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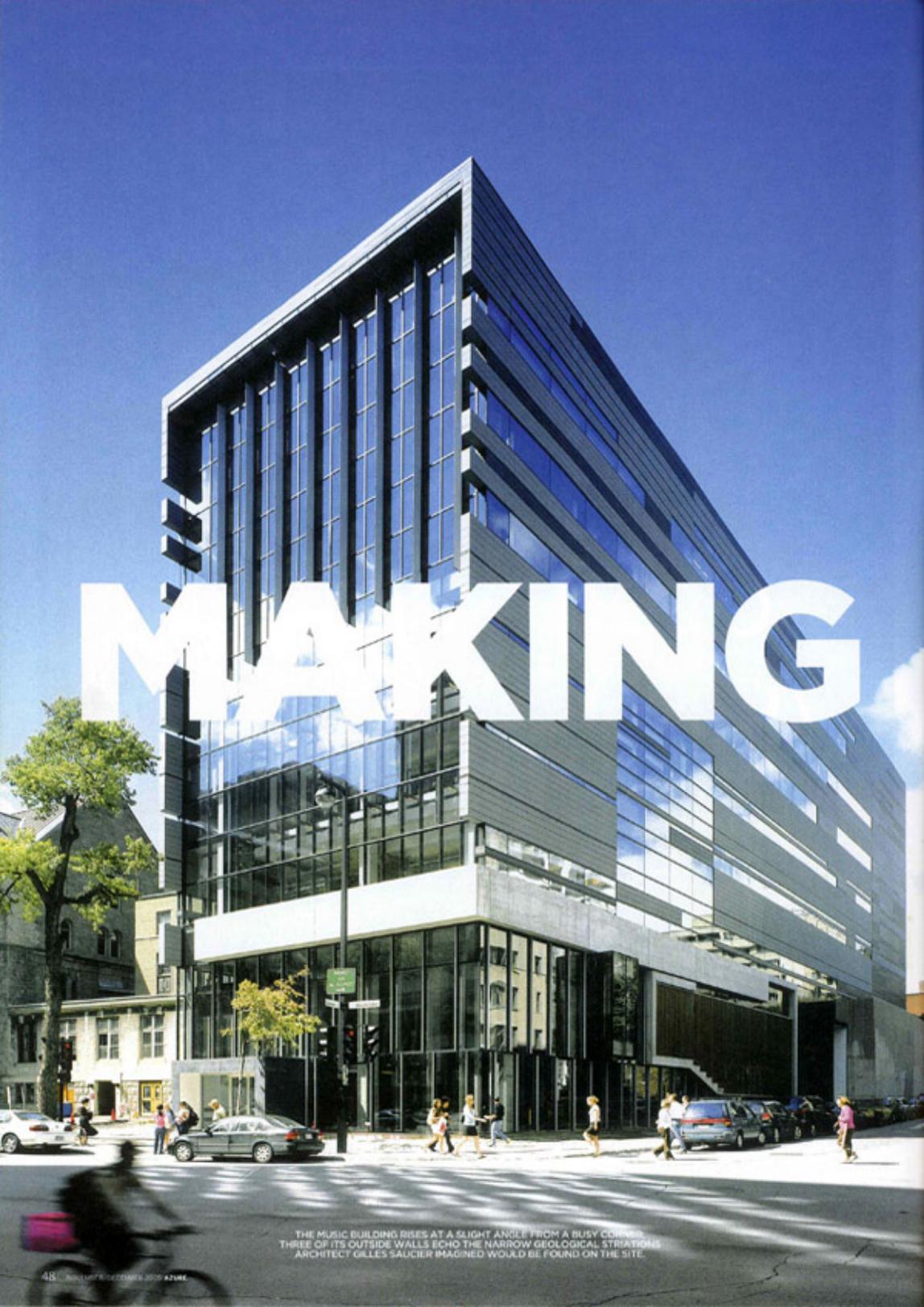
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MAKING

THE MUSIC BUILDING RISES AT A SLIGHT ANGLE FROM A BUSY CORNER. THREE OF ITS OUTSIDE WALLS ECHO THE NARROW GEOLOGICAL STRATIFICATIONS ARCHITECT GILLES SAUCIER IMAGINED WOULD BE FOUND ON THE SITE.



