

# Canadian **Architect**

## Recreation Centres





Centre sportif de la Petite-Bourgogne, Montreal; Saia et Barbarese, architectes

A recreation centre on Montreal's downtown west side compellingly contextualizes the modernist mat.

## Critique Conceptual Alchemy

Review by Hal Ingberg

*Regarding the issue of architectural expression, we seem to be firmly entrenched in an era where materials and the articulation of their assembly have become something of a national obsession... While undoubtedly there is a certain amount of salvation we might collectively derive from such strategies of architectural materiality, I can't help wondering if any sense of spatial dynamics (or indeed an interest in architectural space itself) is being lost in all the whittling.*

*While I won't argue that some of the results undeniably produce moments of successful "tectonicness," what seems to be slipping away in the process is an architecture equal to more than the sum of its parts. A direction that seems particularly moribund at the moment is related to the potential for architecture to contain any symbolic resonance beyond its material being.*

—Howard Davies

The tendency alluded to by Howard Davies in his jury comments for the 1998 *Canadian Architect* Awards of Excellence (see *CA* December 1998) could be referred to as "decorative modernism." This genre emerged in the 1980s with the rediscovery and reinterpretation of Carlo Scarpa by architects like Morphosis and Steven Holl. The influence of this trio has been evident nationally ever since, constituting a Canadian *zeitgeist* of sorts, which has all but quashed interest in important alternative voices.

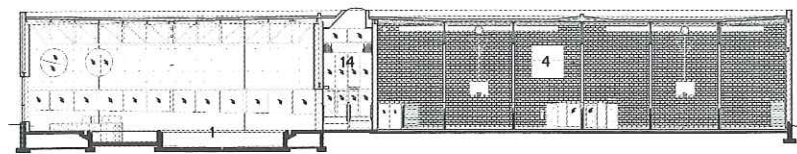
One such alternative voice is found in the work of Saia et Barbarese architectes of Montreal. Curiously, this firm has had little exposure in the national architectural media, yet it is arguably one of Canada's most significant practices. Their Centre sportif de la Petite-Bourgogne (also known as the Centre sportif Georges-Vanier) recently won an RAIC Governor General's Medal for Excellence, an OAQ Award of Excellence and a Heritage Montreal *Prix Orange*.

The project is situated in Montreal's southwest quarter of Petite-Bourgogne, at the corner of rue Notre Dame and rue des Seigneurs. This location is culturally intriguing in that it encompasses Montreal's largest black working class community to the north of

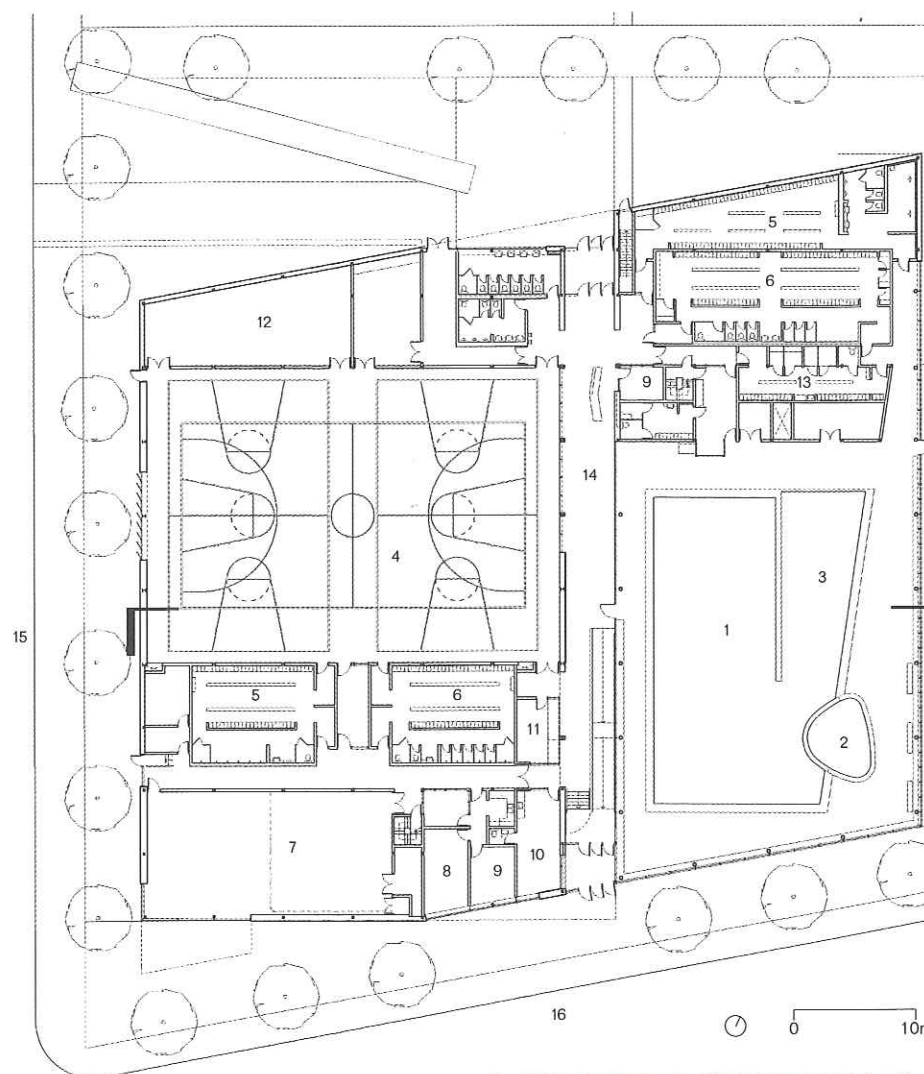
**Left: a skylit interior street bisects the facility, separating the swimming pavilion from the gymnasium.**





