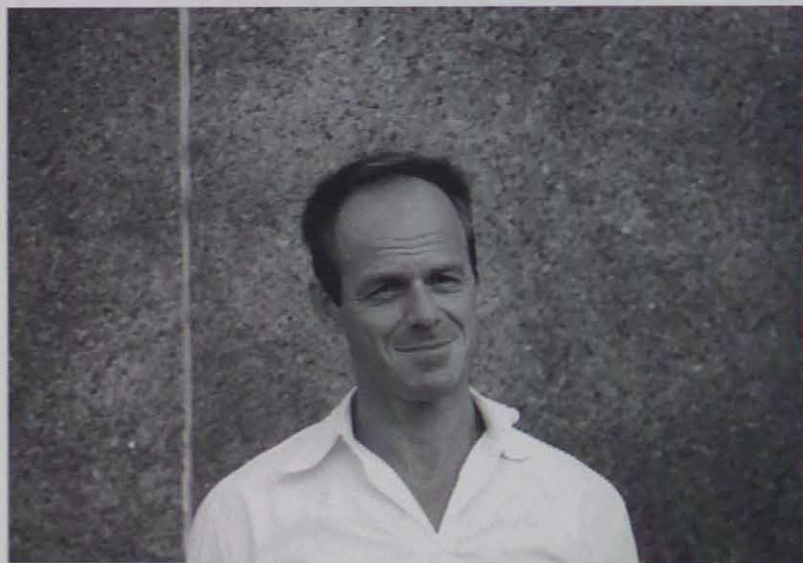


Claude Cormier

Owen Rose



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IF YOU WALK into Claude Cormier's Clark Street office you might notice, as I did, that the back half of this typical Montreal triplex is his home and curiously, that this landscape architect has no indoor plants. He does not really like them. Cormier points out that contrary to Frederick Law Olmsted's artificially created images of nature, his own projects are "honestly" artificial. Many of his realisations make use of concrete, asphalt, steel and yes, possibly, vegetation; however, he sees plants as another element in the creation of a landscape — not an end in themselves.

Cormier tells me that things start to get easier after fifteen years of work, but the first ten years were not so easy — he thinks out loud about his friends who went to law school and have higher incomes. Nonetheless, Cormier loves his *métier* and his life style is proof of his dedication to landscape architecture. He constantly records a flow of new ideas in his notebooks which serve him well in his design process.

"Define what you want," is one of Cormier's mantras upon which he elaborates by emphasizing the value and importance of self-honesty and reappraisal. For Cormier, self-satisfaction and happiness are all about exploring. From his childhood on the family farm, his life has been a process of exploring, starting with his first degree in agriculture from the University of Guelph followed by an undergraduate degree in landscape architecture from the University of Toronto in 1986. Cormier worked both in Toronto and Montréal before he did his Masters in History and Theory at Harvard's Graduate School of Design in 1994. He took the needed time, in Cambridge, to develop his design ideas; synthesize his accumulated experiences; and finally fuse his interests in agricultural theory with landscape design. Now he is well established in Montreal with his firm, Claude Cormier Architectes paysagistes.

If Cormier could be characterised as having a specific design approach it would be based on "leaving all the doors open." He firmly believes in exploration and even being open to making mistakes. Cormier has several different design processes. One of these is his method of slicing, multiplying, and combining ideas to create an entirely new and unforeseen result. This could be characterised as "design hybridization" in which his education in genetics gives him a particular understanding.

Cormier also uses his condition of what he calls "conceptual dyslexia" to completely turn projects around. He likes to look at problems differently from

the approaches taught to him in school. He tries to push the envelope in new directions. One such direction is his ongoing dream to turn the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) lawn blue. Cormier proposed this at a lecture he gave at the CCA in 1998 during the American Lawn exhibition. Although initially skeptical, I was relieved to learn that his botanical knowledge was put to the test in ensuring that the grass would survive such a transformation. He assured me that there would be no negative environmental impact from the chemicals found in the blue paint.