MUSIC

IN ONE OF DOWNTOWN MONTREAL'S DRABBEST
QUARTERS, SAUCIER + PERROTTE'S NEW MUSIC BUILDING
FOR MCGILL UNIVERSITY STRIKES A COOL CHORD

BY LISA FITTERMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARC CRAMER

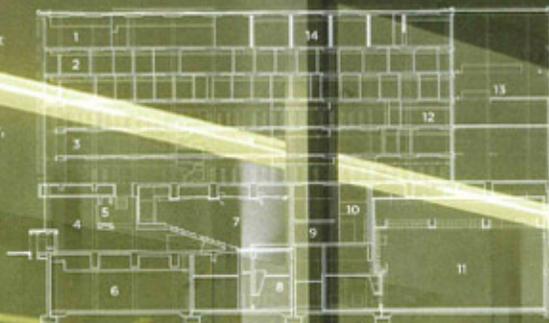
THE WALL FACING STRATHCONA HALL, THE VICTORIAN HOUSE
THAT MCGILL'S FACULTY OF MUSIC CALLS HOME, IS MADE OF
OPAQUE BLACK GLASS. SAUCIER CALLS IT "AN INFINITE MIRROR."

The strains of a jazz saxophone float out from a nearby window, bebop notes that punctuate architect Gilles Saucier's soliloquy on McGill University's new music building. He speaks of horizons, light and sound, and he revels in the need to create a new urban landscape in black, white and grey, complete with a lone live maple tree out front and a cacophony of honking cars. "We could have designed a very nice building, with a lovely, dramatic entryway, but

that wasn't the point," Saucier tells me. A thick sheaf of drawings that date as far back as 1985 for the CDN\$70-million project was first conceived. "We wanted to send a message with this building, namely, that music — any kind of music — can find a place here."

The Schulich School of Music of McGill University rises at a slight angle from the corner of Sherbrooke and Aylmer streets in downtown Montreal as if it has been sitting calm and tranquil on the site forever. The angle sets it apart from the strictly functional hotels and mid-rise buildings that are its neighbors, and makes it seem as if the walls themselves are drawing the two streets close in, marking it off as the easternmost gate of the university proper.

Three of the outside walls echo the narrow, geological strations that Saucier, the project's lead design architect, imagined would



- 1 FACULTY LOUNGE AND CONFERENCE ROOM
- 2 OFFICES
- 3 MUSIC LIBRARY
- 4 LOBBY
- 5 BRIDGE TO EXISTING MUSIC SCHOOL
- 6 OPERA REHEARSAL ROOM

- 7 RECITAL HALL
- 8 RECORDING STUDIOS
- 9 GREEN ROOM
- 10 LOBBY FOR GREEN ROOM
- 11 MULTIMEDIA SOUND-RECORDING ROOM
- 12 MULTIMEDIA ROOM
- 13 MECHANICAL AND ELECTRICAL ROOM
- 14 SOUND RESEARCH LABORATORIES

A COVERED BRIDGE WITH WINDOWS OF BOTTLE GREEN GLASS (THE KIND ONE MIGHT FIND AT AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DIG) RUNS THROUGH THE ENTRANCE HALL, LINKING THE NEW BUILDING TO STRATHCONA HALL.

be found on the site, formerly home to a parking lot and a building that housed a swimming pool. It's vintage Saucier + Perrotte. The firm's projects – ranging from theatres and a physics research centre to a First Nations garden and an upscale hair salon – are all informed by an instinctive sense of scenography.

The lower levels, composed of concrete, glass and grey limestone, give a sense of permanence and transparency, as if to include passersby in their embrace. The wall that faces west toward Strathcona Hall, the Victorian home to a much vaunted music department beleaguered by little space, is made of opaque black glass – what Saucier calls an “infinite mirror.” As a result, every reflection is rendered into anonymous silhouette, a chiaroscuro that lends the illusion that it is both part of the old and a harbinger of what lies beyond. Following the theme, the covered bridge joining the two buildings has windows of bottle green glass, the kind one might find at an archaeological dig.

