

Building a *Parc de la langue française*

Retracing my steps as a designer

by

Louis-Charles Lasnier

A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfilment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Architecture

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis,  
including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

In 1979, Québec artist Rober Racine wrote a 190-word text that would describe his idea for *Le Parc de la langue française*, a landscape where one could literally meander through the French language. Although some partial iterations of this project have been presented over the years, the complete *Parc* has not been built. Yet. This thesis is my take on Rober Racine's *Le Parc de la langue française*. In doing so, I found myself observing the design process itself, the making of a design project as well as my making as a designer.

This thesis has many questions. Where could you build it so it would be, as Racine envisioned, 'permanent'? Emblematic Mount-Royal Park was the first answer. Then how to unfold Racine's 190-word concertina vision into a 2,14 million m<sup>2</sup> park? How to intertwine the 60,000 words of *Le Petit Robert* dictionary into that landscape and create a space to celebrate the French language while providing freedom for slowness, contemplation and absorption? How to create the depth, layers, spaces and media through which the visitor could dialogue with the language, Olmsted's park, the forest and the city? In building a project, I, as a designer, ask myself a plethora of questions. Layering the questions, one atop the other, is my design process. My proposition for *Le Parc de la langue française* is therefore multi-layered: beacons within the landscape; a map one could keep and follow while in the park; a circular glass pavilion, 75 m in diameter where one could sit and read the full 292 m of a table on which the 60,000 words from *Le Petit Robert* are printed.

This thesis also reflects on what builds a community around a project, how this community becomes involved in it, adopts it, builds it and nurtures it through time. In the hopes of engaging such a community, this thesis has become an exhibition.

While writing my thesis, I reflected on how a design project is made and, beyond the project, how a designer is built. Examining the different layers of my persona – graphic designer, architect and now professor at UQAM – I explored the palimpsest that I am through the influences my teachers, mentors, friends and colleagues have had on me. Both cathartic and optimistic, this essay is testimony to what it means to be a designer and what it means to build designers.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Robert Jan van Pelt, who first supported me in my undergraduate studies at the School of Architecture at Waterloo University and offered guidance and inspiration in this long journey. He has allowed me to find a voice - and as it takes shape in the coming years, with each success, with each difficult endeavour, I will be speaking directly to him.

I would like to thank Anne Bordeleau, whose career as a designer and teacher have redefined what I shall try to aspire to in my own career. She has set the bar very high.

I would like to thank Donald McKay, who taught me important lessons about collaborations and a new outlook on the power of books.

I need to thank my classmates whose passion, curiosity, generosity and friendship have made this year incredibly rich. I look forward to seeing you again soon, and often.

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I would also like to thank l'Université du Québec à Montréal who gave me a *congé de perfectionnement*, a year away from my teaching responsibilities in order to pursue this Master's.

-

I would like to thank Rober Racine, whose career has inspired me from the very beginning, from my first contact with his work in 1985 to our present exchanges around the idea of a *Parc de la langue française*.

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Many people have contributed to this very special year. But all of this would have been impossible without the support of one single person, Cloé. She became a single mother overnight and held our small family together while I was away. This thesis is dedicated to her - and to my daughter Romane and son Max; they are teaching me the poetry in our everyday lives. Merci.

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**Building a *Parc de la langue française***  
**Retracing my steps as a designer**

## **Book One - Six key moments**





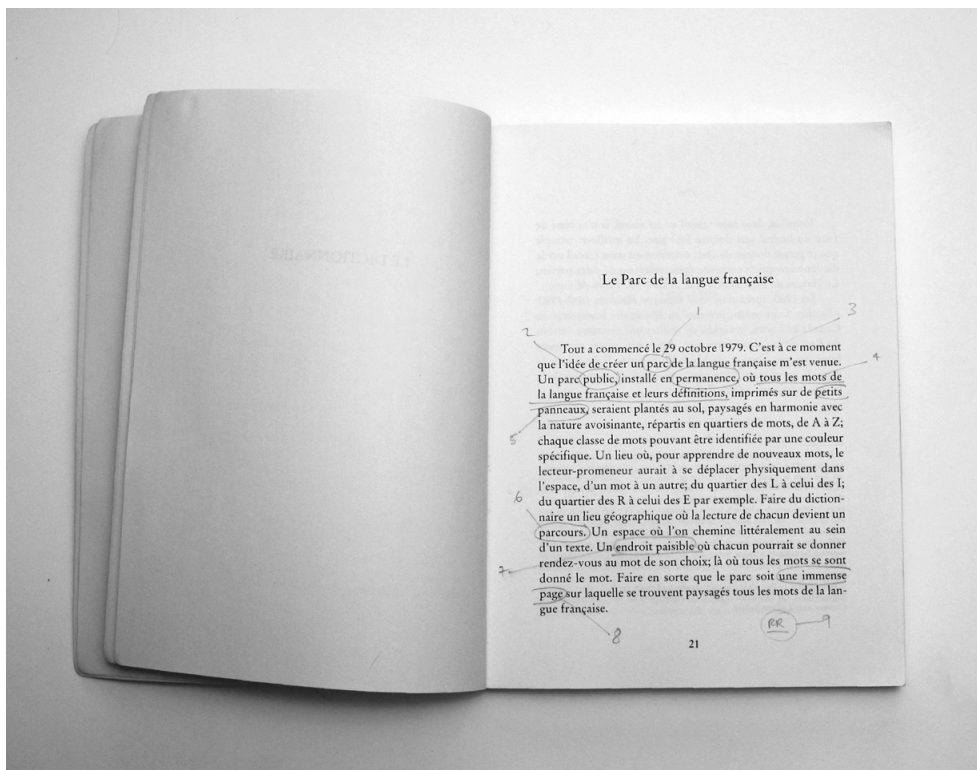
*Good afternoon,*

*As Robert Jan was presenting me to Aida the other day, he said that he had known me ever since I was a tiny shrimp, and that I am now a rather large lobster. I will not argue Robert Jan's sense of biology, but will agree that I am a bit of an odd creature in this setting. I graduated here in 1998. It was a different structure then, one started by doing a Pre-Professional Bachelor (1A to 3B) followed by a second Professional Bachelor (4a to 5B). So I left here with two bachelors, which is rather unfortunate as I already had a bachelor of graphic design before joining Waterloo. That didn't stop me from having an interesting career. Upon graduation I worked for Bruce Mau design, then for Claude Cormier Landscape Architects and then Saucier + Perrotte architects in Montreal. In 2001, I started my own practice and began teaching part-time, beginning by co-teaching the Montreal studio (which I think no longer exists) with Marie-Paule Macdonald. The practice became well known for its innovative exhibition design and signage projects, moved three times as it expanded to 5 full-time designers.*

*I chose to close the office in 2014 to devote myself to teaching full-time. Now, that is where my three bachelors proved to be a peculiar condition. I was hired as a graphic design professor at École de design UQAM based on my experience and peer recognition, one of the last professor in our university to have been granted that honor. Now anyone would need at least one Masters degree to have access to such a position. I am here now, on leave from my school to complete a Master's. This will allow me to pursue more graduate studies as I embark on my new academic career. So I will not be seeking professional registration as an architect when I leave here, although I am almost tempted...*

*This master's was to have a very different effect on me.*

*As you know, when we are accepted into the Master's program, one of the first things that the teachers ask us to do is write a small text about what we wanted to do. We were*



Racine (1998)

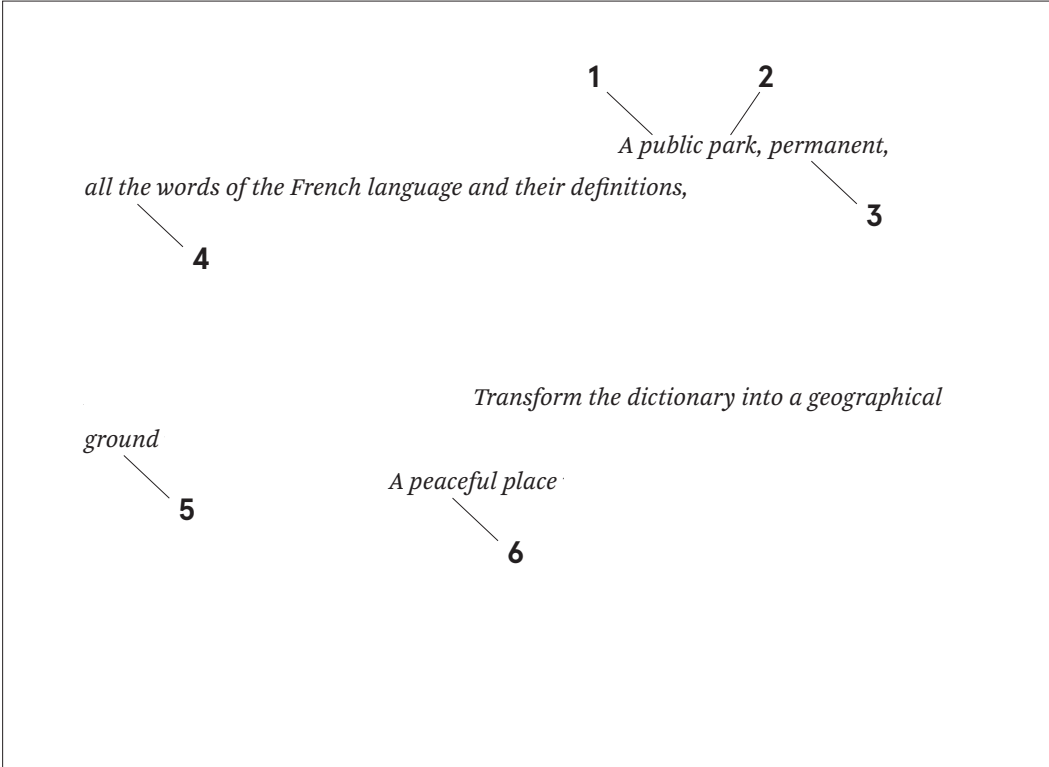
*asked to find a subject that we were passionate about, something that would sustain lengthy inquiries over a year or more.*

-1-

*I chose right away to do a park of the French language. The idea came from a text that Rober Racine had written in 1979 called Le Parc de la langue française. In that text he describes a park where you could meander and find all the words of the French language. You would go from one word to the next. Instead of simply reading, moving your eye on a page, you would be also strolling through the landscape. Here was a giant landscape of words, so language, a convention used for communicating, became objects within the landscape. That idea, coupled with the work that Rober Racine had done around the same time surrounding that idea, was incredibly compelling to me. At the same time, I was a bit afraid because here is a beautiful text and I was wondering if it was even possible to do this. I was sort of trying to build the Library of Babel; maybe you shouldn't try: it would end up being just a pale copy of the original. So it is with great faith in the process of design that I took this on, thinking "I don't know if I will be able to pull it off, but surely, by trying to do it, I will learn a great deal." That was, I guess, the first key moment, coupled with the fact that when I decided to take on this project I wrote to Rober Racine, he responded and we met. It was a chance to meet someone I had admired for as long as I could remember. It was quite a privilege in its own right. So he agreed to let me do this, gave me his blessings and we said we would talk. So this was a really good starting point.*

-2-

*Now, as I started, the second major moment for me in this thesis, has to do with the site. I started studying very closely Rober Racine's text. It was literally becoming my program. He was my inspiration as a person and his body of work was going to be brought to bear*



[ Program ]

*on this whole project. But I needed to use this as a program. As designers, we receive programs all the time. This was a way for me of looking at the power of that moment, that initial moment where someone gives you a description of what they want and how powerful that can be or how limiting it can be. In this case, it turned out to be incredibly powerful. There were some words that I extracted from this text. You can see them here. I thought they were the main concepts. The one that was to give me the most difficulty was the word permanent. Not only was I reading this as an urban installation - if you read between the lines, you perceived people going there informally - I really saw this as an urban place, not something that you would make a pilgrimage to - although that could work. This text implied an urban setting and it implied, or projected, a permanence. Rober Racine would tell me that permanent in this context meant "not temporary." What I wanted it to be, was really permanent. I thought that if we were going to do something that dealt with language, in order to give the depth that it required, it needed to be something that was permanent. So where it would be situated became incredibly key. There would be a series of other circumstances, but where it would be, was key.*

*Rather naively, I imagined it could be on Mont-Royal Park. Now, for those who know Mont-Royal Park, you will know that it is the centre of Montreal, both geographically and culturally. It is almost a sacred place: it is a public - very public - place and all development on it is proscribed, has been so for a long time, and people are interested in keeping it that way. It is a pretty widely accepted thing that the Mont-Royal Park should not be affected by private interest or its access limited in any way. It is a natural preserve within the city, needs to be kept like that, and has been. Even just cutting a tree there is a big deal. But I felt that as an urban place, if it accepted such a project as Le Parc de la langue française within its fold, it would protect it forever. So it was rather unlikely site, but at the same time if it did work, it would be the perfect setting. I just had to find a way of making it work.*

*So I chose Mont-Royal Park and spent almost four months studying it from afar, here*



*in Cambridge, doing maps, trying to figure it out. I found a site that I thought was significant, and started developing the project.*

*One of the breakthroughs was deciding that it was going to be a layer added on to the existing Mont-Royal Park; that it wasn't going to take over. Mont-Royal Park wasn't going to become Le Parc de la langue française, but it would gain a third or even a fourth reading. There would be another layer added, one that did not distract from the other ones, but simply added something. When I started looking at the mountain, I realized that there had been quite a few projects recently: renovating a pavilion here, adding an entrance there, doing different things to it, recognizing that the mountain had to evolve somehow. And I began to see Le Parc de la langue française as one of those evolutions quite clearly.*

*What happened is that I spent a day on the site in January. I was going back to the site after having studied it from afar, and I was afraid. That day was something. I will remember that day for some time, because here I was, walking to the site for the first time with a project in my head, and wondering how it would accept it. And I realized that it is one the key joys of being a designer: this 'projecting'. When you have a project in your head, and you go to its site, you start seeing it there. It becomes this place, a place like no other. I was afraid that it wouldn't work, that the site would not accept the project, that I would have to start over. But I didn't. When I got there, to the specific site, a site that was going to carry Le Pavillon du dictionnaire - I will come back to the Pavillon a bit later - I realized it would work. It would really work. I could do this. Not only would it work there, it would make the Mountain better. So I came away from that completely elated, almost drugged as I walked out of there, and realized that this is a condition that I really, really enjoy. So, that was a good day. I had found the site. And that site had influenced the project, the very conception of the project. It wasn't just a place where the project was going to be, it was becoming the dialog between the two.*





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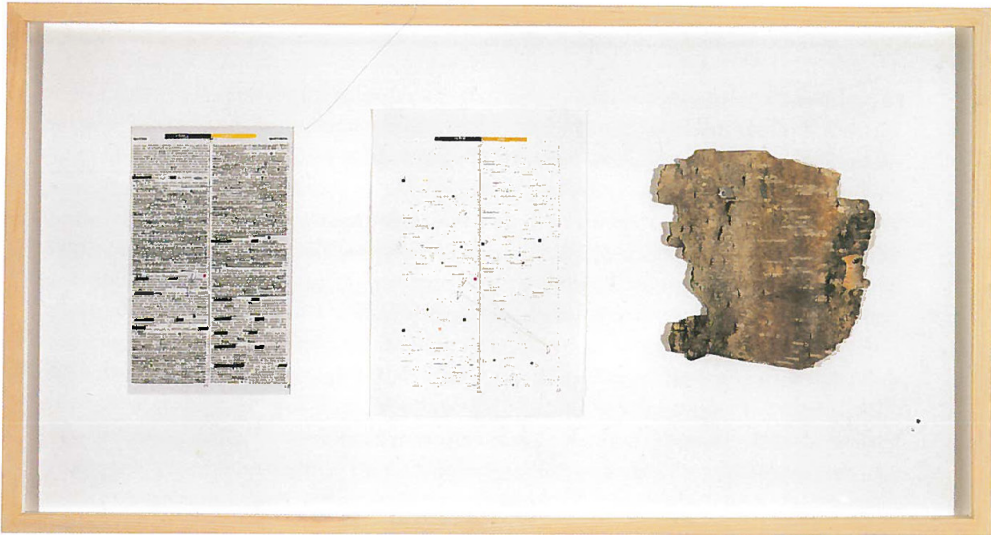
*Now there is another moment that, for me, was profound somehow. At first I had imagined a sort of aviary-like structure in the forest, where all the pages from the dictionary would be. This would be a sort of condensation point for the words that would also be spread gently across the park. And I spoke of that to Anne Bordeleau. She was looking at my proposition, at the pages pinned up on the wall and somehow just moved her hand like this... from a horizontal position, her hand in front of her face to her hand in a resting position and said, in a typical Anne fashion: "This doesn't work. You need the intimacy of reading - horizontally - don't you think?" And walked away... That is where the idea of making a table that would accept all the words was born. I have had Rober Racine as an inspiration, and talking to Anne over the course of the semester had proven as equally rewarding. So that small gesture she had done, became very very key for me. I started designing a pavilion that would hold all the words, on a table.*

*I started seeing the table as a place of contemplation. As a place where you could layer the different changes to language through the years, so that language would be very much alive there. With each new edition of Le Petit Robert, which was the dictionary that we were using, you could build layers upon layers, so you would be really showing that the dictionary is very much alive.*

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*So I began testing this out. There are 3753 pages in Le Petit Robert. If I was to include them at 125% of their original scale - something a bit bigger than the original, but still intimate, something you had to read from up close, the pavilion would measure, - if I did a circular building with the pages placed alphabetically on the inside and then following up on the outside, always reading left to right - 75 metres in diameter. This was as large as the mountains' existing Belvedere space.*

*The moment where something really coalesced for me, was when, as I was playing*

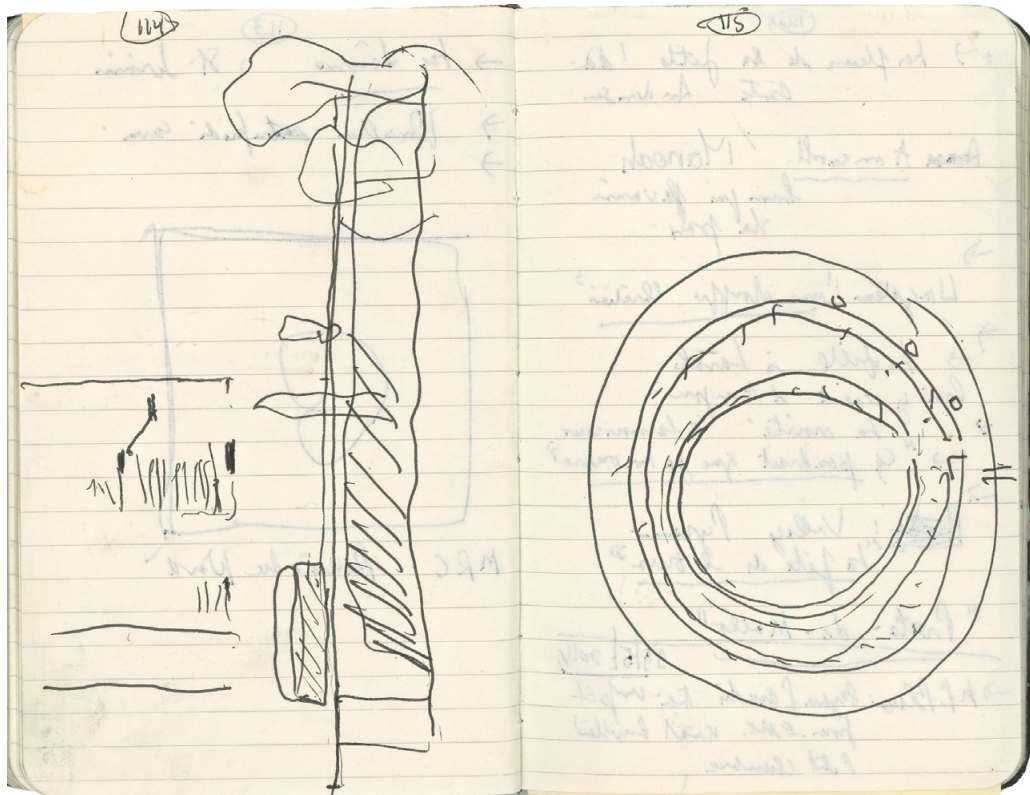


*around with how many text columns there would be (I decided that the pages would be presented as in Le Petit Robert dictionary but adding columns of white space that would allow for the inclusion of translations into different languages of those French words, and leaving space to add new words to accompany each re-edition of the dictionary). As I was doing this, I had an Excel spreadsheet open which would calculate how big the building needed to be. So here, for a graphic designer, as I was changing the width of a text column, the whole size of the building would be shifting. That was something I really enjoyed. Because there are 60,000 words, even small incremental changes would have drastic effects on the size of the Pavillon. So that really was a high point for me. If walking the mountain was one, playing with leading and influencing the size of a building was also something that I thought was quite profound for me.*

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*So we can talk about the actual project of Le Parc de la langue française, looking at the exhibition a bit more closely, but first here's another moment that I want to talk about which is very key.*

*As you know, I met Rober Racine at the beginning: he told me then that he agreed with me doing this, but then, when I tried contacting him... Silence. I tried calling him repeatedly, trying to show the work to him, but figured by January, February as I left messages on his answering machine, emailed him again and he did not respond, that he had chosen not to be involved in the project, and I respected that. That's quite understandable. But it was still hard for me. Then I found a work he had done later in 1995, it is the work here. So with him absent, I looked to his work to validate what I was doing and when I found this work, that I had not seen before, I realised that maybe I was on to something. Here he was putting a Page miroir with his annotations and a piece a bark saying that these things... obviously this is an idea closely related to Le Parc de la langue française... were meant as one.*



*So there was a long silence from Rober Racine, but then he called up again in March. And we met in May, where I presented most of the work. I will remember for the longest time his gentleness... just... he took his time and he was asking questions. He was looking at everything as if this really mattered to him. That was, for me... a great moment.*

*And we talked about a lot of the assumptions underlining the park. One of which was that when he wrote it in 1979, it was only two years after bill 101 had been passed; so language was very much a battleground. This was not what I was proposing. This was not a political stance. This was just showing the richness of language: something to be shared by francophones and non-francophones alike. I was wondering how he would respond to that, whether he would feel that I had diluted his project somehow. I didn't. He felt that this is truly how this thing should be. And he was really puzzled by this idea of Le pavillon du dictionnaire.*

*Someone had called him in the meantime saying "We want to build this. We want to build Le Parc de la langue française." So when he met with them two weeks after I had met with him, he started describing my project to them. Specifically Le pavillon du dictionnaire and how the table would work. This is a page from his sketch book. This is Rober Racine explaining the project to someone else. So if Rober had done, you know, Le Terrain du dictionnaire, this and that, all these works, Le pavillon du dictionnaire, as a device, had entered that company of heroes. So seeing that page was an incredibly key moment for me.*

**Louis-Charles Lasnier** 14 juillet 2016 17:33  
À : Rober Racine Envoyés - Google  
Rép : Lundi

---

Bonjour Rober,

Lundi, 14 h au EM café me convient très bien.

J'ai une présentation succincte du projet que je peux facilement montrer sur mon ordinateur portable. Cela nous permettrait de voir le projet dans son ensemble assez rapidement et nous laisser ensuite le temps de discuter.  
Qu'en penses-tu?

Aussi, deux points importants:

1) Site  
Le projet actuel est développé pour le Parc du Mont-Royal. Un site extrêmement complexe à la fois physiquement (contrainte patrimoniale) et politiquement. Une grande partie de la réflexion porte donc sur l'arrimage à ce site. Ce n'est pas un problème en soi, la spécificité du site sera toujours une donnée incontournable, peu importe le site.

