

Les jardins du Pelican (photo:Francois Decarie)

ARCHITECTURE AND MYTH: THE VANDA-STEIN AFFAIR

by François Goulet



Le Pelican entrance reproduce the temple's gate in the background of Aloys Zofl's painting (photo:Francois Goulet)

Sur la rive sud de Montréal, deux immeubles résidentiels ont été dédiés à la mémoire d'Eva Stein, une anthropologue allemande de renom. Bien que l'architecture veuille symboliser la vie d'Eva Stein, le personnage est inconnu de la plupart des résidents. En l'absence d'indices, les résidents interprètent l'architecture et ses symboles, les meublent de leurs propres mythes. Cette approche est donc distincte de l'architecture "déterministe", qui propose des symboles facilement perceptibles; distincte aussi de l'approche moderne qui suggère un environnement vide de valeurs imposées.

"Architects make architecture, historians make history, and what they both make is myth."

Charles Jencks, *Meaning in Architecture*

Architectural historians sometimes reveal the contribution of overlooked architects who, ignored by teaching institutions and the media, have nevertheless influenced the evolution of their art. The contribution of individuals who are neither architects, artists nor theorists, is less often recognized, even when their life and work has inspired architects and influenced architecture.

Eva Stein was one such person. Today her outstanding destiny is mostly forgotten. But some were so impressed by her that two buildings now stand in Longueuil, along the St-Laurent River, near Montréal, to commemorate her. It is her life, and its source as inspiration for architecture, that will be presented in the following article.

The True Story of Eva Stein

According to *Who's Who*, Eva Stein was born in 1931 in Stuttgart, Germany. Anthropologist and author of a few books on the Aymaras, a South American tribe, she is best known for her discovery of Iberia, a pre-Colombian city in the Peruvian Andes. This discovery was made in 1957 with her friend Massimo Vanda, an Italian anthropologist and entomologist.

It was also in December of 1957, as reported in the *New York Times*, that Massimo Vanda and Eva Stein, while searching Iberia, were first reported missing. It was generally thought that their plane had crashed somewhere in the jungle. No one had seen them for 26 years, when they reappeared in 1983. As mentioned that year in *La Presse*, Eva Stein and François

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THE VANDA-STEIN MYSTERY

LIMA, Peru (UPI) — Massimo Vanda, world famous scientist and his associate Eva Stein, estranged wife of German coal magnate Heinrich Stein, haven't been seen or heard of since their departure from Lima three months ago. They left the Peruvian capital on September 10 aboard their private two-engine plane. Officials here say that the couple was setting out for Quilla bamba. Radio reports from the area confirm that a two-engine plane has been spotted a month ago, possibly heading for the village of Iberia. It has been reported, although unofficially, that the two scientists have sold or given away most of their personal belongings before their departure.

Massimo Vanda is best known for his numerous books on birds and their mythological incarnations in Asian and Pre-Columbian cultures. He is also a respected entomologist. Eva Stein has studied anthropology in Paris and published books on the Aztec Indians. Mr. Vanda and Mrs. Stein met in Paris in 1955 during an art sale at Hotel Drouot. They have been working together on numerous research projects since then.



Eva Stein



Massimo Vanda

Decarie, alias Massimo Vanda, were arrested in Longueuil, after a fifteen year search by the RCMP, assisted by Peruvian National Police. They were formally accused of having pillaged the treasures of Iberia.

According to specialists, Iberia was probably inhabited by the Talixas tribe (a name meaning "people with bird eyes"). Until that discovery, the Talixas were known only through allusions in folk myth passed down through time. Still, according to experts, Talixa's civilization had achieved a very high level of evolution, especially in the field of architecture.

For years, Eva Stein and Massimo Vanda had been hiding in a building conceived by him, surrounded by the treasures and souvenirs they had brought from Iberia.

How and why did this happen?

Eva Stein first met Massimo Vanda in Paris in 1955, at an auction of Aloys Zottl's paintings. The event was reported by Le Figaro at the time. At the auction, the two anthropologists fought over the water-

colour of a pelican. Massimo Vanda finally bought it, at twenty times the starting price. After the auction, Eva Stein met Massimo Vanda and told him she was sure an architectural detail in the background of the painting in fact represented the ceremonial gate of a temple, built by the Talixas. How could she have known about a tribe that, at that time, was only described in legends? She wouldn't say. But she convinced Massimo Vanda, who as a result, started working with her.

