

A less-than-happy marriage of exterior and interior

The museum of contemporary art moves into the heart of Montreal

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

After 24 years marooned on Cité du Havre, the Musée d'Art Contemporain is busily preparing to open its new premises in the heart of Montreal. As isolated as it was in its former home, the new building is completely surrounded by the city.

In fact, it is difficult to imagine a site as bound to the urban infrastructure of Montreal. The new museum bridges two major downtown thoroughfares. It is located on Jeanne Mance St. between de Maisonneuve Blvd. and Ste. Catherine St.; it also encloses the plaza at Place des Arts, and is connected to the Métro and Complexe Desjardins. Not a bad start.

Some features of the project's site planning, particularly its eastern edge, make positive contributions to the area. The long, narrow, skylit structure serves to define the edge of the main square of the Place des Arts complex. It encloses the public space that formerly bled uncontrollably to Jeanne Mance St.

Animated at night

Most importantly, however, the Musée d'Art Contemporain adds a new component to Place des Arts, making it a true "cultural centre" like Lincoln Center in New York. The addition of a museum to the complex will add vitality to the square during the daytime hours, while Place des Arts and the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde animate it at night.

Less positive is the new museum's relationship to Jeanne Mance St. This long, western facade is faced by a false arcade.

Real arcades have been used since antiquity as a means of providing protection from the elements at the edge of a building, usually its entrance. They have also served as a transitional space that connects and differentiates inside and outside, making cities livable by providing pedestrians with outdoor environments that are humanly scaled.

The magic of the Rue de Rivoli in Paris or Piazza San Marco in Venice, for example, derives in part from their use of arcades. In Bologna, the romantic character of the entire city stems from the co-operative use of arcades; a city ordinance requires that all buildings be set back from the street and connected by a shared covered space.

Merely decorative

The arcade at the new museum along Jeanne Mance St., however, provides none of these amenities. It is constructed along a blank wall (where one would expect entrances) and is uncovered. In fact, the pedestrian cannot even enter the space between the columns and the wall; in essence, the arcade is merely decorative.

In addition to the gesture of "turning its back" on the street, this false arcade might prove dangerous. The absence of openings along the museum's west wall makes this block of Jeanne Mance threatening for women or anyone walking alone at night. In the words of urban critic Oscar Newman, the street has become "indefensible space."

If the spaces hidden behind the

thick piers of the arcade are not brightly illuminated or carefully surveyed at night, the Jeanne Mance arcade will almost certainly accommodate undesirable activity. The "dead" space between the false arcade and the wall has already become a collecting space for litter.

The interior of the building, thankfully, is much more satisfying than its exterior. The visitor enters from the plaza into a monumental, circular lobby. Modelled on Salle Wilfrid Pelletier in Place des Arts, another arcade gently swells at this point to direct visitors toward the giant rotunda marking the entry point from the exterior.

This large, round room — a popular feature in contemporary museum design — acts as a distribution point, a knuckle, for the entire museum. A grand staircase rings the room, emphasizing its circular form. Galleries to the north are intended for temporary exhibitions, while similar spaces to the south will house the permanent collection.

These exhibition spaces are huge, rectangular spaces — some are beautifully illuminated from above — with clean, white walls and handsome oak floors. The entry space is crowned with an aedicule, a skylit pediment supported by four giant columns faced with green, oxidized copper panels. The restaurant, looking into the entry space as well as out to the plaza, encircles this space.