2) Communauté  
Pour qu'un tel projet voie le jour, et qu'il soit véritablement permanent (et non « l'attraction du mois » ou un projet temporaire), il nécessitera l'appui d'une communauté élargi. Autant dans le financement à long terme, que la programmation et l'animation, l'entretien et le renouvellement de son contenu, il faudra construire une communauté engagée et active. C'est à mon avis le but ultime d'un tel projet, de léguer quelque chose de durable aux générations futures, avec un horizon aussi ample que le langage lui-même. Il sera intéressant de discuter de cet aspect du projet dès les premières rencontres, même si je suis conscient qu'une telle communauté se construit lentement, par passion partagée et engagement.

Cela dit, une version « temporaire » du projet est aussi envisageable, et serait possiblement un départ rassembleur.

Alors Go!  
À lundi.

N'hésite pas à me contacter par courriel ou par téléphone (514-271-5577) si tu veux discuter avant la rencontre.

Louis-Charles

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—  
7378, av. Christophe-Colomb  
Montréal, QC  
H2R 2S6  
+1 514 271-5577

-6-

*Another one that was as important was when we finally decided to meet up, Rober Racine, Jonathan Demers - who was interested in building this project - and I. In preparation for that meeting, I wrote a really quick e-mail. Here it is. It spoke of how the site - because they weren't proposing to build it on the Mont-Royal, they were thinking of another site - saying "if you're going to do that, you need to let the site influence this." So the joy I had in working with the site and its importance was playing out in that small text I was writing.*

*The second paragraph one was about community and how I had realised through my thesis that no matter how permanent a site or a materiality or intensions were for the initial carriers of a given project, the only way they would ever be permanent was if it was embedded in a community, and that community would protect the project over different generations, hopefully centuries, just as languages was constantly reinvented. That was a very key e-mail that I wrote and it's been reverberating ever since. This notion of community. This notion of trust, this notion of how we build a project together around something, and then it stops being our project: it becomes a collective project. Architecture works that way. It works at that scale.*

*And it started resonating for me in a very specific way, a very personal way. What I must admit at this point is that when I took on the Master's project here, I really had doubts about my career, whether I would continue to be involved as a designer, either as a practitioner or an educator. I had grown weary over the years of my ability to affect change. I'd become disengaged with the practice and by reconnecting with both the community here - fellow students, Robert Jan, Anne, Donald, everyone here, Rick, you know, everyone who you probably take for granted, I had seen at a distance and realised just how incredibly rich an environment this was. How incredibly... possible... things were here... And how I felt that, as a designer, what I would do mattered here, somehow. Also, the connection with Rober Racine and how working from his brief, trying to live up*





*to what he had done was turning into a project; was creating a new community. And it's given me new hope... really...*

*After I would say a good five or six years of really doubting whether I should continue a career in design or not, this thesis has given me hope and has made me realise that as designers in Canada, of course we need to fight, but there is only so much we can fight. We need to find the right people to surround ourselves with in order for things to become possible. Without them, it becomes impossible. Surely we need to face the constraints as designers in Canada, but one needs to build a community around themselves in order to do things, or else things become impossible. No matter how good we are as designers, we need to first work on that community and building it up.*

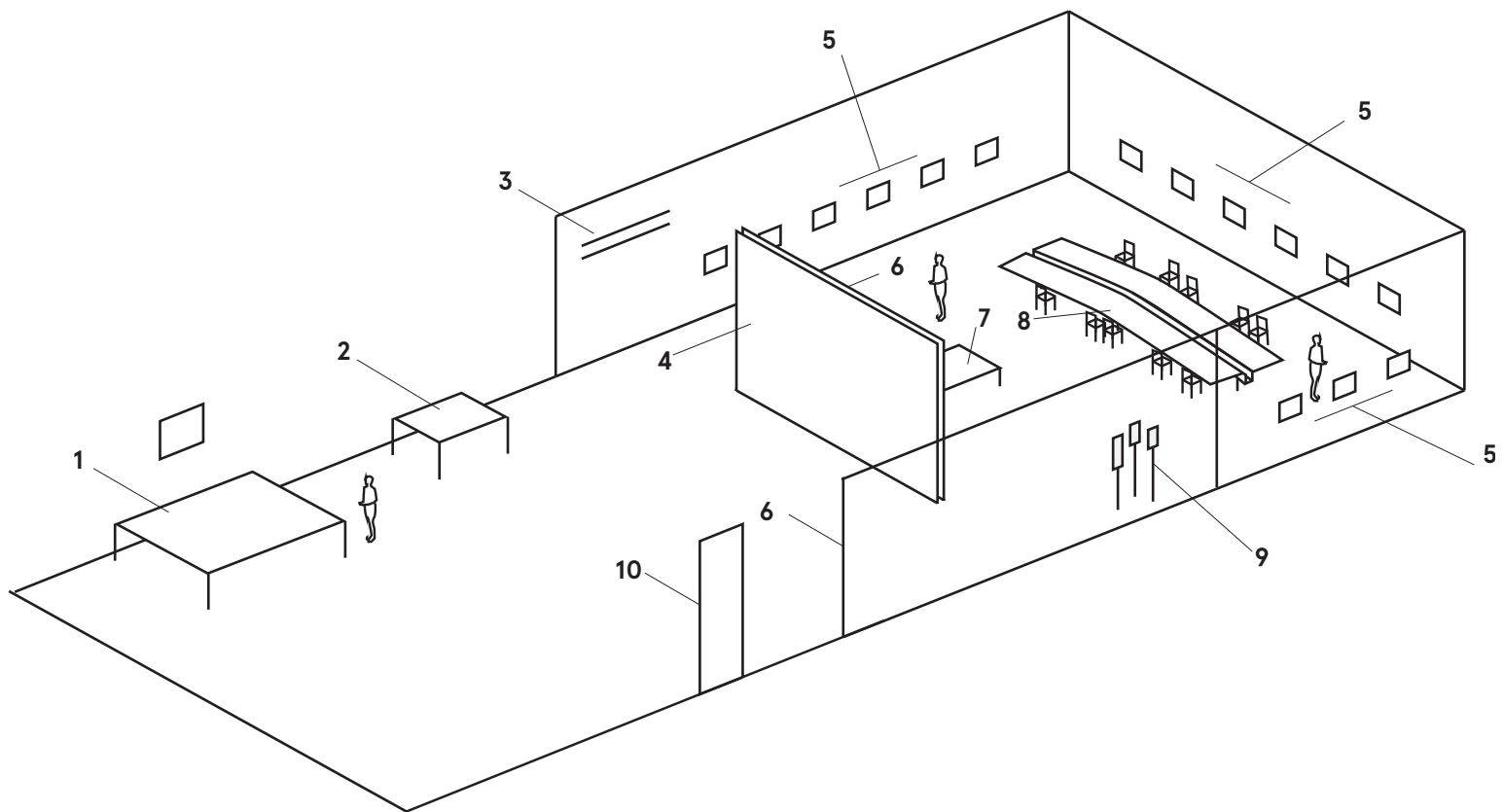
*That's why, as a thesis, what I'm presenting here is an exhibition. The exhibition you see here is something I would want to present in Montreal to see if we can get people interested in this project. For me, it's a way of extending a community that is so necessary for us to build the things we care about.*

*I pledge, in the coming years, to build communities of people who are interested in such projects and others. This will allow me to continue my career as a designer, as an educator with the same passion that has characterized my early career.*

*Thank you.*

**Building a *Parc de la langue française***  
**Retracing my steps as a designer**

## **Book Two - Designing an exhibition**



- 1 Works from Rober Racine
- 2 *Le Petit Robert* dictionary
- 3 Introduction
- 4 Map of Mont-Royal Park
- 5 Encountering *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire*
- 6 Implementation
- 7 Model of *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire*
- 8 Table
- 9 Beacons
- 10 Supporters / Guest book

## Exhibition

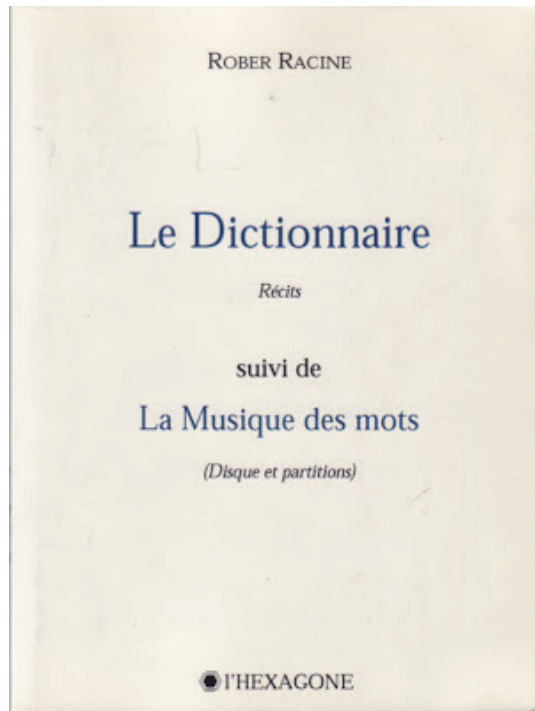
In order to tackle directly the building of *Le Parc de la langue française*, and give it the possibility of becoming a permanent installations, the project chose to take on the task of first building a community. It is with this in mind that I designed an exhibition showcasing the project and its different components.

The proposed exhibition can be understood by anyone, not only architects or designers. The modes of communications include: perspective drawings, a model of *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire*, full scale mock-ups of both the table and the proposed beacons. It is hoped that it would be attended by a great diversity of actors and citizens, gathering comments and hopefully wide support before taking on a definite shape.

The exhibition carries a different title than the overall thesis, from *Building a Parc de la langue française*, the exhibition chooses to focus on how Mont-Royal Park benefits from the proposed project: *Un projet pour le Mont-Royal / Celebrating Mont-Royal Park*.

For the thesis defence presentation a smaller scale exhibition was created. The formatting of this smaller exhibition is presented here in the following pages as individual panels.

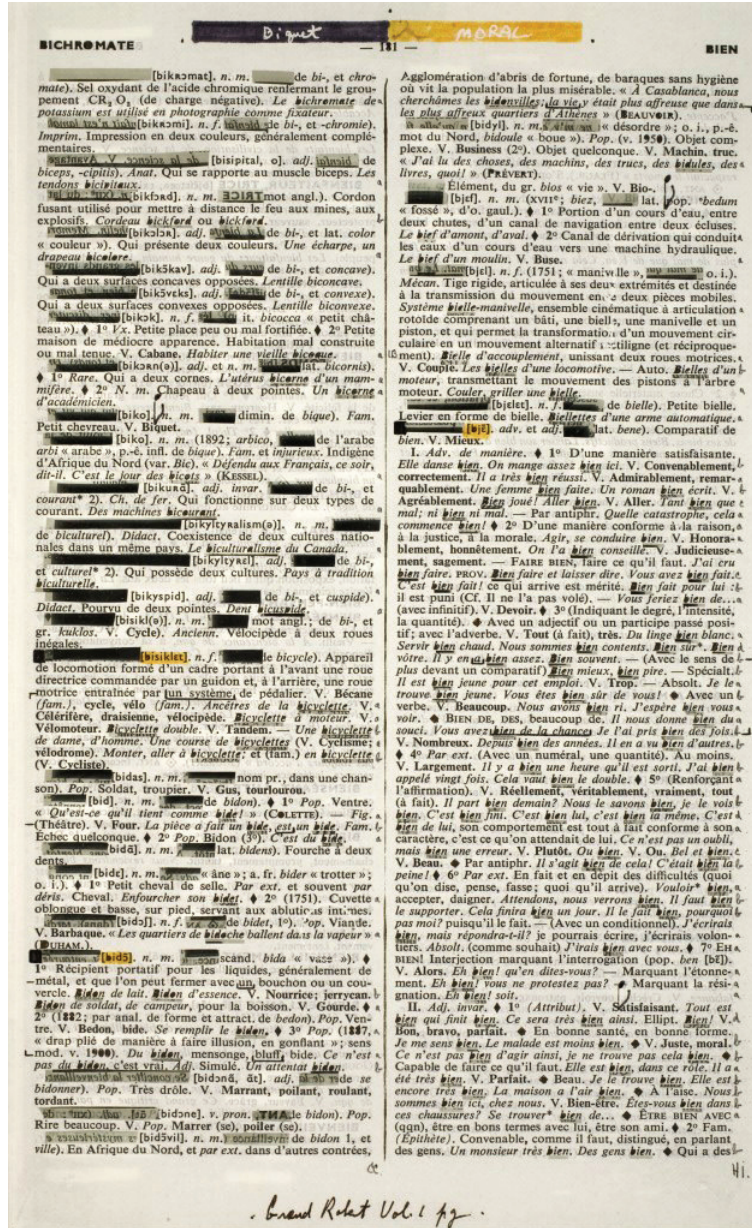




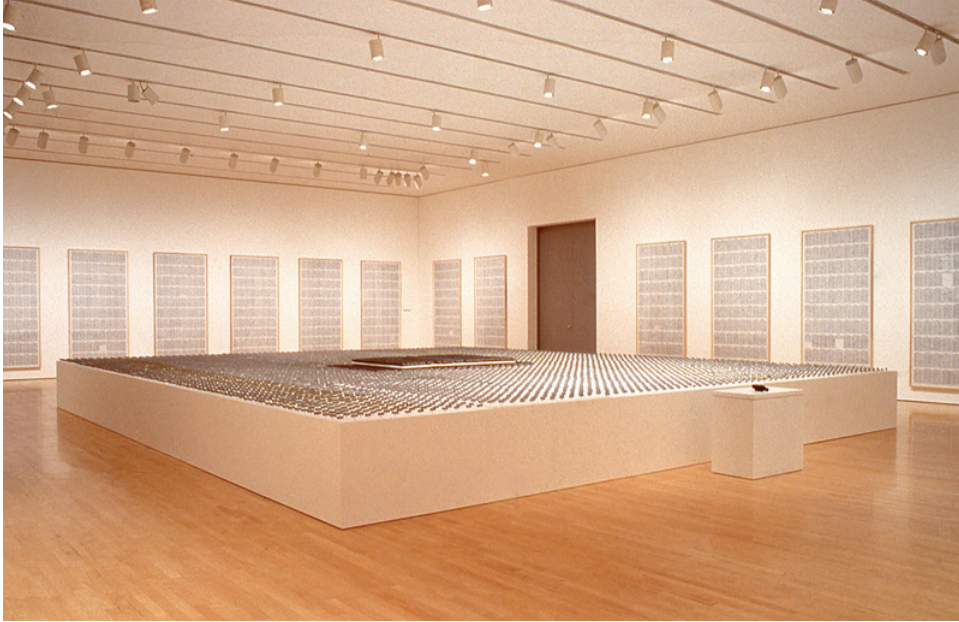
Rober Racine, *Le Dictionnaire*. 1995







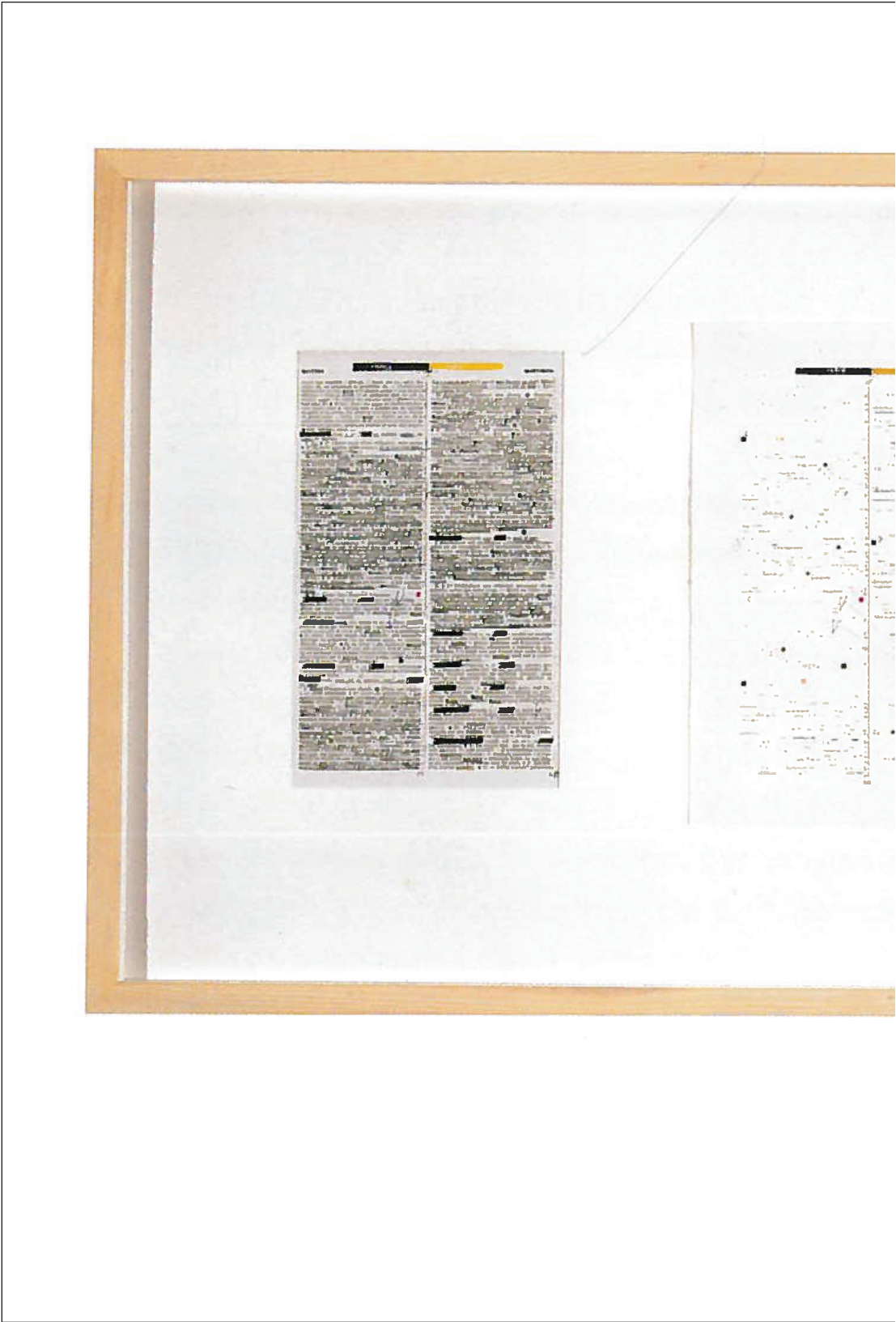
Robér Racine, Pages-Miroirs: Bichromate-181-Bien, 1991



Rober Racine, *Le Terrain du Dictionnaire A/Z*, 1980



Rober Racine, *Le Terrain du Dictionnaire A/Z* (detail), 1980





Rober Racine, *Dessin d'une Page-Miroir* (oeuvre triple), 1994

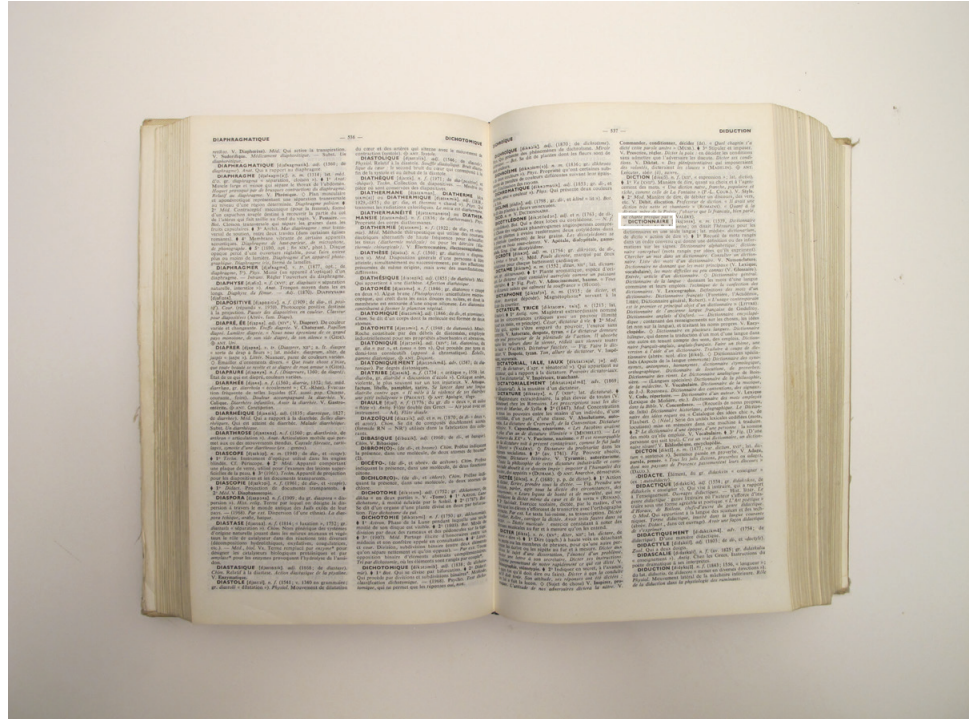




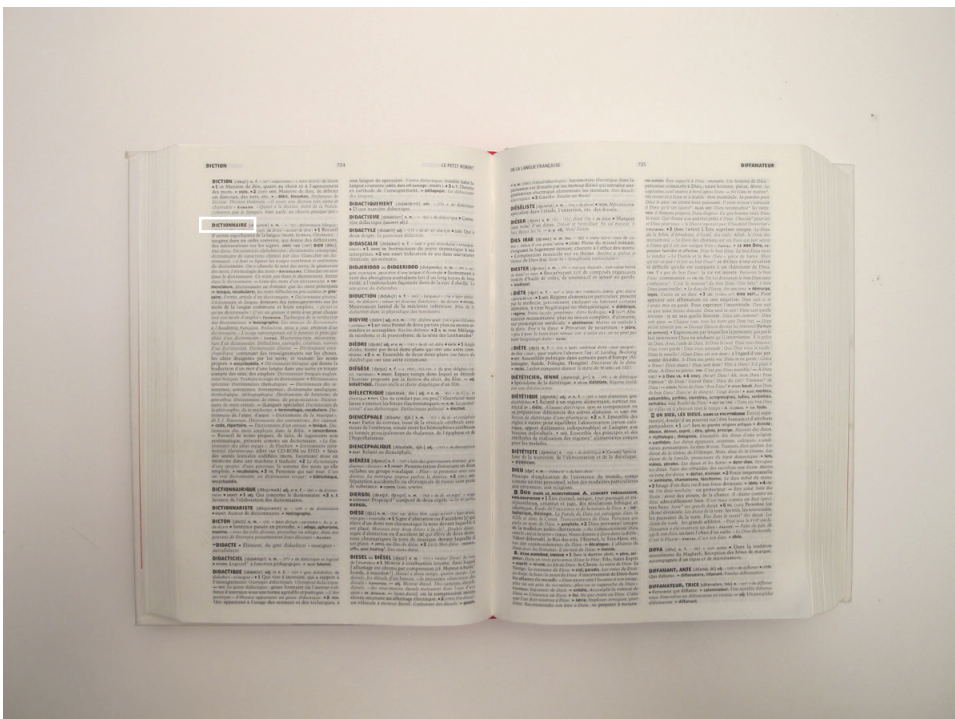
the word 'Dictionnaire' in the 1967 edition







the word 'Dictionnaire' in the 1977 edition



the word 'Dictionnaire' in the 2016 edition

« Car il ne suffit pas d'ajouter des mots nouveaux pour qu'un dictionnaire soit actualisé; la modernité pénètre la langue dans toute son épaisseur: les mots certes, mais aussi les significations, les contextes d'emploi, les locutions et les allusions qui sont les témoins et les signaux de notre époque.»

