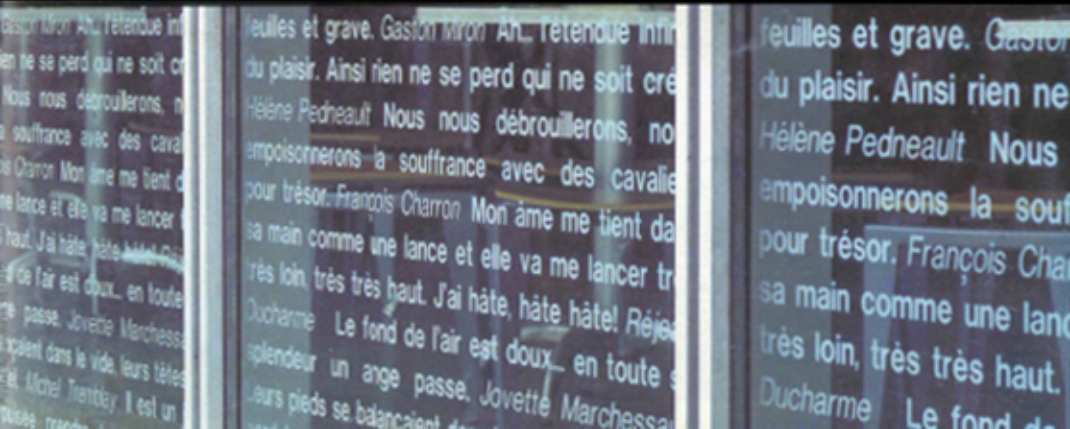


Canadian **Architect**

Four Quebec Theatres



Theatres: Urban Interludes

By Joseph Baker

Small theatre is thriving in Montreal, occupying old buildings and slipping into the cracks and empty spaces in the urban fabric.

The investment of existing structures with new uses is ages old. On the Adriatic, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Diocletian's palace was occupied by generations of squatters to become the full-blown town of Split. The theatre of Marcellus at the foot of the Capitoline hill in Rome was done over by architect Peruzzi as a home for the Savelli family. *Buildings Reborn, New Uses for Old Buildings* and scores of other titles have documented innovative recycling of everything from breweries to brickworks, convents to corset factories. Indeed, it would appear that the most interesting and sensitive contemporary architecture results from the enforced discipline of existing frameworks (and conversely that without such constraints even our most distinguished practitioner, given his head, is quite capable of going completely off it!).

Restoration, recycling, reconstruction, call it what you will, such work has had a salutary effect on current architecture; not only has it instilled a respect for context and the work of predecessors, but it has returned architects' attention to the volume within the

Certainly the final result owes much to the contemporary hand, but like those intriguing palimpsests, traces of an earlier hand at work ghost through, adding the enriching element of time to the final result.

While Montreal has witnessed the wasting of its theatre and vaudeville houses become picture palaces, transforming them into cut-price pharmacies, labyrinthine mini-cinemas, or decaying hulks and heaps of rubble, theatre itself is nevertheless splendidly alive and well in the city. A recent scan of the telephone directory revealed the existence of some 75 theatre companies in and around the metropolis, a profuse and overwhelmingly francophone activity that dispels any notion that Quebec's unique culture is in danger of being swamped by an English tide. Many companies are of relatively recent origin; sustained with the barest resources, they perform in any makeshift quarters they can legally open to the public. And there are also exemplary facilities that have been carved out in the interstices of old neighbourhoods, squinted behind a curtain of greystones or into the substantial legacy of defunct industry.

Years ago an early lead was given when the English-language Centaur theatre found a home in the quarters of the Montreal Stock Exchange. The traders decamped to a new location in the Nervi-Moretti towers of Place Victoria. (Come to think of it, one of Britain's most adventurous companies carved a niche for itself in the monumental pile of the Manchester Royal Exchange; what would Brecht make of this new dalliance in the houses of Capital?)

True, the downtown Place des Arts complex still plays host to the Montreal Symphony and Opera, the Andrew Lloyd Weber extravaganzas and the respected Duceppe theatre company, while across the street, at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, the stars of the Quebec theatrical firmament shine as brightly as ever. Elsewhere, however, more adventurous companies can be found cohabiting cheek by jowl with the cloth trade, the emporiums of the Main, the boutiques and bars of St. Denis, Quatre Sous, Rideau Vert, Théâtre d'aujourd'hui, and now Carbon 14 and Espace Go are a firm presence outside the traditional hub. They bring back what every sound neighbourhood needs—something of the public stature that was once contributed by the local picture palace and the corner bank; they are what Jane Jacobs has termed, "staunch buildings."

