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MONTRÉAL MODERNS: TWO THEATRES ON ST-DENIS

Saucier + Perrotte architectes use a restrained modernism in two flexible theatres in Montreal.

Review by Bruce Anderson

Montreal's rue St-Denis cuts from south to north through the heart of the city's east end, from Old Montreal to the Metropole elevated expressway. Its character and make-up are unique in Canada, representing the epitome of French Canadian culture with its blend of urban qualities, history, building types and street life. Mixed in along St-Denis are institutions such as the Université de Québec à Montréal, the Bibliothèque Nationale and the National Theatre School. Urban spaces such as the Carrée St-Louis enrich its character; bars, clubs, residential flats and every assorted type of commerce that a city can possess are to be found here tightly arranged within the rows of attached buildings. The street's special qualities are further enhanced by the presence of two new theatres, the Théâtre du Rideau Vert and the Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui. Situated on the west side of the street about four blocks apart just north of the Carrée St-Louis, both theatres are compactly composed on small sites in among the three-storey grey limestone fronts.

Both theatres have been awarded prizes; the Théâtre du Rideau Vert was awarded the Prix d'Excellence in 1991 by the Quebec Order of Architects and the Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui received an award of excellence in 1990 from *The Canadian Architect*. Both were designed by the young Montreal firm of Saucier and Perrotte, with Lemay and Associates collaborating on the Rideau Vert. Gilles Saucier and André Perrotte were trained at Laval University in Quebec City and bring a fresh clarity to Montreal's often bombastic and heavy-handed contemporary architecture. Their work is sensitive, well-crafted and deeply committed to a simple modernist formality. Despite

having to work with tight budgets, the young firm has managed to assert itself as one of the most exciting and innovative in Montreal.

At first glance, both theatres make similar statements on the street, exploring the early modern strategy of "*la façade libre*," involving the arrangement of elements such as solid planes, voids of glass, mullions, canopies, in a deliberately minimal, Mondrian-esque composition. The Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui was designed behind the facades of four existing 19th-century grey-stone houses, which had been previously altered to house a pornography cinema by punching a 2-storey rectangular lobby in two of the houses and supporting the walls above with a heavy beam. This feature, considered an acquired right, allowed the architects to introduce a frontal element containing the box office and marquee, but the Montreal authorities insisted that the traditional stone facades behind be retained and restored and even disallowed the replacement of two missing dormer windows with other than replicas.

The Théâtre du Rideau Vert was completely rebuilt on its existing site except for the fly tower which was retained because it could not have been rebuilt at the same height. Both theatres fully cover their sites. The facades are similarly handled with heavy aluminum panels painted with an earthen brown or dark green glossy paint, set against storefront glazing and light grey limestone walls. The original sand-blasted glass marques have been reinstated.

The name "Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui" recalls the ambitions as well as the aesthetic and material concerns of the early Modern

Théâtre du Rideau Vert



movement in France. The architectural mood of the lobbies is reminiscent of modern exhibition design of the 1920s, 30s and 40s by architects such as Alvar Aalto, Sir Basil Spence and by Le Corbusier for example in his Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux for the international exhibition "Art et Technique" in Paris in 1937. During intermissions the audience appears almost like props set against the backdrop of the blue-black steel walls, while the open free form staircases and freestanding elements such as light poles, water fountain cylinders and open iron railings highlight the experiential qualities in terms of sequence, movement and parallax. Like the theatre itself the effects are always changing. A step beyond the rigidities of the architectural tableau would be to take a cue from the flexibility of the black box performance spaces themselves, where mechanical devices enable floors and walls to be reorganized and rearranged in different configurations.

Saucier and Perrotte's work is also very much tied to the functional modernism and technological aspirations of the *Maison de Verre* designed by Pierre Chareau and built in Paris in 1931. This unique work, a masterpiece of spatial and technological design, has clearly been a formative influence on the architecture of these theatres. The theatre plans bear many similarities to the plans of the *Maison de Verre*, reflecting the inherent qualities of the "plan libre" espoused by Le Corbusier and manifested in the *Villa Savoie*. The theatres are organized both horizontally and vertically by means of a transformable grid. In both, the panthéte and balcony levels are linked by means of an open sculptural staircase expressed as a unique and well-detailed object.