– Josette Rey-Debove et Alain Rey (2016)

« ... si [le langage] a pour nous la valeur d'un signe précieux, c'est parce que, du fond de son être et par la lumière qui n'a cessé de le traverser depuis sa naissance, il est ajusté aux choses mêmes, il en forme le miroir et l'émulation (...) il a, avec les choses qu'il dévoile, une affinité sans âge.»

– Michel Foucault (2014)

Relating to encyclopedias:

« ... reconstituer par l'enchaînement des mots et par leur disposition dans l'espace l'ordre même du monde.»

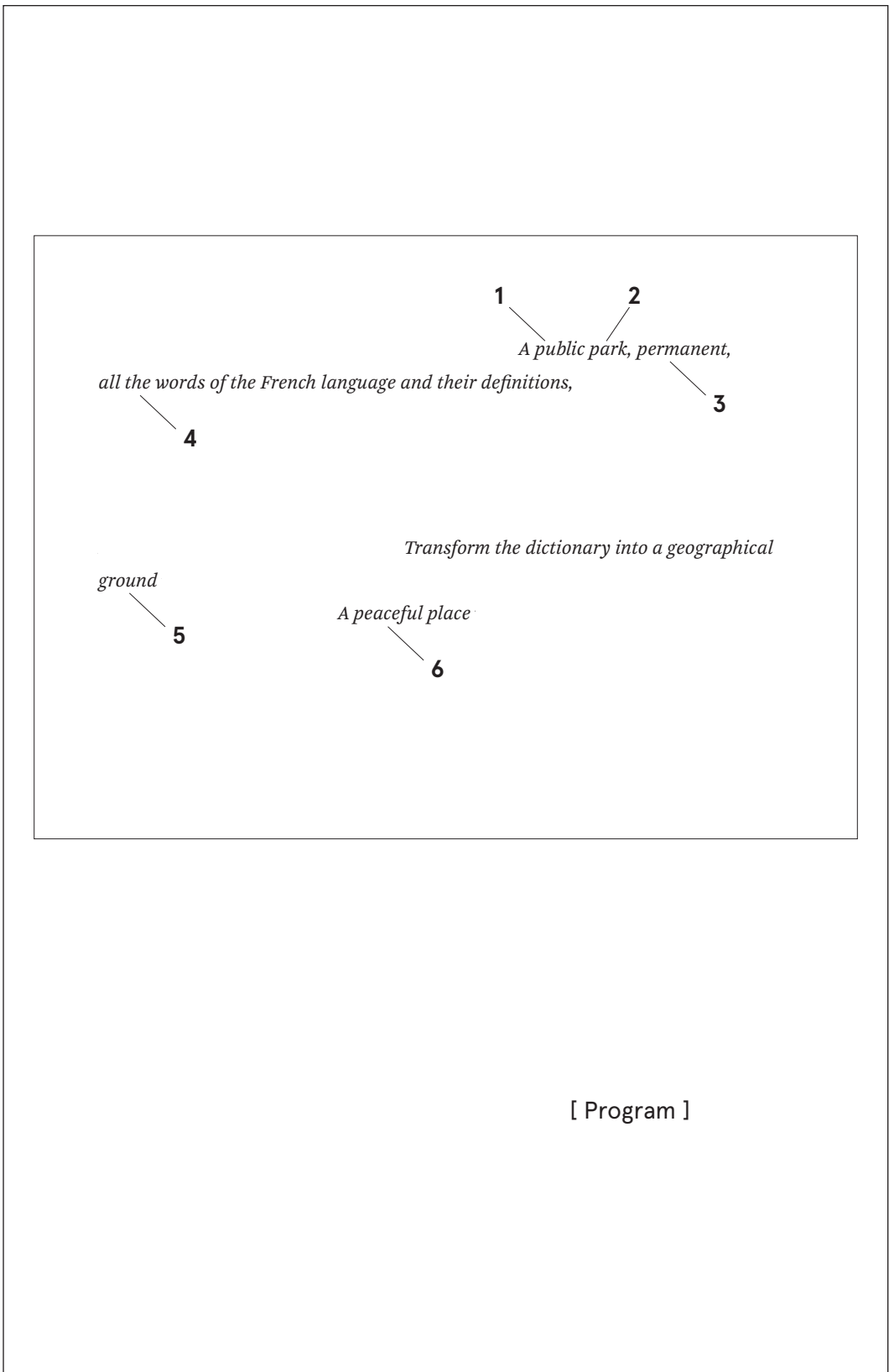
– Michel Foucault (2014)

*It all started on October 29, 1979. That is the moment at which the idea of creating a park of the French language first took hold of me. A public park, permanent, where all the words of the French language and their definitions, printed on small plaques, would take ground, harmoniously implemented in its surrounding landscape, laid out in neighbourhoods of words, from A to Z; each type of word possibly identified with a specific colour. A place where, in order to learn new words, the reader-stroller would have to move physically in space, from word to word, from the L neighbourhood to the I; from the R's to the E's for example. Transform the dictionary into a geographical ground where reading becomes a personal path. A place where we make our way literally in the body of the text. A peaceful place where one could set up a meeting at a specific word of our choice, where every word conspires with every other word. Build it such that the park is an immense page on which we find carefully considered plantings of all the words of the French language<sup>1</sup>.*

– Rober Racine,

(my translation)

Rober Racine, *Le Parc de langue française*, 1979



# Celebrating Mont-Royal Park

This exhibition is not about a project that has existed in the past, but rather one that wishes to exist in the future, one that wishes to capture your imagination and that of many generations to come.

It is about the meeting of a simple text, written in 1979 by artist Rober Racine, and a place unlike any other: Mont-Royal Park. The exhibition's main intent is to show that the text and the site form a natural pair; that the world view embedded in Rober Racine's œuvre would be an eloquent means of celebrating Mont-Royal Park as both a place of nature and culture. In this sense the project proposed here, presented to gather your thoughts and support, is about the future of Mont-Royal Park. But it is also very much about its very nature, from the beginning, as a place of nature and culture, as a place outside of daily life yet profoundly grounded in it, by custom and proximity.

So please enjoy the tour, see if you find yourself in it, if you would want to spend time here, share it with your friends, new and old, with your family, or simply find time there for yourself. I dream of spending time there one day, but I know that no matter what I do, even if I could build it myself, it will never make sense unless it is shared, unless it belongs to everyone. That is the place I dream of.

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**Note:** There is an important component of this project that might not be evident at first. It seeks to be permanent, to survive not mere decades, but centuries, to live on as language does. It is in this light that the full meaning of the site is brought to bear.

If the structures seem at first light and temporary, this is only as a sign of respect for the nature that is already there, not wanting to remove anything from the site, but rather a willingness to insert itself within.

If, as the words embedded in the table change constantly to reflect the true nature of language they appear fragile and temporary, it is hoped that permanence will rise from involvement, nurture and constant re-investment from each generation.

*Le Parc de la langue française* becomes a new layer, celebrating the very essence of Mont-Royal Park in our lives, in our city and our community, past and future.

You will have realized this already: this project does not exist yet, and will never exist without your support and that of other individuals like you.

Louis-Charles Lasnier,  
student, School of Architecture, University of Waterloo







Map of Mont-Royal Park / initial implementation of the beacons

## Beacons

325mm

**DICIONNAIRE** [diksjɔnɛʁ] n. m. – v. 1501 « dictionnaire bilingue » ♦ latin médiéval *dictionarum*, de *dictio* « action de dire » # 1 Recueil d'unités signifiantes de la langue (mots, termes, éléments...) rangées dans un ordre convenu, qui donne des définitions, des informations sur les signes. ABRÉV. FAM. (1885) **DICO** [diko]. Des dicos. *Dictionnaire alphabétique, dictionnaire conceptuel, dictionnaire de caractères chinois par clés. Consulter un dictionnaire.* « il faut se figurer les usages nombreux et ordinaires du dictionnaire. On y cherche le sens des mots, la génération des mots, l'étymologie des mots » **ДИКЦИОНАРИЙ**. Chercher un mot dans le dictionnaire. Ce n'est pas dans le dictionnaire. Entrer dans le dictionnaire. — Liste des mots d'un dictionnaire. > nomenclature. *Dictionnaire ne donnant que les mots principaux (> lexicque, vocabulaire), les mots difficiles ou peu connus (> glossaire). Entrée, article d'un dictionnaire.* ♦ *Dictionnaire général. Dictionnaire de langue, donnant des renseignements sur les mots de la langue commune et leurs emplois.* « qu'est-ce qu'un dictionnaire ? C'est un grenier à mots avec pour chaque mot son mode d'emploi » **Толковник**. Technique de la confection des dictionnaires. > lexicographie. Les séances du dictionnaire à l'Académie française. Rédaction, mise à jour, révision d'un dictionnaire. « L'usage contemporain est le premier et principal objet d'un dictionnaire » **ЛРРФЭ**. Macrostructure, microstructure d'un dictionnaire. Définitions, exemples, citations, renvois d'un dictionnaire. *Dictionnaire illustré.* — *Dictionnaire encyclopédique, contenant des renseignements sur les choses, les idées désignées par les mots, et traitant les noms propres.* > encyclopédie. ♦ *Dictionnaire bilingue, qui donne la traduction d'un mot d'une langue dans une autre en tenant compte des sens, des emplois.* *Dictionnaire français-anglais, latin-français. Traduire à coups de dictionnaire.* ♦ *Dictionnaires spéciaux. Dictionnaires thématiques.* — *Dictionnaire des synonymes, antonymes, homonymes, dictionnaire analogique, étymologique, orthographique. Dictionnaire de locutions, de proverbes. Dictionnaire de rimes, de prononciation. Dictionnaire de mots croisés.* — (Langues spéciales) *Dictionnaire de la philosophie, de la médecine.* > terminologie, vocabulaire. *Dictionnaire de l'argot, d'argot.* « *Dictionnaire de la musique* », de J.-J. Rousseau. *Dictionnaire des conventions, des signaux.* > code, répertoire. — *Dictionnaire d'un auteur.* > lexicque. *Dictionnaire des mots employés dans la Bible.* > concordance. — Recueil de noms propres, de faits, de jugements non systématique, présenté comme un dictionnaire. « *Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues* », de Flaubert. ♦ *Dictionnaire informatisé, électronique, édité sur CD-ROM ou DVD.* ♦ Série des unités lexicales codifiées (mots, locutions) mise en mémoire dans une machine à traduire. # 2 *Le dictionnaire d'une époque, d'une personne, la somme des mots qu'elle emploie.* > vocabulaire. # 3 **на**. Personne qui sait tout. C'est un vrai dictionnaire, un dictionnaire vivant ! > bibliothèque, encyclopédie.

dictionnary/ dictionario / دیکشنری / 魔鬼殿

Le Parc de la langue française  
Visitez aussi / visit also Le Pavillon du dictionnaire

Dictionnaire beacon

*proverbes. Dictionnaire de rimes, de prononciation  
naire de mots croisés. — (Langues spéciales) Dictionnaire  
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dictionnaire/ diionario / دينااطيش / 魔鬼般

**Le Parc de la langue française**  
**Visitez aussi / visit also Le Pavillon du dictionnaire**

*Dictionnaire beacon (detail)*

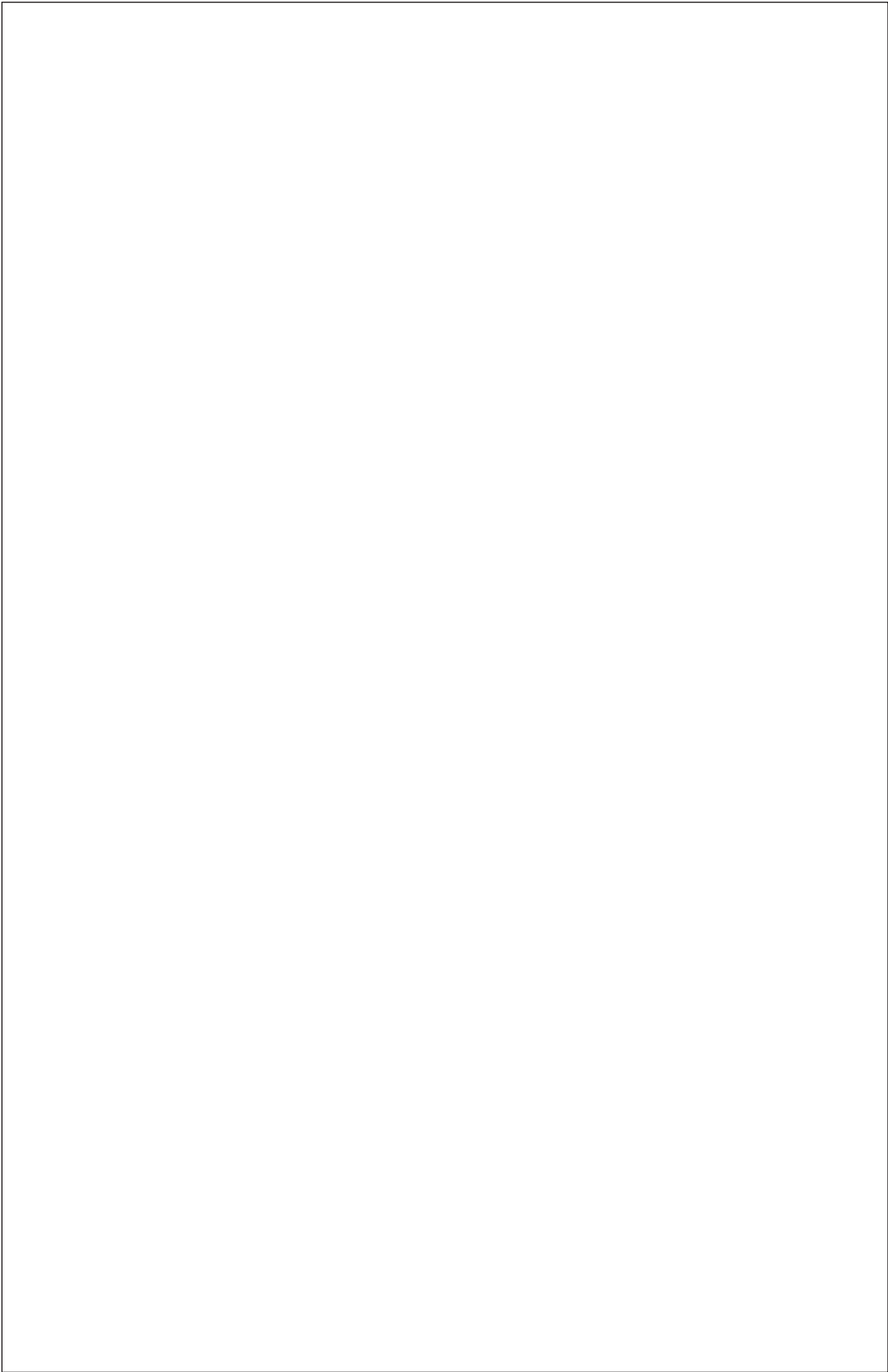




**Encountering *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire***



In its position at the centre of the city, Mont-Royal Park is both engaged yet removed from daily life. A place outside of time or the demands of city life. It is in this duality that the Park fosters contemplation, somehow giving you a different perspective on the world and your place in it.







For most visitors, the Belvedere and its Chalet is the culmination of their walk, with its expansive panorama looking South, giving you a panoramic view of downtown Montréal and the St-Lawrence seaway. The city is grand and beautiful from here: dense, diverse and alive. You see the bridges linking this metropolis to its larger context. You feel both small but empowered, raised above normal city life.



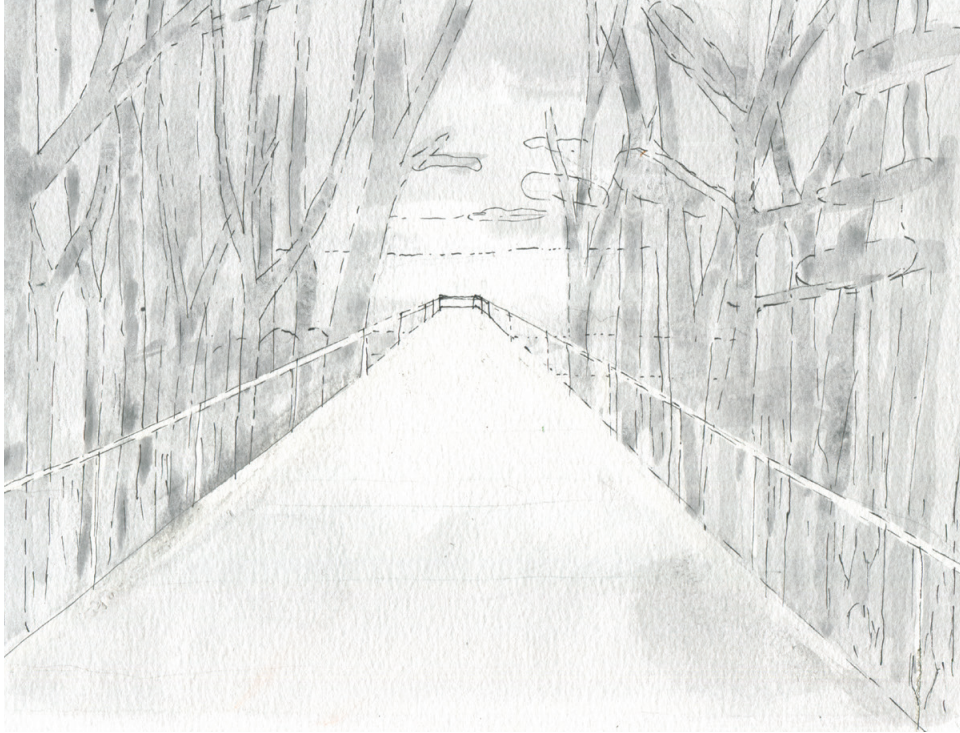
**The Belvedere is not the highest point of the Park.  
Should you extend your walk and follow directions to the  
Cross, you will discover a more intimate portion of the  
Olmsted Way.**



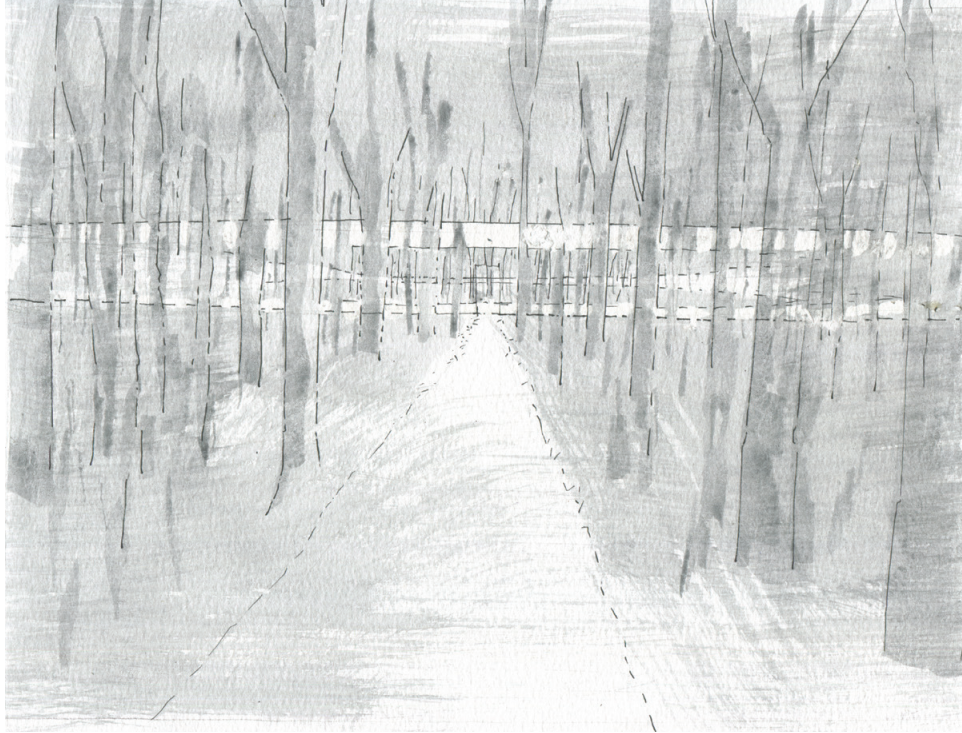
As you climb along the path that leads you away from the Chalet and in the direction of the cross, the forest transforms. It is dense, stopping you from seeing the horizon even in the winter when the leaves have fallen. To the West, the ground slopes abruptly just beyond the path. You see the trunks of the trees but not their base or the ground that supports them. This gives a sense of levitation, of being above it all without seeing the horizon.



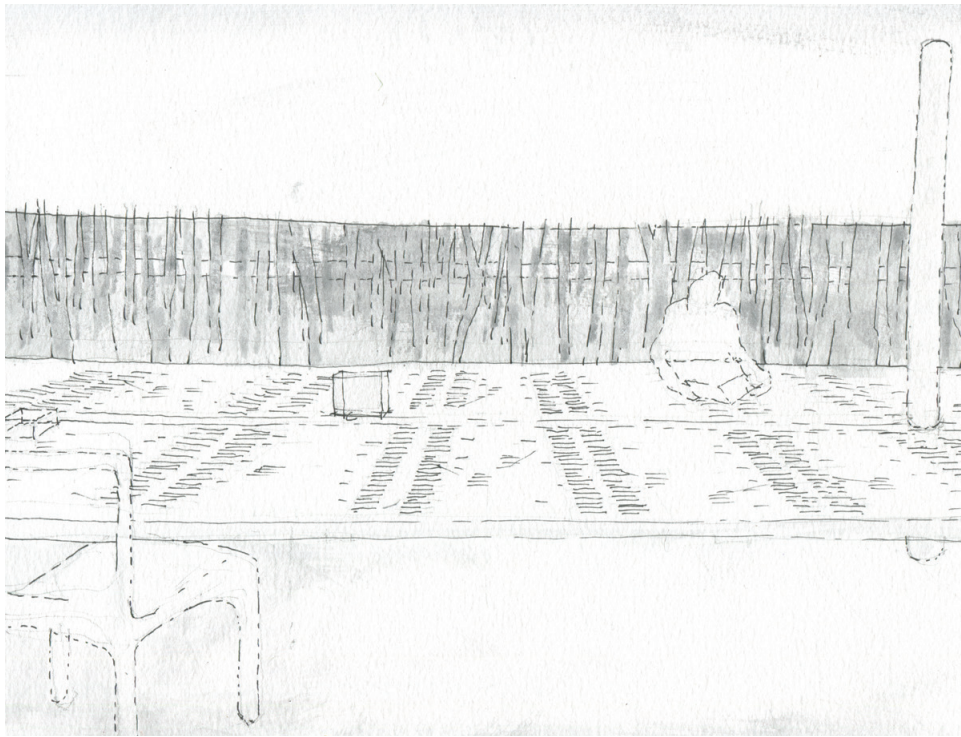
**You will encounter a different path, placed perpendicular to the main path. As you approach, you will see that it stretches to the North and culminates into a small lookout point. This is the first component of *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire*.**



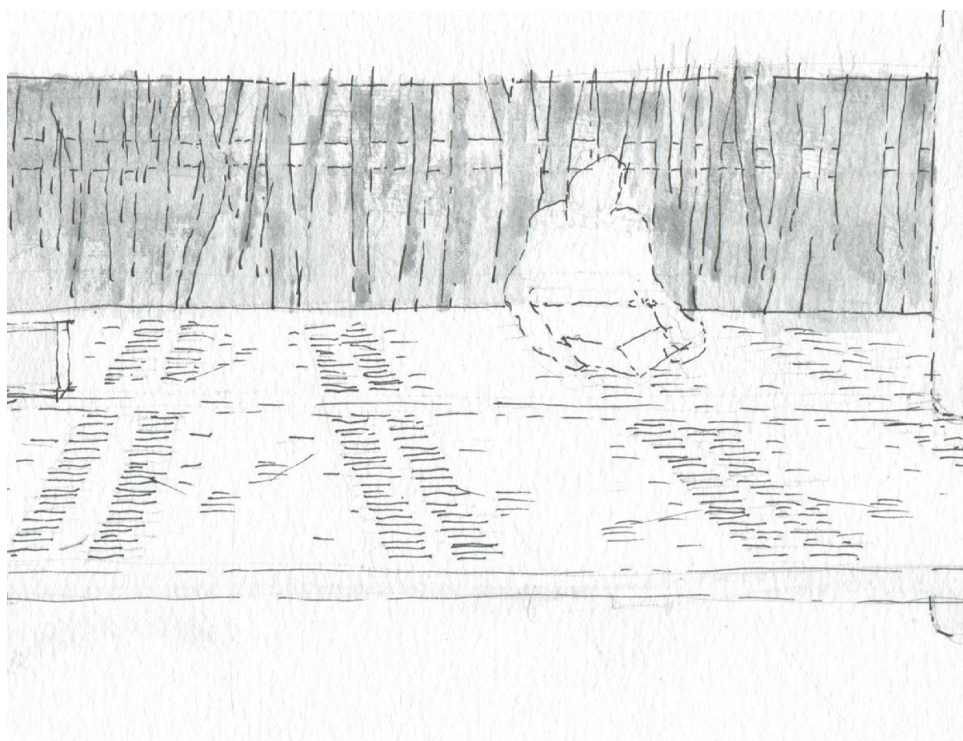
**You traverse a dense forest, the ground slopes away sharply. You can now see the horizon, the hidden side of the Mountain and its cemeteries. The view stretches out, and on a clear day, you will be able to see the Laurentians, a low mountain range 80 km away. At that specific point, you are actually at the very centre of the Mont-Royal Park historical boundaries.**



As you head back, your line of sight will reveal the previously unseen *Pavillon du dictionnaire*. Yet it is embedded in the forest: you can glimpse at a low horizontal glass building. As you get closer, it stretches symmetrically to the left and to the right, curving gently and almost disappearing among the trees only to reappear again as you look through the transparent pavilion.