Soon after, the pair fell in love.

The truth is that when Eva Stein saw the painting at the auction, she experienced a strong "déjà vu", which explains why she wanted it so much. Soon, Massimo Vanda's knowledge about ornithology led them to identify the natural habitat of the bird represented by Zottl. "That's where Iberia is," they thought. At the same time, their research led Eva Stein to remember the most extraordinary thing possible; she had lived a previous life in the Iberian civilization.

Now that she was remembering her past life, the present one had no interest

anymore; before her departure for South America, the two scientists sold or gave away most of their personal belongings.

When they finally reached the site of Iberia, in 1957, she instantaneously recalled every detail of her past life. They had no difficulties in understanding the meaning of all the archaeological treasures surrounding them. Eva Stein guided Massimo Vanda through every part of the city, telling him: "Here I was living with my family. Here I went to school. Here I first fell in love. Here I died..." The temple she had recognized on Zottl's painting was there, and she finally realized that she had been the high priestess of ancient Iberia.

For years they lived in Iberia like gods on earth. However, such heavenly existence was shadowed with apprehension, as they knew that, sooner or later, the city and themselves would be discovered by others. So they pillaged the site, secretly bringing everything they could to Lima, hiding their real identity and the origin of their treasures. Then, they reached Canada by boat and travelled onto Longueuil, where Massimo Vanda owned a building. There, Eva Stein started her seclusion, surrounded by

COUP DE FILET SANS PRÉCÉDENT

Arrestation de François Décarie, alias Massimo Vanda et de sa complice

■ Les journalistes de la métropole ont eu droit, tard dans la soirée d'hier, à un spectacle aussi insolite que dramatique. François Décarie,

YVON LÉONARD

rie, qui a dissimulé son identité pendant des années sous le nom de Massimo Vanda, a été inculpé dans sa résidence de Longueuil en compagnie de sa complice Eva Stein. Les deux individus seront accusés de s'être emparés frauduleusement de trésors culturels et archéologiques d'une valeur inestimable. Trois agents de la Gendarmerie royale du Canada ont procédé à l'arrestation sous les yeux d'une dizaine de représentants des médias. Ce coup de filet est le fruit d'une enquête menée conjointement depuis quinze ans par la GRC et les autorités policières du Pérou.

Il faut retourner vingt-cinq ans en arrière pour retracer l'origine de cette affaire Vanda-Stein, une affaire complexe dont plusieurs éléments restent à éclaircir. Massimo Vanda et Eva Stein, dont les noms étaient surtout connus, jusqu'aux événements d'hier, dans les milieux scientifiques, avaient été portés disparus en décembre 1957. On croyait, généralement, que leur avion privé s'était écrasé dans une région inhabitée des Andes péruviennes. Or, la découverte par des archéologues américains, en 1968 dans la région d'Ibéria, des ruines d'une civilisation précolombienne jusqu'alors inconnue a ranimé de vieux soupçons au sujet du couple Vanda-Stein. En effet, le site découvert par l'équipe américaine avait été manifestement pillé par des mains expertes de cinq à dix ans plus tôt. Il est intéressant de noter que l'on ne connaît pas encore le nom de la civilisation ayant atteint de toute évidence un stade d'évolution très avancé. Au dire des spécialistes, il s'agit peut-être des "gens au regard d'oiseau" auxquels font allusion plusieurs légendes du peuple Ayмара. Quoiqu'il en soit, le site découvert par les archéologues américains avait été pillé à un point qui rendait toute recherche scientifique extrêmement difficile.



François Décarie (alias Massimo Vanda) et Eva Stein au moment de leur arrestation.



M. Décarie-Vanda, qui ne semble pas avoir de toutes ses facultés, ne cherchait nullement, hier soir, à nier sa culpabilité. On l'entendit même déclarer que ses gestes n'étaient nullement criminels. Pendant que les photographes s'affairaient devant des objets et artefacts aussi inusités les uns que les autres, il répétait à qui voulait l'entendre que les moments passés dans le vieux site andin furent les plus heureux de sa vie. Il parlait, non sans une certaine frénésie, du sens de l'espace de ce peuple ancien, d'un travail incomparable des formes et des volumes. Ses longues années de clandestinité et de réclusion dans sa résidence de Longueuil, au milieu des objets de la vie courante de ce peuple, ont été, d'après lui, pleines de découvertes et d'émerveillement. Eva Stein, qui semblait très fatiguée, se contentait de hocher la tête en signe d'approbation. Elle souffre d'une maladie dont la nature n'a pas encore été précisée. Mais il semble que ce soit cette maladie qui ait incité le couple à s'installer dans un pays au climat assez voisin de celui de l'Allemagne (pays d'origine de Mme Stein). La résidence que les deux complices ont fait construire à Longueuil pour accueillir leur "collection" rappelle les monuments et les temples qu'ils ont pillé au Pérou. M. Décarie, alias Vanda, précise même qu'il a dessiné l'édifice en respectant sinon la lettre du moins l'esprit des innovations architecturales les plus caractéristiques du peuple ancien.