Walls are treated as separate receding planes and achieve rich planar and spatial interpenetrations; cold, dark walls are formed from gun-blued shipplated steel plate, lighter planes are expressed in warm reddish-brown maple paneling and partitions are clad with high-gloss enamelled aluminium plate. Several of the walls are canted, drawing the eye or body along or upwards to create a cavernous effect. In the *Rideau Vert*, the rear wall of the auditorium tilts upward on the lobby side and reappears throughout the building ending up at the roof top rehearsal room. Black vinyl floors, stair treads and landings are

carefully executed as horizontal planes in sharp contrast to the wood or metal walls, and to freestanding elements such as the charcoal grey light poles inspired by the *Maison de Verre*, or the lime green mosaic cylinder which contains the water fountain and stands as a vertical totem. Even the bar is designed as a series of vertical and horizontal elements. Ceilings, smooth or stuccoed, are handled as inclined planes. Some of the details, however, are not sufficiently refined to survive the wear and tear of crowds. Baseboards of painted wood and gypsum walls in some of the tight circulation spaces do not reflect the same thorough attention to detail and may, like the sets themselves, require regular painting to maintain a sense of newness.

An impressive mechanized modular theatre concept has been implemented in the *Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui*. Based on the flexible theatre innovations by designers like George Izenour and Jules Fisher, the theatre has an adaptable ground plane, which accommodates various seating arrangements through hydraulic lifts and seating modules of 15 seats each. Reversible hinged panels cover the walls and the ceiling consists of a steel wire "trampoline grid" which allows the lighting operators to work anywhere above the performance and the audience. The black box can be transformed into a proscenium stage by engaging the fly tower. The *Rideau Vert* also has impressive mechanical features, with a revolving turntable in the stage and sophisticated lighting catwalks cleverly concealed within the elegant ceiling.

At the top of the *Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui* a separate rehearsal room can accommodate additional performances, as can a splendid roof terrace with a skyline view over the east end rooftops towards the high rise downtown core and Mount Royal. Both of these theatres are truly integrated into the tightly knit city fabric, and are characterized by an appropriately urban sensibility which both reflects and amplifies the vital culture and unique context from which they grow. ♦

Bruce Anderson, FRAIC, has an architectural practice in Montreal and is a professor at McGill University School of Architecture.

Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui



Théâtre du Rideau Vert

Saucier + Perrotte architectes, Lemay & associés, architectes.

Founded in 1948, the Théâtre du Rideau Vert is the oldest theatre company still operating in Quebec and is home to such notable dramatists as Michel Tremblay. The company moved to their building in rue St-Denis in 1960, and in 1990 received a grant to completely demolish three adjoining wood structures and rebuild the theatre to contemporary scenographic and safety standards.

The front elevation presents an elemental restrained image on St-Denis, with the main entrance below the restored original marquee. Inside, although the functional simplicity of the new building recalls the morphology of the old theatre, the proportions of the performance hall have been altered to create an L-shaped foyer. This allows the performance hall to stand as an object within the space, an impression reinforced by cutting

away an elliptical void to the floor above.

The back wall of the performance hall is a heavy, cantilevered wall which leans into the foyer. Finished in deep brilliant green, it is visible from both levels of the foyer and acts as a threshold between the public world and the imaginary world of the theatre inside. In the north half of the foyer, a long stair doubles back and floats against the side wall of the performance hall and gives access to the upper balcony foyer.

The integration of complex technical aspects in a subtle and aesthetically pleasing way was one of the most important design challenges. Two lighting catwalks allow complete flexibility of lighting arrangements, and there is a rotating stage platform 5 metres in diameter integrated into the stage floor and an elaborate system of counterweights in the fly gallery. ♦

Below: the wall of the auditorium curves and leans out into the front foyer. Visible from all levels, it acts as a threshold between the public space and the imaginary world of the theatre inside.

