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A neglected site on the edge of the St. Lawrence River is transformed into a multi-dimensional waterfront park worthy of the river's majesty and Quebec City's historical repute

BY DAVID THEODORE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARC CRAMER

RIVERSIDE REDUX

- 1 Quai des Cageux
- 2 Coastal walkway
- 3 Bridge to pedestrian path
- 4 Bike path
- 5 Soccer pitches
- 6 Quai-des-Brumes
- 7 Quai-des-Flots
- 8 Quai-des-Hommes
- 9 Quai-des-Vents

A concrete and yellow pine walkway along the bank of the St. Lawrence is a key feature of Quebec City's expansive waterfront development, which stretches for a total of 2.5 kilometres.





Blame the Spanish. Municipalities around the world have engaged internationally renowned architects to design local landmarks ever since titanium sheets began gently undulating in Bilbao ten years ago. The wager, beyond the quest for world-class design, is that a star's international reputation will rub off on the city, and Canadian cities have been quick to join the trend. Witness Antoine Predock's Canadian Museum for Human Rights under development for Winnipeg, and Daniel Libeskind's Royal Ontario Museum expansion in Toronto.

In a fiercely proud provincial town like Quebec City, this marketing technique has one obvious drawback: Quebecers seek to protect and promote homegrown, French-speaking talent. So, in 2000, the Commission de la capitale nationale du Quebec, which oversees the city's development, wisely opted for another approach. The provincial government had decided to fund an urban waterfront park as a 400th-anniversary gift to its capital city. Rather than pin its hopes on a fly-in star, the commission engaged Daoust Lestage, a Montreal firm known for careful, precise designs that are praised



by clients and the general public alike. The 20-year-old firm in turn assembled a consortium with an abundance of local knowledge, including Montreal landscape architects Williams Asselin Ackaoui and Quebec City landscape architects Option Aménagement.

Design work in Quebec City draws the critical attention of tourists, politicians and history buffs. Recognized as a Unesco World Heritage site, the old town holds a remarkably intact ensemble of historical landmarks and domestic cityscapes, some of which date back to the 17th century, when it was founded by French explorer Samuel de Champlain. It is Champlain's legacy to have founded New France without brute military conquest, although ironically the city's renown comes from its fortifications: gates, bastions and the only remaining ramparts in North America. Daoust Lestage knows well both the history and current politics of building here, since, among other projects, the firm carried out an award-winning renovation of the roads and public spaces surrounding Quebec City's Parliament Hill in 1999.

For the \$70-million gift, patriotically named La Promenade Samuel-De Champlain, Daoust Lestage brought a forgotten but majestic riverside site to life. Dominated by long, uninterrupted views of the historic Quebec Bridge, the 2.5-kilometre park is wedged between a set of train tracks running up along a bluff and the St. Lawrence River, about eight kilometres southwest of downtown. It's 125 metres wide at some points, but at others only wide enough for a bike path, benches and a sidewalk. Conceptually, the firm created a 325,000-square-metre flat plane, tilted with a slight slope toward the water, so every spot in the park overlooks the river. "The tilt is not really visible as a design move," says project director Réal Lestage, "but it's fundamental to the project." The three per cent incline works like a natural amphitheatre where the stage is the St. Lawrence and the backdrop the hills of the south shore.

Building public space in the city takes considerable charm and political savvy. Somehow, Daoust Lestage managed to convince Quebec's notoriously mulish traffic engineers that a road could be moved to make



- 1** The Quai des Cageux visitor centre, which serves as the park's main entry point, features a timber-clad pavilion, a deck and an observation tower. Made of latticed western red cedar and painted steel, the tower pays homage to the historic pier towers and lumber pilings that once characterized Quebec's ports.
- 2** Looking westward along the walkway, which features benches made of white concrete and ipé wood, the historic Quebec Bridge can be seen.
- 3** A bridge made of yellow pine and steel leads from the coastal walkway to the pedestrian path.

more space for the park. What's more, the designers were able to put parallel parking along the boulevard, giving drivers the option of pulling over for a quick visit. There are two larger parking lots, one just north of the Quai des Cageux and the other near two soccer pitches. Pathways sometimes cross the boulevard, too, marked with street lights at three critical points near the parking lots. One of these paths leads to a wooden stair that rises to the Bois de Tequenonday, among the last stands of indigenous forest along the St. Lawrence and an Amerindian archaeological site.

