

McGill College rates lump of coal for Christmas lighting

*A cross between
Star Wars and
a used-car lot*

ANNMARIE ADAMS
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

As is the case in many competitions, the ritual has ended in sacrifice, says architect Eric Gauthier, speaking of the decorative lighting scheme he designed three years ago for McGill College Ave.

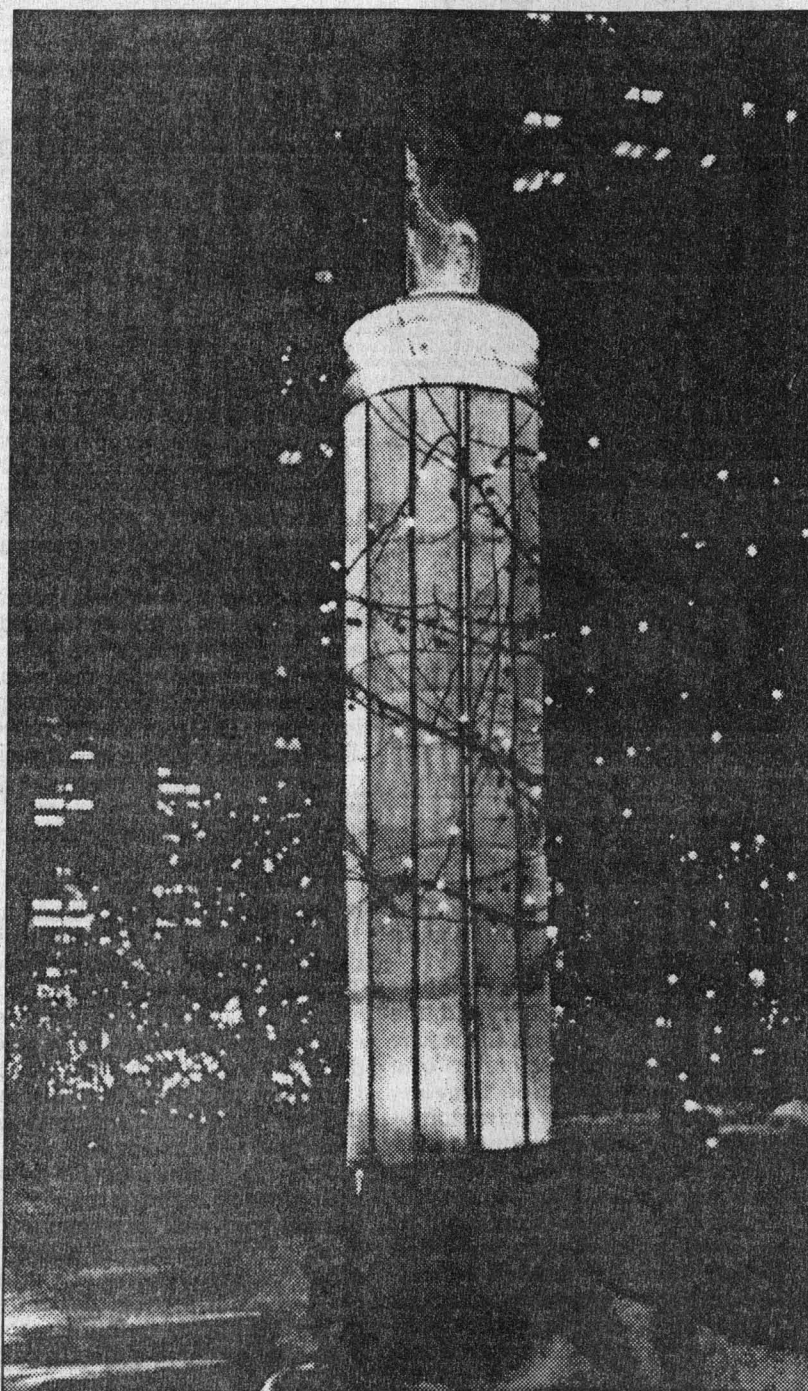
Today, only one of Gauthier's six giant sci-fi candles, which punctuate the avenue from Sherbrooke St. to Place Ville Marie, is fully illuminated. Electrical cables run between candles on the street's narrow island; tiny white lights in the trees compete for attention with the candles; and aspects of the original scheme — colossal bowls and cutlery intended to suggest that urban embellishment is a kind of centre-piece to the street — have been long forgotten. As a result, McGill College Ave., a showcase street, looks this season like a cross between a Star Wars film set and a used-car lot.

The idea was to have winter decorations, rather than lighting just for the Christmas season, explains Gauthier. Nordi-cité was a competition organized by the city in which 15 firms — architects, landscape architects, industrial designers and interior designers — were invited to propose winter decorations for three sites in the city: McGill College, Place Victoria and Place Jacques Cartier. The intent of the competition was to recall the spirit of winter carnivals in Montreal and to reaffirm that this is a northern city.