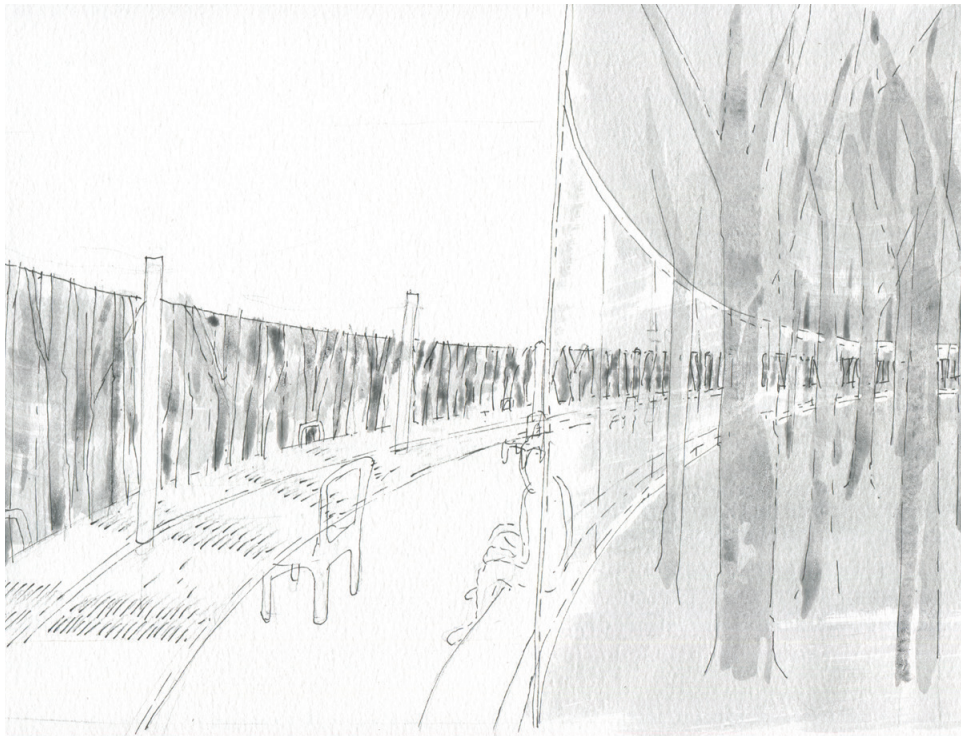


**A low table wraps around the entire building, interrupted only briefly to allow passage at regular interval along the perimeter. If you begin with the letter A, you first travel close to the inner skin between the glass and the table. The words invite you to move clockwise, facilitating reading. You will travel 292 m, looking down at the table and outwards to the forest.**

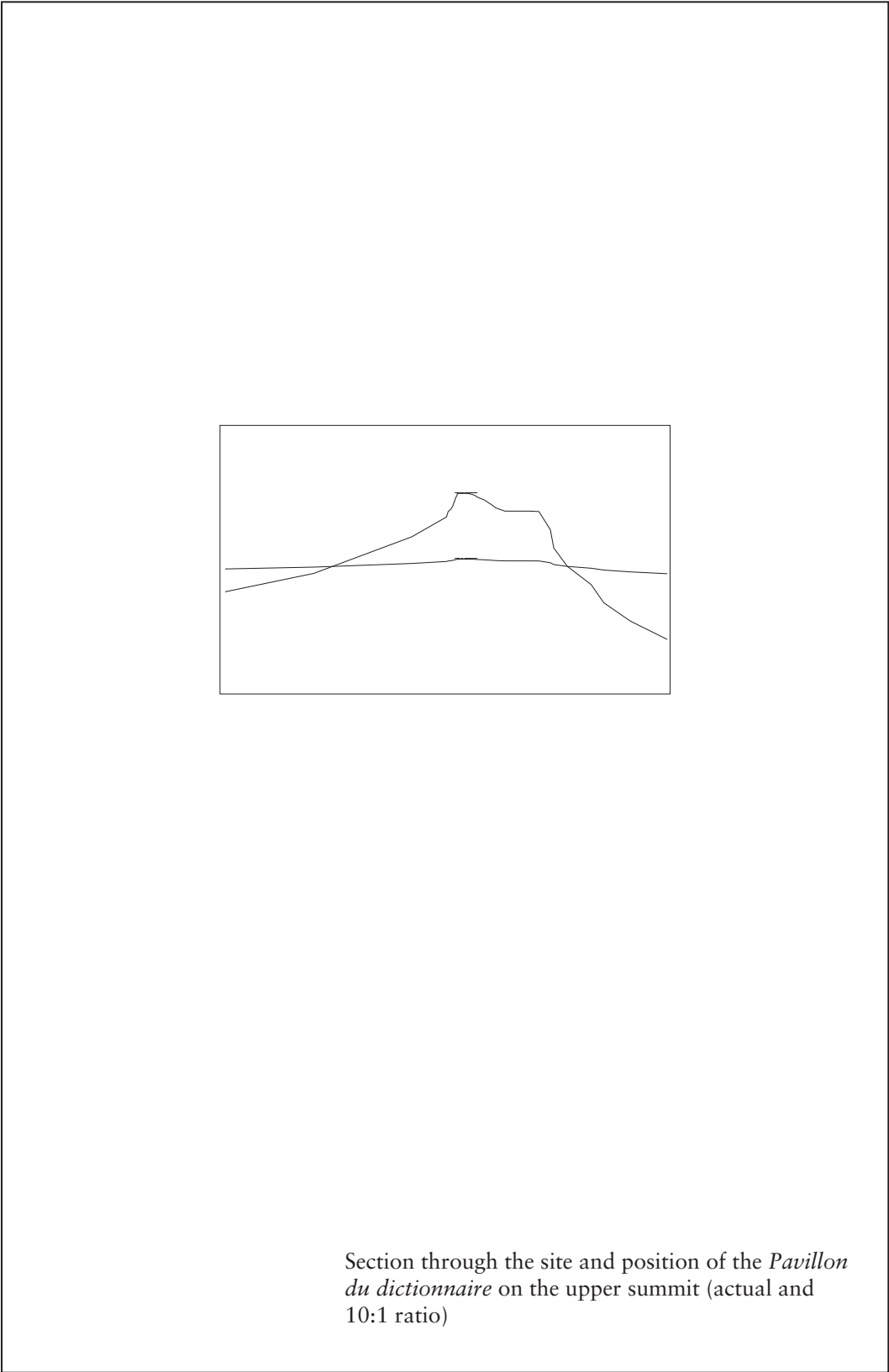


The table invites you to sit and look at the 60,000 words that make up *Le Petit Robert* dictionary. As you look closely, you will notice that alterations have been made to this text, words have been added, others replaced or inflected. The traces of these changes to language can be seen for the first time and projects both languages timelessness and relentless transformation.

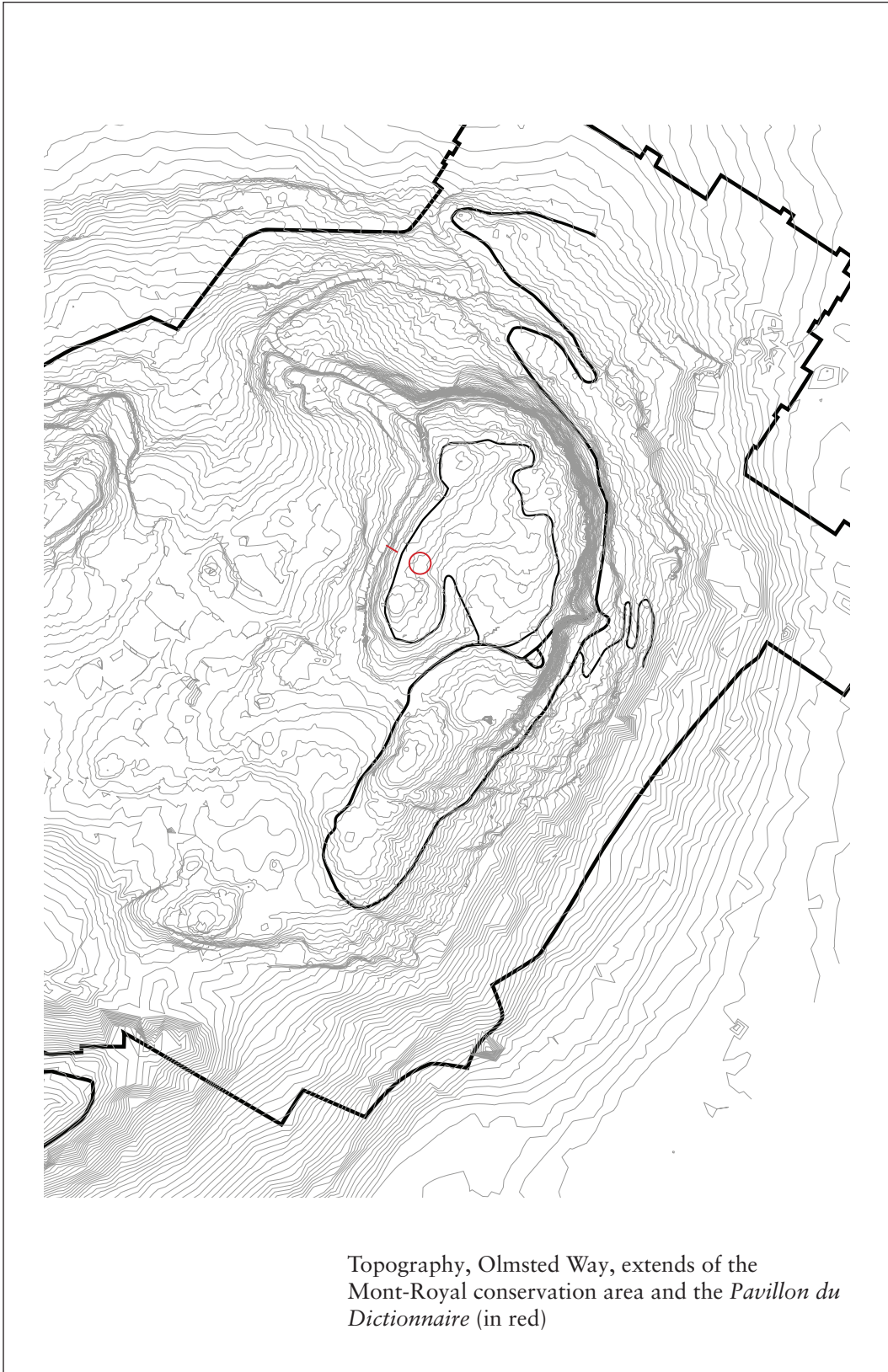




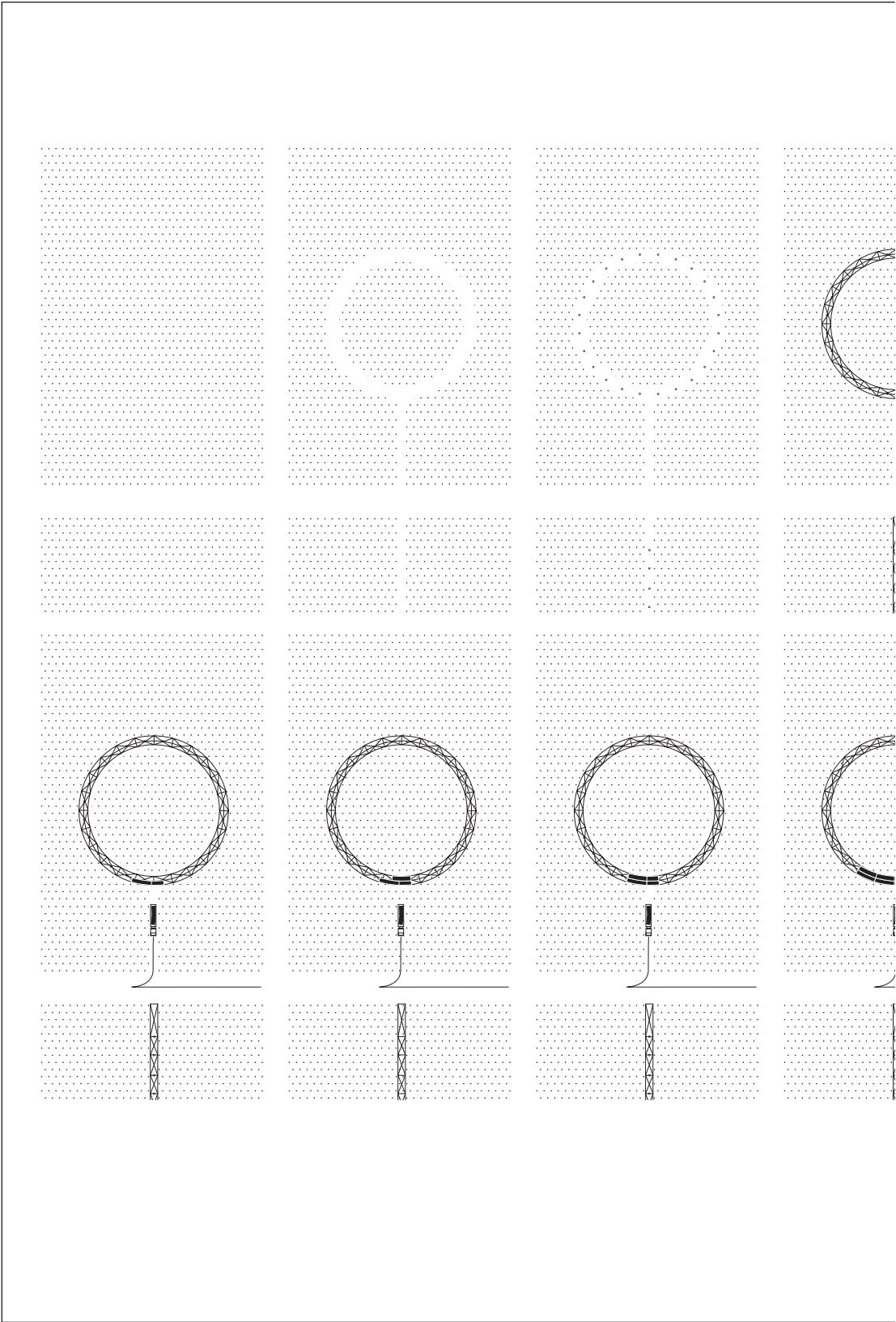
**That is the gift of *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire*; the simple pleasure of sitting in a forest, engaged yet removed from the city, a place of contemplation unlike any other, in perfect accord between nature and culture.**

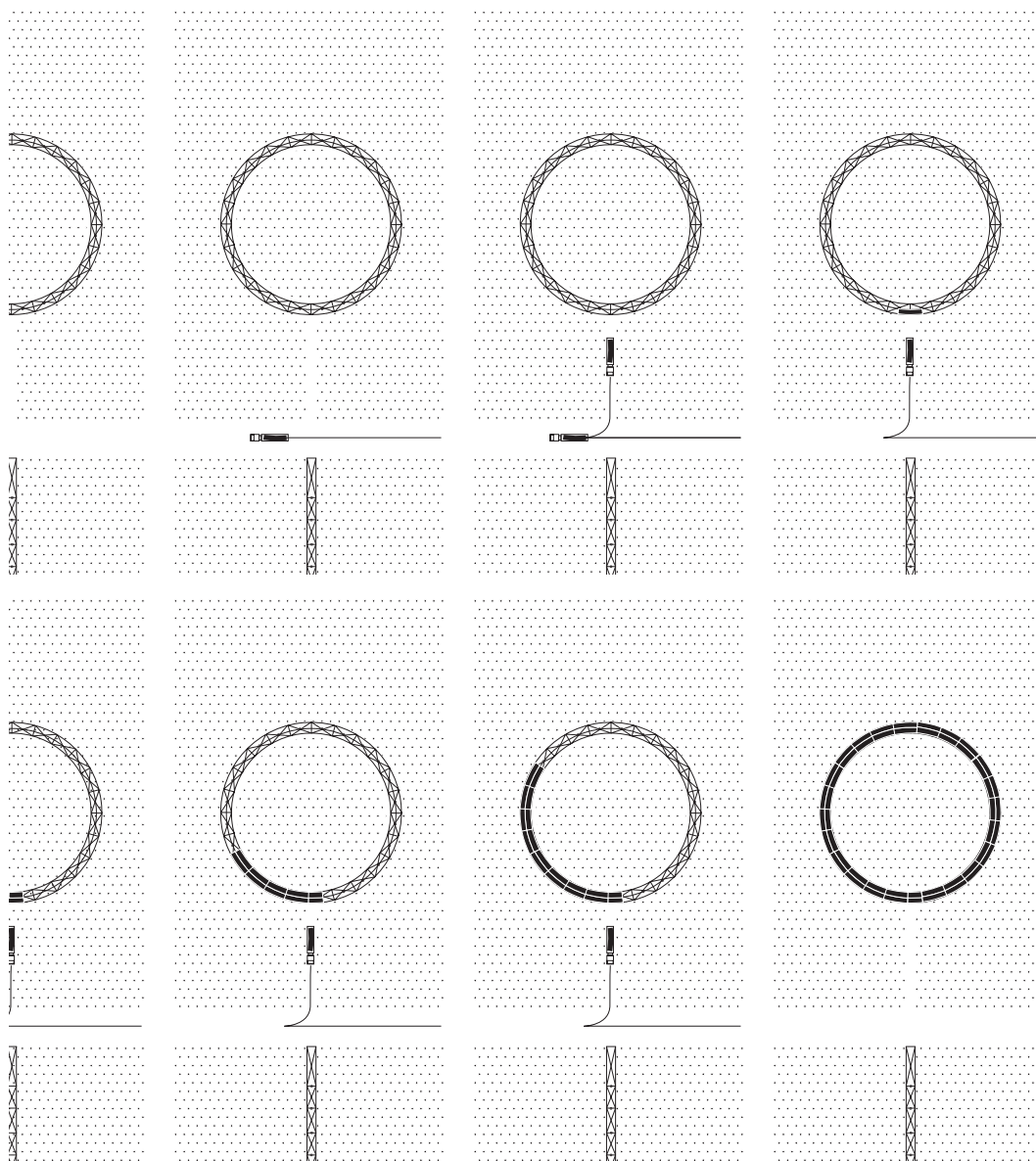


Section through the site and position of the *Pavillon du dictionnaire* on the upper summit (actual and 10:1 ratio)

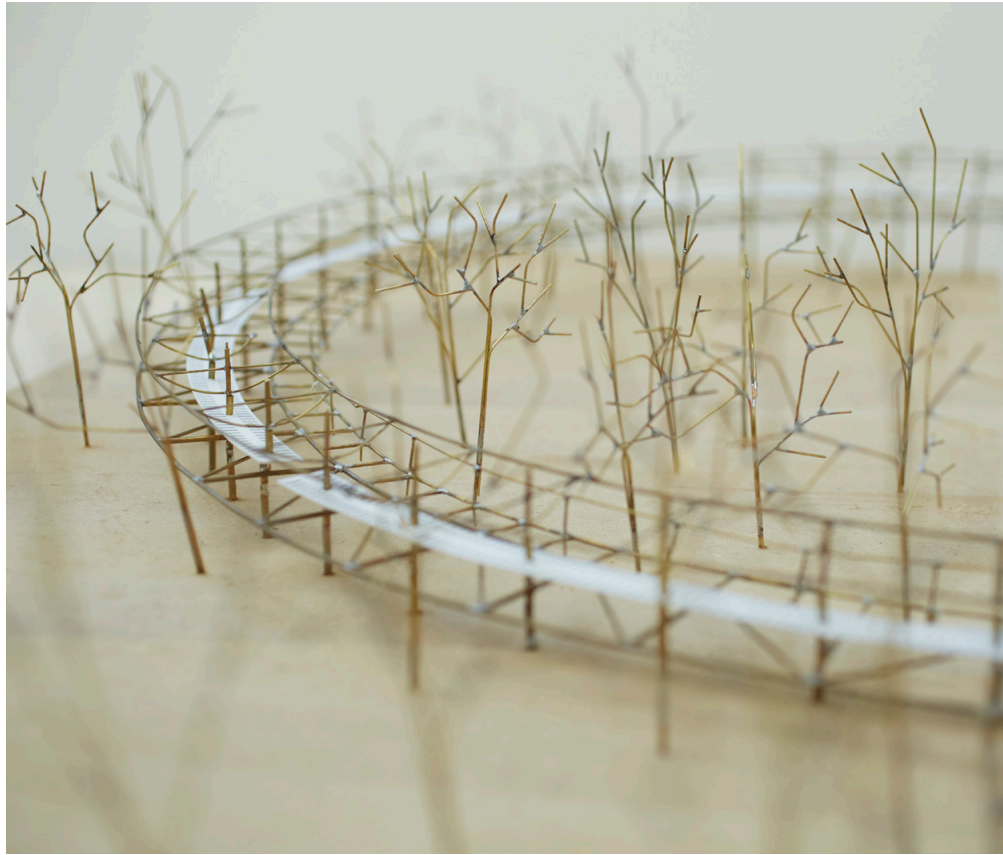


Topography, Olmsted Way, extends of the Mont-Royal conservation area and the *Pavillon du Dictionnaire* (in red)





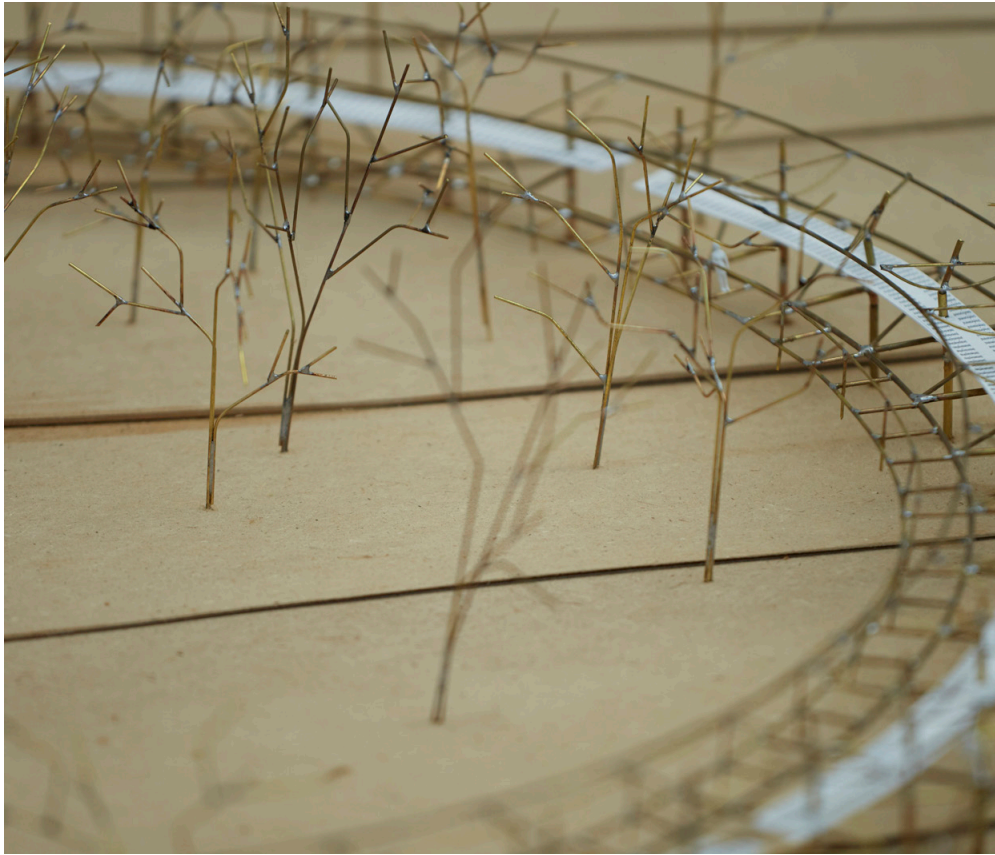
Implementing the *Pavillon du dictionnaire*  
(and its' belvedere) within the existing forest.