No example merits this term more than does the Monument National. Dream of a nationalist bourgeoisie to create a genuine *maison du peuple* for the edification of the masses, the Monument National never attained its hoped-for potential. Inhabited and frequented by diverse ethnic groups, over the years it languished and crumbled until in the 60s it became home to the National Theatre School of Canada. From then on its cavernous



envelope, a field too often abandoned to so-called space planners and worse. When the interior is essentially all there is with which to work, a creative hand makes of it architecture. Borromini turned holy theatrical miracles behind the minuscule facades of S. Ivo and S. Carlino.

There is also a significant plus that accompanies this form of architectural endeavour.



spaces and dilapidated auditorium would nurture the talents of would-be actors, directors and scenographers, many of its laureates being household names in both of the country's solitudes. At the beginning of this decade, government and private foundations provided the funds to undertake a complete renovation that refurbished the Ludger Duvernay auditorium, introduced an experimental black box into the building's capacious underbelly, and provided a street-oriented lobby that hosts many of the city's festival organizations.

Quite appropriate for *The Beu's Strategem* or *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the auditorium, I found, is less suited to *Wunderkind* Claude Lepage's *Elmore*; the video tricks seemed at odds with its rigid proscenium arch, red velvet fauteuils and rococo. At odds, too, is the introduction of catwalks and lighting grids below the ornamental ceiling. Still, the principal vocation of the building including the auditorium is pedagogical, and no claim is made for authenticity. The architects, Blouin Faucher Aubertin Brodeur Gauthier, have settled for the illusion of opulence. After all, what is theatre if not illusion and shadows, and what venerable London or New York house would bear exposure to the full light of day?

On the other hand, in the austere setting of *Usine C*, Michel Tremblay's *Alberline en cinq temps* seemed right at home. Here, in an old jam factory in the heart of Montreal's working class east end, the characters in the play might easily have wandered in off the street, and as if to reinforce the point the set was a mirror image of the spectators' bleachers. "C" for Carbon 14, the previously itinerant company in quest of a permanent abode, and "C" for *Confiture Raymond*, once the major source of employment in the quartier, among whose vats, boilers, jellies and jam-jars, the theatricals came to rest. *Usine C*, transformed by architects Saucier + Perrotte, now houses a totally flexible auditorium that at the flick of several switches can be transformed to present a variety of seating formats, send bridges into motion, drop the floor out of sight, or reduce the hall to the industrial shed in which the company has its roots.

Usine C places little store on sense of entry. "Waiting hall" would better describe the foyer. Patrons appear reluctant to divest themselves of their coats; in the chilly atmosphere these tend to stay on, collars upturned—one expects to encounter Mother Courage trundling her belongings through the black-on-black clad clientele oblivious to anything but their own earnest conversations.

The traditional theatre placed great store on entry and preparation, facilitating transition to that suspension of disbelief considered the essence of theatre: arriving in the foyer, mounting the stairs, scanning the crowd, seating oneself amid the glow of lights and plaster cherubs. A distinctly different experience is



encountered in the industrial vernacular of the contemporary theatre: the small concession to comfort, the minimalist decor, leave little doubt that we are in for an instructive experience. The foyer is multi-functional, equally suited to a varied exhibition schedule; the coffee shop leads its own life, the auditorium owes almost everything to the imperatives of production, light, sound and, yes, performance. It is essentially a theatre workshop, the ultimate "black box" to which the audience is admitted to view, and even occasionally, to participate.

Espace Go is one of the rare instances in recent Montreal memory where a theatre company has decided to build an entirely new facility on an urban site. It could, of course, have followed the route of adapting space in an existing building—Montreal has any number of heritage characters in search of an interesting occupant—but it was equally important that an avant-garde company make a new and creative gesture within the existing urban tissue. Certainly this city is not lacking in holes and scars awaiting appropriate infill. Picking up

cues from its commercial neighbours, yet displaying a resolutely modernist expression, Espace Go, again by architects Blouin Faucher Aubertin Brodeur Gauthier, has slipped into a slot on the Main so comfortably that it is frequently assumed to be one more in a series of theatre renovations.

