



Éric Gauthier (projet architect, FABG), Maison Intergénérationnel - La Station, Île des Soeurs, Montreal, 2011-2012. © Steve Montpetit FABG, 2012.

A New Future for the Montréal Mies Gaz Station

BY FRANCE VANLAETHEM

When it comes to ensuring the authenticity of an architectural conservation project, is an architect's interpretation of the original sufficient in itself? Or should the architect's largely intuitive understanding of a site be complemented by the knowledge of the architectural historian? The adaptive reuse of the *Île des Soeurs* service station, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1967 and renovated by architect Éric Gauthier in 2011, raises such questions. The unique value of this small facility is recognized by its designation as a historic monument. Today, it is a multigenerational activity centre where youth and seniors can gather to learn, play, and socialize.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed a surprising number of projects for Montreal — seven in all, of which five were built¹. **docomomo** Québec offers a tour of them in its guide to modern Montreal². Like many North American cities, Montreal experienced rapid growth and renewal in the 1960s. Though no longer the metropolis of Canada, it attracted cross-border real estate developers from the mid-1950s on, including the flamboyant New Yorker William Zeckendorf, who responded to the challenge of filling the “Central Station pit” with *Place Ville-Marie*, inaugurated in 1962. Less well known is the contribution of Chicago's Metropolitan Structures, Inc., a successor to the Herbert Realty Co. Founded by Herbert S. Greenwald, the firm gave new impetus to Mies' career by commissioning him to design the Promontory Apartment Building in 1946. A number of residential projects followed, including 860–880 North Lake Shore Drive, also in Chicago, and Lafayette Park in Detroit.

In 1965, Mies became involved in the planning and construction of a community with 15,000 residential units that the Canadian subsidiary of Metropolitan Structures planned to develop over a 15-year period on *Île des Soeurs* (or Nun's Island). Following the construction of the Champlain Bridge, which crosses the Saint Lawrence River at the height of the island, this 400-hectare insular agricultural area became an attractive site for the development of a garden suburb, thanks to its proximity to downtown Montreal. Metropolitan Structures signed an emphyteutic lease³ with the owner of the island, who had purchased it a decade earlier from the Catholic sisters of the Congregation of *Notre-Dame*. In addition to consulting on the project, Mies van der Rohe designed the first three apartment buildings of the planned ensemble, as well as the first gas station. Shut down in 2008, the small service station, located on the island's main *boulevard*, was converted into an intergenerational community centre through the initiative of the municipal council, which proved exceptionally vigilant in the matter, and under the direction of architect Éric Gauthier of the

firm FABG⁴. Gauthier originally established his credentials in the preservation of modern architecture with his renovation, in the early 1990s, of the geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao to house the US pavilion at the 1967 World's Fair in Montreal.

The Mies van der Rohe Service Station

The *Île des Soeurs* service station occupies a unique place in Mies' *oeuvre*. Throughout his long career, the architect had no other project of its kind, although the automobile was no stranger to his reflections on the development of architecture in the Machine Age. The project is iconic. Its sobriety distinguishes it from the standard gas station designs of the 1930s, which treat the building itself as an advertising billboard. Here, the brand is not the pretext for the project. Instead, its presence is subdued: the company sign is modest in size and placed discreetly out of the way, by the sidewalk. The structure is a pavilion, one of two generic building types privileged by Mies in his North American career, the other being the tower. As such, the *Île des Soeurs* service station can be considered alongside such diverse projects as the Illinois Institute of Technology, the Cantor Drive-In Restaurant, the Chicago Convention Hall, and the *Neue Nationalgalerie* in Berlin, among others.

The facility, commissioned in 1966 by Imperial Oil limited (now Esso Canada), was intended as a prototype. It was the first in a series of six service stations proposed in the master plan developed by landscape architects Johnson, Johnson & Roy of Ann Arbor, it was also meant to be a model for the others. In order to ensure the supply of fuel on *Île des Soeurs*, Metropolitan Structures signed an exclusive agreement with the petroleum company which, in return, agreed to adhere to the promoter's standards of architectural excellence. To carry out the project, Mies partnered with Paul H. Lapointe, a Montreal architect and regular Imperial Oil collaborator.

Located at the corner of the *boulevard* and a residential street, the service station pavilion imparts a sense of great



01 Mies van der Rohe (consultant architect, Chicago), Paul H. Lapointe (architect, Montreal), Esso Gas station, *Île des Soeurs*, Montreal, 1967-1968. © Michel Brunelle, 2007.

spatial fluidity, thanks in part to the cantilevered roof, carried by a double row of columns set on either side of the pump island, and to the transparency of the service areas it houses. The original design featured three enclosed volumes, with the cashier booth in the middle, flanked by a customer service office on the street side of the structure and a service garage on the other. The latter is more opaque, with buff-coloured brick walls obstructing the view of passersby. In their commitment to excellence, the designers even devised custom-made gas pumps for the project⁵.