Below right: stair detail in warm maple and cool steel.

Facing page: side foyer, with main staircase floating against the auditorium wall.

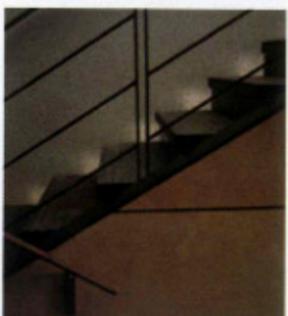
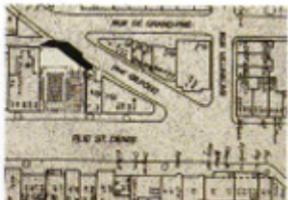


Architect team: Gilles Saucier, André Perrotte (principals, design), Ewan Branda, Louis T. Lemay, Richard Coudrebe, Guylaine Baron

**Scenographic consultant/
project manager:** Scénô Phis Inc.

Structural & Mechanical: Les Consultants Gemic Inc.

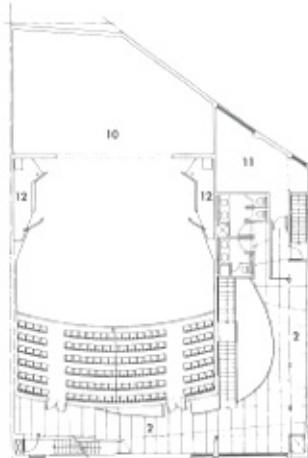
Photos: Paul Labelle (left), Ewan Branda (below), Ravois-Rajotte (over).