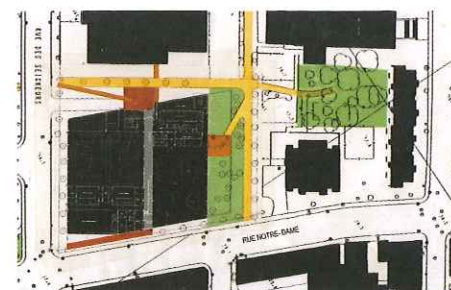


Cross section



Plan

- |                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. swimming pool     | 9. office             |
| 2. wading pool       | 10. day care          |
| 3. access area       | 11. restaurant        |
| 4. gymnasium         | 12. storage           |
| 5. men's lockers     | 13. family lockers    |
| 6. women's lockers   | 14. interior street   |
| 7. multipurpose room | 15. rue des Seigneurs |
| 8. meeting room      | 16. rue Notre Dame    |



Site plan

rue Notre Dame, and a collection of more affluent condominium owners, apartment dwellers, businesses and restaurants on rue Notre Dame itself. The street presents a heterogeneous collection of mostly red brick or grey stone buildings, the sectional rhythms of which establish a staccato street profile. These and other contextual factors have been incorporated deftly into the urban thinking behind this recreational facility.

#### Urbanizing the "mat"

The building faithfully follows its build-to lines except in two instances, the most significant of which is found on its north side. Here, a wedge is extracted from the potential maximum footprint in order to establish a forced perspective view of the fine neo-Gothic St-Joseph parish church. The slightly deformed planimetric lozenge that results still carpets most of the site. In the 1960s, Team 10 espoused such "deep" or "mat" plans because of their internal casbah-like possibilities. Yet for all of the extraordinary qualities of Candilis, Josic, Woods and Schiedhelm's Berlin Free University or Aldo Van Eyck's School for Orphans, these buildings were largely oblivious to their context. More recently, Rem Koolhaas has revived interest in the dormant mat, but has also famously suggested that we "fuck context."

The Saia et Barbarese design team, led by Mario Saia and Vladimir Topouzanov, does no such thing. In the first of a series of engaging inversions of typical preconception, the mat plan is rendered urbane. The first move in this respect was to inscribe along the traces of a formerly existing street a generous sky-lit circulation hall linking rue Notre Dame on the south and a garden neighbouring a local primary school on the north. This north entrance is in fact the primary entrance for the majority of the community, as it is nearest to their homes. The rue Notre Dame entry establishes the representational nature of its public function as well as its accessibility to the city at large.