Model of the *Pavillon du dictionnaire*



Model of the *Pavillon du dictionnaire*



Model of the *Pavillon du dictionnaire*





Model of the *Pavillon du dictionnaire*





**Building a *Parc de la langue française***  
**Retracing my steps as a designer**

**Book Three -  
Retracing my steps as a designer**

# Finding

Koen de Winter

In 1989, I attended a lecture by Koen de Winter. I was in my first year as a young design graphic design at the respected École de design at Université du Québec à Montréal. Koen is a world-renowned designer, the only Canadian designer with objects in the Museum of Modern Art's collection in New York. He was presenting some of the projects he had been involved in the past 20 years, first as a designer in Sweden, then here in Canada. He told us a story that would greatly influence me.

He was approached by a large hospital to design disposable cutlery and tableware. The hospital was simply losing too much money with the existing plates and bowls which had to be replaced often due to breakages. It was also quite heavy, making it difficult to carry from the kitchen to the cafeteria, to the washing machine and back. The hospital had calculated that changing to disposable tableware would save them a great deal of money: no more handling and washing. On man-hours alone, they would reduce their operating costs significantly, which would allow them to spend money more wisely, on patient care for example.

This was the early 70s, the environmental consciousness was not as developed as today. Which makes Koen de Winter's response all the more striking. He first asked his clients why the dishes broke so often. He realized that their weight was an important factor: they would be piled high at time of great affluence and the trays would then be very difficult to carry and dishes would often fall. Instead of designing new disposable tableware and the significant impact it would have on the amount of garbage produced each day, thousands of plates and cutlery thrown out every week, every month, every year, de Winter set out to redesign the handling system. He devised racks that could be left in the cafeteria; patrons would be encouraged to place their dishes in these new racks and cafeteria staff could then simply roll the mobile rack to the dishwasher. The new tray system would then go directly from the racks into the washing machine, taken out after the drying cycle and put out

again for the kitchen staff to use. The plates, cups and cutlery would always be carried and stored in that new tray system.

The whole process became much more efficient: dishes were no longer transferred from one tray to the next. This literally eliminated breakages and saved a great deal of time. These systems are now in common use across America and Europe in hospitals and hotels. Koen de Winter did not design disposable tableware as first asked, he studied the brief carefully and proposed a different answer.

Cedric Price

After studying graphic design at École de design UQAM, I enrolled in architecture at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. Mary Lou was a young teacher there at the time. She was very inspiring and I would grow a lot from her teachings, but the first thing that comes to mind when I think about her is this story of the time she was working as an architect in London. She had heard first-hand about how The London Transit Authority (LTA) had contacted Cedric Price, then a young architect with very few projects to his name who would later become one of the most influential architect of his generation, to design a new bus station. They sent him the documentation of the site and their requirements. He began to work, and realized rather quickly that something was wrong. He had studied the different transit maps, showing the different bus routes and correspondences and he simply did not understand why they needed a new bus station on the proposed site.

He phoned the LTA to inquire about this. He explained that by looking at the transit maps, he could see that there was a few problems, some redundancies and areas that were not as well served as they should be, but he could not understand why a new bus station was required. He added that the few problems he did see could be solved by making a few circuit changes, and proceeded to describe the proposed changes in detail. There was



a long pause at the other end of the line. The gentleman from the LTA asked Price to go over the proposed changes a second time and took careful notes. "I will show this to our traffic engineers and will get back to you shortly," he said. He did just that and a couple of weeks later he phoned Cedric Price with the result of their analysis of his proposal. "You are right, if we proceed with the changes that you suggest, we do not need a new bus station - Thank you Mr. Price." End of discussion, problem solved. Cedric Price had just lost a lucrative architectural contract, one that would surely have brought him much needed exposure as a young architect.

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These two stories, of de Winter and Price, taught me early on that objects and buildings are always the result of a set of circumstances within a given community, and that working as a designer to the benefit of those communities is really what design is about. The form and materiality of a given project are only the outwards manifestations of a much broader set of circumstances - the tip of the iceberg.

These two stories revealed the often hidden side of design - and introduced me to a career I now wanted very much to pursue. It led me from studying graphic design at École de design UQAM, to architecture at the University of Waterloo, to landscape architecture at Université de Montréal, to working early on in my career for immensely talented people like Bruce Mau in Toronto, Claude Cormier and Gilles Saucier in Montreal, to then running my own respected trans disciplinary design practice for 14 years, to now, back at École de design UQAM as full-time professor.

It has been quite a journey, a mixture of intuition and chance that has led me down this road. It would provide me with a very specific set of skills. The most important one being a keen sense of design's ability, as a human endeavour, to tackle the complexity of our world and offer inspiring answers.

I began teaching full-time in 2011. We are now in September 2016. I am finishing a Master of architecture from the University of Waterloo. I was extremely fortunate to be granted a one-year leave from teaching in order to pursue this. I took on Building *Le Parc de la langue française* as outlined in book Two.

That project managed to reconnect me with my life as a designer.

This is the story of that journey.

You see, even before embarking on this thesis, even before deciding to become a full-time professor (or perhaps because of it), I had lost myself. I felt disengaged and restless; my lifelong commitment to design was wavering. As design had always been at the centre of my life, of how I defined myself and my relationship to the world around me, this left me quite distressed.

This was my state of mind as I embarked on this thesis. So it would be a design exercise as well as a quest to feel re-engaged. I am not sure that this was a wise decision. A thesis is already a difficult endeavour, trying to do it while questioning the very core of who you are is probably not the best situation. But somehow it worked.

So the following text is about me, about my career and about what I learned in Building a *Parc de la langue française*. I feel it is pertinent to a design thesis because design - as a student, as a practitioner, and now with the responsibility of educating a new generation of designers - is at the very core of this story. Perhaps I am only fighting my own demons in this. If so, it will still provide a window into the struggles of a designer in Canada and will possibly allow you to see a bit more of the iceberg that lies under the surface.

Louis Fortin

In looking for answers, I think that somehow the following story is important.

A student was doing a series of interviews about design and process and he asked whom I most admired. And the first person that came to mind was not a designer at all. I was thinking of Louis Fortin. He is my cousin's husband. He is the director of a rehabilitation centre for violent offenders in Montreal. He works with ex-convicts who have spent at least 15 years in jail. That means people who were sentenced for very serious offences, including murder. He takes people who have spent the major part of their adult life in prison, and tries to give them the tools to survive outside of it. He and his team are quite successful. He rarely speaks of work unless you ask him about it. We had the chance to talk on a few occasions and I grew to admire him and what he did greatly. His role was not to judge - the court had done this already - he was there to help, if possible. Sometimes it wasn't, and he did not lose sleep over it. But when it did become possible, he would go to any lengths to succeed.

Louis had a dog, Icare, which was trained as a seeing-eye dog and then as a therapeutic aid. Icare would coexist with the staff and men staying at the rehabilitation centre. Icare would give his trust to people who were kind to him, and the men's interaction with him was a big indicator of progress for Louis. One ex-client had come back to the centre after his release. He asked if he could stay for a couple of weeks at the centre, he was having problems and was afraid he would do something foolish again. Louis and his staff opened their door to him. He did get better and went out again to try and make it work. When he came back, a year later, Louis was concerned. Here was this guy coming back yet again. Maybe this wasn't the right solution. As it turned out, the man was doing very well, had found a job and felt happy about the possibilities that were now open to him. He was back for two things: he wanted to thank everyone for helping him, and he had a favour to ask. He took Louis aside and asked if he could borrow his car and his dog for an afternoon.

What? He explained that freedom for him was having a car and a dog that would stick its head out to feel the wind. He wasn't going to have a car or a dog anytime soon, but he was wondering if he could indulge, just for a few hours. Louis agreed. So he went off on a ride without any destination, Icare on the passenger seat, head in the wind. The man came back after two hours, beaming, tears in his eyes. Louis had given him the thing no one else would - a moment of pure freedom - perhaps a lifetime of possibilities.

And Louis is a gentle father and husband who goes fishing every year with his good friends. At their wedding, I met many like-minded friends, and truly enjoyed myself, feeling a kinship with people I barely knew. There was something about Louis, about what he did and who he was, that touched me greatly. He had succeeded in building a worthwhile life and it was contagious.

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This answer surprised me.

I have had the chance to meet many inspiring designers in my career, many through close collaborations, people who were both great designer and great human beings, gentle, generous and passionate. And they, like Louis, had touched many people's lives with their work. Yet Louis was the benchmark. How could this be? Surely, I do not have to justify myself. I admire Louis and this does not take anything away from all the other people I admire. But I remain puzzled by my own answer, as a mirror to who I am, it is showing a side of me I was perhaps not paying enough attention to.

I needed to reconnect with my passions, to the people and things that are important to me. In a past crisis, I had used my graphic design skills on a similar task. I made a list of everything I loved. It included people I love, either close to me or people I know of, people I admire; it included favourite things; favourite actions. The list is quite long. It was written very quickly and I was having a hard time making sense of it. I decided, quite

arbitrarily to alphabetise it. Previously unrelated things started to converse and draw a portrait of myself. Ok, this was interesting. I decided to print a small booklet, all the words starting with the same letter on a single page, 26 pages, one for each letter. The words were placed vertically on the left side of the page and a grid extends from them to the right of the page. The idea was to carry this small booklet with me and, periodically, to check the appropriate boxes as I completed these activities or indulged in any of the things included there. I could not do this each day: it proved too cumbersome and distracting. But doing this once a week proved a very good exercise. I would sit down to lunch on Fridays, alone, and fill out the booklet. I would simply check the boxes and include a brief description of the context. Under Ella Fitzgerald “listened to some of her songs on Thursday.” Under Sun “took time to sit in the park Monday morning.” Under André (my brother) I had phoned him on Tuesday to plan a supper, I had not seen him in a long time. This would take me roughly 90 minutes, and while checking away - patterns would emerge. Some things would come back again and again, others would be ignored. At this point, I would consciously choose things that I had not done in a long time, simply by opening the booklet at a given page and make that action / person / thing part of my day. I was discovering anew who I was through the things I loved. This had helped me tremendously. Surely in this new moment of crisis and self-doubt, I could revert to the same tactic. But the questions I was asking now were different - I was looking to reconnect in order to make decisions about where to go next.

Recounting my admiration of Louis to a design student made me realize that I had met incredible people over the years. Maybe I needed to listen to them again, rediscover what I had learned from them. This is what I propose to do here. Explore chronologically the events and people that have shaped me. The experience of going back to school, of Building a *Parc de la langue française* had begun to show me the way - but I needed to understand this in more detail. There would be a time where the thesis would end, but my career as professor of design is only just beginning.

Louise Viger and Serge Murphy

I was not accepted in Architecture school. I had applied to two local universities, Université de Montréal and McGill, but my grades were simply not high enough to allow a spot in first year. I had also applied to another architecture program at Université Laval, in Quebec city, where my sister had studied architecture and I was accepted there, but did not want to move away at that point.

I had yet another option: I had applied to yet another bachelor's program, Graphic Design at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). I had done this mostly out of curiosity; I did not know exactly what graphic designers did, but I had been invited for an interview. It turned out that the selection committee had also acted out of curiosity. They were curious to know how a student who had studied Pure and Applied Sciences in Cégep had managed to build an extensive art portfolio, and why I was interested in graphic design.

That portfolio was the result of work produced in art classes I had attended under the immensely capable hands of two great artists / teachers, Louise Viger and Serge Murphy, at Cégep Montmorency while studying sciences.

I was enrolled in an art class tailored specifically to those in the sciences curriculum. I had always been interested in drawing and arts. It was part of our daily lives: my mom was always drawing or doing collages; our house was full of books on art; and my sister Suzy had just graduated from architecture school at the time. My brother is a mechanic but also artistically inclined; I learned from him that you could do great work quickly, that precision was not the product of slowness. My father was a doctor with a small home-based practice. He did not draw much, but had always dreamed of being able to draw faces - he knew that no two faces were alike and this fascinated him.

This first art class in Cégep was to prove, almost, a total disaster. The teacher (someone who was not part of the full-time Arts program given at that Cégep, but brought in specifically for us "science students") gave us color wheel exercises, self-portraits, still

life drawing and concentrated on the technical aspects of drawings, along with a series of lectures that felt disembodied to me. I was miserable, but did have access to the Art department studios, and since I needed an escape from my sciences classes, I spent a great deal of time there, every chance I got. Our teacher had given us one exercise that resonated with me: we had to explore plaster castings. When the studios were less busy I spent a long evening and an early morning conducting experiments. In the end, I had over 40 different casts, each using a different proportion of plaster, water and as many different additives as I could find. Some crumbled, some were almost impossible to take out of the mould- I had had a lot of fun.

Louise Viger and Serge Murphy, both highly respected artists then and now, were teachers in what is a well respected full-time Arts program. They saw this large array of casts and wondered who had done them. They asked their students - no one knew. They asked the other teachers - they did not know either. I met them as I was clearing out the casts, as we had to do before the end of every week. They congratulated me on the casts and we began to talk. When they asked me if I would continue with other art classes, I had to admit to them that the course offer was really slim for science students but that I really enjoyed spending time in the studio. They offered me a place in the full-time Arts program; I would have access to all art classes given here, while pursuing my science courses. I accepted immediately. This was a big deal because students from all over the region would apply to this arts program but few were chosen.

I took more and more art classes with each term, completing them on top of all my other science classes. Spending time in the art studios was heaven, a much needed escape from the demanding science courses (that I needed if I was to go to architecture school). It was also one of the few spaces in the whole building that had any natural light... (There was even a rumour that this school had been designed to be converted into a shopping mall if there were not enough students; this explained all the service corridors placed at the periphery and thus blocking natural light to the classrooms).

I did not realize at the time the immense privilege of those discussions with Louise and Serge and other artists who would gravitate around that program - Charles Guilbert and Gilbert Boyer among others. Louise once showered me with praise for an essay written on a Michel Goulet exhibition, but I did not pay attention, I had simply written what came to mind and did not see much value in what I had written.

At first, I was somewhat of an outsider in the art department, but I slowly became one of the gang. I had no illusion or desires to become an artist but I very much enjoyed their company and the questions raised in our numerous discussions. I realize now that I enjoyed being somewhat of an outsider, I could have a different point of view and that was always very stimulating intellectually.

Frederic Metz and Alfred Halassa

Back to the Graphic Design admission interview room, may 1989. I told the interview panel about my meeting with Serge Murphy and Louise Viger, how they had saved me from otherwise difficult Cégep years. It was a good discussion, led by two strong figures: Frederic Metz (a Swiss born designer who had come to Montreal to work on Expo 67 and decided to stay) and Alfred Halassa (a polish poster artist). They would ask quick questions and expect quick answers. I remember that I was very nervous but that we laughed a great deal. My answers were not the expected answers, yet I stood by them. I simply did not know any better...

I was accepted in this Graphic Design program - one of the lucky 50 students accepted from over 600 applications received that year. And in our very first class Frederic Metz gave us an incredible lecture. He asked why taxis in Montreal were not yellow and why public trashcans in Montreal were taken away in the winter. He handed out several Montreal phone books and asked us to find a specific restaurant in the phone book (we



couldn't find it because it was listed under "café" and not "restaurant" or its official name). These questions were to instil in us a sense that design was about looking at the broader issues: designers were not only concerned with color or form, but how these made sense somehow.

Alfred Halassa was one of our first professors. He was trained as an architect in Krakow and taught us that design is both an intellectual exercise and a muscular one: we had to draw and draw and draw, produce at first huge quantities of work, train our muscles and then train our minds to edit and find the gem among the production, developing our own critical position that would allow us to learn and invent. He brought us in contact with the immensely rich poster culture from Poland, inviting colleagues from Krakow to teach at UQAM. One such person, Mieczysław Górowski - a world-famous poster artist - was to be a memorable meeting for me. In his vest pocket, he would carry all he needed to work: a few small brushes, a tin with maybe 3 or 4 tablets of pigments, some cheese cloth to apply texture and a few short pencils, sharply chiselled. He would draw his posters on a small, postcard-sized piece of cheap paper. From this he would produce some of the world's most memorable posters. They would then be blown-up, often 800 % and would find their way to Poland's city centres, taking over the public space for a brief period, announcing a play or an exhibition and probably winning an international award in every contest in which they were entered. This is powerful stuff to learn as a student, all thanks to Alfred. [It is strange writing this now, as I am now a tenured professor of Graphic Design in that school. In fact, I occupy Frederic Metz's old office and Alfred is my office neighbour. He gave me a great bottle of Polish vodka when I received my permanent status in the spring of 2015; it almost broke my toe the other day when it fell from our freezer.]

Angela Grauerholz

You might know Angela's work. Canada Post just issued a stamp with one of her photographs. Last year she was awarded a Governor General medal for lifetime achievement in the arts and received the 2015 Scotiabank photography award. A book by the Steidel press, showcasing 30 years of work as a photographer, will be coming out shortly and completes an extensive list of publications on her work. Angela taught typography and book design (she retired last Spring). Initially, I was planning to do only one year in graphic design and reapply to architecture school but Angela's teachings convinced me to stay. To her, design was about process and attention, presence and intent. Her teaching methods were not particularly effective - one had to read between the lines quite a bit - but what you got in exchange for your perseverance was exposure to a very beautiful attitude towards work, where you needed to study very hard and trust yourself, trust the process.

In 2001, there was a fire in her home. She and her husband, also a professor and artist, lost all their books. This was devastating for them, almost too much to bear. Angela decided to retrieve the fire and water damaged books to photograph them. She managed to recuperate roughly 75 books. Each were photographed in a studio, front and back, and printed in large format, 80 cm x 120 cm. The result is a series called *Privations*, first shown at the Montreal Biennale in 2002. These photographs are absolutely mesmerizing. Each standing next to the other, you first wonder what they are, and as you recognize these shapes as books, when you realize what has happened to them, there emerges an incredible sorrow but also an uplifting. Angela had transcended a traumatic event and brought us with her to this place where wonder is again possible. I speak of this work because it is emblematic of her teachings and research. She has created a very high standard for me to aspire to.

Denise Gauthier

I took a History of Contemporary Architecture elective as part of my graphic design curriculum. A teacher named Denise Gauthier gave it. After class towards the end of the term, I asked her for advice: “I want to study architecture, which school should I go to? Université de Montréal? Laval? McGill or Carleton?” I was holding four fingers up, one for each school mentioned, thumb folded into my palm. She took my hand, unfolded my thumb and said “Waterloo. If you can get in, it is the best school in Canada, perhaps North America. Don’t miss your chance to be part of that school.” She went on to explain that Waterloo had a great Cultural history stream and had a coop program, where you would combine academic work with work terms in architectural offices, and they also had a Rome program, during which fourth year students would spend a year in Rome, seeing first-hand what most students only studied in books.

Ok, that was a convincing speech. I was 22 years old, still living with my parents in the suburbs of Montreal - this might be a good idea.

Two weeks later, I drove down to Waterloo with my good friend Jean-Louis Léger who had taken the Contemporary Architecture course with me and was also thinking of pursuing architecture after graphic design. I don’t remember much about the trip, except staying in the students’ residence overnight, walking into the school the next day and being greeted by someone walking through the front lobby, asking us if we had any questions. As it turned out, it was Rick Haldenby, director of the school. I told him about Denise Gauthier and what she had said about the school. He laughed, shook his head gently up and down while playing with his beard, as if he was saying to himself: “maybe we are doing something right in the end.” He wasn’t boastful, simply proud somehow and encouraging, reminding us that we were making an important decision, that we had, by choosing architecture, chosen a worthwhile endeavour. He wished us good luck on that path, here or elsewhere.

Rick Haldenby and Meg Graham

As for the graphic design program at École de design, many applied to the Architecture program at Waterloo but few were chosen. The admission committee at the time conducted interviews across Canada. I was to attend the interviews in Ottawa. My parents came with me; we stayed in a Holiday Inn hotel. I was still very young, very naive, half realizing what I was getting into but excited about the possibilities. My portfolio was now quite elaborate, with work from three years as a student in graphic design.

The interview went well. I argued with Professor Robert Jan van Pelt about the cover typeface he had chosen for his last book. I spoke of Collège Montmorency where I had studied in Cégep as the most significant building I knew [It was significant because it was so bad - some student probably dropped out of school because of it, thinking that studying was not for them when they were simply getting bad vibes from an awful building.] And on the question “Why is there such bad architecture out there?” I answered: “Because architects don’t believe in their ideas enough” – “Really?” – “Yes, without a doubt.” I would have a very different answer now, but somehow, I was convincing and granted a place in first year.