En fin de soirée hier, les scelles ont été apposés sur les portes de la résidence. La date de la comparution des inculpés sera connue demain ou mercredi. Des pourparlers sont présentement en cours entre le Ministère des Affaires Extérieures et le gouvernement péruvien en vue d'établir les modalités du recouvrement de l'ensemble des objets. Un agent des Affaires Extérieures a confirmé à LA PRESSE que l'on cherche à obtenir du gouvernement péruvien l'autorisation d'ouvrir aux spécialistes canadiens et même, éventuellement, au grand public les portes de la résidence Décarie-Vanda avant que la

LE FIGARO

A X X MERCREDI 20 DECEMBRE 1955 (N° 12 206) — Edition de 5 heures PRIX : 3,80 F

Les aquarelles de Zötl à l'Hôtel Druot

C'est hier qu'avait lieu à l'Hôtel Druot, dans un climat survolté, la première de deux ventes aux enchères de l'ensemble de l'œuvre peinte d'Aloys Zötl. Le commissaire-priseur Maurice Rheims a dirigé cette séance exceptionnelle à plus d'un titre, ne serait-ce qu'à celui de la durée, plus de trois heures. On pouvait reconnaître dans la foule pressée des amateurs, des collectionneurs de renom comme MM. Alix de Rothschild, Massimo Vanda et Pierre Balmain. C'est lors de la mise à prix d'une petite aquarelle intitulée "Le Pélican" que fut déclenchée la course la plus vive de la séance. Mme Eva Stein et M. Massimo Vanda rivalisèrent pendant plus de vingt minutes, dans une cascade effrénée de surenchères, avant que Mme Stein ne lâche prise. Lorsque le marteau d'ivoire frappa, l'aquarelle avait atteint un prix vingt fois plus élevé que la mise de départ.



"Le Pélican", aquarelle d'Aloys Zötl qui provoqua hier une des courses aux enchères les plus singulières des annales de l'Hôtel Druot.

Aloys Zötl (1803-1887) n'aurait jamais pu s'imaginer que ses œuvres puissent provoquer de tels émois. Il a mené une existence parfaitement obscure, de maître-tenturier dans le bourg d'Eferding en Haute-Autriche. Nous ne savons rien de lui, sinon qu'il a peint toute sa vie dans un secret absolu, laissant 170 aquarelles, toutes signées et minutieusement datées, représentant des singes, des poissons, des reptiles, des oiseaux et des coquillages. Il ne se sépara jamais d'aucune des œuvres composant ce bestiaire fabuleux. C'est que tout récemment qu'un de ses descendants, qui souhaite garder l'anonymat, apporta toutes ces aquarelles à Paris pour les mettre en vente et, du même coup, attirer sur elles toute l'attention des connaisseurs. Car c'est rien de moins que la relation solitaire et inquiétante d'un homme avec univers animal que l'on pouvait contempler à l'Hôtel Druot. Zötl rend dans ses aquarelles tout le mystère du regard que les ani-

souvenirs and remnants of her past life.

To please her, Massimo Vanda introduced some changes to the building, including structures typical to Talixas' Architecture. The first thing he did was to add the temple's gate to the entrance of the building which, incidentally, is called "Le Pélican", after Zötl's painting. He also erected a wall surrounding the building, in the image of Iberia's city wall. Between the wall and the building was added a small courtyard, and he added pergolas to the balconies, inspired by those found in Iberia's tropical civilization.