Each side of this route encloses a volume whose perimeter is wrapped both externally and internally with brick and glass. To the west, a red brick mass houses a gymnasium, a combat room, change rooms, and administrative facilities, as well as ancillary storage and other functions. To the east, an ensemble of black brick houses the swimming pool and its change rooms. The external profiles of these

Right: the red brick gymnasium façade along rue des Seigneurs. Below right: the pool pavilion is clad in contrasting black brick. Bottom right: four conical skylights cast dynamic circles of light onto the masonry walls.

brick walls expand and contract vertically to accommodate high and low interior spaces. Seen in concert with the streetside transparency of the swimming pool, the carefully orchestrated volumetric and material fragmentation that ensues forges the building into its concatenated context, thereby urbanizing the mat.

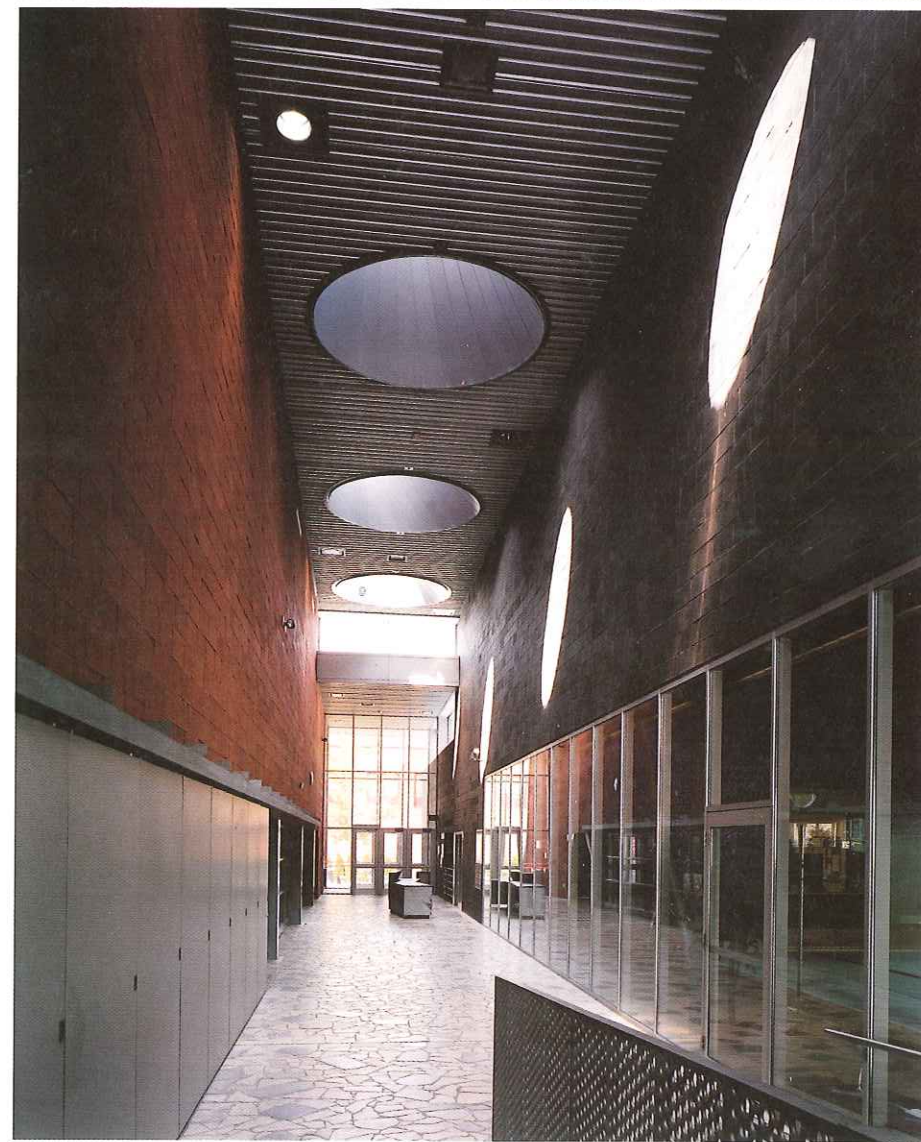
#### Light, Transparency and Spectacle

The black sheep cousin of Team 10's mat could be said to be the banal and often monotonous horizontality of the contemporary big-box hypermarket. Because the recreational facility in question doesn't provide internal casbah-like courtyards, its mat plan is in fact more clearly related to the hypermarket—a building type generated by the forces of economic expediency.