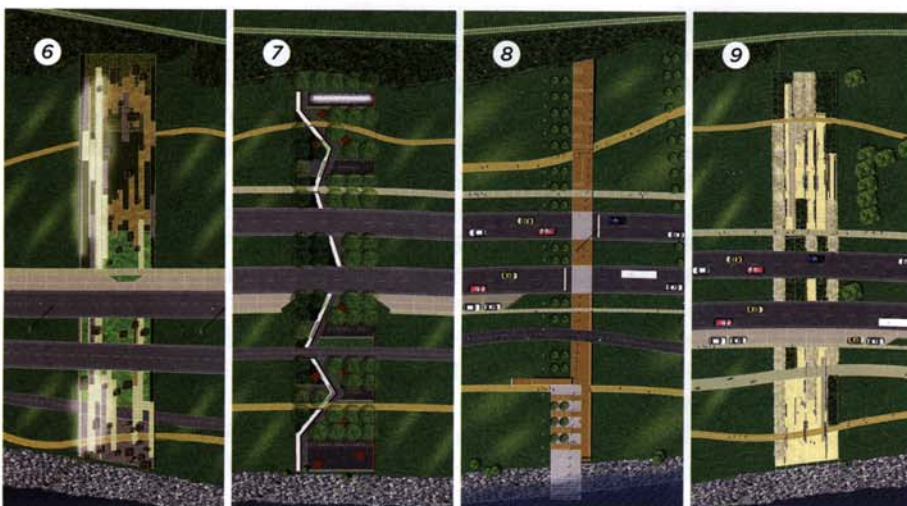
The park's focus is a series of four thematic gardens: the Quai-des-Hommes, the Quai-des-Brumes, the Quai-des-Flots and the Quai-des-Vents. The conceit is that each is a wharf and the grass is the water. Between them, the ground jogs like a ski-hill mogul run, forming undulating waves constructed to millimetre-height precision. Laid out perpendicular to the river, these gardens link the terrain on both sides of the boulevard, and lead visitors down to the water's edge.

The team sought to portray a theme for each garden by experimenting with textures and materials: illuminated fountains, fog, weathering steel, indigenous plants, even a small marsh. The Quai-des-Vents, for instance, has aluminum sculptures, designed by Lestage himself, that suggest wings or birds in flight, while the Quai-des-Hommes features wooden decking that turns up 90 degrees to frame views of the river. Whimsically, the Quai-des-Flots' Quebec granite surface pattern is meant to recall the spring-time breakup of ice on the river. Most theatrically, the Quai-des-Brumes uses a variety of chiselled granite monoliths. When Lestage's team encountered a couple enjoying a romantic candlelit dinner on top of a boulder there one evening, they knew they had succeeded. "The challenge is to get the poetry right," says Lestage. "The gardens' function is to evoke the history and moods of the river."

Wood serves functional and symbolic duties in the project's design. It is the signature material: red cedar lines the buildings inside and out, smaller items such as furniture are made with ipé and pine, and walkways



- 6** One of four thematic gardens on the park's eastern end, the Quai-des-Brumes is defined by granite boulders set among linear paths of trees. Underground atomizers blast mist into the air, creating a moody, foggy atmosphere.
- 7** The Quai-des-Flots, which recalls ice breakup patterns on the river, features granite ground cover; a low-slung, zigzagging wall; and raftlike wooden seating elements.
- 8** The Quai-des-Hommes is defined by a yellow pine boardwalk that flips up into a nine-metre-high wall whose steel-edged opening frames views of the river.
- 9** In the Quai-des-Vents, aluminum sculptures among low granite walls whirl in the wind like modern weather vanes.



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are constructed of, along with white concrete, yellow pine. But wood is also used to subtly memorialize the area's heritage. For instance, the largest architectural component, the Quai des Cageux visitor centre, has an envelope of slatted horizontal wood meant to recall stacked logs. That's because, as Lestage tells the story, this spot used to process timber for the European shipbuilding industry. Workers gathered and stacked the logs, which they floated down the river bundled in rafts, or *cageux*, to be sent on by boat to Europe. Anchoring the promenade's west end, the centre contains a mid-size, multi-purpose hall, a snack bar, public washrooms and, out on a wooden deck, a 25-metre-high viewing tower.

When it came time to choose urban furniture, the vastness of the project posed a problem. Lestage says he quickly realized that even the bike racks and tables needed to be closely tied visually and thematically to the larger elements. For instance, they needed benches robust enough to suit the river's savage majesty, yet small enough to encourage intimate conversation. The resulting custom-designed lounge chairs, some as long

as 12 metres, have bases of white concrete – the same specially mixed material used for the walkways – topped by ipê slats.

The promenade will likely spark further recreational development along the river. The long-term plan is to extend the parkland and bike paths eastward to join up with the historic parks and monuments downtown. In this sense, the project represents an elegant example of a worldwide urban design movement to revitalize former industrial waterfronts, like those in Barcelona and Seattle – and even Bilbao. In 2008, the Quai des Cageux of Daoust Lestage's promenade was shortlisted in the World Architecture Festival, the world's largest architectural awards event, and there's no reason to believe the accolades will stop. It's a wonderful moment: the go-local move has made for international success. **AZ**