including winners Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg) they were the only unknown and non-Torontonian firm. But their competition entry, a startling asymmetrical response to a conservative programme, made them known across Canada.

Over the last ten years, they've won the lion's share of Montreal's theatre



For example, in 1988 Saucier came very close to winning Canada's second Prix de Rome, a grant for a year of architectural research in the Italian capital. "I wanted the Prix de Rome; I *dreamed* of the Prix de Rome," he recalls. But after placing second to Montreal architect Jacques Rousseau, Saucier banished all thought of ever reapplying. He quit his safe job in a huff and implored Perrotte to start up a new firm with him.

Their professional union honoured a six-year-old pact they made as architecture students at Université Laval in Quebec City during the early 1980s. Seeing how well they worked on student projects, they vowed to start a partnership by the time they turned thirty. They graduated into the 1982 recession and each

commissions, including an ingenious conversion of a jam factory into the home of the Montreal theatre and dance troupe Carbone 14. Dubbed "Usine C," the gritty industrial-building-turned-theatre features an auditorium with seating and stage components that can be easily reconfigured.

The constant in every project is the sensation of drama: the stage, the screen, the motion, the manipulation of light. Even non-theatre projects – like the foyer for ad agency Cossette Marketing and the Eclectic hair salon – have a scenographic feel, as though you're on a stage or in a film studio. From the street, as with the Faculté de l'aménagement, you feel like you're peering into a television or movie screen.

Saucier + Perrotte's scenographic motif reaches its apogee in the Cinéma québécoise, a widely acclaimed project completed last year. The building's exterior features a large split projection screen. The Cinéma is a centre for cinema broadcasting and video arts, which includes a projection room, complete with cantilevered seating, as well as two exhibition spaces, a library, film archives, a theatre, administrative offices and a cafe. The concrete and steel catwalk, shown bottom left, backs the public screening room in the central volume.



PHOTO BY BOB FROST (LEFT), ALAN LAMBERT (RIGHT)

Showing the human activity inside defies the opacity of late post-modernism (think of Michael Graves' tiny windows) which was in vogue during the team's student years. Call it a reversion to the earlier ideals of modernism exemplified in Bruno Taut's 1914 Glass House or Mies van der Rohe's 1950 Farnsworth House. Except this time, the human inhabitants become part of the architecture. "We're the *metteurs en scène*," says Perrotte. "We kind of like using the people themselves as moving images."

The scenographic motif reaches its apogee in the firm's Cinémathèque québécoise, a widely acclaimed project completed last year. The centre incorporates a three-storey-high reception hall and public screening area with

Now that government spending in the theatre sector is winding down, the firm is riding up Quebec's next big spending wave: schools. In addition to the Université de Montréal project, the firm is working with Menkès, Shooner, Dajenais Architectes on the new Faculty of Music/Opera Hall at McGill University and with Desnoyers Mercure architectes on a major addition to a 1930s monastery that is being converted into a college.

Back in his Jetta, cruising up Saint-Denis, Saucier waxes on about his ultimate goal, hands once again flying off the wheel. "My dream, my greatest dream, is to create a project that's perceived in colour, but that isn't in colour."

Huh?



cantilevered seating, library, theatre, exhibition halls, administrative offices and café. As always, the design suggests an ethereal world: the inside of a television set or the outside of the universe. As we ascend to the upper floor, Saucier notes that the elevator is, not incidentally, "like the transporter in *Star Trek*."

PHOTO BY BOB FROST

Everywhere in the Cinémathèque québécoise, the Saucier + Perrotte palette of black and white dominates. But the rear wall of the office corridor stands out - it's a rectangle of electronic green. I point out to Saucier that it's the same hue as the shirt he's wearing under his black blazer.

"I don't know why I have this colour on; I usually wear all black," responds Saucier, looking genuinely bewildered. "Maybe it's because you're a visitor."

Colours, he points out, are more than electromagnetic radiation frequencies. They're also generators of certain feelings and sensations. But Saucier and Perrotte reject the usual gospel of colour psychology: that red equals warmth, or that blue suggests sadness. Suppose you could design some kind of black-and-white structure that arouses the same feelings you get from colour. Suppose that, instead of the colour wheel, you used ten tones of grey and a riot of forms. Maybe, suggests Saucier, you could prompt a new, more intense sensation of colour that you'd ever get from paint pigment.

"It's bizarre," says Saucier, with uncharacteristic understatement, "but I think it just might be possible." ■

The top row shows Usine C, the new home of the Montreal theatre and dance company Carbone 14. The former jam factory features a café, an exhibition hall, a rehearsal room and a 450-seat auditorium with seating and stage components that can be easily reconfigured. Even Saucier + Perrotte's non-theatre projects have a sense of the spectacle. One example is the façade and foyer they created for Cossette Marketing, shown below. The large foyer contains reception spaces and also functions as an exhibition hall, which presents work by the agency.