But why change the lawn's colour? Cormier's business card says it all. At the bottom, he gives Larousse's definition of artificial: "produced by a human technique, not by nature; acts as a substitute for a natural element." The blue lawn would draw attention to the fact that our 'natural' lawns are anything but natural. Here, not only does Cormier propose to draw attention to the expansive lawn of the CCA's landscape, but he also gives us the opportunity to question the value and role of a lawn in the landscapes that we create. We live on a continent where the use of lawns goes without question. In residential cases, we believe that the absence of lawns is the equivalent to abandonment, negligence, or even anti-social behaviour. What we fail to recognize is the negative environmental impact that lawns have: they deplete valuable water resources; they waste gas or electricity needed to maintain them; they are the grounds for the deployment of fertilizers and pesticides used to keep them green and healthy-looking. The artificiality of the lawn is an interesting subject for Cormier to explore which, in itself, can also serve as a warning to him about the environmental consequences of artificiality.

When approaching new projects, Cormier frequently draws upon the wealth of ideas stored in his sketchbooks. His books contain thoughts, clippings, drawings, etc. that are waiting to be worked into just the right project. Such was the case with the design of Place d'Youville (1997-99) in Montreal's old port (fig. 1). Even before Cormier officially acquainted himself with the site, he already knew what he wanted to do. He describes this recent project, a collaboration with Michèle Gauthier of the planning and architecture firm Cardinal Hardy, as a quilt of walkways both covering and expressing 350 years of history. It is effectively a thin layer of landscaping over a rich archaeological site that was not disturbed by his scheme. The paths are made of Montreal's past and present



Figure 1. Design drawing for the Place d'Youville path.



Figure 2. Place d'Youville path.



Figure 3. Place d'Youville path.

building materials: wood, granite, concrete, and limestone (fig. 2). They represent connections to history and the contemporary urban environment: Cormier believes that “constructors have a mandate to show our present and not copy [the past].” The Place is crisscrossed by a network of paths connecting neighbouring buildings (fig. 3). It is a place for passers-by as well as for the inhabitants of Old Montréal. Cormier describes it as a public place where you can sit on a bench and just think — an escape from our normal commercial surroundings. Thus Place d'Youville is historic, current, and urban — far beyond a mere pastiche of what was once on the site.

With respect to history, Cormier believes in showing design leadership by creating for a contemporary urban society. He thinks that the role of preservation is best left to the museums. In fact, his office displays the following quote from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophical essay *A Thousand Plateaux*: “History is made only by those who oppose history (not by those who insert themselves into it, or even reshape it).” Of course, challenges to our picturesque Olmstedian image of landscape are not an easy sell.

Cormier has found that any plan opposing historical sentimentality in Montréal demands a compelling presentation strategy. In these situations, Cormier does not talk about theory. He concedes that it is primarily other architects that appreciate theoretical discussion of a project; most people are just not interested. Frustrating? Yes, but Cormier has learnt that design submissions have much to do with navigating the politics of public commissions. He says that his presentation strategies do not influence his design ideas; rather, he carefully takes into account the various people he will be presenting to. He keeps his presentations very clear and simple and speaks about “just what you see.”

Cormier became very aware of effective presentation tactics when he worked on the restoration of Square Phillips (1996-97). Here, timing and politics were such that his original plan was rejected. His design was based on the Victorian urbanity of King Edward VII, whose statue is at the centre of this downtown Montréal square. Edward VII is known for having reenergised Britain's textile industry. He promoted contemporary British fashion, notably the Prince of Wales fabric motif, otherwise known as houndstooth, which became well known (fig. 4). Houndstooth is still a popular classic; if we ourselves do not have a jacket or trousers with this pattern, there is a good chance that our fathers do. Cormier's plan was to pave the square with this pattern. The reference would thus be two-fold: he would be expressing the Victorian history of the square's endur-

ing statue as well as reinterpreting the current context of the square as central to one of Montréal's fashion districts along Ste-Catherine Street (fig. 5).

The project also called for the planting of two rows of twenty-five trees each along either side of the square. The trees would not only focus the viewers' attention upon Edward VII, but would leave a clear central space for special events such as seasonal fashion shows. The controversy surrounding the proposal was complex, but a major issue was raised by the projected removal of eight mature Norwegian Maples from the site. Politics stopped the proposal's acceptance and a very conservative restoration of the square ensued. Cormier learned much from the Square Phillips affair and now, with his infectious laugh he says, "I think I like politics." He is referring to the challenge of successfully conveying his designs to a sceptical public.