With regard to this building type, a second important conceptual inversion occurs. Through a particularly inventive series of decisions relating to natural light, transparency and the spectacle ensuing from social interaction, the familiar, monotonous and aspatial horizontality of the hypermarket is appropriated, turned upon itself and, ironically, rendered compellingly spatial. Mat buildings without internal courtyards usually don't provide access to an abundance of natural light. This building, however, provides generous daylight, while varying its effects circumstantially.

The interior circulation hall provides a curtain of floor-to-ceiling glazing at each extremity. Within this space the section steps up along the four structural bays parallel to the gymnasium, providing centralized clerestory lighting at the short extremities. Upon this raised section sit four massive conical skylight funnels. These galvanized cones have each been individually inflected at different angles to ensure the casting of large, piercing rays of light onto the brick walls of the space throughout the day.

Large expanses of glass wrap the two exterior walls and the hall elevation of the swimming pool. The east garden wall glazing splays in order to follow the site topography and to open up views toward downtown Montreal. Because the pool sits roughly two metres below street level, the act of swimming towards the rue Notre Dame curtain wall is perceptually quite theatrical. One sees people and the street from the underside, an experience that is especially unusual in an urban swimming pool. From the point of view







**Centre sportif de la Petite-Bourgogne, Montreal**  
Saia et Barbarese, architectes

Left: swimmers are treated to generous daylight and a view of the adjacent park. The glazing follows the slope of the exterior grade. Below: an evening view of the pool as seen from rue Notre Dame, showing the vibrant blue tile wall.

of the street, this fishbowl-like transparency establishes a delicious sense of urban spectacle, while the two large circular windows which float above the street side glass wall cast enigmatic rays of morning light onto the pool in a manner similar to the conical light funnels.

Those who operate recreational facilities generally have an aversion to the use of natural light in gymnasia because of the potential problems caused by glare. The architects have worked diligently to disprove this preconception. The two central structural bays of the gymnasium's west wall contain a massive clerestory of blue glass blocks where western light is further diffused by panels of galvanized steel mesh *brises-soleil*. Within, the glass blocks effect an almost ecclesiastical serenity; on the outside the setting sun brings into relief moments of iridescent reflection and powerfully rugged form. A thin clerestory strip of mottled blue glass near the top of the north wall has a similar effect. Two and a half bays of the gymnasium's corridor wall are also glazed and borrow light from the hall and the swimming pool.

The degree of transparency between these three spaces and the exterior allows the hall and the swimming pool to borrow light in a similar manner. It also sets up the possibility for a complexly layered spectacle of people-watching. To the best of my knowledge, and with the possible exception of A.J. Diamond, Donald Schmitt and Company's Toronto YMCA, the potential for social interaction established by this spectacle has rarely been visited with such flair in this building type, at least in Canada.

#### Materiality and Conceptual Inversion

The conceptual inversion of everyday preconception is also manifest in the architects' treatment of the building's material character.

Their approach is consistently rugged and straightforward in terms of detailing, and nuanced in terms of material selection.

In this respect, the choice of blue glass block for the gymnasium is quite illustrative. In recent decades, glass block has suffered from extensive overuse, thereby placing the material in clichéd disrepute. Here, however, this familiar architectural cliché has been absorbed and reinvigorated by the inspired combination of colour and the *brises-soleil*.

The solid wall of the swimming pool and its corridor wall are covered with a mottled blue ceramic tile similar to that found in kitsch 1950s suburban bathrooms. Samples of this tile have likely found their way to the rubbish bin of many another architect preoccupied with received decorum. This tile's potential association with bad taste therefore creates a certain semiotic *frisson* which is enhanced by the tile's surprisingly iridescent reflective qualities in this particular context.

