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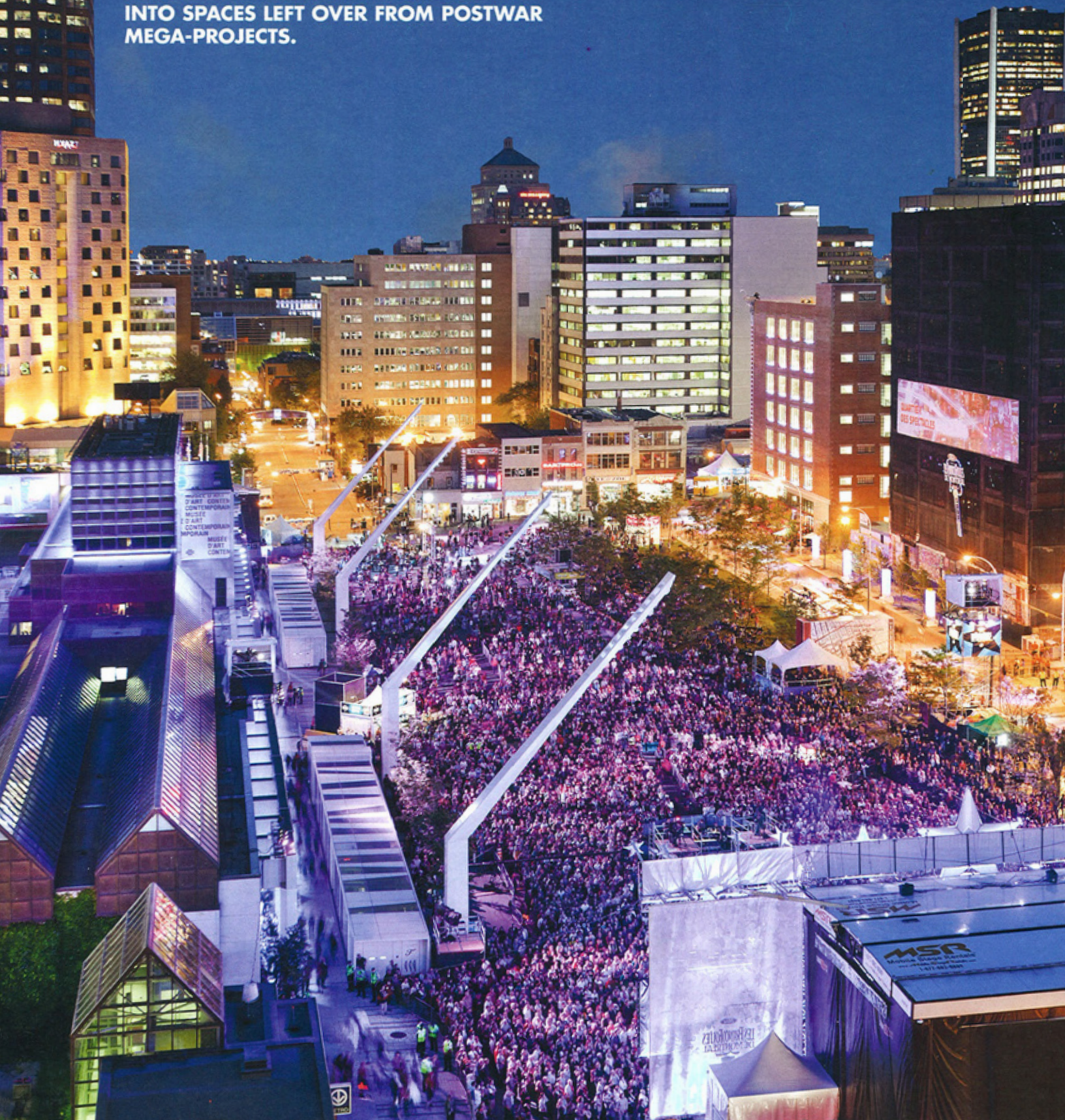
ARCHITECT