These modest Montreal theatres do not compete on the same terrain as the exuberant revivals and eccentricities underwritten by impresarios outside Quebec. The Pantages, Prince of Wales and L'event theatres address an audience that would be equally at home at Place des Arts with *Phantom*, *Saigon* and *Evita*. There they get entrance, fresco cherubs, glitter and glow. That is entertainment. But at a time when startling visual effects assault our senses through cinema, cyberspace and the blockbuster products of the big houses, it is timely and reassuring to find settings where the spoken word is free to work its own magic. ★

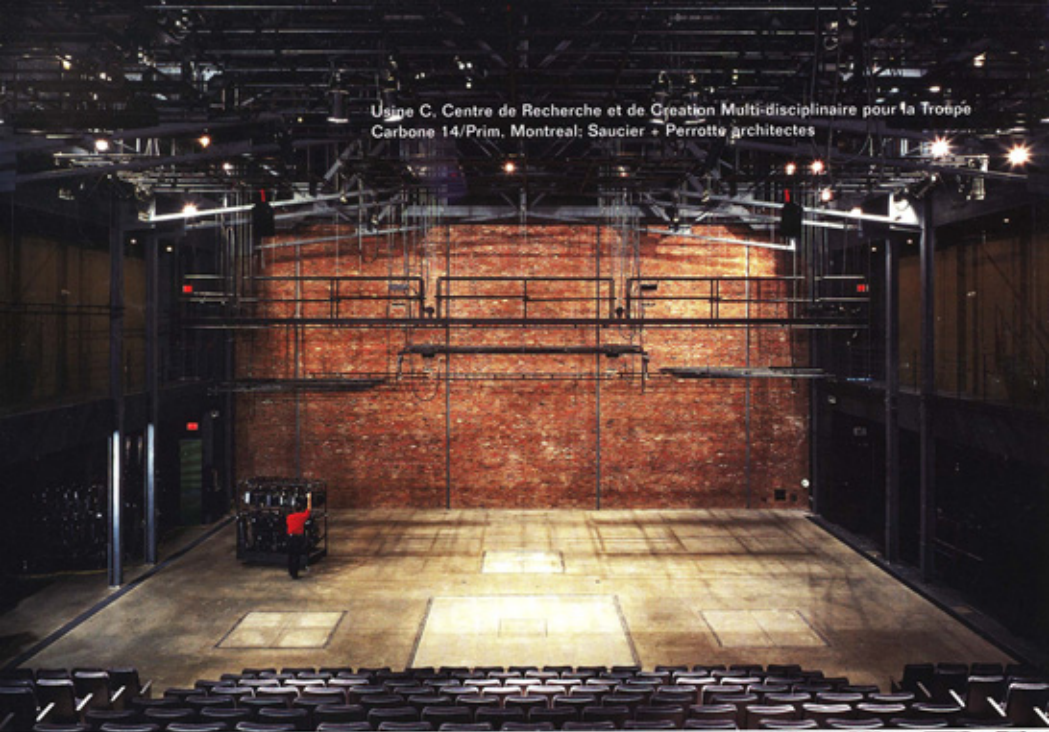
Joseph Baker is a professor of architecture at the University of Laval.

Theatre 1: **Production Factory**

An old jam factory is transformed into a permanent home for Carbone 14's experimental productions.



Usine C, Centre de Recherche et de Création Multi-disciplinaire pour la Troisième Culture
Carbone 14/Prim, Montréal: Saucier + Perrotte architectes



Photos page 20, top: the public stair from lobby to the second floor foyer and offices is framed by an inclined yellow plaster wall.

Bottom: the entrance bridge (at left) overlooks the café, which has been excavated from the boiler room of the former jam factory.

Page 21, top: the new exposed steel structure of the performance hall supports a series of lighting catwalks. The back wall is rebuilt from the reconstituted bricks of the factory.

Bottom: the foyer between the performance hall and the outdoor court. In contrast to the heavy exposed concrete of the existing factory, new structure emphasizes lightness and transparency. The slender structural mullion was developed with the window manufacturer, Lessard Deschamps Lemieux, by reconfiguring a standard window to make an H-section.

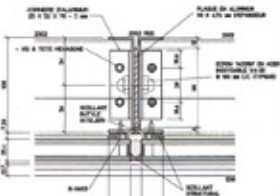
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The entrance from rue Visitation. The chimney marks the presence of the theatre, visible all the way from rue Ste-Catherine. The façade plays off the industrial character of the old factory, adding a fire stair clad in corten steel to amplify the industrial patina.

The monumental wood factory doors are used as a secondary entrance off rue Lalonde.

Detail: the rue Panet elevation is a layered composition of grey limestone and brick, with wood, galvanized and painted steel, and a corten steel display box.

The intimate exterior court is accessible from the adjacent lobby, foyer, and practice studio.



Mullion detail



Section a-a



Section b-b



Site plan

- 1. rue Ontario
- 2. rue Visitation
- 3. rue Lalonde
- 4. rue Panet
- 5. existing building
- 6. new construction

Client: Carbone 14

Architect team: André Perrotte, Gilles Saucier, Franck Thonon, Yves Bouchard, Oscar Juarras, Robert D'Érico, Martin Bouchard, Jean Pelland

Structural: Mertoni, Cyr & Associates Inc.

Mechanical/Electrical: Le Groupe Teknika

Theatre consultant/construction manager: Scéno Plus inc.