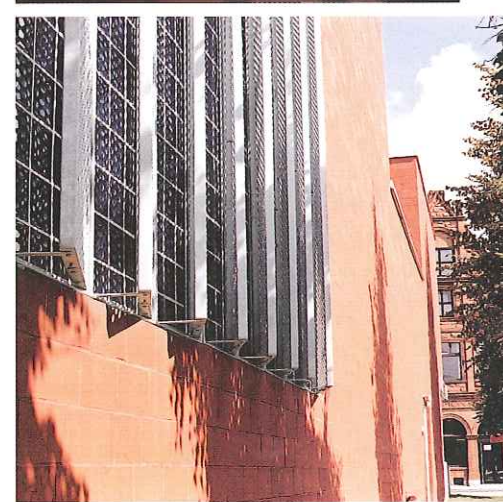
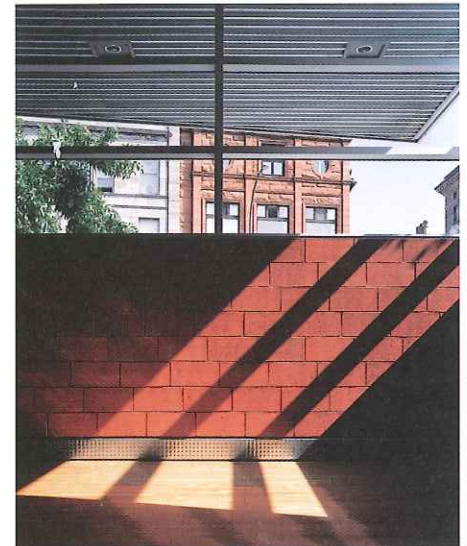
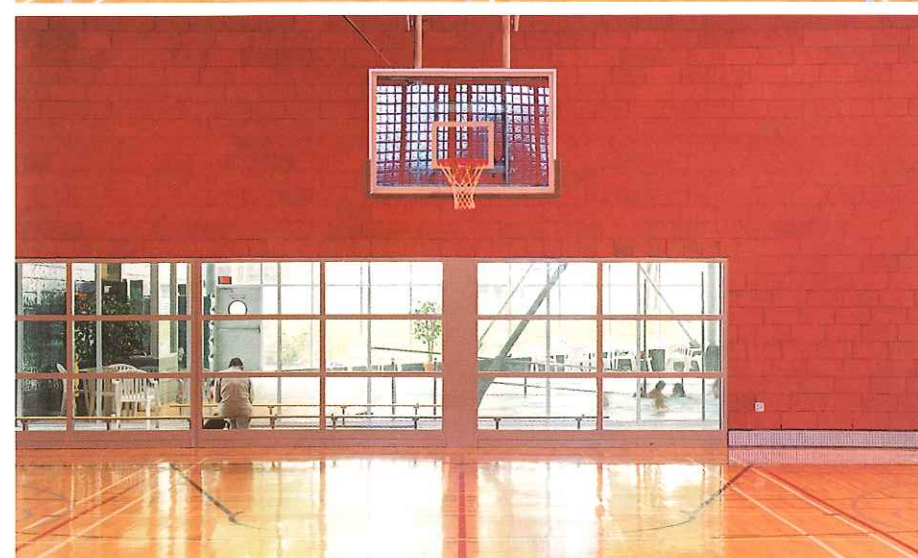
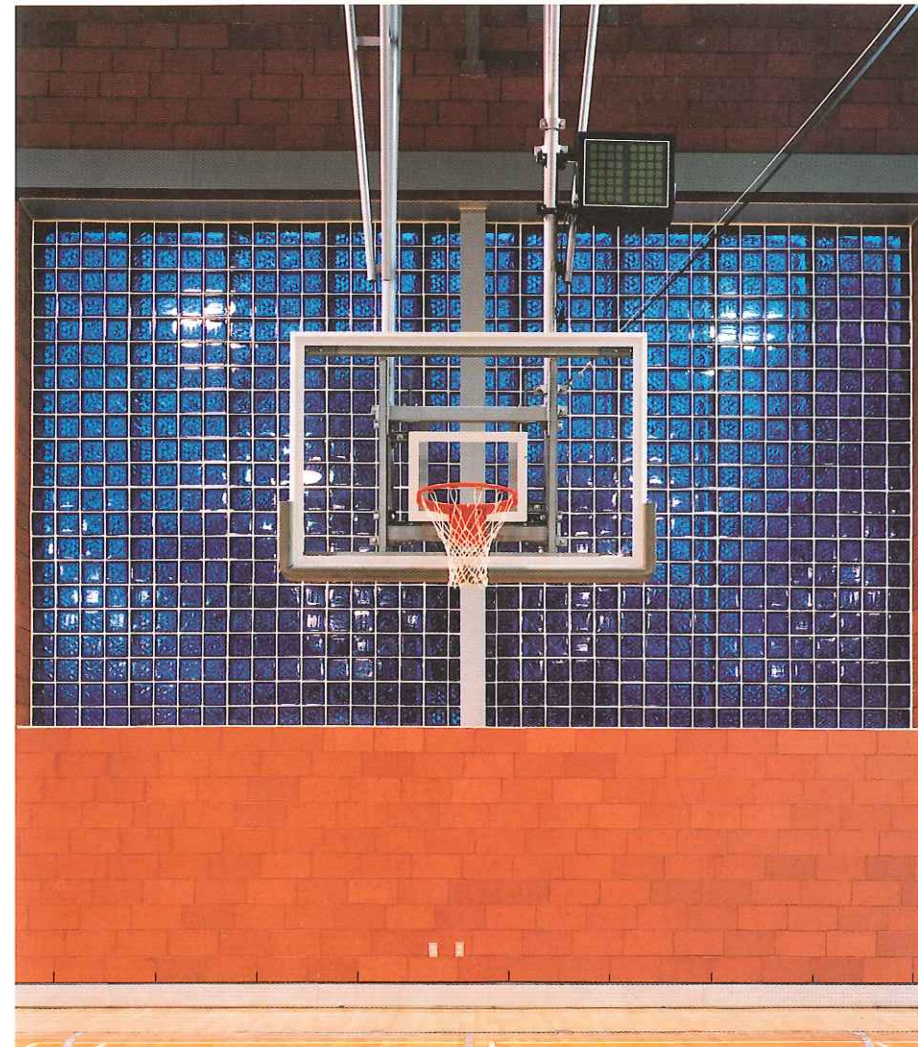
The brick colours employed were chosen because of their similarity to those found in the immediate vicinity. However, these bricks are over-scaled (the size of concrete blocks) and have been patterned in a fish scale-like bond. The imperfection of the bricks themselves allows for the subtle casting of shadows which brings the pattern into greater relief. This meeting of a familiar material with an unfamiliar scale and bonding pattern disrupts our preconceived reading of brick and therefore forces us to look at these walls with fresh eyes.