The Reuse Project

Today, *Île des Soeurs* is a prime residential area for affluent *Montrealers*. Its overall appearance, however, differs from that imagined by Johnson, Johnson & Roy, as several real estate developers succeeded Metropolitan Structures of Canada in 1978 in the context of changing economic and political conditions. In fifty years, additional service station capacity was created, though not on the scale initially planned. Esso opened only one other station, located at the entrance to the island, near the Champlain Bridge access road. With residents preferring the new location, business slowed at the site on *boulevard de l'Île des Soeurs*. In the early 2000s, some worried that the station designed by Mies would be shut down and demolished, given the conditions of the emphyteutic lease between the petroleum company and the island's owner. The concerns attracted the attention of heritage groups and municipal authorities. In 2005, the urban planning department of the borough of Verdun initiated discussions on the future of the structure by requesting advice from the *Conseil du Patrimoine de Montreal* (the city's heritage council) and consulting with specialists and citizens. All expressed support for the preservation of the building. The borough thus proceeded to file a request for heritage protection with the city in 2008⁶.

Meanwhile, steps taken to determine a new use for the building yielded a proposal for the creation of an activity centre for youth and seniors. Once the building was granted recognition under the *Loi sur le biens culturels du Québec* (the provincial cultural property act) and acquired by the city in 2009, a call for tenders for the conversion of the service station into an intergenerational centre was made to Québec architects and won by the firm FABG. It should be mentioned that the service station's historic monument status is linked to a municipal by-law that, in addition to stating the reasons for the designation by listing the cultural values attributed to the station, also identifies characteristic elements of the structure and site that are to be maintained. In sum, it aims to ensure the consolidation or restoration of the original architectural aspect and layout, and requires all modifications to be compatible with the qualities and features of the building⁷.

The architect Éric Gauthier describes his project as an "interpretation", not a "restoration". His intention in its design was to convey the artistic vision that gave rise to the structure, although the world has changed considerably since the 1960s. Guided by Mies' lesson in simplicity, Gauthier's interventions fall into three categories: the restoration of the skeleton and envelope of the building, the renovation of its interiors, and a thermal upgrade.

The envelope of the building was meticulously restored without much difficulty. The anodised aluminum frames were dismantled and repaired in a workshop. Corroded parts were replaced, as the type of extrusions used were still in production. The buff yellow brick walls were repointed and the flat roof was resurfaced with no change to its profile. The steel structure was painted the original black.

The adaptation of the interior spaces proved more problematic. The borough had commissioned a preliminary study to explore the building's reuse potential. It led to the choice of a new program to inhabit the existing spaces, at

