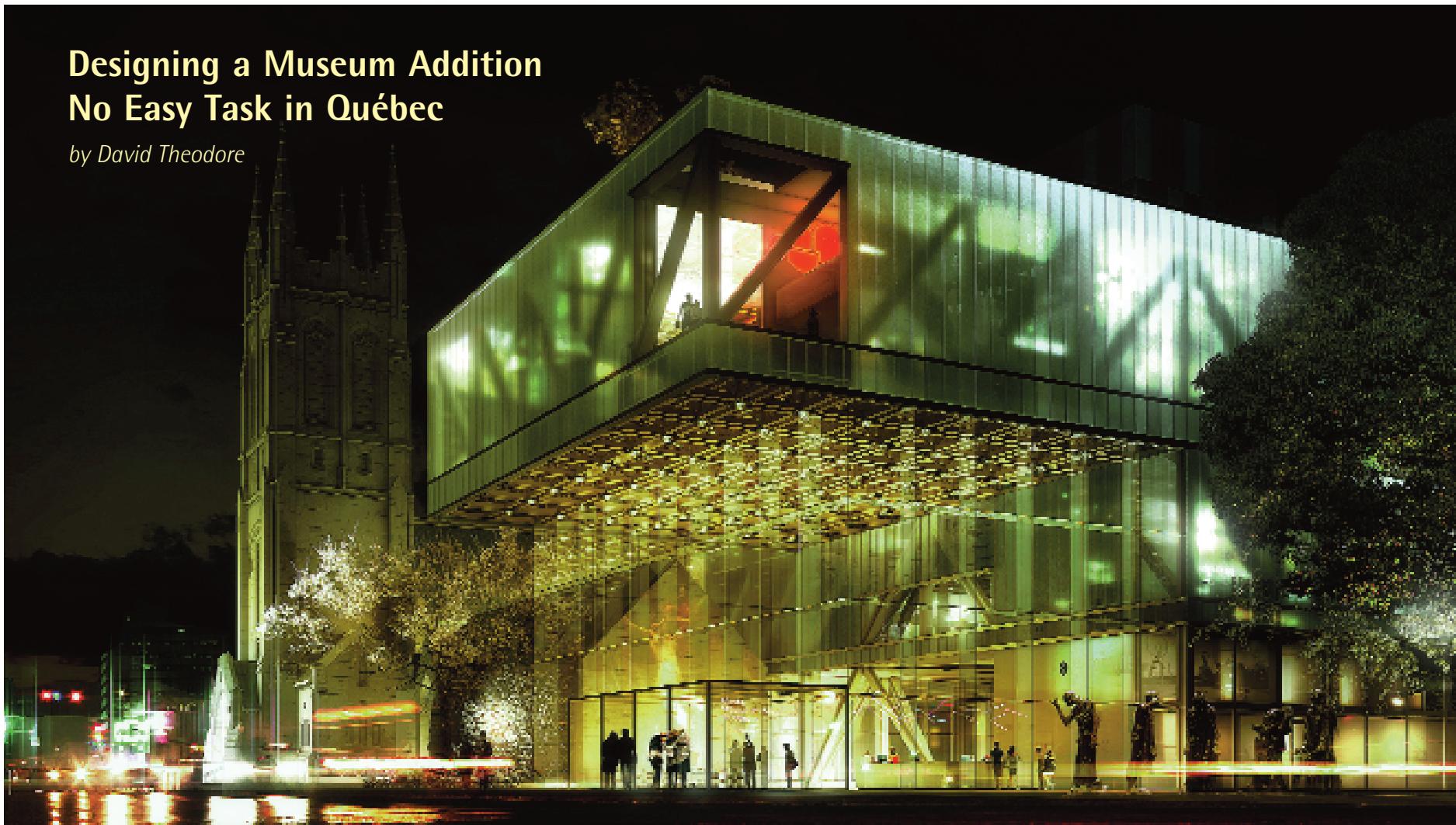


Designing a Museum Addition No Easy Task in Québec

by David Theodore



The Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) made architectural history in 2010 by winning an open international competition for a new museum in a place where international architects hadn't won one for over fifty years. What's more, they won in a city that's been on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1985. This aggressiveness in foreign markets is business-as-usual for the world's top firms. But surprisingly, the competition wasn't in China or Russia or India or Brazil, but rather Canada. It was here that OMA won the international competition for an addition to the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (MNBAQ) in Québec City.

The competition called for a 10,000 sq-metre addition displaying art of the 20th and 21st centuries, connected by tunnels to a 1933 building and a renovated 1861 prison. An existing Dominican monastery was set to be demolished in order to make way for the new pavilion, while neighbouring Saint-Dominique church with its prominent steeple and presbytery were kept. The lot stretches from the city's main street, the Grande-allée, down to the historic Plains of Abraham overlooking the St. Lawrence River.