Space for performance

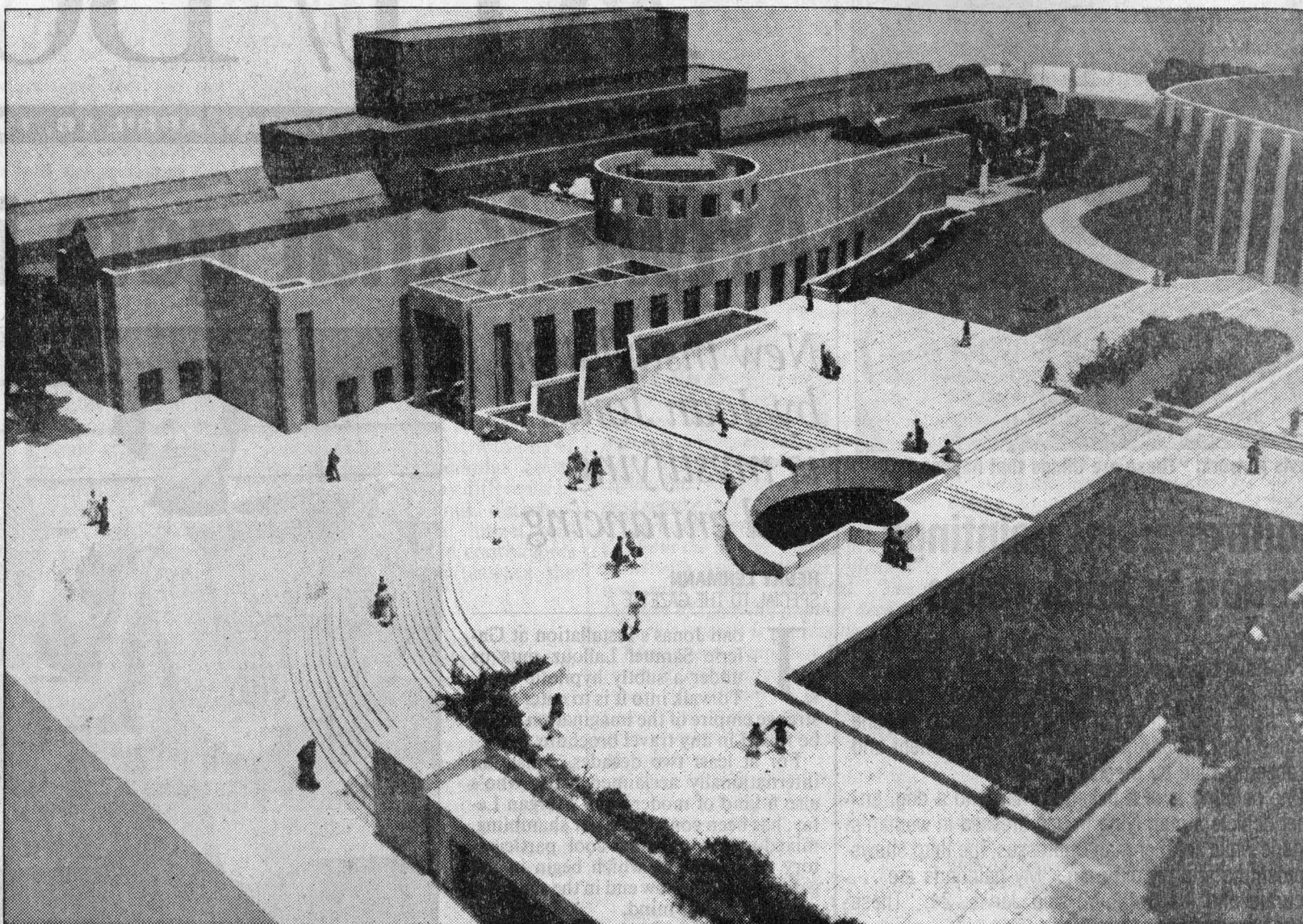
Several other features of the Musée d'Art Contemporain mark its architecture as contemporary. Of particular merit are the two flexible performance spaces in the new building. A 400-seat theatre, to be shared with Place des Arts, boasts an inventive system of fixed and folding seats and an adjustable stage to accommodate concerts, plays, lectures and screenings. A smaller multi-purpose hall will also accommodate many types of performance.

Both spaces indicate the importance of performance in the avant-garde arts scene in Quebec, and both spaces obviously will benefit from the new association of the museum with Place des Arts and Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. The new building, by the way, is the only major museum in Canada devoted exclusively to contemporary art.