Suppliers: CGC Interiors (ceiling); Canadian Gypsum Company (wall systems)

Cost: \$6.1 million (with equipment)

Area: 55,000 s.f.

Completion: March 1995

Photography: Jacques Lavore, pp. 20, 21 (top); Alan Laforest, pp. 21 (bottom), 22

In keeping with the spirit of invention and experimentation which characterizes the work of Montreal-based performance troupe Carbone 14, the design of a facility containing a new theatre, offices and practice studios is a raw and resourceful exercise in transformation.

Over the last few years, the international stature of Carbone 14 has soared, their unique combination of performance, dance and music drawing critical acclaim. The architect and client embarked upon a search for an appropriate permanent home base to put an end to Carbone 14's nomadic occupation of various spaces across the city—warehouses, factories, an old fire station. The thrill of a challenge won out over convention: rather than selecting a site in the mainstream downtown hub of entertainment activity, they chose to adapt the site of an existing turn-of-the-century jam factory in a working class area in east-end Montreal, turning it into a fluid, flexible performance space.

A U-shaped court is created between the mass of the existing factory, which contains all public gathering areas at ground level and support and administrative functions above, and new volumes, one containing the practice

studio, and the other, a 450-seat theatre. This intimate exterior space, accessible from the main hall, the practice studio and the foyer, can be used in the summer during intermissions or by the performers.

The tall chimney adjacent to the four-storey brick factory becomes a marker for the new theatre. A steel, glass and corten-clad box containing a stair floats above the entrance and a broad stair leading down to the café.

An attenuated architectural promenade leads members of the audience from rue Visitation into the body of the transformed factory. A ramp leading up to the entrance transforms into a bridge overlooking the lower-level café, which inhabits the old boiler room.

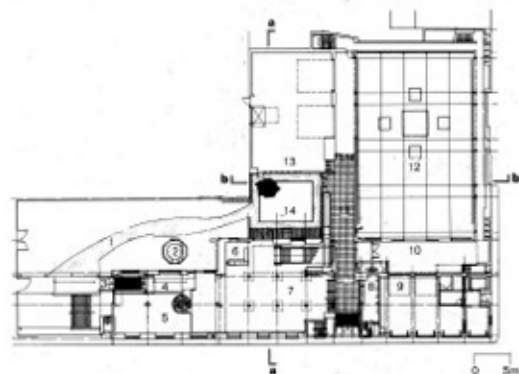
The linear sequence continues into a long open-plan entrance hall, which is punctuated by exposed concrete columns, and flanked by a ticket booth. Further into this space along the west side, a double-height yellow plaster wall invites vertical ascent. A light steel and maple stair rises through the opening created by this element, leading to the second floor foyer, with the promenade finally terminating in an expansive glass wall overlooking rue Panet. At ground level, the lobby sequence continues

down a small flight of stairs, to be intersected by the cross-axis of the linear foyer parallel to the performance hall. The heavy wooden factory doors at the end of this foyer also serve as a public entrance.

The performance hall is a flexible shed which permits a variety of configurations through modular seating. A series of steel bridges hang between the trusses, allowing easy access to lighting. In the foyer overlooking the courtyard, very fine vertical aluminum mullions dematerialize the glazed wall between inside and outside.

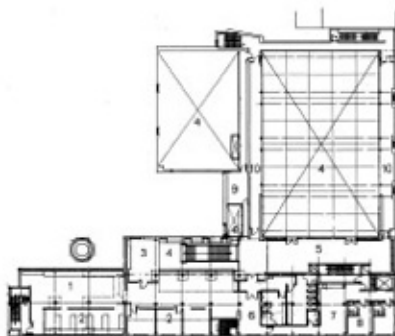
The massive concrete structure of the existing factory is exposed and celebrated, and inspires a playful "invented archeology," whereby raw solid concrete elements, such as the board-formed concrete wall of the ramp between lobby and foyer, render ambiguous what is new and what is old.

For the most part, however, new construction is light and delicate to contrast in weight and texture with the existing structure. The use of exposed structural steel in both the practice studio and the performance space echoes the industrial quality of the factory yet remains distinct. **BK**



Ground floor plan

- | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------------------|
| 1. garden | 6. tickets | 11. foyer |
| 2. chimney | 7. lobby | 12. performance hall |
| 3. public entrance | 8. coat room | 13. practice studio |
| 4. bridge | 9. workshop | 14. courtyard |
| 5. open to café below | 10. storage | |



Second floor plan

- | | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| 1. production | 6. reception |
| 2. office | 7. common area |
| 3. meeting | 8. dressing room |
| 4. open to below | 9. artistic director |
| 5. foyer | 10. gallery |