Searchlights proposed

Gauthier's winning entry for Blouin & Associates (the firm is now Blouin, Faucher, Aubertin, Brodeur, Gauthier, Plante) proposed the use of vertical searchlights as a way to enliven McGill College Ave. during the dark winter months. The searchlights would mark the grand axis of the new street and — it was believed — could be easily installed on the eight-foot centre island of McGill College, a base too narrow for even the leanest of Christmas trees.

The project was plagued with problems from the beginning. First, there was insufficient power provided in the redevelopment of the street to run the three 500-watt spotlights



GAZETTE, DAVE SIDAWAY

Small lights compete with last of Gauthier's illuminated candles.

as specified in the design; the searchlight concept was thus modified to the present candle idea: stark modern forms, capped with blue neon and a fake flame. According to Gauthier, the scheme was even further modified by city maintenance crews, who have used less and less of the original ensemble each year.

In 1988, the project comprised giant candles, bowls and cutlery, as mentioned. Today only the candles remain. Gauthier suspects the shoddy condition of the candles is due to the fact they are stored without adequate protection during summer.

Clearly, Gauthier's scheme was a poor choice as winner of the competition. It is far too difficult to main-

tain. Also, the extensive modifications necessary to power the project should have been anticipated by the competition's nine-member jury, made up of architects, landscape architects, industrial designers as well as a film-maker and leaders from the business community.

Eugene Riesman, current president of the McGill College Ave. Property-Owners Association, is disappointed with the street's appearance. He says he wishes those rocket launchers would just disappear, although he is delighted with the co-operative use of white lights by property owners along the street. The association contributes funds to the improvement of the street, in-

cluding summer planting and winter lights. Only white lights — inspired by the Place Ville Marie Christmas tree — are allowed for decorations both on the buildings and the sidewalk.

Gauthier admits in retrospect that his design was naive; he realizes now the difficulties of designing for public spaces and hopes others will benefit from his experience. Public art is always modified by criticism, he says now, referring to the harsh criticism of the project in the Daily News when it was first installed. When asked whether he has seen McGill College Ave. this year, he says he tries to avoid it. Who can blame him?

The tradition of decorating cities for Christmas has not always been so gloomy, nor have the results been so unsightly.

Long history of lighting

In fact, the special lighting of cities for the holidays has been a source of great pride among city-dwellers for centuries. Daves Rossell, a doctoral student in architectural history at the University of California at Berkeley, is completing his dissertation on the introduction and influence of electricity in North American cities in the late 19th century. He says the elaborate use of exterior lighting at world's fairs, particularly Chicago's World Columbian Exposition of 1893, immediately inspired a greater use of exterior lights for both commercial and decorative purposes, especially at Christmas.

Visitors to the Chicago fair saw more artificial light than existed in any American city at the time, explains Rossell. Like today, however, it didn't come cheap. Buildings at the Chicago fair were outlined with more than 90,000 incandescent lamps, each at a cost of \$5.20.

Decorative electric lighting was immediately appropriated for Christmas decorations because of the religious connotations of light — inspired, presumably, by its roots in the tradition of decorating with candles as well as the starry sky of Bethlehem. Electric light was festive and delightful, Rossell says of 19th-century illumination. Reinforced by its association with fairs and festivals, it was exactly what Christmas was supposed to be. Merchants and city officials in the early years of this century realized elaborate Christmas lighting would attract people to the city centre, improving the use of city streets at night as well as business.

The potential to change the appearance of buildings with dramatic lighting, of course, is well-known among architects. Electric light fo-

cuses on certain features of a building, leaving the rest in darkness, Rossell explains. This visual editing, as he calls it, can have spectacular effects, highlighting particular features of buildings to animate the street and entice pedestrians to enter.

The Chrysler Building (1928-30) and Empire State Building (1931) in New York, for example, are lit by concealed spotlights in their upper reaches, emphasizing the buildings' unusual shapes from the dark streets below. Flood lighting tends to make small buildings seem heroic; the McTavish Pumping Station (1928) on Dr. Penfield Ave. is illuminated this way throughout the year, highlighting its romantic, fortress-like appearance.

Downtown Montreal shows plenty of electrical know-how this season; particularly impressive from a distance is the illuminated crane above the Eaton Centre tower. In the last few years there typically have been several cranes dotted with

Christmas lights. This year, however, the lone crane is especially striking against the otherwise undecorated skyline of the city, a potent reminder of the season, as well as the impact of the current recession.

The same characteristic that makes good streets — co-operation — ensures good street decoration McGill College Ave. should turn down the background lights and repair its rockets or launch them, and continue a spirit of co-operation between property owners on the street. In either case, the avenue should act as a simple connection — rather than as an independent space — between the elegant tree at Place Ville Marie and the cross on Mount Royal. In its present condition, the street appears more like an electric battleground pitting public interests against private ones more than it does a celebration of Christmas.

■ Annmarie Adams is an assistant professor at McGill University's school of architecture.



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