I was accepted into a community that would shape me more than any other. The students were from all over Canada and abroad and a very motivated group. I had a graphic design background, which proved to be quite an asset. I had learned at UQAM the culture of a design project, how one both explores and directs, folds as many aspects into the project as possible. I did well, winning the studio Design prize for the first year. My classmates caught up rather quickly and by second year I was struggling to keep up. I managed to get the third year studio Design prize but was again way behind in fourth year. This is a great school.

There were so many important people in my life then, fellow classmates and teachers. Rick Haldenby, Rick Andrewghetti, Mary-Lou Lobsinger, Steve Mannell, Dereck

Revington, Andrew Filasky, Marie-Paule Macdonald, Donald McKay, Fred Thompson, Mike Elmitt, Terri Meyer-Boake, Val Rynnimeri - all very different teachers that somehow managed to share a vision. There would be one question asked at the end of term reviews, always the same one, simply “Why? Why do you propose this, here, now?” In first year, the answer could be quite simple, could be motivated mostly by personal preferences. As the years went on, the same question would be asked but our answers had to be more and more grounded in an ever-expanding context, socially, culturally and politically. It was very reassuring to be asked the same question. We learned that our first year projects were no less important than the fifth year thesis: it is the same quest for relevance. The school made certain that we understood that this was a question we would ask all our lives as practicing architects, and ultimately, as citizens.

There is one teacher that I have deliberately left out of the above list for now: Robert Jan van Pelt. He is my thesis director now and has been an active participant in my success from my initial interview on. I will come back to him.

At first, I simply worked on my own. I had a spot near a window in our studio, and would spend all my time there. I was the guy in the corner, working. I moved away from my isolation slowly. There is a moment that has stayed with me as if it had happened a couple of hours ago. We were on a field trip in Toronto, walking as a small group. Meg Graham was alongside me. She is small, red-haired and looked rather conservative. I was to be proven completely wrong. As we walked along the street, we saw a woman with a small dog, very small, making their way slowly on a busy sidewalk. Meg leaned her head against mine, looked at the dog and whispered in my ear “Let’s kick it.” We became good friends on the spot. She heads a very successful small architectural practice now in Toronto with her husband. She came to lecture in the school a couple of months ago; she has not lost any of her wit or passion.

I had managed to make friends towards the end of the first year and we became a very close bunch, some of us sharing a house, moving away for a work term and finding each

other again after four months. This ritual brought us close. We were all coming of age in this convoluted process; we needed to share those experiences. This probably shaped us as much as anything the teachers did.

I was to get to know my classmates really well. Each had a passion, their own brand of being in the world. Jason Jondreau for example, had this amazing energy. When we worked together, he would be firing in all directions: trying too many things at once, too eager somehow, always very ambitious. He would almost always be disappointed by his own work, somehow not achieving exactly what he wanted. Here was a very intelligent, sensitive and hard working student, but he had a hard time pulling it all together in the last stages of our projects and would feel let down. But he didn't give up, he kept at it, and his work improved over the years. He remained a puzzle for me until he invited a bunch of us to a concert in Toronto. His uncle George Westerholm was part of a band called Sinphonic that played Rockabilly songs, all original material, no covers. [George would write the lyrics and would go on to write for *This hour has 22 minutes*, one of Canada's funniest TV shows ever]. As it turned out, Jason was also going to be onstage, playing second lead guitar (or whatever you call someone who accompanies the lead singer / guitarist but is not playing base). Jason was on fire. He was like a fish in water, weaving chords in and out of the main score, truly enjoying himself, in complete control, even pushing himself to the limits of what he could do. It was beautiful. There I understood immediately. This is what Jason was looking for in his work. I don't know if he found it, I suspect he has. I haven't spoken to him in ages. I hear he works in Australia now as an architect.

This is just a glimpse of this amazing group. I was proud at first to have been accepted into this very selective school, but in the end, I felt pride in being simply one of the gang.

Lorenzo Pignatti

I spoke earlier about design and how it is still an unknown quantity in Canada than, say, Italy. I have learned this first-hand, while on a work term in Rome, that it is a very different scenario in Europe. Lorenzo Pignatti, director of the Waterloo School of architecture Rome Program and principal in the firm Studio di architettura, hired me. His firm needed help in designing a new church and he offered me a job. I would be heading to Rome ten months prior to joining classes as part of our fourth year Rome studio. I was quite excited: I would also be getting away from a bad work term in Toronto doing Bank of Montreal branch rollouts. [This consisted in trying to fit an abstract architectural concept done by another architect to the different locations, ignoring local needs or opportunities as much as possible, trying to change as little of the initial concept, in order to keep the “brand” intact. In this, I saw all that could go wrong when we try to build an abstract corporate culture over the value of people and places]. As soon as Lorenzo confirmed the outlines of employment by fax, I announced to my employer that I was leaving and three weeks later, I was in Rome.

I learned that when you begin a project in Italy the basic premise about what we do as designers - reflect on the broader implications, find the project, try different things and finally use your expertise to give presence to form - is understood by the client and most of those involved in the process. They also understand that it is not a linear process; that form might be a way of discovering the larger implications, that finding the project might take some time. Of course, there is a price to pay for this. In Italy, it means working always in a collaborative venture, at least four or five very talented designers working on the same competition or project. There simply isn't enough work for all those architects in Italy, even in Rome, so they work together and the process is far from efficient. It has its charms, but at the time I found it exhausting. In France, the hierarchy is very strong: you work under someone until you are old enough, no matter your specific talents or energy,

or rather in spite of it.

This knowledge - that as designers in Canada, we are somehow pioneers - has been an important fact in both my career as a designer and a teacher. This realization led me to consider the constraints I encountered as simply inevitable, as part of the job - I simply had to learn to be more convincing and work harder.

Bruce Mau

Upon graduation from Waterloo School of architecture in the spring of 1998, I was invited for a job interview at Bruce Mau design (BMD) in Toronto. Bruce Mau and his team had done work very few Canadian firms could aspire to. Here was a design firm with a truly international scope, working with OMA / Rem Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, Zone Books and Sandford Kwinter, among others, always associated with ground-breaking work. It was exciting to think that this could be the next step in my career, that I could stay in this realm where ideas truly mattered and away from ill-conceived projects [such as Bank of Montreal branch roll-outs]. I had stayed behind in Waterloo, waiting for their call, but it did not come. I headed back to Montreal to look for work.

I began work at Saia et Barbarese architects almost right away. Most of the interesting young architects in Montreal had, at one time, worked in this firm. This was a great place to begin a career; I felt that I was somehow already part of a Montreal tradition and could hope to have a great career. Six months on, I got a call from Bruce Mau design, asking if I would be available for a two-month contract? I would be working on the preliminary design of a Frank Gehry building. Mario Saia, the firm's principal encouraged me to go, knowing that this was too good to pass up and that there would be a job for me when I got back. Therefore, two weeks later, I was in Toronto, working on developing a program for the Coca-Cola Museum, funded by a consortium of wealthy bottlers and designed by



Frank Gehry and partners (FOG). When Frank Gehry had received the commission to design a museum dedicated to Coca-Cola, he had turned to Bruce Mau to help in defining what such a museum would contain. It was an amazing project.

While designing a time-line as a main guide through the museum, we came upon a rather large problem. This time-line was to be anchored in the main stairways, a structural concrete circulation that would wrap around the central atrium. We developed this component in detail, as one of the key moments of the museum. But while doing a large scale mock-up, we discovered a major flaw: text read from left to right, so as you climbed the stairs, if you started reading the text to your right, this would naturally lead you down the stairs, not up. Text on the left would work, but the artefacts were on the right and the text had to relate to them. This was not something easily solved. We could make the steps as large as possible to allow a comfortable reading, but visitors would still move in a zigzag pattern, climbing up / reading down which was not the fluid experience that we were looking for. At some point, someone said that we should simply flip the whole building; that if we started the stairs to the right of the entrance instead of to the left, as Frank Gehry and Partners had designed, visitors would be reading to their left as they went up. Bruce picked up the phone and asked FOG if they could flip the whole building on its site. This was not a small matter, even thinking of such a change was difficult, let alone asking them if we could do it. But there was a spirit of open collaboration that made such exchanges possible. Everything was possible; the only thing that mattered was the end result and failure was not an option. You did not have to worry about stepping on anyone's toes, as long as you did your homework and made the project potentially better. Ultimately, the project was stopped, so we did not get to "flip" a FOG building, but the fact that they considered it was a great lesson for me.

At the end of those two months, Bruce asked me to stay and join the BMD team. Before I accepted, I had to go back to Montreal to finish work started there, but four months later I was back in Toronto.

At BMD, the attitude that everything was possible, that we could change at the last minute if needed, or simply not present at all if the work done simply wasn't conclusive, was a great learning environment. It turned out that everyone, no matter whether they were famous or not, were simply trying to do the best they could, and pushed the limits by collaborating, by creating an atmosphere of trust and possibilities. Sure, there were difficult periods where tempers flared, but everyone understood that we were simply trying to do a better project. To me, at the time, this justified almost anything. And Bruce Mau was a gentle director, always laughing, suggesting and asking the right questions. When things would start to slide, he would see it quickly, stop everything else, focus and find a solution. So this is how you did it, this is how you did world-class projects, not through force or battles, but ultimately through care and collaboration. Who knew! I saw the dedication and willingness to collaborate and the trust that this implied.

Claude Cormier, Gilles Saucier + André Perrotte

The intensity of work at Bruce Mau design proved to be too much. I was expecting, even looking for an intense work schedule - this was how projects got done - yet it became unsustainable for me as a way of life. I needed to have time for other things, no matter how rewarding the projects we worked on.

One day, I was offered a part-time teaching position in Waterloo. I proposed to take my Wednesdays off work and trade in my Saturdays instead, even my Sundays if needed. This did not fit in with BMD needs.

We sat down to talk about it, how the studio was already a rich experience, how they needed me full-time. Bruce is convincing, very convincing. This was to be his least convincing speech ever - I sensed that if he were in my position, he would probably leave.

So I decided to leave. Having left my main source of income in Toronto, I could not

accept the part-time teaching job in Waterloo. Instead I chose to head home to Montreal and look for work.

Claude Cormier runs a very successful landscape architecture practice. I had the chance of working there briefly a few years back, doing a competition [which we won for La Place d'Youville]. On the strength of this past experience and my involvement with BMD, he hired me. Claude was to be a true mentor to me. Again, laughter and collaboration were the main ingredients to his growing success. As a landscape architect, he would be often called to work with architects on proposals and competitions. He would always be the wild card, the one who thinks outside the box, the one who seems to be enjoying himself the most. This proved a welcomed change from the architects who often had a much gloomier attitude towards their predicament as designers. Claude is truly someone who listens, and listens very carefully. You would think, with his unconventional approach, full of humour and joie-de-vivre and very strong color palette, that there would be an overriding force, bending the project to his will, but that is not the case. He listens, does his homework, then and only then, does he propose his signature style. And it is always pertinent. Always. That was yet another invaluable lesson for me as a young designer.

Yet I was very stubborn; too stubborn. I wanted to lead my own ship. So after almost two years, I left the office to join yet another, world-renowned office, Saucier + Perrotte Architects (S+P). But it was written in the sky: I needed my own projects. Gilles Saucier sensed but hired me anyway and was very gracious, giving me as much room as he could. I learned a great deal in the year I spent in their office. Gilles - like Claude - believed that there was always a solution that would work for the client and his own aspirations, and he did not spare his time or effort on a given project, always ready to do more, to change the design as needed; always on his own terms - this needs to be clear - but still flexible and very dedicated. Once, a client announced that the budget for their project had to be cut by x amount. The project was already well along, almost at the construction documents stage. There was an entry pavilion that would cost exactly the same x amount. The client

proposed to simply cut this part of the program and move on. Gilles got up from his chair slowly and stood there. “I am the architect, you have hired me to make these decisions, let me make them” and sat down again. I suspect the client was a bit put off by this at first, but three weeks later, when the team presented a revised project that had met the new budget without cutting the entry pavilion, the client understood. Here was an architect who was willing to do the work, figure it out, and not make compromises simply because of budget constraints. This client is, I believe, still a loyal client to S+P, knowing that he can trust them to go the distance. [Gilles could also convince a client to spend much more than he could afford on a given project, but that is another story].

Brigitte Desrochers and Georges Adamczyk

While working at Claude Cormier Landscape architects and Saucier + Perrotte architects, I did small exhibition design projects on the side. It started thanks to Brigitte Desrochers (now architectural officer to the Canadian Arts Council). At the time, she was a consultant for the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), but was slowly heading towards another career as a researcher and manager. This dual career proved difficult for her and she asked me to help out with a project for the CCA. From the strength of this first collaboration, she then recommended me for larger projects, and thus a career in exhibition design began. It was perfect for me: small projects that were fuelled by both my architectural and graphic design background. I could do these part-time, but they started to take up more and more of my time. It was already an issue when working for Claude Cormier and this did not stop while at S+P. But I was very lucky yet again: when I decided to leave S+P to dedicate myself to exhibition design, Gilles Saucier and André Perrotte understood that I wanted to do my own projects. In fact, they hired me, this time as an outside consultant, to design a show featuring their work. This proved to be a fabulous experience, acting in

the end as both co-curator with Georges Adamczyk and exhibition designer.

When the exhibition opened in April 2001 in a gallery space that S+P had newly renovated, the whole architectural community was there and the project was a success. I was making a name for myself and was in extremely good company. I saw this as an extension of previous work with Bruce and Claude; it seemed that my career was launched, that I would continue to exist in this place where excellence was expected and all was possible.

Serge Belet, Louise Désy and Lewis Baltz

Another key moment was the unveiling of a Lewis Baltz exhibition I designed for the CCA. Serge Belet, then director of exhibition, had contacted me to do the graphic design of a show they were installing to celebrate the recent acquisition of a series of photographs, New industrial landscape in Irvine California, by renowned American photographer Lewis Baltz. They had decided to block off half of the Octagonal Gallery and squeeze all 51 photographs in a rather unfortunate arrangement. Granted, this is a very difficult space: octagonal as its name implies but with doors on three sides and an expansive skylight above. The proposed layout was a bad compromise that could not be fixed with clever graphic design. This is what I told Serge, and decided not to take on this project. Serge told me that they simply did not have any other options, but I disagreed and produced an alternate layout, which was presented a couple of weeks later: we would install a long freestanding wall across the anti-chamber to the Octagonal Gallery, giving us a wall long enough to accommodate all the photographs generously. They had never done anything like this in this room and were highly sceptical. There was also a problem with the lighting: there was no appropriate exhibition lighting in the anti-chamber; the photographs would have highly different light conditions along the continuous exhibition partition, and this was unacceptable. By looking at the scale model of the proposal, I

suggested that we include a new source of light, a long fluorescent tube, stretching across the full length of the proposed wall. This was in keeping with the industrial nature of the subject without being overtly illustrative, and the lighting conditions would be ideal. They accepted the proposal; I was back in the project.

We needed to find out how black and white photographs would react to long-term exposure to fluorescent light. The CCA conservation department worked really hard, contacting different manufacturers to get the specifications of the fluorescent tubes and comparing them to their lighting standards. None of it matched; there were simply no precedent for these types of fixtures in a museum setting. But they did not give up: they did their own test and finally found a suitable configuration, using dimmers and special UV filters applied directly to the tubes, keeping the aesthetics intact. This is work that they did; I simply did not have that expertise at the time. This is how fortunate I was, not only getting to design great projects in a prestigious institutions but learning in the process how to do things properly.

The design process would be a learning experience in its own right. I was learning everyday - and this is exactly what I had signed up for - what I had absorbed from passionate teachers and mentors such as Bruce, Claude and Gilles. It was probably a matter of faith; I believed that this was what design was all about.

Lewis Baltz was still alive at the time, yet he wasn't involved in the exhibition design. In fact, he wasn't able to attend the opening but joined us a couple of weeks later for a small symposium on his work held at the CCA. Lewis Baltz was 6'-3", tall and intimidating. Towards the end of the symposium, after the talks and the many drinks, he stood in front of me, leaned forward and puts \* his large hands on both my shoulders and leaned in more. "This is the first time that I have not been involved in the installation of this piece. It is one of my favourite piece, an early one, when I was just out of school. I am incredibly specific about how it should be installed. I have always been involved... until now. And I regret..." here I thought he was going to strangle me, he was obviously not pleased...

“That this is the best installation of this work to date. Thank you.” Phew.

The fallout from this project was even better than the S+P exhibition. Eric Marosi [a respected architect I had the pleasure of working with briefly as part of a work term] said to the director of exhibitions that I was one of them now, meaning I could stand on my own as a designer. Photographer Genevieve Cadieux said it was one of the best photography installations she had seen in a long time (and she had seen a great deal of them across the world).

So again, I was able to achieve what I considered to be an extension of work done under people like Bruce, Claude and Gilles. This is how I would measure the work of my new practice, thus began a 14-year adventure.

Thomas Schweitzer

In parallel to starting my own practice, I had the opportunity to teach part-time. Here again Waterloo School of architecture was to play an important role.

Waterloo professor Marie-Paule MacDonald was then giving an option studio in Montreal. It was the 4B term, second semester of fourth year, right after the Rome term. Students would either extend their European adventures by going to another semester offered in Finland, go back to Waterloo or opt for a semester in Montreal. Montreal was a popular option because the Rome term was often hard on personal finances: not everyone could afford to spend yet another four months abroad. Yet going back to small town Kitchener/Waterloo right after Rome often proved too much of a contrast. Back in Ontario, students often felt as if they had dropped off the face of the earth, stuck in the middle of nowhere. The memories of the Coliseum, the sheer materiality of Rome were too fresh and collided with the cheap, almost frontier-town construction of Kitchener/Waterloo. So Montreal, while feeling as if it had been bombed recently compared to the

density of Rome, was a great mediator, allowing a certain European flair to ease their way back to Canada.

The Montreal Waterloo studio was housed for the summer in the McGill architecture school, a very traditional campus right in the centre of the city, complete with its great lawn. It was my first contact with teaching apart from coaching first and second year students or being involved with end of term reviews in Waterloo. It went well: my knowledge of the City and emphasis on process proved useful to students and Marie-Paule and I worked well together.

It turned out that Marie-Paule was sharing an apartment with Thomas Schweitzer [an architect and Waterloo graduate] while in Montreal. Thomas was also teaching part-time at l'École de design de l'Université du Québec à Montreal (UQAM) as well as working for Dan Hanganu, then one of the best architectural firms in Montreal. For the upcoming fall term, because of the workload at the office, Thomas had decided that he would stop teaching altogether. He did this reluctantly because he enjoyed teaching a great deal and was much appreciated by the students and the school. As September came along, Thomas received a call from École de design: they were wondering where he was as classes were about to start. They obviously had forgotten that he had told them four months before that he would not be coming back. They were stuck without a teacher with only a few weeks to spare before the start of the semester. Marie-Paule knew that Thomas loved teaching and was only reluctantly leaving this role in order to meet the demands of the office. She suggested to him that he should share the workload with me, allowing him to teach yet making it more manageable by reducing the number of hours that he would have to spend teaching. So, on the strength of Marie-Paule's recommendation, Thomas phoned me up to offer the opportunity of sharing the teaching task with him. We got along perfectly: we had the same attitude towards what constituted good projects. So we began teaching together. I learned a great deal from his generosity and patience towards students.

It was a strange beginning for me at l'École de design UQAM. Here I was, holding a



part-time university teaching job but without having gone through a selection process. Thomas had simply suggested me as a teaching partner. This co-teaching was an alternative to him not teaching at all, so they had agreed. Such a collaboration, where one teacher shared his contract with someone else, did not have to go through the usual postings and admission protocols. For the first couple of years, none of the other teachers knew me. It was simply Thomas's studio, as usual.

L'École de design had two different programs then, Graphic design (where I had studied eight years prior) and Design de l'environnement, where I was now teaching. The latter is not your typical architectural curriculum, but a mix of industrial design, urbanism and architecture.

I have truly enjoyed teaching in this program. What the students lacked in focus they more than made up for with curiosity and hard work.

For me, design was design. Surely there were different cultures within the different disciplines, but I considered these completely artificial. There is, at the core of any design project, the willingness to take on the complexity of our contemporary condition and - literally - build a better world.

I would go on to teach part-time in the design de l'environnement program at UQAM for over 11 years.

Nicolas Olsberg, Gaetane Verna, Jacques Doyon, Luc Plamondon

The main focus for me as a designer remained my practice. I worked mostly on my own for the first years, hiring students part-time as needed to help in larger projects. And then full-time collaborators joined in and the firm gently grew from one, to two, to three, and finally four full-time employees.

The practice remained successful and the projects slowly grew in scale and complexity.

The Canadian Centre for Architecture was our main client for over seven years. Jacques Doyon, editor of the photography magazine *Ciel Variable* hired us to do a complete re-design of the magazine and produce three issues a year for the following five years, winning numerous graphic design awards along the way.

We began to tackle signage projects, and again won high praise: a first prize in the International Re-Design Award from the AIGA for our signage for the Ecocentre and a Grand prize for the same project in *Grafika* - the annual Québec graphic design awards.

A collaboration with Gaetane Verna of the Musée d'Art de Joliette was the basis for two great projects: a travelling exhibition on photographer Gabor Szilasi and a catalogue of their institutional collection which again won first prize in the Alcuin awards for excellence in book design in Canada. [Awards are far from the best indication of quality work, lots of great work does not receive awards, but they still show a certain measure of success as perceived by the industry. We did not enter many awards, but often distinguished ourselves when we did.]

The firm built strong relationships and continued to do noteworthy work. Up to that point, I somehow managed to live up to my mentors, managed to keep learning with each new projects. In fact the office was much more like a school or a research lab: employees were collaborators, involved in every step of the process from client meetings to production supervision and installation, and we were out to prove that design is an important actor in our society.

