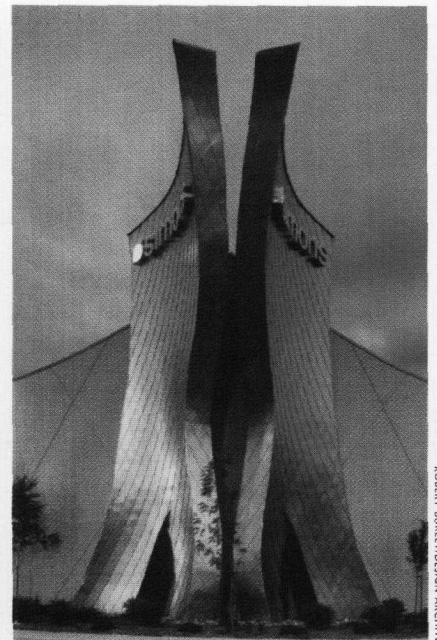


A Quebec department store borrows the sinuous forms of Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum to attract attention—and customers.

Simons Says by Annmarie Adams



ROBERT BULEV/DESIGN ARCHIVE

The Maison Simons department store in Sherbrooke, Quebec, is hard to miss. Its organic, glittering elevation gushes like a retail geyser from the Carrefour de l'Estrie, a generic suburban mall.

The new store is one of the hip Quebec City fashion retailer's three forays into malls (two more outlets are set to open). Lemay Michaud Architects of Quebec City and Toronto-based retail consultants Watt IDG designed these, as well as the Montreal Simons in the old Simpsons building. Each is entirely unique. Maison Simons in Sherbrooke boasts a titanium and copper-clad pulsating facade to attract shoppers from the mall's vast parking lot, the fast-moving boulevard Portland, and the distant autoroute 410. Two bulbous, asymmetrical copper protrusions seem to grow out of the asphalt, enticing potential customers to enter the glass doorway wedged between them. At the building's corner, a sharp peak of titanium points skyward.

The store's architectural pedigree is obvious. Sherbrooke's Simons looks a lot like Frank Gehry's celebrated 1997 Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, also clad in titanium. Retailer Peter Simons is a big fan of Gehry and actually travelled to Bilbao in 1998 to check out the Pritzker Prize-winning Canadian-born architect's best known wonder for himself. "The idea was to animate the mall," says Simons, adding that the huge metal

sculptures of Richard Serra were also inspirational. "The design is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but I also hope it will prove to be durable architecture."

The store's film references are less obvious but equally interesting. Maison Simons in Sherbrooke reminds me of the wonderful moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy and friends first spot the Emerald City gleaming on the horizon. The green, glowing skyline of Oz offers the foursome goodies they think they need yet already have, and is thus an altogether appropriate reference for a contemporary shopping environment.

While the image of Oz remains unchanged in our minds, Maison Simons is designed to weather. The 16-ounce copper squares that comprise the dramatic gateway to the store will darken with time, perhaps exaggerated by its curves and overhangs. Since the copper actually continues from the exterior of the building to its interior, this process should be quite evident. The architects estimate that about a decade's worth of Sherbrooke's tough winter conditions will produce the perfect tinge.

While both Gehry and Serra use the computer program CATIA to produce their mind-boggling geometries, Lemay Michaud and structural engineers CIMA+ used Visual Design and basic AutoCAD for Simons. The sinuous forms are constructed of steel tubes—like a three-

Above left: asymmetrical copper volumes flank the store's glass entrance. Above: mirrored peaks of titanium glitter at the building's corner.

dimensional truss—and then sheathed in plywood especially cut to follow the complex curves. Both the copper and the titanium shingles are then attached in a traditional way, with rows of overlapping units.

The interior of the store is also distinct and curvilinear: Circulation from both the mall and the exterior leads to a central, elliptical focal point, accentuated by a silver-leaf dome. Screen walls in each department emphasize openness and fluidity. Simons' clothing, especially their own label, *Twik*, is trendy and minimalist, just like the new store's interior. Both are modern, post-industrial, and *très chic*.

Over the last few years, Lemay Michaud have masterfully transformed a whole series of drab, humourless places into edgy, futuristic venues. *Condé Nast* magazine recently included the firm's Hotel Le Germain—a luxurious oasis in the former home of the Ordre des Ingénieurs du Québec in Montreal—on a list of "The World's Coolest Places to Stay." Definitely not Kansas any more.

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