The addition would double the museum's exhibition space, and bring the total surface area to 28,876 sq meters.

Besides OMA/Rem Koolhaas, there were four additional finalists competing in the second stage. They were: **Nieto Sobeyano**/Brière Gilbert et associés; **Barkow Leibinger architekten**/Imrey Culbert Architects; **Allied Works Architecture**/Fichten Soiferman et associés; and **David Chipperfield**/Arcop. Notable firms, who came under consideration, but were eliminated before the final round, were: Consortium Coté Leahy Cardas architectes/**Adjaye Associates**; **KUMA Associates**; **Gigon-Guyer, architects**; **GLCRM architectes + KPMB**; **Saucier Perrotte**/Bélanger Beauchimen Morency, architectes; **Behnisch Architekten**; **BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group)**; **M.C. Croft/J.Plante/Hudon Julien associés**; **why Architecture**; and **Brasil Arquitetura**.

It was hardly a surprise to see **OMA** among the finalists. Guided by Rem Koolhaas' canny disciplinary politics, OMA excels at promoting modern design within the contradictions of a globalized world. The MnbaQ project is surely another example of OMA at

its globe-gobbling best. And yet many other entrants are also known for their ability to succeed in diverse political zones: David Chipperfield, Allied Works, David Adjaye, Behnisch, Snøhetta, GMP and BIG, just to name a few. The jury reports make it clear that OMA won not because of any political savvy—jury members were on the watch for competitors willing to listen and take direction; in short, they were wary of divas—but because the proposal seemed to effortlessly fulfill very specific local demands.

Shohei Shigematsu, the partner who runs OMA's New York Office, led the project. His description of the proposal, enthusiastically quoted in the local press, shows an almost perfect understanding of the museum's setting: The building reflects the museum's ambition and the city's need to find a meeting point between the art park and the city. . . .The concept is fairly simple: by lifting the ground we create a meeting space between the city and the park. The art becomes the link connecting the two. OMA's proposal carried the day because the team paid close attention to the particularities of the site.