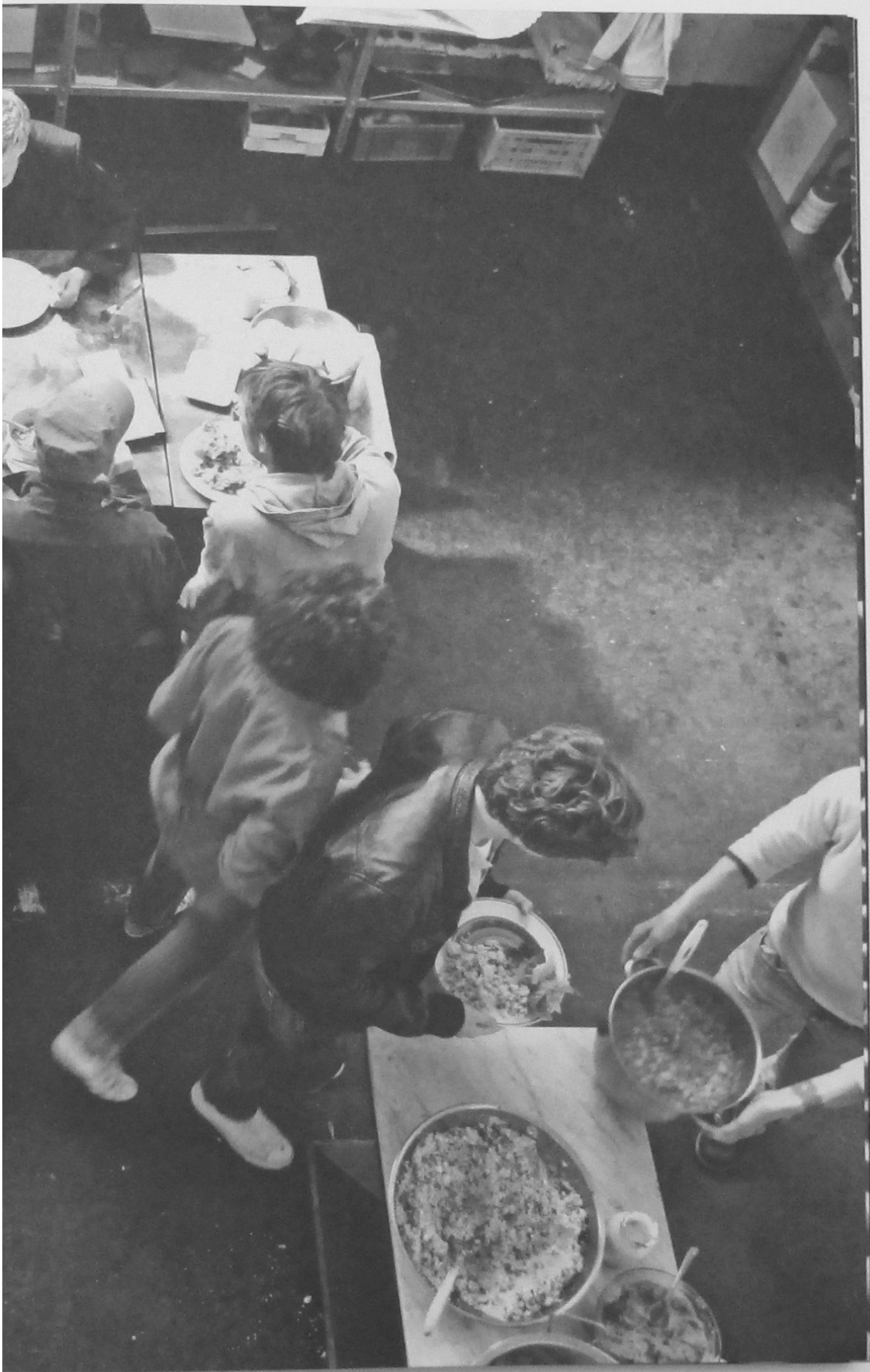
The studio space grew with the years, moving three times, always keeping its trademark open plan surrounded by a long row of fully stacked bookshelves: graphic design, architecture, landscape architecture and industrial design intermingled and provided us with a broad selection of possible projects.

Each year, just before Christmas, we invited clients, friends and students to a sit-down supper. We couldn't afford to cover all the costs, so we would ask for a cover charge. This wasn't a high-priced evening in the hopes of bringing in lucrative contracts: we simply

wanted to celebrate with the people we cared about. We did rent white linen and chairs and invite 60-70 people for Indian food. It was not a quick stand-up cocktail where you drink too much and need to get out in order to have some food before passing out. People could sit down and talk, and because of the varied mandates we took on, they often met people working in a very different field than their own. It has proven to be great fun, with returning guests each year. At our last supper in December 2013, the table stretched for over 15 meters.

There was an image in Olafur Eliasson's book *Take your time vol. 1: small spatial experiments* (2007) that represented the very essence of what we were trying to achieve: a photograph of a long table amidst a busy fabrication shop, tools mixing with food, people sharing a lunch and a passion for good work.





# Losing

Place des arts, Musée Pointe-à-Callière and other mistakes

Slowly, it became more and more difficult to identify a project with a person. We were taking on municipal projects and doing large offer of services that required a lot of work, with no one to relate to. I suspect this is what became more and more difficult for me. Here I was, finally getting projects of the scale approaching that of work done under Bruce, Claude and Gilles. I was building something. But in retrospect, I wasn't. I cared much more about engagement than scale. And I chose projects on the wrong premises - would we learn something by doing it - and not paying enough attention to the people involved and whether we had any shared passions. This led me to take on projects where the clients were not engaged or ambitious. At first, as a designer working in Canada, I thought that this was inevitable. And perhaps it was, but as the sole proprietor of a growing design practice, I lost my way. Work became tedious because we were working for people who did not care. We were working for institutions now and had lost access to people's commitment somehow. Our answer to these new conditions was to work even harder. I felt like a preacher, trying to convey a mission to people who were simply not interested. We were a service provider, not a collaborator, hired to do as we were told and not question anything. I had lost the privilege of asking difficult questions; they were not welcomed, they made for bad chemistry.

This could be easy to fix. I could downsize the firm, go back to smaller projects. But I didn't. I felt an obligation to my long-time employees to still believe, to show them that it was possible. Here I was acting as a teacher who did not want to reach the conclusion that sometimes, things were simply not possible or worth doing. It would be admitting defeat.

I started teaching more and more, because it was more rewarding and as a form of escape, of running back to a place where every passion had a venue and could blossom.

This led me to accept a position as a full-time teacher in Graphic design at École de design UQAM in 2011. The plan was to fill the order books so the practice could live on.

I would slowly migrate to teaching over the next six or seven years. I was deluding myself: this proved to be much more difficult than I thought. Teaching full-time was the start of a new career, not simply teaching a bit more and being involved in my practice a bit less. But it almost worked.

By 2014, we were going after large projects that would have a great deal of chance of coming through. Three employees were willing to take it on with me as a part-time collaborator. Out of four large commissions, two were almost signed and a third was very likely to work out as well. We needed only one of these contracts to keep the practice moving for the next year and beyond. We had a new name. We were ready. But in the end, none of the contracts came in and a large project we were working on was halted. I had to simply pull the plug; pay everyone right before Christmas and fill out end of work forms.

There would be no sit-down supper that year or the next.

Writing this, two years later, I realize that I do not have any regrets. I wish I were a better entrepreneur, someone who would have planned and taken full measure of what we were actually doing instead of simply thinking that it would work out in the end. It was maybe not a feasible business, but it was a great school. I am still in contact with former employees; they are doing very well: some have joined up to create their own firm. They will probably not make the same mistakes I made. They are engaged and proud and open. Yes, I would probably do it again for them.

Over the years I had ignored myself, pushed too hard against immovable obstacles instead of simply going around them. We achieved great things as an office, but it failed me as a way of life. Unfortunately, I have a great deal of difficulty separating work and life. Once Bruce Mau decided to put a “help wanted” add in *Now*, a popular street newspaper. He had devised a questionnaire that was to be printed full page: 50 questions ranging from “what is the difference between Sushi and Sashimi” to “who designed this or that”.



They were specific questions that would show the general culture of a person. Applicants were instructed to simply answer the questions and not research them extensively. BMD was looking for interesting answers, not necessarily the right ones. It proved to be quite a success. The office received numerous answers, and interviewed a great deal of very talented and motivated individuals [Bruce told me that years later, they were still fishing out of that pile of interviews when looking to hire people]. While writing the copy for the ad, Bruce asked our help in describing what type of person we were looking for. I proposed the following sentence: “We are looking for people who do not see a clear distinction between work and play” which Bruce liked very much and it was included in the final text. Kevin Sugden, a long-time BMD employee and one of the pillars of the office (and a Waterloo Architecture graduate) said to us at the time that such an attitude would kill us one day. Maybe he was right.

Personal worth resided in my ability to succeed in our projects. As this was taken away, it was not only a financial or professional crisis, but also the very definition of who I was that needed to be rebuilt.

My father was a general practitioner, with a small home-based practice. In the 90s, his health was deteriorating, and the government at the time was offering early retirement packages to older physicians in order to reduce the deficit. My mother urged him to accept this package, turn in and devote himself to his many other interests instead. He did it, but somehow lost his sense of self. He felt as if he was no longer someone who could help others, he was simply leading his life, his interests, and it proved unfulfilling for him.

### École de design UQAM

École de design UQAM was a second home to me. Beginning a new career there as a tenure-track position seemed like quite an honour and the perfect way to get re-engaged

with design, re-engaged with myself. I had studied graphic design there and worked at the school's exhibition centre, le Centre de design, a small exhibition venue dedicated to design: as soon as I had received my acceptance letter for the graphic design program, I had applied to work there, and started in May 1989, the summer before classes started. Georges Labrecque who was, and still is, the coordinator and designer there is another mentor. When I began to work there, it was housed in a neoclassical building at 500 Sherbrooke Street West. The specific exhibition space was originally a library, complete with beautiful stained glass window and light well. The floor was early linoleum, very porous. In fact, we could drill right into it to fasten a system of moveable partitions. When we would move the partitions again, the holes left behind - after a careful high-gloss wax shine - would miraculously disappear. There was a suspended grid, 12'-0" above the floor, constructed from heavy wires at 4'-0" intervals. This, combined with moveable light frame exhibitions panels and some freestanding walls, allowed multiple configurations. Georges Labrecque would exploit these to incredible effects. Each opening night, people would discover a totally different atmosphere. Sometimes the skylight or the side windows would be blocked, transforming the space dramatically.

For me, this was straight out of science fiction, a kind of Star Trek "Holo-deck", a gridded space that could be programmed with anything. Georges would sketch out a layout and the team would quickly move the walls to see if it achieved the desired results. My best friend and fellow graphic design student Jean-Louis Léger had joined the installation team. Going directly from drawing to actual three-dimensional space was to prove one of the most formative experiences for us as future architects. Not only were we able to test first-hand our initial intuition, but everything was possible: Georges would suspend the partitions horizontally, create raised platforms, include order material such as scrims and raw wood, all in the service of the specific content being shown. With very limited budgets, he created whole new environments. I took this for granted as a young designer: that museum spaces could be transformed at will. I soon realized that this was not only

uncommon amongst museums, but also literally unheard of. Some museums had flexible exhibition systems, but they would rarely exploit it as Georges has learned to do.

There was another tradition at l'École de design UQAM that was to prove extremely inspiring: Design International, a series of intensive workshops, conducted over ten days and given by designers from abroad. I had the opportunity of taking part in four Design International workshops. The first was Mieczysław Górowski, famous Polish poster artist (who would go on to stay at the school and teach other classes for a few years before going back to his native Krakow). Then there was François Lequerneq, again a poster artist who conducted a studio under the theme Liberté - Égalité - Fraternité. A third studio with Michael Speaks and Minke Themans centered on urban design. Finally, a fourth with Rosemarie Tissi, Swiss designer, who was then a finalist to design the Swiss currency. She was not pleased with my work. I had a good design on the first day and she was very excited about it. On the second day, I had another idea that she did not like as much and prompted me to go back to my initial idea. On the third, again another idea arose, even less successful than the second. On the fourth day, she started to lose patience with me when I presented yet another idea. So we fought, or rather she argued with me and I simply went on my way, trying to improve my ideas, but not going back. Finally, two days before the end of the studio, I went back to my initial idea and tried to develop it further. It worked, but Rosemarie was still mad at me, refused to talk to me on those last days. She was mad at me because I had spoiled all this time on other ideas when I could have perfected the first one. As I apologized to her, she looked at me intensely for a very long time - what was she going to say?

We were interrupted. The final speeches were to begin. She stood up in front of the class, began to thank the students and the organizers for a great ten days. Her gaze would come back to me as she spoke. At the end of her speech, she said that she had been reminded of something important in the past ten days. As a practitioner, she needed to be decisive and agile, working deliberately and quickly to gain a client's trust and make any

project a sustainable practice. But, she had learned during that week that sometimes one needs to wander and try different things, not rush into the first idea. She came to me after, told me that my project was way under-developed, that here was something significant that was somehow diluted. She also said that I was right to be curious, to try different concepts. “As a student, it is your role to explore” she apologized for pushing me towards a single idea.

As a somewhat unconscious 22 year-old, this had a big impact. It gave me confidence and pride in what I was doing. It probably shaped me as a teacher as well - at least I hope it did.

So l'École de design UQAM is a great place. If the office was not turning out as I hoped, being accepted among the professors of this great school was surely going to make up for it. Here was a way of consolidating what I knew, of contributing to building the school and help the students build a rich and meaningful career in design. I remember thinking that perhaps this was the path I should have followed all along.

But it was to prove the beginning of yet another difficult situation.

During the selection process for the position as a professor in Graphic design, I spoke of l'École de design as a design project in its own right, and that I was very excited about building this project with them. This, I felt, was well received and was probably a strong point in favour of my candidature. I was to realize over the first years, that the project of the school, as a matter of fact, did not exist. Each teacher had a very different idea of where the school should go. After many bitter battles, each had retreated to their own position. When the program committee meetings started to go badly because of these differences in opinions and personal rivalries, they simply stopped having those meetings.

In the first weeks and months, I would ask my colleagues for direction. Could they help me figure out what my position in the school could be? They simply stared back, with very little advice or direction to give me. Having both a graphic design and architecture

background, I was not a specialist, therefore, there were many courses I could teach: anything from first-year introduction to design to third-year end-of-studies studios. I could teach exhibition design or signage as I had done in the past, but I wanted to understand what the precise needs of the school were in order to develop and help l'École. This was a mistake. When I was asking for direction, they perceived it as a lack of confidence, as a flaw. It took me quite some time to understand this, way too much time. I had done my career a great disservice by being open when I should have been simply assertive.

I wasn't being welcomed into a new community, I was asked to prove my worth. And my worth as an academic was still something to define. I had taught for most of my professional career, so I knew how to teach effectively and this had been incredibly rewarding. This was why I had accepted this position in the first place. Yet, I was losing my bearings.

This is when I decided that now was a good time to take a leave and complete a Master's degree. I had been hired on the strength of my experience and on my three Bachelor's degrees. If I was to pursue an academic career, I needed to complete doctoral studies, but I would first need to get a Master's. This brings us to September 2015, and back, yet again, to the University of Waterloo School of Architecture.

# Searching

Waterloo School of Architecture was offering a one-year Master of Architecture to qualifying students. Having done the full five-year pre-professional and professional Architecture at Waterloo, I was eligible for admission to this program. UQAM was offering a full year off, with partial salary, to teachers wishing to complete graduate studies. The timing was right. Doing it early on and quickly also meant that in six years, I could take on a PhD.

I would also be going back to my roots somehow. Waterloo School of architecture had defined me as a designer and I was eager to see how it had changed in the last 15 years.

Sophia, Tin, Sneha, Safira, Marc-Antoine, Dennis and Anne Bordeleau

I would be going back to school [aged 46] in a school where the average is probably 24 or younger. Waterloo School of Architecture had moved into fabulous new facilities, on the canal in Cambridge, Ontario. Our young family - Cloé, Romane and Max (ages 8 and 6) would stay in Montreal. I would be in Cambridge full-time for the first semester, part-time for the winter semester and work from Montreal for the last term.

My initial idea was to find a small bachelor's apartment and isolate myself in work, much as I had done for my first year at Waterloo back in 1991. Instead, I chose to join the School's unofficial student housing coop, the Grand House. It was a giant home built on a steep site not far from the school. A former Waterloo student designed it as a Master's thesis in the first years the school had moved from the main Waterloo campus to Cambridge. Built by Students, the house ran as a coop for the first years. It has since been bought by a private owner but still caters exclusively to Waterloo architecture students. There are 14 small cubicle-like rooms, expansive communal spaces and a fabulous kitchen, all spread over three floors. This was to prove the perfect setting to get back into student life and the culture of the school. For the fall semester, the house would be full;

six second-year students (Cindy, Felix, Jenny, Justin, Tristan and Vincent), one third-year (Bianca), one first-year (Tin), three grad students ( Jay, Sophia and I) and the house managers Tiara and Gustavo.

On the first evening, after my first grocery run, I sat in the dining room, looking out over a parking lot to West Cambridge, the School and the Grand River: maybe this would work.

Teachers I had known previously were almost all still there, now part of a larger community that included many new teachers and staff. Again, the students came from varied backgrounds and constituted an incredible array of talent and commitment. The School had kept its spirit.

This was made very evident by the quality and diversity of the studios offered. We had to choose between four teachers, each holding out a variation on what the first semester would be. In the main lecture hall, each presented his work and attitude towards the upcoming semester. We would then signify our preference and groups would be formed. I chose Anne Bordeleau's studio along with Sneha, Dennis, Pawel, Desiree, Kat, Stephen, Jay, Marc-Antoine and six other students. Surely I was the odd person in that group, but I quickly felt that I belonged here. I wasn't a teacher anymore. I was a student, with all the privileges and expectations that came with that.

Here I was, among a group of young adults, each facing probably the last years of school before jumping into practice, each facing a very significant transition. I felt the same way. Somehow, if they were transitioning from being students to professional architects, I was still trying to come to grips with the passage from practice to academia. We shared this moment where things matter somehow, where we were defining something about ourselves that would hopefully endure.

It must have been strange for Anne Bordeleau: I was a design professor joining her studio as a student. I should have known how to do this but I was as lost and eager as the other students, exploring many avenues but not necessarily with as much intent as expected from someone with as much experience.



We would meet almost every week. This proved to be too often for me. My research pattern is not linear, can shift from week to week before it settles down. I explore by doing instead of doing what I think is best. I could see Anne's puzzled face as yet another idea or undigested position would be presented. I was not making a statement: I was exploring possibilities.

It was a struggle. At one point, I even felt as if an academic setting for design work was actually an impoverished context compared to practice. Here we were trying to do a project without a client, where everything was up for grabs. This should have been liberating, but the constraint of practice had always been the lever you used to do great work, work engaged, by definition, in making the world a better place. You had to convince others, and if you did, the project might actually get built. Practice was not a place of compromise to be contrasted with academia's freedom. Also, as a teacher myself, I had many unresolved questions about how to best teach design.

My reviews went badly, to the great dismay of my fellow students who took for granted that I had this down somehow. I suspect it was refreshing for them, to see that, no, this isn't easy; that they were struggling because it was hard, no matter how much experience you have. But maybe this is just the teacher in me talking; maybe they were simply concerned about my mental health.

One review proved particularly disastrous. I was presenting to Adrian Blackwell and Anne Bordeleau. It was the last presentations of a long day of reviews. I presented a large map of possible directions; a complex layered drawing that was not a proposition as much as a coming together of influences and intents. I did not present it well. Then the dreaded question arose "What is your thesis question?" - I froze. To this day I can still remember what my body felt like. I had no clue. I was literally terrified. I could not answer this simple question. "Bo" came to mind as an answer, like the Italians do in Rome while flicking their fingers under their chin, as a sign of "how should I know! You answer your own question" but I wasn't allowing myself to take the question lightly. This was to haunt me

for many months. Anne Bordeleau seemed also concerned that I wasn't able to answer this simple question. As the end of term approached and I started getting my bearings back, I realized that I did not have one thesis question, but 32. I could list them in order of importance or difficulty, run through them effortlessly.

This led me to question how design was taught. Was I to answer my teacher's wishes? Were they the clients? Just how much depth could you get in 20 minutes of desk reviews or 15 minutes of presentation in front of three different guests? This felt incredibly wrong. It isn't of course: it pushes you to find a clear idea. But it proved highly reductive for someone questioning how to be a teacher, a student and a designer all at once.

There is a clear danger here of beginning a critique of design teaching methods. That is not my thesis question. Surely it was one of those 32 thesis questions, but not a central one.

Anne pushed us to write, to build in writing the basis for our thesis. I struggled with this because it takes me a long time to write. When designing, I write best at the end of the process, not as an initial research. Anne probably felt I was resisting her direction when in fact I was simply trying very hard and not getting anywhere. But her direction paid off and even though the last review did not go as well as I had hoped, I was able to wrap things up in my final hand-in a few weeks before Christmas.

The "bubble" away from the family and my job for this first four months, coupled with Anne's apt direction and discussions with my fellow classmates had reshaped me.

I came away from this semester with a strange sense of achievement. Andrew Levitt, one of the graduate teachers, asked me how I was doing at the beginning of the term. I answered simply "Fine", but somehow he saw through this. I ran into him again towards the end of the term and confessed that I was actually struggling, but figured I was struggling for the right reasons, that I was asking the right questions.

Now I needed to see this through. In order to finish the thesis, I had only eight months left, not a day more. The more personal question of how I had lost my sense of engagement with the world was an altogether more complex question. Somehow, and here we

get back precisely to the specific thesis project, Building a *Parc de la langue française*, this past year has allowed me to do both.

*Le Parc de la langue française*

After receiving our admission notices to the Masters program, we had to submit a brief text outlining what our subject and intentions were. We were advised to choose something that we were passionate about, something that would feed us and propel our work over the next year (or more). I decided to use the following text as a basis:

It all started on October 29, 1979. That is the moment at which the idea of creating a Park of the French language first took hold of me. A public park, permanent, where all the words of the French language and their definitions, printed on small plaques, would take ground, harmoniously implemented in its surrounding landscape, laid out in neighborhoods of words, from A to Z; each type of word possibly identified with a specific color. A place where, in order to learn new words, the reader-stroller would have to move physically in space, from word to word, from the L neighborhood to the I; from the R's to the E's for example. Transform the dictionary into a geographical ground where reading becomes a personal path. A place where we make our way literally in the body of the text. A peaceful place where one could set up a meeting at a specific word of our choice, where every word conspires with every other word. Build it such that the park is an immense page on which we find carefully considered plantings of all the words of the French language.

- Rober Racine

I had known this short text by Rober Racine for a long time. This was going to be the basis for my year back in school, the gift I was giving myself. I had often wondered what such a *Parc* could be. How would one manage to place 60,000 words in a park, and make that experience as rich as Racine's text?

## Mont-Royal Park

So Rober Racine's text was to be the program of my project, literally the text to refer back to. I was serving that text; that was my task. And serving something greater than us had often been a truly great path as a designer. We had the tools to do this, we simply began as we could and tried to make a project that was true to its origins. This is what, in my mind, designers did.

Several key concepts were singled out of that text. Among them were the word "permanent" and a conviction that this *Parc* had to be urban somehow. When Racine suggests that friends meet there, I did not imagine that this was a road trip to a remote location, but a place already embedded in the city, something both close but allowing one to escape. I imagined that the *Parc* would be in Montreal. As the main francophone city in North America, it was the perfect location for a tribute to the French language - and as a Montrealer, I could not think of a better place. In the middle of the city stood Mont-Royal Park.

Central both geographically and culturally, Mont-Royal park designed by Frederic Law Olmsted in 1877, would be the ideal place. If Rober Racine's project could be accepted within its fold, it would truly be permanent: it would benefit from the park's protection as a public place, shared by a wide community. The project would not be temporary or last a few years, no. It could be here for decades and centuries, or longer, truly belonging to the scale of time as language itself.

But Mont-Royal Park is as close to a sacred place as it gets, an impossible place in which to build anything, let alone an impossible park of language with 60,000 words.

I spent a great deal of time analysing this site. Using my skills as a graphic designer to produce maps that would teach us about the many aspects of the site. My experience of that site was also a guide: I needed to get to the reality of this site within the city. This analysis was done while in Cambridge over the Fall 2015 semester. It became clear that the *Parc* should be a new layer onto Mont-Royal Park. Not one that would take over, but

a slight shift in reading of the landscape for those who were interested. Racine's project should be a third or even fourth reading of La Montagne - The Mountain, as Montrealers call Mont-Royal Park.

Many small and not so small projects had been undertaken on the Mountain in recent history. A renovated Pavillon des castors and its surrounding landscape, the main Chalet was also renovated, a new entrance from downtown incorporated a tribute to Yoko Ono, a new stair was linking a residential neighbourhood to the North and artists, such as Gilbert Boyer, had done installations recently which contributed to the large arrays of art installations that have been part of the Park from the beginning. So there was a slow maturing of the Park where Racine's project could find a home.

If *Le Parc de la langue française* was to be subtle and truly integrated, it still needed a strong founding mark, something that would hold its ground, contribute clearly to this place as both a cultural and natural landscape, just as Frederic Law Olmsted had first imagined. This would be the role of a new component, one not described by Racine: *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire*.