Like many destined to be great, Eva Stein entered the legendary realm, to an extent that it is often difficult to recognize what is fact and what is myth in her life. But she certainly did exist. Buildings are there to recall her. And if further proof is needed, she obviously lived, for she died in 1985, in Peru, where in response to a court order she had returned to help rebuild the city she had spoiled. A short announcement was published in *La Presse* milestones' column. To commemorate her, Massimo Vanda de-

signed a second monument, a kind of modern Taj Mahal, next to Le Pélican, and which is called "Les Jardins du Pélican". The "Real" Truth

And for those who still can't believe this story, the truth is that Massimo Vanda killed Eva Stein. Massimo Vanda, whose real name is François Décarie, a Montreal artist, invented an end to the imaginary Eva Stein. He was tired of her, or more precisely, he didn't want to be branded as the architect who designed for imaginary residents.

Why does someone go to such an extreme as to use an imaginary source of inspiration to design a building, invent in detail the entire life of Eva Stein, print look-alike newspaper stories about her, and finally, announce her death in a real newspaper?

François Décarie's career is the opposite of many architects who late in their careers become designers of wall paper, furniture or jewelry. He is first an artist,

who started as a decorator, designing furniture and wall paper, some of which have won international prizes, and have been exhibited at Le Louvre, Paris.

It is only in recent years that he became interested in architecture. A promoter asked him to design a six story condominium building in Longueuil, to be called "Le Pélican". François Décarie produced a relatively standard, though personal, condominium building. When the time came to decorate the model apartment, he realized he had never decorated without specific clients in mind. So he invented the characters of Eva Stein and Massimo Vanda. In the beginning, their story was much simpler. But it slowly evolved and became very detailed. Believing in reincarnation, François Décarie included this belief in Eva Stein's life. He provided her with an obsessive mania for protecting the beauty and youth of her hands, while Massimo Vanda was provided with a passion for insects. These two character traits are reflected in the decoration of the model apartment. Eva's obsession is revealed in

her bedroom, where hundreds of night gloves are piled next to her bed. Massimo's insect collection is exhibited on the wall of his office. Half of the colorful insects are real, half are designed by François Décarie, using paper and fabrics.

This last detail reveals the originality of François Décarie's work. To create sculptures, furniture and decoration, he uses common objects and materials, even construction extras such as industrial outdoor carpeting becomes a luxurious one once it is cut by him; a screen, a hockey puck and a concrete column become religious sculpture; a bowl bought in a bargain store and a basement drain grating become a ceremonial vase with its trivet. François Décarie reveals a hidden beauty in these objects, and creates with them a pseudo mythical experience, where everything looks familiar, but tells a new story. Is this perhaps the kind of "déjà-vu" that Eva Stein experienced when she saw Zol's painting for the first time? On the ceiling all around the living room is written:

"Les astres et les dieux nous regardent et nous poussent. Pourquoi nous Eva? Mais pourquoi nous deux?"²

In the end, Eva, Massimo and the holy city of Iberia become so palpable, said François Décarie, that he could see himself in Iberia. It's only lately that he realized Eva Stein could be a source of inspiration for the building itself. Since most of it was already built, Eva Stein's contribution to Le Pélican's outside has been limited to three additions to the original building: the monumental gate, the surrounding wall and the pergolas over the balconies. Nevertheless, in 1984, Le Pélican won a Domus award given by the Association Provinciale des Constructeurs D'Habitation, as well as two Habitas awards given by the Chambre de Commerce de Montréal, one for best

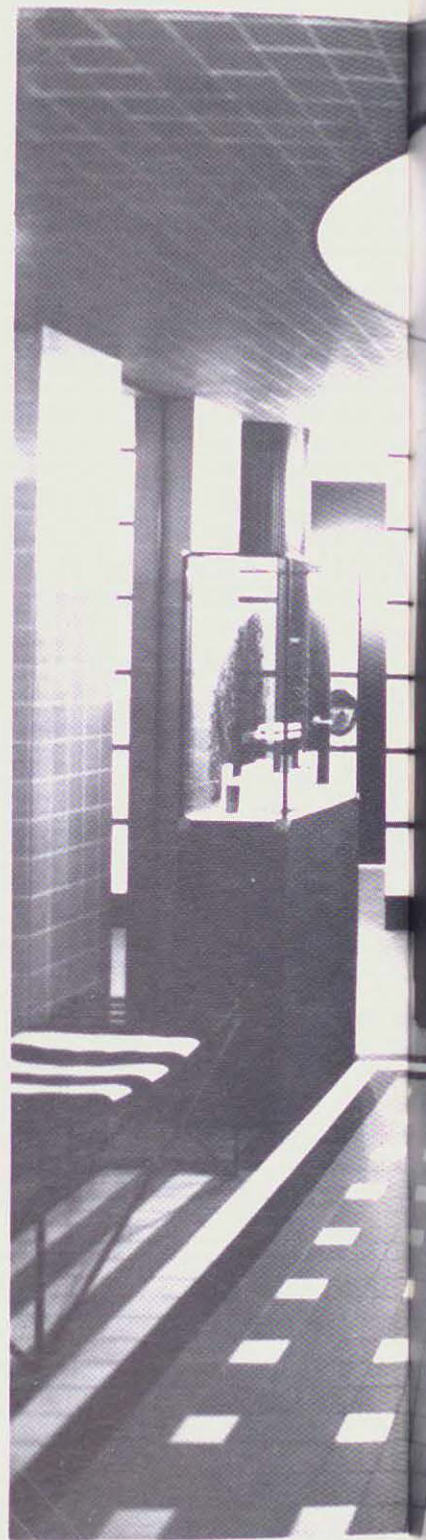
multifamily housing project of the year, and one for best interior design of the year.