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Winning Design

**Office of Metropolitan
Architecture**

Rotterdam/New York

LEFT
Model revealing interior
BELOW
Interior ramping view

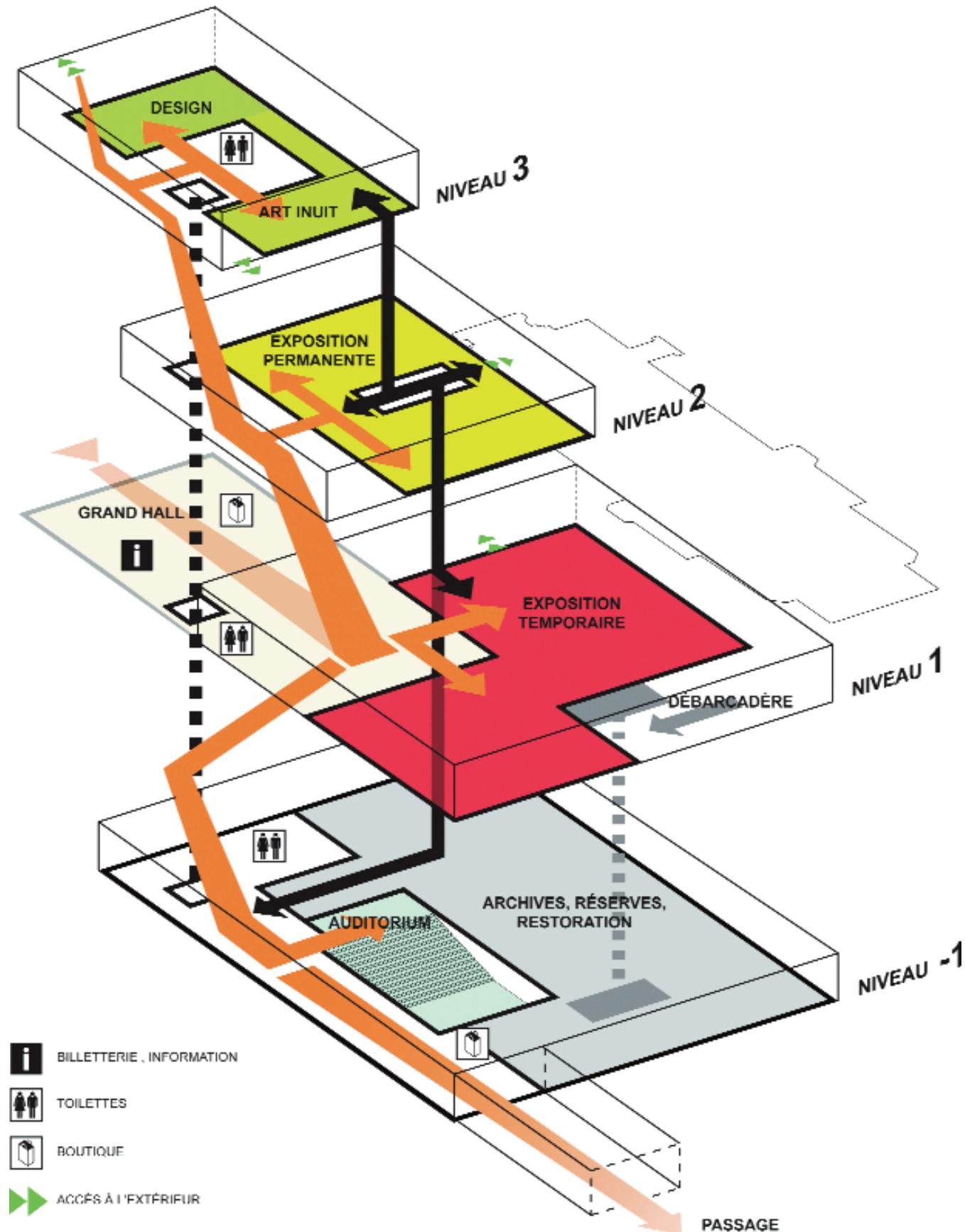
OPPOSITE PAGE
View to main entrance



Still, politics in Québec are important. OMA's winning in Quebec is no less remarkable as an outcome than when Renzo Piano and Richard Rodgers won the contest for the Pompidou Centre (Beaubourg) in Paris. It's not that the MnbAQ reinvents downtown Quebec; or that a new architectural style is epitomized. In fact, OMA proposes a staid and simple landmark. But the name of the museum already indicates some of the issues. The city and the province bear the same name, but the museum is a provincial entity, not a municipal one. The museum's mandate is to represent and promote a vision of the entire province. The Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec is a national museum; the nation in question is not Canada but the Province of Quebec. (A couple of hours up the St. Lawrence River, the equivalent museum in Montreal, the province's largest city, bears only the city's name.) As part of this mission, major capital investments are typically confided to Quebec professionals and entrepreneurs. How were international architects allowed to build a national museum in the capital city of a province hypersensitive to the issue of independence, language, and internal development?

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The first answer is branding. The driving forces behind the project, museum director John Porter, and the benefactor and president of the museum's foundation Pierre Lassonde, wanted the project to participate in the so-called Bilbao effect. They wanted the names of the architects themselves to bring media attention to their plans. And they wanted a building that would bookend Quebec City's most famous building, the Chateau Frontenac, a railway hotel that sits at the other end of the Grande Allée. The seven-member jury, however, was much more focused on making sure the architects delivered a working museum. Two architects with international reputations, Nasrine Serjai and Xaveer De Geyter, joined André Bourassa, representative of the Quebec Order of Architects, and Jacques White, a professor at the nearby School of Architecture at Université Laval. Two museum representatives, Porter and Esther Trépanier, and the jury chair, Charles-Mathieu Brunelle, the director of Montreal's nature museums, rounded out the committee.





Another factor is that in open competitions, OMA competes against itself. While the winner has a prominent, daunting, theatrical cantilever defining the main entrance, others of the fifteen also used dramatic cantilevers and other ideas popularized by OMA. Indeed, Koolhaas' prolific teaching and atelier-style office means many designers have direct experience of OMA strategies, forms, and preferences. The popularity of the office's images, books, lectures, buildings, and the personality cult that surrounds Koolhaas mean that OMAish ideas permeate international design competitions, even when OMA doesn't compete.

A third answer as to how an international firm won a commission to build, despite local politics, is that for twenty-five years, the province has been a rare district in North America that regularly holds competitions for public buildings. In Quebec, any building project of a certain size using public funds must commission architects through an architectural competition. This policy has been successful and influential. Not all firms are happy with this policy, especially because there is no second tier;

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that is, while the policy can help young firms gain access to substantial projects, it also means that established firms have to compete in the wild and woolly west. Although not all commissions are awarded through competitions, there have been about fifteen per year throughout the province. Montreal, in particular, has a number of small, design-oriented firms whose business plan can be tied to the implementation of the competition format.

But alas! The MbanQ contest had the unfortunate effect of eliminating those small firms, mostly because they could not pass the first qualifying stage of the three-stage format. Of 76 firms who made an offer of services, the jury retained 15, five of which had to be Quebec-based. Those fifteen made a concept proposal, and the jury winnowed them to five. Those five had two more months to fine-tune plans based on the jury's comments and to present their proposals in person. At that point, the team had to contain an experienced architect licensed to work in Quebec. OMA, for example, teamed up with Montreal-based Provencher Roy architects.

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Winning Design

Office of Metropolitan Architecture

Rotterdam/New York

ABOVE
Birdseye view of site

OPPOSITE PAGE
Organization and circulation plan