It would be an expansive pavilion that would house all the word on a long circular table. This idea of a long table where one could sit and read imposed itself after a brief comment from Anne Bordeleau. I was presenting schemes where the pages of the dictionary were placed upright ("standing amongst us" as Rober Racine had described). Anne stood in front of this small full-scale mock-up, held a hand in front of her face, palm towards her to mimic the position of the pages. She made the simple gesture of lowering her hand, placing it horizontally, palm up and looking at it in this position as if reading a page. She was suggesting, or rather wondering, if this horizontal position would not be better suited, whether it would create a more contemplative posture. That small gracious movement - of her hand as a page, of her eyes following it - convinced me. This is where the idea of the table was born. If Rober Racine's work was one of the richest bodies of work on which to build a project, Anne's Bordeleau teachings, her approach to being an

architect today, was surely as solid a foundation.

So the idea of *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire* took hold and the careful analysis and readings of the site allowed me to find the perfect location for such a building: it was to be located on the original Chemin Olmsted but in a section less travelled, between the CBC transmission towers and the Cross. This was the highest of three summits that make up Mont-Royal Park; most visitors do not go above the Chalet and its belvedere, situated 20 meters below and slightly to the south. It is a good thing that most visitors stop there, for if you continue on to see the cross from a close look, this monument that you see at first from afar and that defines in a way Montreal, proves a bitter disappointment when seen up close. The base of the cross appears to be a cage, a vandal proof installation that does not have any other purpose but to invite vandalism. And there is no horizon to discover there: the views out are blocked by a slim band of trees. So here was a site that needed help - or so the analysis told me. I had been looking at maps for a long time, drawing and redrawing, adding and subtracting layers of information culled from various sources. But these abstractions were not the site. In the best of circumstances, this allows one to see what was previously unseen, in the worst of cases, it is a delusion and fabrication that stops us from seeing the real thing. I was to go back to “the real thing” Tuesday January 12, 2015.

I was scared. Genuinely scared. Afraid. Really afraid and nervous about this visit. Everything could go wrong. The whole project could collapse if this site turned out to be the wrong one. Perhaps all my mappings were skewed from my intentions and had taken me away from the true nature of the site. I would know shortly, and this is part of any project, but I was scared nonetheless. I wanted this to work; this had to work. If it did, I would still have a hard time finishing my thesis in time and there would be a great deal of work to do; if it did not work, it would be a major setback. In an office, such a setback might simply mean hiring more people to find another solution, going back to your client and asking for more resources, nothing quite so easy, but you would have options. But as a Master’s student, there are very few resources of this kind. Surely the teachers and your

fellow classmates offer an ideal setting in which to think, but it always comes down to what you can do. It comes down to proving that you know how to do this, and that you can contribute to the advancement of the field. I was scared.

It was a beautiful morning, light snow falling. I was not alone on this cold weekday morning. Joggers and strollers would inhabit the park even in this slow season. It showed me that my first intuition was right: this place is part of life in Montreal, embedded in it, as much for Montrealers as for tourists. Score: project 1 - sure death 0.

As I walked up the last summit towards the CBC transmission towers, a path I had not walked recently or often, I was disappointed. Here was a stretch of the Olmsted Way that seemed, if not abandoned, at least less celebrated. The occasional service vehicle - unseen anywhere else - would make its way to the CBC transmission tower. And as you approached, this specific site felt out of place. You could see the CBC building in the forest, a low stone building, but you could not approach it. As you walked past and continued on, the forest on both sides would block the view toward the horizon. Even with the steep incline down to your left, the trees would still tower above your head, and even in winter with its bare trees, you could not see out. The path was a long corridor, a beautiful room but somehow disappointing if you were not simply jogging or skiing past. This was great! The site actually needed help and would benefit from a new project. It would not only work here, but would help in defining it as a celebrated place. Score: project 2 - blandness 0.

The pavilion would be inserted into the forest with a small belvedere extension across Olmsted Way. The forest was dense but would easily accept a narrow building. The path here could accept heavy trucks and cranes that would bring the prefabricated units in place. They would slide into the forest on discreet pile foundations, barely disrupting the site. Score: project 3 - unbuildable 0.

I walked back down again to the Pavillon des Castors, sat in the upper level eating my lunch. I had come prepared: extra mitts, water, a notebook and pens, my camera and a lunch. This was truly an expedition; one I was now very happy about. This was going to

work. I could truly say at this point that this project was going to be a success. I could feel it and could convince anyone of its value. Contact with the real, with direct experience, which is the very essence of architecture, had allowed me this conviction.

I had always known that a given project site was an important component, one that would dictate the project. Today I had learned that it was the project. That the distinction between site and program is but a temporary separation that allows us to think and study, but ultimately, the two must come together. The site is a physical as well as cultural and social construction; the permanence of any architectural project depends on this dialogue. Surely Mont-Royal Park is an extreme case study. Like a Single-malt Scotch - preferably from Islay - it is a strong presence that teaches you the subtleties of even the smoothest of Merlots.



# Finding again

So I am on my way to making this project work. The feeling of accomplishment is leading me to a place where I feel engaged, where my actions have the possibility of touching other people's lives.

My professional practice is now a thing of the past and my academic career is beginning with difficulty, yet this strange project - a *Parc de la langue française* - is propelling me forward with that same passion and intensity that characterized my early career.

This year was to hold yet other surprises. Two people who would draw a clear path for me.

Robert Jan van Pelt

Robert Jan van Pelt was on my admission committee when I first applied to Waterloo school of Architecture. I have already mentioned that we had a discussion about his choice of font for his book during that first interview. What I haven't mentioned is the role he was to play during my time at Waterloo, then and now.

I was having difficulty with the cultural history curriculum. This consists of four courses, taken in succession starting in the first semester on to the end of second year. In these courses, we are brought in contact with the cultural production of different key periods of humanity, with a focus on architecture, literature and film. In the first term we begin with the Modern period, contemporary culture and the World Wars and how they have shaped us. In subsequent terms, we would study Antiquities, Middle Ages and Renaissance. Each week, we had to read one book and answer an in-class question in the form of a précis. We had 20 minutes to do this, at the beginning of class every week. This was to prove very difficult for me. I would fail these quizzes repeatedly. In fact, I failed this first cultural history course.

There were few students in this position, and such a failure put in question my very

presence in the School. If I had not received the design prize that year, I might have been asked to leave. I was to retake this course with a different teacher, namely Robert Jan van Pelt. I was still struggling with the course, but somehow, Robert Jan saw that I was not a lost cause, that I would pull through eventually. He was to be my cultural history teacher for the first three courses, and brought out my strength and ignored my weaknesses. I was still very young at the time, not overly self-aware and I accepted his help perhaps without realizing just how much it would shape me.

For the final and last cultural course, this one dealing with the Antiquities, my teacher was Steve Mannell. My troubles began again: I was starting to fail. I went to Robert Jan for advice. He simply said to stop worrying about it and enjoy the course. That was surprising, especially because he knew quite well that if I did not succeed in this last course, I would probably not be allowed to stay in the school.

In the final exam of the final Iconography class, after a semester of very poor grades, I needed to do very well. I was scared. All this hard work over almost three years would be put in jeopardy over a single exam. On exam day, when asked to compare Greek and Roman culture based on material covered in the course, I decided to trust Robert Jan, or rather to trust myself. Instead of using the reading as a basis as I thought I had to do, I analyzed two photographs, one of a Greek Theatre and the second of a Roman theatre, each a similar view of ruins in the landscape with the horizon beyond. For me, the main difference between these two cultures was their relationship to the landscape. My essay was mostly a visual comparison between a Greek and a Roman theatre, based on contemporary photographs. I had nothing to lose, my other strategies had obviously not proven effective.

Steve and Robert Jan came to see me with the test results. They were shaking their heads. They asked me where this came from. What? What did they mean? Steve told me that if this was what I was trying to do in my previous cultural history précis or exams, no wonder I had been failing. My answer proved very compelling, original thinking, and meant that I had managed to find my own reading instead of using the interpretations

suggested in class. Robert Jan and Steve gave me my paper and walked away, shaking their heads. I got a very high mark for this exam; it allowed me to pass the class and put an end to a very difficult period. I am not sure I understood exactly at the time what had conspired, but I do realize now that I was trying to develop a world-view through the material being presented in our iconography classes; a very noble task, but one that went beyond what the course asked of us. If only I had known this...

Let's travel ahead 15 years, to another course with Robert Jan as part of my first semester as a graduate student. The course is entitled Books are the bones of Saints - in celebration of Robert Jan's close relationship to Ben Weinreb, the famous London book seller who gave a series of similarly entitled lectures. We had to write two essays, first presenting them to the class, gathering comments and then writing the finals before the end of term. In these, I decided to trust myself again. After each presentation in class, I had a very peculiar sense of achievement. Here was something that I could do - very well it seemed. Writing the essay afterwards became an incredibly enjoyable enterprise. I was feeling the same passion in writing as I had in designing and it surprised me. I was still very unsure of myself, but Robert Jan's confidence was the perfect guide. As it turns out, I received the highest mark Robert Jan has ever given anyone for one of his classes. As the student who always did poorly on these types of assignments, this was an important moment. Writing had always had a supporting role in my career. I would write offer of services or project briefs or class syllabus. There was always a project to follow or a class to teach. Somehow, this isolation as a student allowed me to see writing as a whole project in its own right. Robert Jan had given me a new voice. A vague memory of writing a small essay on a Michel Goulet exhibition, for an assignment given by Louise Viger in my Cégep art classes, came back to me.

## Aurora Borealis

Before we move on, or rather as an introduction to, the second person that showed me a possible path, here is a brief anecdote.

In the fall semester, Stephen, Sneha and I took a break from studio work and went to the Guelph book sale. Books could be purchased there for one dollar each; they were spread out on temporary tables in the city's main arena, stacked in cardboard boxes. Mostly fiction books but also a full array of other books. There, to my great dismay, looking at a small section of boxes labeled "art", I found a striking green and blue catalogue. The cover consisted of overprint colour onto a black and white high contrast photograph with bold type. I thought I had seen this before. It was the catalogue of Aurora Borealis, a contemporary art exhibition that was held in Montreal in 1985. And then it struck me: I had seen this exhibition with my mother and sister. It was held in the lower level of the still unfinished La Cité complex. The organizer of the event (which would go on to become the Montreal Biennale) had borrowed this very raw space to hold their temporary exhibition. The ground floor was to become a small shopping mall, but at that stage, all the walls were still bare concrete. Each artist had been given a small space, the equivalent to what would become a small shop, that they could use as they saw fit. The installations were often quite site-specific. This was a first for me: the first time I would see works of art respond to a given context instead of being a stoic object on a wall or podium in a gallery space. Even the lighting became a key actor, as the electrical installation was not fully in place and artist had to improvise. This created an amazing array of experiences, unlike anything I had seen in a museum.

I suspect that this is where I became a designer. The world was not only governed by conventions or arbitrariness, there was room for thoughtful invention. Even more important, we needed this invention in order to grasp our contemporary condition. This is what I learned at Aurora Borealis. Standing in Guelph, Ontario, in the middle of a large arena,

was a strange place to rediscover this important event.

Imagine my surprise when I flipped through the book and saw *La musique des Pages-miroirs* by Rober Racine. This was also the exhibition where I first saw work from Rober Racine. I like to think that he is, in some way, linked to my decision to become a designer.

### Meeting Rober Racine

Few works of art have made as strong an impression upon my life as the work of Rober Racine. That is why I chose *Le Parc de la langue française* as a basis for my thesis.

From 1979 to 1985, his body of work concentrated on the French language dictionary *Le Petit Robert*. It began with the description of the *Parc* and would go on to *Le terrain du dictionnaire*, *Les Pages-miroirs*, *La musique des mots*. He also built numerous works around literature, space exploration and the solar system. I am tempted to look at these explorations as ways of materialising *Le Parc de la langue française*. He published his first work of fiction in 1992 and has written four novels since. The story of one of these novels is centered on a visit to Walter De Maria's Lighting Field.

He worked on *Les pages-miroirs* for over 15 years - reading, cutting, gilding and assembling. In his book *Le dictionnaire* published in 1985, he describes this process. He writes that ultimately, he could have written a story about someone who does this. It would have taken him an afternoon and maybe four or five pages. Instead he spent 15 years working and "Et c'est toute la différence" (And that is what makes it so important). He had to materialize it so others could experience it, could walk along and see the words, could measure language with their own bodies. Here was a plea for Architecture.

I met Rober Racine for the first time as part of this thesis. I was considering working on *Le Parc de la langue française* and wrote to him in May 2015, asking for permission. We met to discuss this and spent an incredible afternoon and early evening talking. It was

a fabulous moment for me. Rober preferred to talk about other artists, but we did manage to talk about his work. He told me that in 1999, 20 years after first writing *Le Parc de la langue française* and trying to get it built, he had given up on ever realizing the project and decided he did not want to have anything to do with it ever again: there had been simply too many deceptions linked to this project. Yet he was there with me then, quite excited about someone tackling the project again.

He had installed a fragment of it in Germany, as part of Documenta IX in 1992. There, the words from the letter K from Le petit Robert dictionary were installed as small plaques along the park's main alleyways, inserted between the trees. And there would be other small temporary installations over the years, but no *Parc*.

There had been no extensive sets of drawings or layouts of a possible *Parc*. All ventures concentrated on finding allies that would fund the project. There was never enough money to warrant a full design for a specific site. This is what I would be attempting to do in my thesis.

I would have gladly collaborated with Rober Racine on this project if he saw me as a worthy ally but this was not the condition of work being proposed. I was doing this as part of a Master of Architecture and needed great autonomy in pushing the work forward. I was not producing Rober Racine's *Parc*. Our conversation closed on this topic, and Rober assured me that he understood, was completely at ease with this situation and was looking forward to seeing the work that would be produced. As he was saying this, I could also see that he very much wanted to take on this project again, that he had never completely given up one day building *Le Parc de la langue française*.

I had sensed ambivalence in him on that first meeting. We parted that night, me full of wonder at finally having met the person whose work was so important in my life, and him, surely wondering where this would lead.

In September, I wrote to him with a detailed schedule of the work I would be doing for the next year. I mentioned that in early 2016, I would have something to show and would welcome the chance of meeting with him again. He did not answer.

On February 23rd 2016, having developed the project and confirmed that it would work on Mont-Royal Park, I wrote to him, hoping to set-up a meeting. Silence. I wrote to him again on March 31st and also left a message on his answering machine, asking if he had received my last email. Silence. I could not write or phone him again at this point. Surely he had received my last two emails and my phone message. He had chosen not to be involved in this project and I understood completely. I was on my own.

I had envisioned this easily: who would want to support work on such an important project by someone you barely knew? This was not going to stop the project: I could and would go on. But I was sad. I was very much looking forward to presenting my work to Rober. All along, he had been my guide; I was trying to live up to his work. I would measure my proposal against the richness of his work. I was constantly returning to that initial text, re-reading his book *Le dictionnaire*, pouring over *Le Petit Robert*, trying to grasp why Racine had chosen it in the first place, looking at his body of work from 1979 to 1985 and beyond.

I found one work that was to give me great hope, work that perhaps was showing me that I was on the right track. It is called *Tryptique*, done by Rober Racine in 1995. He had juxtaposed in a single frame a *Page-miroir*, a drawing extracting his intervention from that original page of *Le Petit Robert*, and a fragment of poplar bark. Here Racine was creating a link between nature, language and art - each one as important as the other. Surely he had done this in his initial *Parc* description, yet seeing the striations in the bark at the same scale as the words on a page and his notations proved a very powerful condensation of all I found important in his work. Discovering this work now was akin to receiving, in absentia, Racine's approval that my work would somehow live up to the original.

I realized then the importance of beginnings: as an architect, we receive projects briefs all the time. We study them and take position and build the project from there. But not all briefs are created equal. Some propel you, while others simply guide you; but unfortunately, many limit you, show you how little faith or understanding there is in the design



process. It becomes our main task as designers to make this initial brief evolve, to rewrite it with the client and give it as much depth as possible, to broaden it, make it inclusive and seek ways of making the intentions endure in the final building.

Working from Racine's small, 190-word text as proven to be both a challenge and one of the most rewarding ventures of my career. It is precise yet manages to remain open. This is what a brief should be, no matter what you are building. A project is a shared construction, one that needs to capture our imagination as well as giving us a sense of scale. Architecture is built with people for people, and a project brief should be about this, about a collective venture, built for strollers as they walk around a park and meet up with friends.

On April 11th, 2016, Rober Racine wrote back. He apologized for the delay and proposed a meeting. I was back in Cambridge at that time, enrolled in full-time courses, but we planned on meeting as soon as I came back to Montreal. YES!

We met at my office at UQAM on May 16th. I had requisitioned a long corridor just outside my office and had hung all the work done over the last eight months. The different presentations stretched for 14 meters, almost floor to ceiling. As Rober greeted me at the beginning of this corridor, he looked around but kept walking to my office. When I began showing him the work done and point to the corridor walls, he realized that this was all work done for the *Parc*. He stood silent. "All this is work you have done?" – "Yes." His eyes began to explore slowly, with an extreme gentleness. As if all this was somehow very precious. I will remember and cherish this gentleness, perhaps the highest praise possible.

I went on to describe the different presentations chronologically, explaining the various investigations and hurdles, moving slowly toward the final proposal. All the while Rober nodded his head, asked me to repeat something, took his time to look and listened.

Had he not liked what I was doing, the project would have been as worthwhile as a thesis. I had mentioned this to him: I was not looking for praise, I wanted to have his reaction to the work conducted over the previous eight months.

There were a series of assumptions and directions that I wished to discuss with him.

Perhaps the most important one was that, in this project, the French language is to be celebrated as an immensely rich experience for all, francophones and non-francophones alike. Here, I did not want to defend anything: I wanted to share, and was wondering how Rober Racine would perceive this. He had written his text at a very different time where language in Quebec was a battleground. Again, he paused for quite some time before commenting. I felt he was visiting a new landscape in his head, testing it out. And he nodded, “Yes. This is what language is now, something to be celebrated, away from politics.”

Our afternoon was one of exchange and communion around this text. Rober allowed me to feel as if this was somehow our text - our project. I felt that afternoon that I had succeeded.

In his email dated April 11th, Racine had also mentioned that he had been approached by Jonathan Demers, the director of the Musée des Laurentides who was interested in building *Le Parc de la langue française*: there might be some leads there. Rober Racine met him two weeks after our meeting at UQAM. He spoke of my project, even drew some plans and sketches of it in his notebook, which he showed me later. My thesis was being folded into Rober’s larger body of work. I felt like the *Le Pavillon du dictionnaire* was now part of the family, along with *Les Pages-Miroirs* and *La Musique des mots*.

I am sure by now that you are able to grasp the important roles that Robert Jan van Pelt and Rober Racine were playing in my life at this point. One was pushing me forward as a teacher and a friend, while the other was becoming a collaborator. Both were allowing me to be that person, engaged and passionate, that I was so eager to reconnect with.

# Community

Rober Racine asked me to meet with Mr Demers to discuss a possible installation of *Le Parc de la langue française*. We agreed on a place and time - but before meeting them, I wrote a small email outlining what I felt was at the core of such a project.

Two important points:

1) Site

The actual project was developed for the Mont-Royal Park, a site that is extremely complex, both physically and politically. A large part of the work and thinking centered on finding the right project for that specific site. This is not a problem in itself (when considering another site) but we must remember that the site is an important actor, in all its dimension and should be left to inflect or transform the project.

2) Community

For such a project to see the light of day, and be truly permanent (and not a savour of the month or a temporary project) it will necessitate the support of a large community. As much for the long-term financing, as for programming and animation, maintenance and updating of the content, we will have to build a community, one that is both engaged and active. This is in my mind the ultimate goal of such a project, to leave behind for future generations something that is durable, with a horizon as expansive as language itself. It will be crucial to discuss this from the very start, even if I am conscious that such a community can only be built slowly, through engagement and a shared passion.

This small text - written in 20 minutes or less - is to be the answer to my thesis question. And the community that I have built in Cambridge while doing my Master of Architecture, the community that we will build around *Le Parc de la langue française* with Rober Racine, and a willingness to stay engaged in the community of my choosing, - as a designer, teacher, husband, father or friend - has allowed me to find my way again.

I was chasing after who I once was, a person completely immersed in being a designer, in conditions where everything was possible, where we could truly make the world a better place, where we could create precedents that would inspire others. This is what characterized my early career, starting with the young artists I met in Cégep, the great teachers there as well as at École de design and Waterloo, to Bruce Mau, Claude Cormier and Gilles Saucier and André Perrotte, and to my first client, the CCA. Design was for them a way of discovery. They had shaped who I was and what I thought was possible.

I was to take on projects later that would not meet this criteria, the mandates were not open to discovery. We were consultants hired to work within a predefined context; we could not ask difficult questions anymore, they were not welcomed. I thought that this was simply the faith of someone working in Canada; I persevered, and succeeded in many ways by sheer will, to teach clients what we could achieve together if only we looked at the larger context, as design had taught me to do.

These difficult years working for the city or other municipalities, or larger institutions, to teaching at UQAM as a full-time professor have taught me that maybe I was allergic to institutions. That their rigid framework was simply not the right environment for someone like me. This is a difficult conclusion to accept. It means limiting my action as a designer to smaller, more versatile and flexible organisations - and greatly limiting my abilities to influence the world around me.

Bruce Mau had a rule for accepting projects: he called it the Three Ps – “People Project Profit”. “People” was about who you would work with: did you enjoy this collaboration? “Project” was about the project itself: was it interesting, could you learn something by doing it, was it important somehow? “Profit” was whether one could make any money doing it, and how much? The rule was that you needed to be convinced of at least two Ps. If the people were amazing and the project was great, but did not pay so well, according to his rule, you should still take it on. If the project was great, paid well, but the people were difficult to work with, or if the project itself wasn’t great but the people and the pay inspired you, you should take it.

I tried to apply this to my practice. It was difficult because the possible Profits were more often than not quite low and the Project, at least initially, could go either way.

One thing has become clear now, by looking back at my career and the specific experience of this thesis, that nothing is possible without the right People. Whether they are part of an institution or not does not matter, I needed to find people I wanted to work with, where we could build together. As a designer in Canada, the line is often quite fine - one has to trust that a given project will create its own set of circumstances and that trust will build slowly from there.

When I was at BMD in 1999 and the office was getting bigger, taking on larger projects, Bruce went on to add two more Ps: Place - where the project was and whether you wanted to go there, and Plate - could you take on a specific project right now or did you have too much on your plate? But Kevin Sugden told me a few years later that he had spoken to Bruce and he was now down to one P: People.

As I look for engagement, I pledge allegiance to the people around me. I will be both patient and attentive, but not blind. In François Girard's movie, Glenn Gould says that for him, listening to music in a bad concert hall, with bad seats and acoustics, was not worth it. "I simply don't like the sound of piano music that much" he said. He had learned to draw a line, I needed to do the same in order to build on solid ground.

Louise, Serge, Alfred, Angela, Robert Jan, Anne, Donald, Kevin, Koen, Meg, Jason, Brigitte, Bruce, Claude, Gilles, André, Mathieu, Bryan, Bruno, Maude-Fred, Fanny, François, Michèle, Sneha, Safira and Marc-Antoine, Miriam, and Rober and Louis, Cloé, Max et Romane, and many others. Thank you.







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« Mais si le langage ne ressemble plus immédiatement aux choses qu'il nomme, il n'est pas pour autant séparé du monde; il continue, sous une autre forme, à être le lieu des révélations et à faire partie de l'espace où la vérité... se manifeste et s'énonce.»

Michel Foucault (2014)