“We were looking for continuity,” the architect explains. “We wanted something that signified both looking out, looking within and looking back, all with as minimalist an approach as possible, something both fluid and precise – like music.”

For Saucier, the project represents a kind of coming home. He lived just a few doors up from the school in an apartment when he first arrived in Montreal in 1984 from Quebec City, a young architect whose memory of open vistas of water and sky along the St. Lawrence River informed his work. He liked to keep his windows open, finding inspiration for his sketches in the sound of practice sessions coming from Strathcona Hall. He recounts this memory as we pass through the bridge into the second level of the building's

palatial area. Low key in wire-rimmed spectacles and black jeans, he turns in a slow circle as he takes in the public lobby below. The floor is of burnished concrete, and the sky room contains such features as a low barrier of black laminated plastic that doubles as a wet bar, and a Pullman-like black shelf that, once unfolded from the wall, turns a corridor into a classroom.

A black staircase winds like a snake, connecting the two levels. There is sound all around us, from the traffic outside, workmen dragging stones for a patio, faraway footsteps, and two students quietly talking in a corner balcony, backlit by flat light. “Look,” Saucier says, “they've created their own little universe.”

This was the challenge faced by Saucier and the other architect on the project, Anik Shooner of Menkes Shooner Dagenais LeTourmeux. They had to create different universes – public performance spaces, a library, a 200-seat recital hall, state-of-the-art research labs, recording studios, offices and practice rooms – all on a piece of land that spans 11,775 square metres. Saucier drew on his experience designing research centres, and theatres such as Usine C (1997), where he transformed an old jam factory in east end Montreal into an award-winning performance space for the troupe Carbone 14, complete with offices and studios. But the McGill project, built from the ground up, required much more. Don McLean, McGill's director of music, says, “Theatre means working with things that are acoustically sensitive, but no one, no one has ever done something like this before.”

In marrying the needs of sound recording and sound research, the architects decided to build two concrete rooms within the structure. The larger one, a multimedia sound-recording room, is tightly separated from the inner structure and supported by neoprene pads. The smaller contains all the machinery and electrical units. The result, save for the public lobbies, is utter stillness, with nary a vibration or even the low hum of an air conditioning unit so common in regular office buildings. Says McLellan, "Ductwork is beautiful."

The building itself is divided into distinct areas, like a concerto with different movements. Besides the public lobbies, two upper levels, with their narrow, rectangular windows and small offices, studios and classrooms, denote the more private

spaces. The library, a cube situated over the middle three floors, is highlighted by a three-storey square window that reaches out as a beacon toward downtown when lit up at night. Where the library might be considered the project's heart, its core, literally, is the multimedia sound-recording room, which, at 18 by 24 by 16 metres, can comfortably hold a full symphony orchestra and chorus. Walk in, and the silence is so palpable it feels as if it can be gathered up and set on a scale. Someone can talk to you in a normal voice from 20 metres away, and it seems as if he's stand-

ing right at your shoulder. Not even the world's most sensitive microphone can pick up the trace of an extraneous hum in here, an acoustic triumph that promises to make McGill even more of a destination for recording artists, teachers and students the world over. The sound-recording room will be open for business once the university buys a Hollywood-scale three soundboard, still about a year from now.

Sancier fiddles with the lights, trying to turn them on. "This is the nerve centre, and the reason the rest of the building was built. It was around this that we have tried to create a feeling, a movement and a rhythm – and I think we've succeeded. Of course, you can't please everyone all the time – not even your mother." What does his mother think of the project, then? "She hasn't seen it yet, but she likes everything I do," he replies. ▲



MUSIC LIBRARY, A CUBE SITUATED OVER THE MIDDLE THREE FLOORS, IS HIGHLIGHTED BY A THREE-STOREY SQUARE WINDOW THAT REACHES OUT AS A BEACON TOWARD DOWNTOWN WHEN LIT UP AT NIGHT.