A bit of Bilbao style at Sherbrooke mall

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SHERBROOKE - Have you driven by the mall in Sherbrooke lately? Even from the fast-moving Pont de la Concorde, the transformation of the popular Carrefour de l’Estrie is hard to miss. The old Eaton store has given way to the Bay and Baby Gap. The most dramatic change, however, is the site of the old Rona store. With the hardware store now ensconced in a "big box" of its own, its former home has morphed into Maison Simons, a pulsating, glittering blob of copper and titanium, à la Frank Gehry.

"The idea was to animate the mall," said style-savvy Peter Simons, who visited Gehry’s celebrated Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, in 1996, before beginning work on the Sherbrooke store.

At 80 kilometres per hour the new store looks remarkably like Gehry’s masterpiece, opened in 1997 and widely hailed as one of the most radical and remarkable buildings of recent decades. In its first year, more than 2 million visitors flocked to see the titanium-clad art museum, which bobs like a noble, shining ship, moored along the Nervion River in northeastern Spain.

Maison Simons in Sherbrooke is the work of Quebec City architects LeMay Michaud and Toronto-based retail consultants Watt IDG. This same team produced the Montreal Simons store in 1999, rejuvenating the old Simpson’s building which had sat unoccupied for years. The challenge in the Sherbrooke project, however, was quite different than in Montreal, since the setting was a generic suburban mall and the market was both untapped and unfamiliar.

"Organic" is the operative word. Seen from the huge parking lot, two folding copper forms climb up from the asphalt, promising potential shoppers a truly hip, post-industrial experience. The glass entrance to the store is actually wedged between these amorphous, unfamiliar shapes, intended to weather with time. This patio will become particularly evident, since the metal cladding actually extends from the exterior to the interior of the store. The architects estimate, in fact, that about 10 years of tough Townships winters should produce the perfect greenish tint (think roofs on old McGill buildings).

Just to the right of this monumental gateway rises a sharp peak of silvery titanium. Shoppers with a little imagination might think that some sort of volcanic eruption has caused the titanium point to emerge from its rounded and softer coppery surroundings.

This same notion of organic, sinuous lines and geological occurrences continues inside. While Maison Simons still occupies the rather boring, boxy space it inherited from Rona, the store feels open and fluid. A particular nice feature of the entrance is that each rounded copper form envelops a display window, as the copper forms are S- and C-shaped in plan, as well as in section (rather than simply being tacked onto the box)

Circulation leads from both the mall and parking-lot entrances to a central, elliptical focus, capped by a silver-leaf dome. Various departments in the store are demarcated by subtle divisions and changes in colour, rather than by traditional walls.

Simons stores, especially in Sherbrooke and Montreal, are distinctive. Like traditional department stores, goods are categorized in general departments, but at Simons, individual types of products - pants, sweaters, skirts - are then presented together, rather than by collection. This adds to the spare, minimalist, trendy look of the store’s interiors. No gizmos here.

Peter Simons says he thought about asking the California-based, Canadian-born, Pritzker-Prize-winning Gehry to design the Sherbrooke store, but was working within a tight time constraint. He particularly likes Gehry’s use of materials and the ways he marries art and engineering.

Also inspirational to the project, according to Simons, was the work of American sculptor Richard Serra, whose huge works in steel and lead are too big, too heavy and too costly to install in most museums. Like his friend Gehry, Serra uses the computer program CATIA to generate his elegant, mind-boggling geometries.

Maison Simons in Sherbrooke is not Bilbao, nor is it Serra’s Torqued Ellipses, a magnificent project installed in a Los Angeles museum in 1998. In Sherbrooke, the architectural excitement is real at the entrance, whereas at Gehry’s museum, the other forms continue into the building’s cross-section. (The Montreal Maison Simons, too, is perhaps best at its dramatic, corner entrance.)

Serra’s forms are solid, whereas in Sherbrooke the metal is clearly only a sheathing. Maison Simons in Sherbrooke is, nevertheless, an impressive attempt to bring contemporary architecture to the suburban mall. It also illustrates at least one of postmodernism’s most potent lessons. The mall, like it or not, is a significant part of our culture. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown taught us as much in their groundbreaking manifesto, Learning From Las Vegas, in 1977.

In that book, Venturi and Scott Brown also argued that two conflicting ways that buildings convey meanings are as “ducks” and “decorated sheds.” A duck, such as Montreal’s Orange Julep on Décarie Blvd., articulates its function by its over-all shape. A decorated shed, on the other hand, is a big box with a sign stating its purpose.

Maison Simons is a classic decorated shed. And in this regard, one of the least successful aspects of the new store’s design is the uneasy fit of the green letters of the Simons name and the curvy copper forms. The letters look stuck on.

Venturi also taught us that architecture can be witty, entertaining, and light-hearted. If mall shopping is still not your idea of a good time, look at Maison Simons in Sherbrooke from the comfort of your moving car. You will look twice. And it is a lot cheaper than a trip to Spain.

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