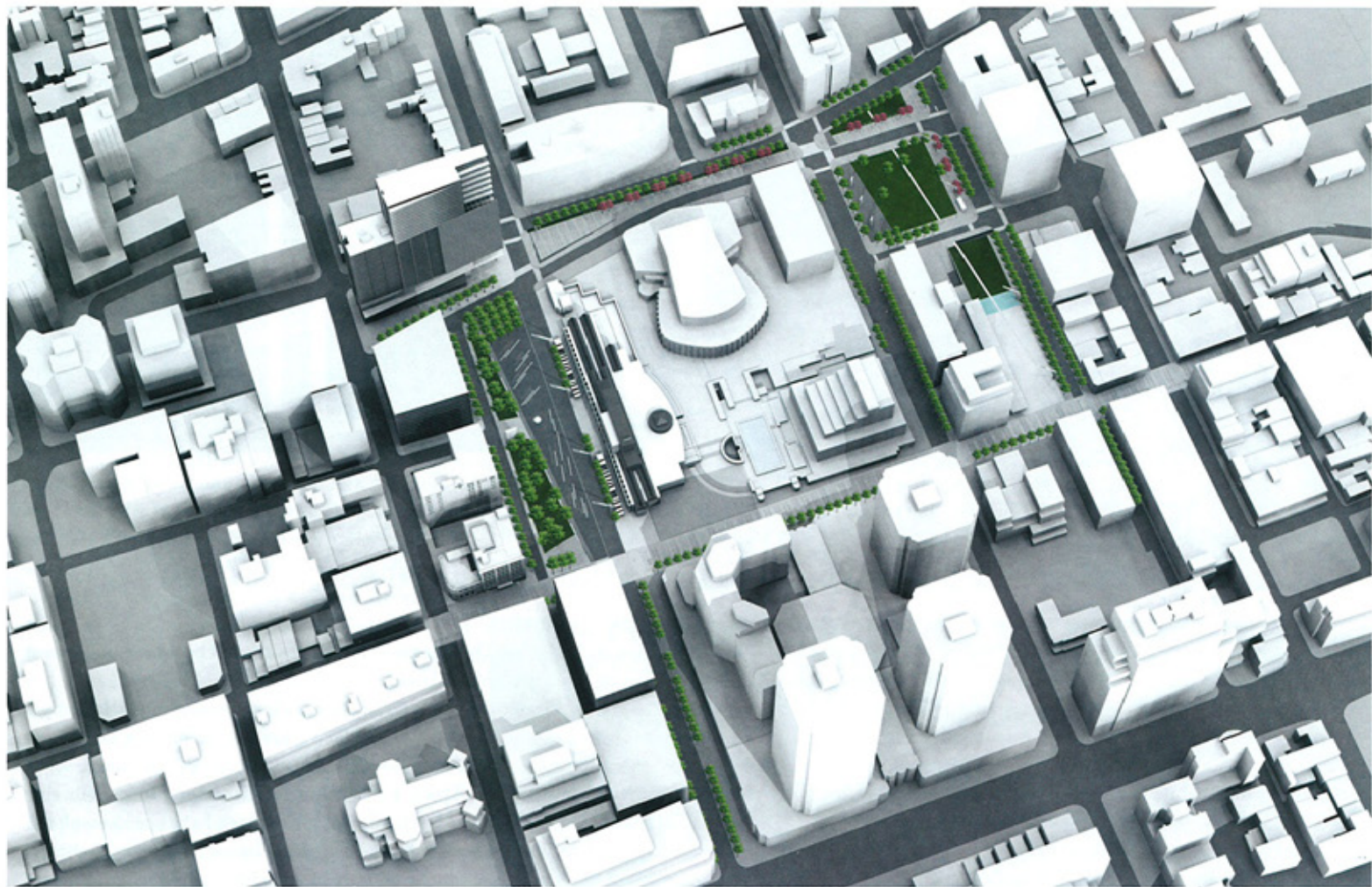
MONTREAL CULTURAL HOTSPOTS



URBAN SPECTACULAR

A BOLD SERIES OF DOWNTOWN PLAZAS
REINTRODUCES VIBRANT URBAN LIFE
INTO SPACES LEFT OVER FROM POSTWAR
MEGA-PROJECTS.





PROJECT QUARTIER DES SPECTACLES—SECTEUR PLACE DES ARTS, MONTREAL, QUEBEC
ARCHITECT DAOUST LESTAGE INC.