Despite the odd setback, Cormier's office is busy. When asked about personal design goals, he says that he still wants to paint a lawn blue. He also confides that he is developing a vision for a park that he would like to realise, but when asked to elaborate, he smiles and refuses to give any more details other than saying that he has tested the idea on a few people and they seem to think that it is possible. No doubt it will be a project that illustrates his passion for exploring and challenging preconceived ideas about the landscape.

What keeps him motivated? Cormier loves landscape architecture and he is having fun practicing it. His experiments and desire to dig into new terrain, so to speak, have earned him a reputation for being, as it is said here in Quebec, "flyé." With a maturing practice, he does not think that he is as radical now; however, that could be because he, or more likely, we have become increasingly open to his brand of landscape design. What is most refreshing about Claude Cormier, in spite of the word "artificial" written on his business card, is that he is a grounded example of someone remaining as loyal as he can to his own path and enjoying almost every moment of it.

Claude Cormier Architectes Paysagistes was, at the time of writing in the winter of 2000: Claude Cormier, Annie Yperciel, Marie-Claude Séguin, and Julie Michaud.

For further information, see: Canadian Centre for Architecture, *The American Lawn Exhibition*, 1998.

Raquel Penalosa, "La Place d'Youville," *ARQ* (November 1998).

Text(ils) urbains. *Inter* 69 1998.

Owen Rose is in his second year of the M.Arch program at McGill University.

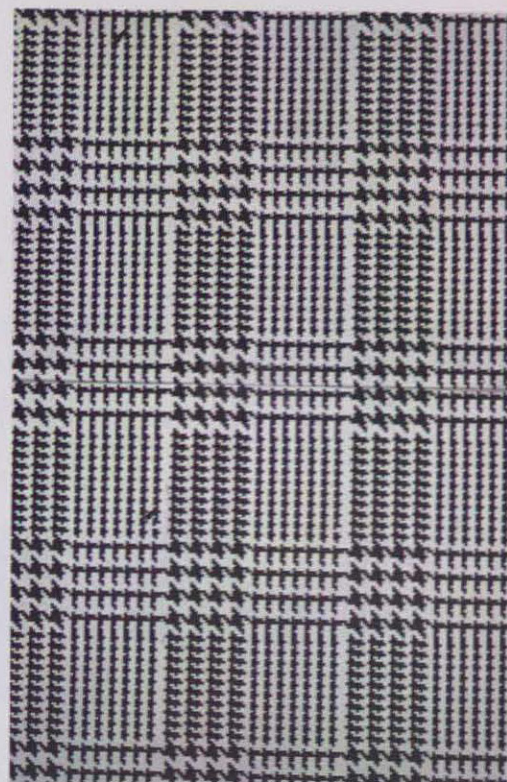


Figure 4. Houndstooth print.

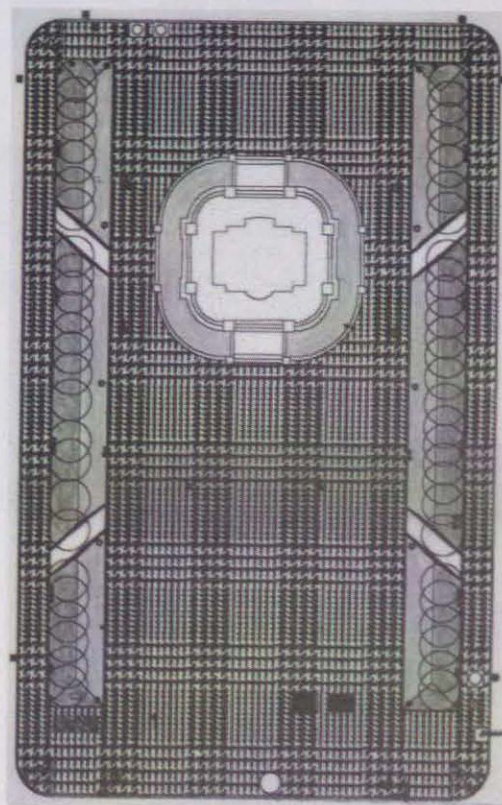


Figure 5. Phillips Square plan.