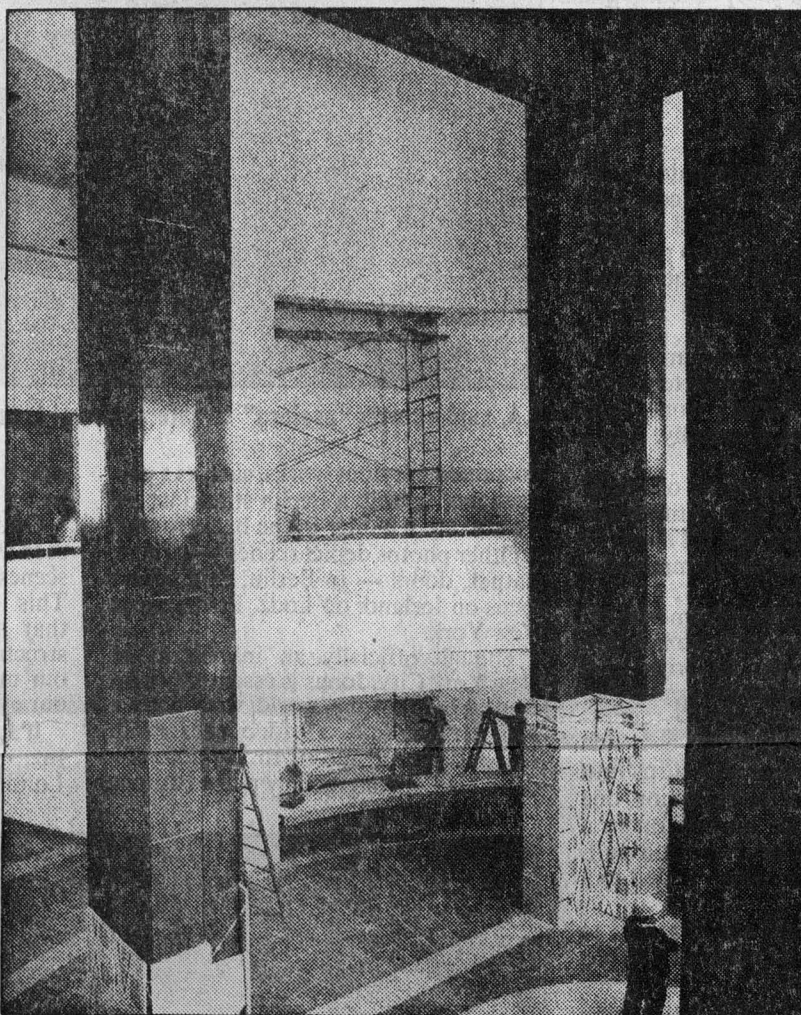
The unhappy marriage of exterior and interior at Montreal's newest museum is perhaps a result of the project's rocky history. As long ago as 1984, an architectural competition was held to generate design solutions for the site. The winners of the competition were Jodoin, Lamarre, Pratte et Associés, the architects of the present building.

In 1985, however, their winning scheme was rejected by the museum's board of directors. Quebec's Ministry of Cultural Affairs decreed a moratorium on construction of the project and began a reassessment of the building's interior spaces. At this stage, the area allotted to exhibition galleries was substantially expanded. Construction of the building began in 1990.

In many ways, the building is a up-to-date museum trapped in old clothes. In deference to Place des Arts, which dominates the site, the Musée d'Art Contemporain is clad



An artist's maquette of the new Musée d'Art Contemporain, with the existing structures of Place des Arts on the right.



An advance look inside the enormous lobby of the new museum.

in precast concrete panels. In spots, the joints between these panels have already begun to age. Even the Place des Arts Métro station at the corner of Jeanne Mance and de Maisonneuve is wearing this old suit. Why should a Métro station appear as part of a museum? Why should a new museum look like an old concert hall?

Good architecture occurs when interior and exterior designs rein-

force each other. Perhaps the museum, in the coming years, will sponsor an annual competition inviting "contemporary" artists to decorate its deteriorating walls; graffiti artists have already started. In this way, the delight of the museum's interior spaces truly would be part of the city.

■ Annmarie Adams is assistant professor at the School of Architecture, McGill University.



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Free with admission to the Museum. Passes available at the ticket counter.

The Museum is open Tuesday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Wednesday and Saturday to 9 p.m.
The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Benaiah Gibb Pavilion 1379 Sherbrooke Street West Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion 1380 Sherbrooke Street West Access: Bus 24 or Guy-Concordia metro Information: (514) 285-2000

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