TEXT NIK LUKA

PHOTOS DAOUST LESTAGE INC. UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

OPPOSITE CONCERT-GOERS FILL PLACE DES FESTIVALS, ONE OF SEVERAL NEW PUBLIC SPACES IN THE AMBITIOUS QUARTIER DES SPECTACLES PROJECT. **ABOVE** PLAZAS, PROMENADES AND STREETSCAPES REINCORPORATE THE PLACE DES ARTS MEGA-BLOCK INTO THE URBAN FABRIC.

Montreal is defined, more than most cities in North America, by its public realm—how its streets, squares and parks are configured as well as the ways that people animate and appropriate those spaces. The *casseroles* and associated activities of the 2012 *printemps érable* were but the latest in a long history of Montrealers making public space live up to the democratic ideals extolled in the work of philosophers such as Hannah Arendt. There is something remarkable in Montreal's very publicness, where streets literally teem with life both summer and winter. This is due in part to the city's dense prewar neighbourhoods of residential multiplexes, in part to a certain cultural comfort with city life, and perhaps also in part to a pan-Canadian notion of Montreal as a cosmopolitan metropolis where business interests play a secondary role to arts, culture and *joie de vivre*.

Into this felicitous mix, locals have seen an encouraging if somewhat controversial series of urban projects undertaken over the last decade. These fall under the banner of the Quartier des Spectacles, a state-led partnership of civil society, business interests, public institutions and para-municipal entities. Officially established in 2003, the place-based initiative aims to nourish the cultural development and enhancement of a one-square-kilometre area straddling the downtown core and the Latin Quarter. It is a fine example of a compelling Canadian tendency toward reurbanism—a sophisticated densifying and diversifying of urban form as we grow at long last more content with urbanity, thanks in significant measure to the continued influx of immigrants from cultures with strong traditions of city living and public life.

The Quartier des Spectacles zone has long been a hotbed of arts, culture,

and racier forms of entertainment that staid English Canada historically found both titillating and alluring. With some 30 performance venues containing tens of thousands of seats, the area has endured as an important focal point of cultural expression. Major venues include the Monument National (Maurice Perrault, Albert Mesnard and Joseph Venne, 1891-3), the Place des Arts complex (including contributions by many Canadian firms, begun in the 1960s), and more recently, the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (Dan Hanganu, 1997) and the Société des Arts Technologiques (Corriveau, Dionne et Girard, 2005 and Luc Laporte, 2010-2012).

The Quartier des Spectacles has arisen like a phoenix from the ashes of postwar urban renewal in central Montreal. From the '50s to the '70s, the area was fragmented by aggressive road-widening, construction of the metro system, and the development of mega-projects such as the Complexe Desjardins (Darling, Pearson and Cleveland, 1976) and the 788-unit social-housing complex Habitations Jeanne-Mance (Bland, Rother and Trudeau; Greenspoon; Freedlander and Dunne; Jacques Morin, 1961). By the 1970s, the sector was pockmarked by vacant parcels, parking lots and the planning leftovers or *terrains vagues* of the sort found across North America. The establishment of the Montreal Jazz Festival and Just for Laughs in the 1980s—and their growing success—occupied these spaces with summertime events that complemented nearby indoor cultural activities.

A confluence of forces led to a concerted public-private effort to consolidate and infuse this part of the city with transformative energy beginning in the 1990s. This perceived need was formally expressed at the 2002



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT FOUNTAINS INCORPORATED FLUSH TO THE GROUND PROVIDE ANIMATION WHEN NO EVENTS ARE SCHEDULED; A SERIES OF GANTRY-LIKE LIGHTS MARK THE AREA'S NEW PUBLIC SPACES. **BOTTOM** ALONG RUE STE-CATHERINE, DAOUST LESTAGE LEVELLED THE SIDEWALKS AND ROADWAY TO ENCOURAGE PEDESTRIAN FLOW. REMOVABLE BOLLARDS ARE INSTALLED WHEN THE STREET IS OPEN TO VEHICULAR TRAFFIC. **OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM** SPRING-TIME SWINGS HANG FROM OPEN FRAMES ALONG THE PROMENADE DES ARTISTES; THE SAME STRUCTURES MAY SERVE A VARIETY OF FUNCTIONS, INCLUDING HOSTING ART DISPLAYS; ECHOING THE DRAMATIC FOUNTAINS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF PLACE DES ARTS, FINE MIST MARKS A DIAGONAL PATHWAY ACROSS THE PARTERRE.