Eva Stein and her life is much more present in the design of "Les Jardins du Pélican". According to François Décarie, the moderate, somehow hermetic facade symbolizes the South American side of the imaginary couple. The two tones of gray masonry layered on the facade are supposed to recall the horizontality of pre-Colombian walls, with their rows of rocks. The rounded stairwells in glass block on the facade are meant to recall wheat silos, as one would find in an ancient agricultural civilization. The rear side, more open to the environment, symbolizes Eva Stein's South American past life. Balconies celebrate the sun. The third floor residents have access to a terrace on the roof, again with pergolas, inspired in some way by hanging gardens. Thus, the terraces have both a symbolic and a functional purpose, as does the wall surrounding "Le Pélican". Presented as a reminder of Iberia's city walls, the first purpose of the garden wall is to hide the underground parking, which exceeds the building floor area.

An Interpretation of the Truth

It is obvious that the two buildings are not really inspired from pre-Colombian architecture; François Décarie admits he never studied it. It is Eva Stein who is the real source of inspiration to him, or more exactly, the catalyst for François Décarie's ideas.

There are some precedents to the idea of the use of an imaginary source of inspiration. Mark London presents the case of a fire hall built in a field in Coquitlam, B.C.³ The architect invented a story, pretending that the new building reused a non-existent small town commercial strip with garage, gas station and two-story commercial



Le Pelican's Entrance





Le Pelican and its model apartment



block. Each of the 'original' buildings is expressed in the new construction.

Antoine Grumbach, who teaches architecture at the Université de Paris II, sees architecture as a pedestal to support a collective memory. He once had to design a new urban boulevard for a future new town, between existing villages and a new rapid transit station, near Paris. How does one define the collective memory of a place that does not exist yet? Grumbach's answer was to imagine the ruins of a city that might have existed there before the new town.⁴

What is the interest of this imaginative approach? What does "Le Pélican" signify to its inhabitants?

The question of meaning in architecture has benefitted from semiology, as shown in *Meaning in Architecture*, which offers a debate on what should be a meaningful architecture. For George Baird, architecture has to offer an "ideal image of human existence, ideal frames for human action", based on fundamental human values.⁵ In the same way, Christian Norberg-Schulz suggests that "man can only perceive (give meaning to) order; his orientation and identity depends upon the existence of defined structures in the environment."⁶

Reyner Banham, who teaches at University College, London, criticizes this deterministic approach. He speaks for an "environment void of preformed values but capable of generating new values symbiotically with its inhabitants", that is, an architecture adaptable to changing values.⁷ That is also, according to Kurt Forster, what Frank Gehry proposes.⁸ This approach is typical of the modern movement. Its best manifestations are modern museums, where the impersonal, flexible, white spaces adapt to every exhibition.

Yet, the Coquitlam fire hall and Grumbach's new boulevard exemplify Norberg-Schulz's suggestion for the need for defined structures of symbols. In these two cases, this need is considered so important that the designers found it necessary to invent an historical structure to give a meaning to what Grumbach described as a "beet field". Eva Stein's monuments are slightly different, places somewhere in between Baird's and Banham's standpoint. Eva Stein's life gives a structure and order to "Le Pélican" and "Les Jardins du Pelican" elements, but her story is not known by most of the inhabitants of the building.⁹ In the absence of an Ariane thread, inhabitants are facing a collection of elements, architectural and "décoratifs", all once familiar, but now describing something new.