Ultimately, the intelligence and skill with which the architects simultaneously absorb and challenge convention at the scales of urbanism, spatial layering and detail distinguish this project as one of the most stimulating in recent Canadian production. This precise calibration of overall effect can be thought of as a



form of conceptual alchemy because it proves that even the urbanistically destructive or aesthetically numbing detritus of modernity can be regenerated for the social good. It could also be said that this building, like the best in conceptual art practice (see Bruce Nauman, Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dan Graham and others), privileges ideas over the packaging of aesthetics. It imaginatively engages with the symbols of the everyday, in order to make transparent through intense representation or social critique, the material, social and psychological conditions of how we live today. One could, therefore, refer to the Centre sportif de la Petite-Bourgogne as "conceptual architecture" *par excellence*. ©

Hal Ingberg is a Montreal architect.



Above left: blue glass block provides daylight and visual interest within the gymnasium. Top: a view from the multi-purpose room to buildings across rue Notre Dame. Above: a detail of the perforated metal *brises-soleil* on the west wall. Left: glazing along the gymnasium's corridor walls borrows light from the skylit corridor and provides views through the pool pavilion to the park beyond.

**Client:** Service des Immeubles/Ville de Montréal  
**Architect team:** Mario Saia (principal-in-charge), Dino Barbarese, Vladimir Topouzanov, David Griffin, James Aitken  
**Structural:** MLC Associés  
**Mechanical/Electrical:** Soprin/Cima  
**Landscape:** Gunta Mackars Landscape Architecture  
**Contractor:** Les Constructions Lavacon Inc.  
**Completion:** July 1997  
**Budget:** \$7 million  
**Photography:** Michel Brunelle