GROUND FLOOR PLAN

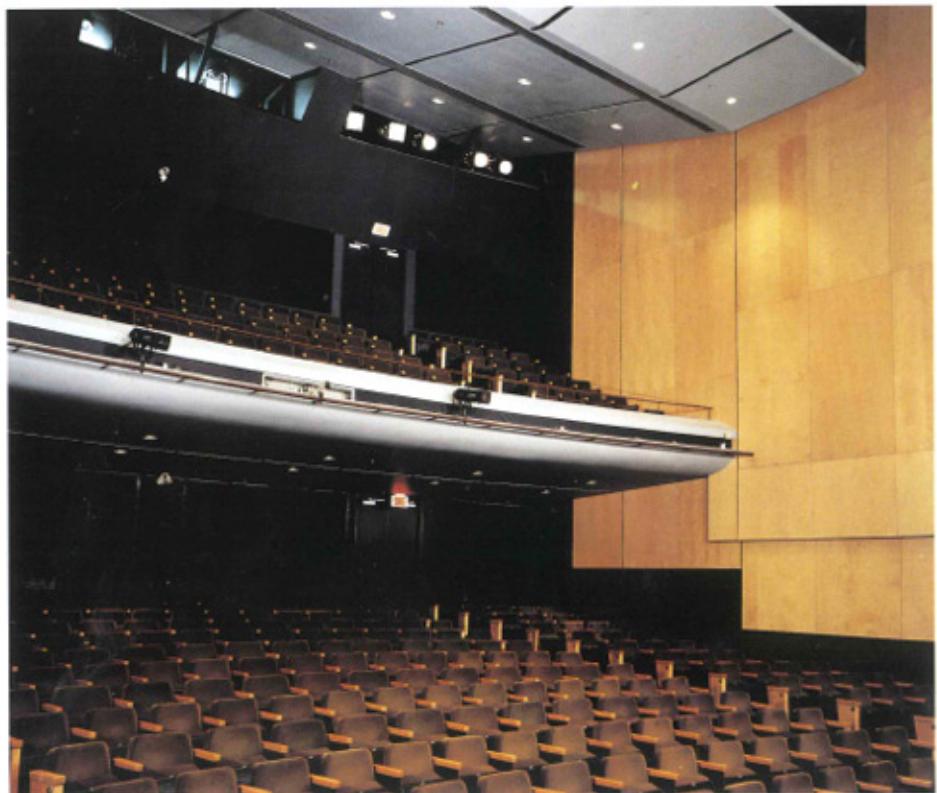


SECOND FLOOR PLAN

- 1 lobby
- 2 foyer
- 3 box office
- 4 cloakroom
- 5 stage manager
- 6 bar
- 7 performance hall
- 8 stage
- 9 backstage
- 10 fly tower
- 11 dressing room
- 12 concealed lighting

Below: Rideau Vert auditorium, an elegant assembly of tilted and receding planes and curves.

0 6m →



Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui

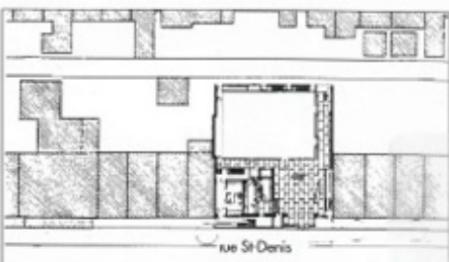
Saucier + Perrotte architectes

The Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui sits in the linear fabric of turn-of-the-century houses converted to commercial uses along rue St-Denis. It occupies a former cinema and two adjoining houses. The more fragmented parts of the program—administration, entrance hall and rehearsal hall—are located in the structure of the two original row houses.

The performance room, a sheet steel-clad masonry "black box," is inserted at the rear of the site as a free-standing object surrounded by circulation spaces. Additional performance spaces, located in the second floor rehearsal rooms and roof terrace, are accessed directly from the street.

The company produces experimental Québécois theatre and needed a flexible performance space to allow for creative possibilities as well as traditional arrangements. All six surfaces meet different scenographic demands. The ground plan can be adapted to various seating arrangements using a system of hydraulic floor elevators. On the walls are reversible hinged panels, wood on one side, black on the other. The ceiling is a wire grid "trampoline" which provides a transparent floor for lighting operators above. ♦

Below: Auditorium of Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui.



Architect team: Gilles Saucier, André Perrotte (principals, design), Ewan Branda, Gail Greenberg, Ourlaine Biron. *Ink drawings:* Franck Thoron

Scenographic consultant/project manager: Scénô Plus Inc.

Structural & Mechanical: Les Consultants Gemec Inc.

Photos: Paul Labelle





Above: a steel stair floats from the lobby to the balcony mezzanine.



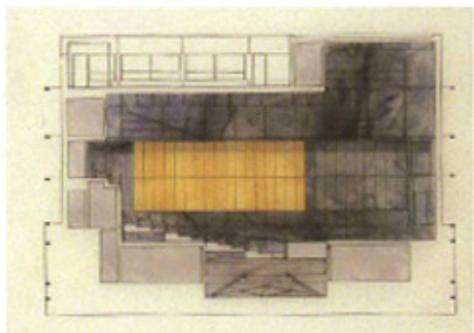
GROUND FLOOR PLAN



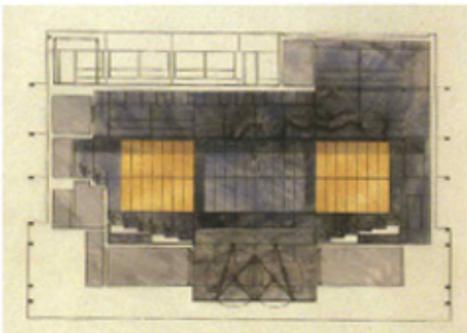
SECOND FLOOR PLAN

- 1 verbiule
- 2 box office
- 3 hall
- 4 bar
- 5 performance hall
- 6 balcony
- 7 mezzanine
- 8 secretarial
- 9 conference room

0 50m →



Theatre configured as proscenium stage



Theatre configured as transverse stage