Montreal Summit, convened to develop strategic planning visions for the newly amalgamated city. In 2003, the Quartier des Spectacles partnership was established to link individuals, associations and government agencies. In the early years, its interventions comprised activities and “light” identity-affirming measures of a decorative nature. It soon became apparent, however, that the area had certain significant challenges in terms of urban structure.

Architecture and urban design became a major focus in 2007, when municipal authorities established a Programme Particulier d’Urbanisme (PPU)—a district-focused planning framework enabling quick action and special measures for strategic intervention. This called for the aggressive development of a high-quality network of public spaces that could easily be adapted for the temporary but demanding needs of the summer festivals. A longer-term intention was to intensify activity and encourage private-sector development in the precinct.

In this respect, the Quartier des Spectacles was a classic 20th-century urban design project, intended to link public and private investments while enhancing the quality of urban space. It audaciously called for several blocks of land to be made into permanent public spaces by removing strategic parcels from private development (and foregoing the tax revenues on which cash-strapped Canadian municipalities such as Montreal rely). Inspired by similar initiatives ranging from Battery Park City in New York to the Quartier International de Montréal, just to the south of

the project area, the Quartier des Spectacles project became a bold move in contemporary city-building.

In physical form, the Quartier des Spectacles includes multiple components organized into two “poles”—the Pôle Quartier Latin to the northeast, which is somewhat awkwardly separated by the Habitations Jeanne-Mance from the Pôle Place des Arts to the southwest. This review focuses on the major urban spaces of the latter, almost all of which have been completed in the last six years. The Montreal-based firm Daoust Lestage was commissioned to develop a comprehensive plan and detailed design in response to the PPU and through collaboration with members of the partnership as client-stakeholders. Building on their accomplished designs for the Quartier International de Montréal including Square Victoria, the firm articulated a four-phase build-out that effectively completes the Place des Arts complex as an urban armature. Indeed, Daoust Lestage has transformed the periphery of the 1960s mega-block into a series of fluid urban spaces, literally turning a sow’s ear into a silk purse.

The first element, which many consider the showpiece of the project, is the Place des Festivals. The long narrow block bordered by Jeanne-Mance, de Maisonneuve, Balmoral and Ste-Catherine Streets is rebuilt as a continuous ground plane combining a gently sloping grassy hillside and a handsome hard surface intended to accommodate concerts and similar large-scale events. Gantry-like arms serve both to light the space and to define it as an outdoor room, while also enabling recognition of the Place



des Festivals from a distance and during tele-vised broadcasts.