"Le Pélican" is not the only example of how architecture can be difficult to 'read'. Baird and Norberg-Schulz probably overestimate the public's capacity to understand a defined structure of architectural symbols. Only the happy few, such as architects and the cultural elite, have acquired the knowledge to 'read' the work of other architects. An illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the public's interpretation of symbols on new or modern buildings. As is presently popular (e.g. in the area of Montreal known as the Plateau), Mont Royal architects might select Art Deco or Post Modern ornaments for their buildings. The passerby will however typically not associate such symbols with any particular architectural style or era. Instead they will appreciate them as being similar to older buildings that they know in the neighbourhood.

François Décarie recognizes the consumers' right to a myth. He provides them with clues, but he hopes that they will come up with their own interpretation of the

IMORIAM

T (Luc)

le 6 août 1985, à 53 ans, est décédé Parent, époux Constantineau. En épouse, il laisse le deuil son fils et ses soeurs: Thérèse (Lindsay), et son frère Armand (belle-soeur Angèle Brazeau) (mère Alice Constantineau; ainsi que ses amis. Les funérailles auront lieu samedi 10 courant. Le convoi partira du Complexe

Dallaire Inc., boulevard Martin est, Laval.

À rendre à l'église St-Joseph, boul. Ste-Justine, où le service sera célébré à 10 heures au cimetière de l'Assommoir. Les amis sont invités à assister sans obligation.

NÉCROLOGIE



Eva Stein

À Lima au Pérou le 2 août 1985, est décédée Eva Stein laissant dans le deuil, Massimo Varda et un ami très cher François Décarie.

Eva Stein's death announcement in La Presse, 9/08/87

buildings.

"Le Pélican" and "Les Jardins du Pélican" speak, they have a meaning the inhabitants may sense, but never really understand.¹⁰ Facing this mystery, the inhabitants can only interpret those elements, giving them their own meanings. They will react as they do with gods, inventing religion to understand them.

Inhabitants can ignore everything about Eva Stein, yet, from the window of their apartment, they can see the skyline of Montreal. For a few hours, they will hide there, trying to forget the madness of the life they just escaped, just as Eva Stein did.

Les jardins du Pelican front and rear facade (photo: François Goulet)



Le Pelican and its model apartment (photo: François Décarie)



NOTES

1. This article is taken from a paper wrote as a partial requirement for a masters degree in Urban Planning at McGill University. The author would like to thank Torill Kove, Cynthia Cheung and François Décarie for their greatly appreciated assistance.

2. "The stars and gods watch and manipulate us. Why us Eva? Why us?"

3. London, Mark, "Exhibit points to where Canadian architecture is going", in *The Gazette*, Montreal, March 28, 1987. The Coquitlam case was part of the exhibition "A Measure of Consensus: Canadian Architecture in Transition", presented in Montreal, in March and April 1987.

4. Antoine Grumbach presented this case at a Hydro-Amenagement lecture in Montreal, in 1985. The lecture is summarized in *Forces*, No. 74, Montreal, Summer 1986, p. 115.

5. Baird, George, "La dimension amoureuse in architecture", in *Meaning in Architecture*, edited by Jencks, C., and Baird, George, Barrie & Jenkins Publisher, London, 1969, p. 98.

6. Norberg-Schulz, Christian, "Meaning in architecture", in *Meaning in Architecture*, Op. cit., p. 228.

7. Banham, Reyner, "The Architecture of Wampanoag", in *Meaning in Architecture*, Op. cit., pp. 101-118.

8. Kurt Foster expressed this opinion in Montreal, in March 1987, at an Alcan lecture entitled "Impromptu Building: Frank Gehry's Architecture of Improvisation".

9. Though they have some clues: for example, the model of the temple's gate is exposed in the hallway of the Pelican.

10. Charles Jencks once described the mysterious dimension of architecture: "New frames old, or vice-versa; new erodes old, or vice-versa; high collides with low and refinement with Punk, or vice-versa (. . .). It is this transgression and elision of elements to create an experience that is at once mysterious and full of surprises which relate Post-Modern space to religious and mystical space." (Jencks, Charles, Chaitkin, William, *Current Architecture*, Academy Editions, London, 1982).

François Goulet is a free-lance journalist who is presently completing his master's degree at the School of Urban Planning, McGill University.