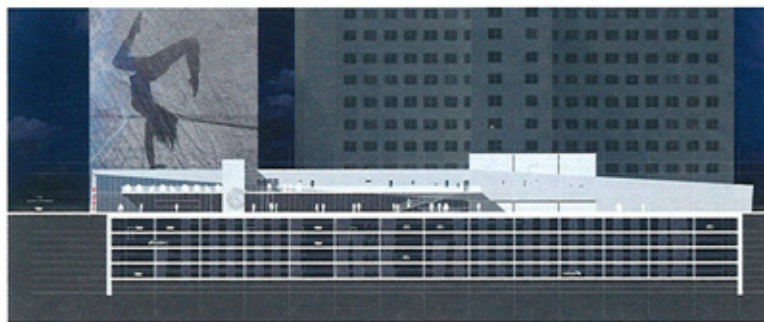
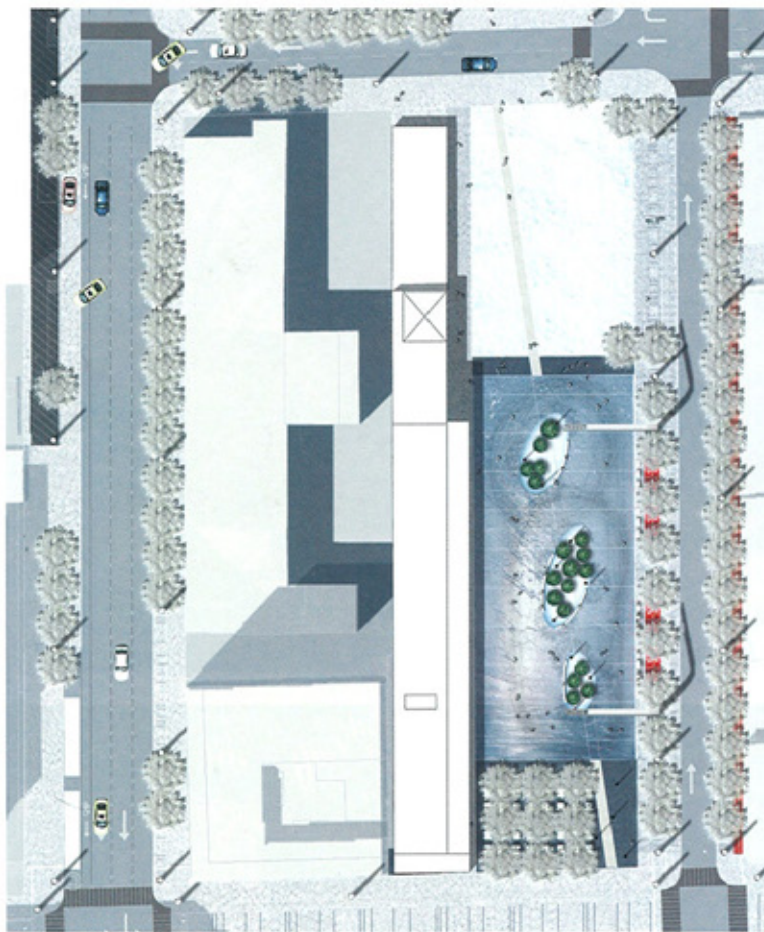
To mitigate the service entrances on the Jeanne-Mance façade of the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Daoust Lestage created two delightful Vitrines Habitées. These linear structures house top-notch restaurants, each accommodating 60 patrons indoors and many more in the summer, when the 10-metre-wide sidewalks host popular outdoor dining terraces. Along with new ground-level public programming in the existing and proposed buildings on the far side of the space, including the Maison du Festival de Jazz and the Louis Bohème (see *CA*, February 2011), the Vitrines nourish the large square with transparent transition spaces blurring inside and outside. Some of this work remains to be done, but the pattern has been set, and it is a welcome return to the vitality and street life that postwar projects so often rejected.

Mature trees, handsomely detailed street furniture, and an extensive series of water fountains emerging from the smooth surface of the central space complete a thoughtful composition that feels comfortable and friendly for everyday life. All told, the Place des Festivals represents a fine reconciliation between the specific needs of large-scale performances and the polyvalence of a public square that can readily be appropriated by Montrealers and visitors throughout the seasons.

Flanking the northwest side of the Place des Arts complex is the Promenade des Artistes. This linear space corrects the bizarre confluence of two parallel traffic sewers, Boulevard de Maisonneuve and Avenue du Président-Kennedy, where several bus lines converge on a metro station. The Promenade ties together the Place des Festivals, the Université du Québec à Montréal's science campus, and the new Maison Symphonique (see *CA*, November 2012). It structures a disjointed ground plane and coarse-grained mix of buildings with simple ground treatments, several more of the elegant lighting structures, and a delicate set of small open boxes that provide a sense of enclosure while serving as a venue for artistic installations. A series of urban swings, installed each spring in the boxes, heralds the beginning of the outdoor festival season.

A third major component aims to connect the Place des Arts complex with Boulevard St-Laurent, Montreal's celebrated "main" street. This represents perhaps the most challenging part of the Quartier des Spectacles in terms of urban structure. The blocks between rue St-Urbain and rue St-Dominique became transitory spaces with the construction of Place des Arts and Habitations Jeanne-Mance in the 1960s. Daoust Lestage sought to rectify this by creating the Parterre, a large green space bor-





LEFT PLANS FOR THE LOT SOUTH OF THE PARTERRE INCLUDE A WINTER SKATING RINK. ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM THE CURRENT DESIGN FOR THE NEW PLAZA INCLUDES AN UNDERGROUND PARKING STRUCTURE AND GROUND-FLOOR RESTAURANT; ART PLATFORMS DOUBLE AS BENCHES IN THE PLANNED STREETScape ALONG RUE JEANNE-MANCE.

dered by hardscape that extends the sidewalks to frame summer concerts. With the eventual addition of new built form on adjacent blocks, this space should help to ground the megastructures found nearby. It continues the bold but elegant architectural language of the Place des Festivals and the Promenade des Artistes, expressed fittingly at a human scale that one can best appreciate when moving on foot through these spaces.

The deftest interventions in the Quartier des Spectacles are found along rue Ste-Catherine, one of Montreal's thriving pedestrian-dominated main streets. In the Place des Arts sector, Daoust Lestage levelled the roadway and the sidewalks to blur the transition between the interior spaces of the Place des Arts complex and Complexe Desjardins across the street. These interventions mesh well with the annual closure of rue Ste-Catherine in the Gay Village on the opposite side of Boulevard St-Laurent, adding to the growing array of people-oriented public spaces in central Montreal. Here, technical and logistical challenges such as clearly demarcating the roadway for motorists were met through the use of handsome but humble fitments, including simple bollards that can be removed when the street is closed to vehicular traffic. Early work to humanize the blunt façades of Complexe Desjardins continues through the addition of trees and, along rue Jeanne-Mance, the insertion of several platforms for public art, all visually linked through consistent surface treatments.

The success of the public spaces and comprehensive plan for the Pôle Place des Arts in the Quartier des Spectacles owes much to the project's multi-scalar, multi-stakeholder nature. It also illustrates the importance of strategic planning frameworks that allow designers, users and project developers to collaborate and move quickly when existing conditions combine with temporal forces to create opportunities for major change.

Like its slightly older cousin, the Quartier International de Montréal, the city-building work of the Quartier des Spectacles has not been without controversy, nor should it be exempted from critical scrutiny. Questions arise about the loss of "authenticity" due to aggressive acts of "branding" city precincts. Of particular concern to certain observers is the dis-

appearance of the disorder, uncertainty and effervescence of the city through state-sanctioned undertakings that amount, for some, to a sanitized urbanism catering primarily to bourgeois suburban visitors. Other concerns that have been tenuously linked to the Quartier des Spectacles include gentrification and the locking-down of public space for profit-oriented corporate-run cultural and entertainment enterprises.

Grumbles aside, the Quartier des Spectacles undertaking illustrates the difficult balance that architects and designers must establish between responding to the immediate needs of clients—in this case, a mix of public and private stakeholders—and the imperative to encourage excellence, justice, and the collective work of making the "good city." This includes advocacy for users who may not have a voice in the formal process of planning and design. Montreal, like other cities, continues to struggle with reconciling the need to engage diverse publics in city-building while seizing opportunities for quick strategic projects.

Nevertheless, two exciting things have emerged from the first 10 years of this endeavour: an array of excellent works of architecture and urban design by Canadian firms, and a raising of the bar of public debate on how we should rebuild our cities and metropolitan spaces in the 21st century. For that we can only be thankful. **CA**

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CLIENT VILLE DE MONTRÉAL
 ARCHITECT TEAM RÉAL LESTAGE, RENÉE DAOUST, CAROLINE BEAULIEU, NATHALIE TRUDEL, LUCIE BIBEAU, FRANÇOIS MÉNARD, CATHERINE ST-MAISELLE, MARIE-PIER MARCHAND, MARIE-JOSÉE GAGNON, STÉPHANE SAVOIE, ÉVELINE SIMARD
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 FOUNTAIN CONTRACTOR SOUCY AQUATIK, DIVISION OF PISCINES SOUCY INC.
 LIGHTING CONTRACTOR LAMPADAIRES FERRAILIX
 AREA 6 HECTARES
 BUDGET \$95 M (ESTIMATED)
 COMPLETION PHASES 1-3 COMPLETED 2012, PHASE 4 IN PROGRESS