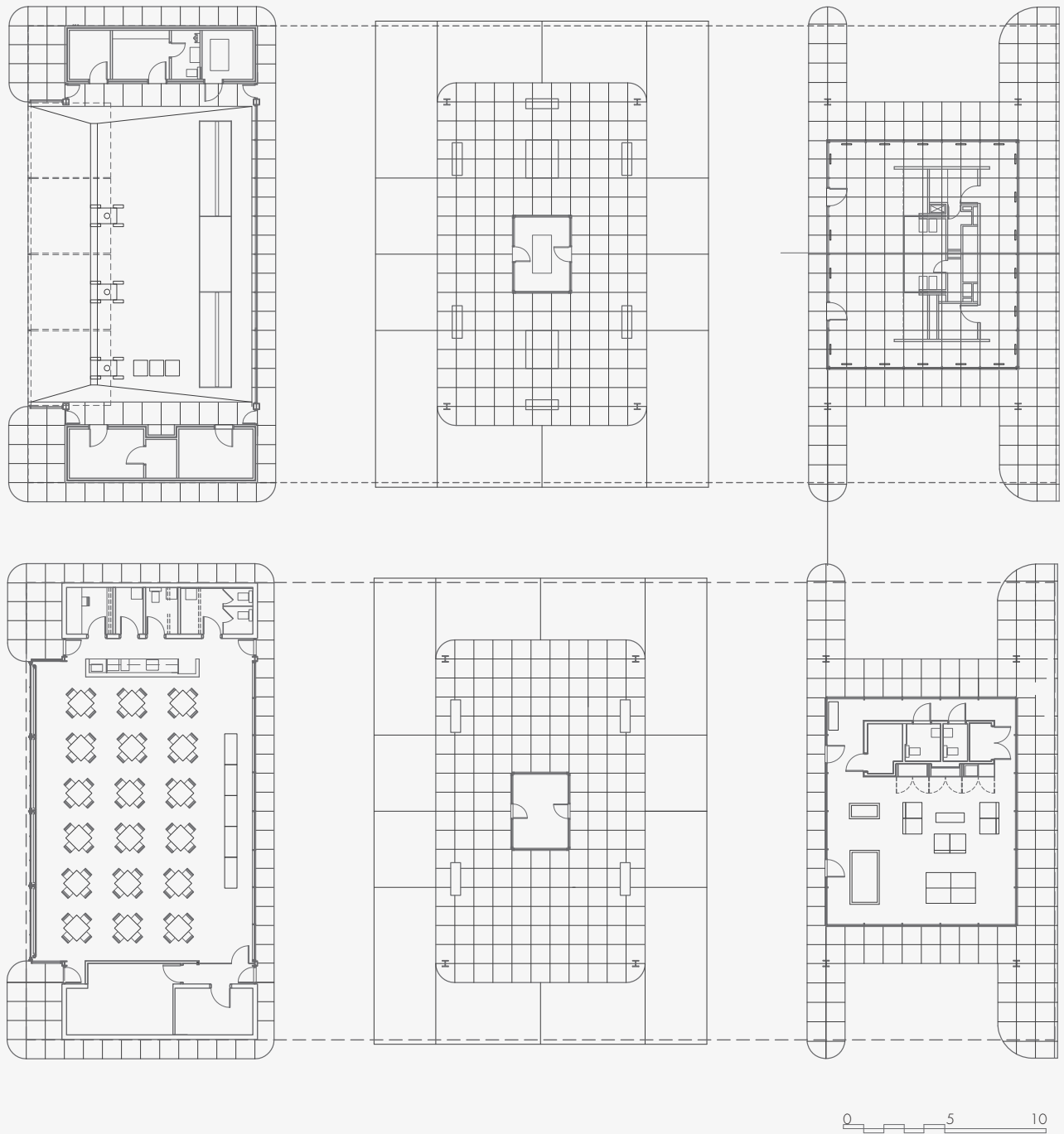


02 Éric Gauthier (projet architect, FABG), *Maison Intergénérationnel - La Station, Île des Soeurs*, Montreal, 2011 - 2012. © Michel Brunelle, 2012.

03-04 Éric Gauthier (projet architect, FABG), *Maison Intergénérationnel - La Station, Île des Soeurs*, Montreal, 2011 - 2012. © Michel Brunelle, 2012.



05 Mies van der Rohe (consultant architect, Chicago), Paul H. Lapointe (architect, Montreal), Esso Gas station, *Île des Soeurs*, Montreal, 1967-1968. © France Vanlaethem, *Patrimoine en Devenir: l'Architecture Moderne du Québec*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 2012, p. 193.



06 Éric Gauthier (projet architect, FABG), *Maison Intergénérationnel — La Station, Île des Soeurs*, Montreal, 2011-2012. © France Vanlaethem, *Patrimoine en Devenir: l'Architecture Moderne du Québec*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 2012, p. 193.

least in terms of the square footage available. During the development of the project, it was decided that the former service garage would be dedicated to seniors, providing a social space for educational and recreational activities, and the customer service area to youth, allowing them to get together in a supervised setting. To maintain the transparency of the enclosed spaces, all equipment (group kitchen facilities, computer stations, game consoles, washrooms, etc.) was grouped together and hidden from view in built-in cabinets, a deviation from the previous layout. In the former service station, all functional equipment—the storage shelf in the garage, the gas pumps, and the volume of the washrooms in the customer service area—was placed perpendicular to the boulevard, not parallel. Through this new parallel placement, Gauthier sought to “favor transparency in the longitudinal axis”⁸, an orientation suggested by the configuration of the roof and the alignment of the fluorescent ceiling lights, whose placement remained unchanged.

The building’s thermal upgrade was an opportunity to preserve the memory of its original function. Ventilation ducts were set in the spaces previously occupied by the gas pumps to take in air and heat or cool it via a geothermal system before redistributing it to the rooms. This sustainable technology thus helped minimize the impact of the new mechanical equipment.

What about Authenticity

In a recent article, Gauthier explains his approach to the conservation of modern structures, noting the importance of emphasizing “what is fundamentally unique to the artistic vision of the creator”. In contrast to older heritage, “whose value lies mostly in conformity with traditional know-how that needs to be preserved and emphasized, the modern oeuvre is distinguished by an architectural intention that needs to be identified and underscored”. This is consistent with the position taken by **docomomo** International in its 1997 report, *The MoMo and the WHL*, which states that changes to modern buildings with heritage value are acceptable “as long as the original intentions of the architect’s concept (idea) in the present form, space and appearance of a building or site are still recognizable”⁹. Conceptual authenticity is thus granted precedence over material authenticity in consideration of the functional and technical obsolescence of modern architecture.

Since the **docomomo** report, the issue of authenticity in modern heritage has been at the center of my reflections. Authenticity is neither a quality of the artifact, as assumed by the notion of material authenticity, nor is it assured by respect for a creator’s idea (to the extent that such an idea can be distinguished, which many dispute). Authenticity is a judgment, a semiotic construct arising from a dynamic in-

volving identity, truth, and authority, a process that involves citizens, experts, and authorities. As a citizen calling for the preservation of modern heritage, I am pleased by the legal protection granted to Mies’ service station in recognition of its value and by its conversion. However, as a historian of modern architecture, I question the validity of the changes made to the layout of the functional equipment. In the service station, longitudinal transparency was blocked and lateral transparency partially open. But was the spatiality of the building simply geometric by nature and its transparency only real, “literal”? Were these characteristics not articulated in response to the urban morphology? Did the longitudinal visual obstructions, parallel to the boulevard, not contribute to the “virtual” transparency of the building, as understood by Rowe, which suggests depth and frontality? In *Île des Soeurs*, as in Westmount, Mies proved sensitive to context, an aspect neglected by the reuse project. ■

Notes

This text was translated from French by Helge Dascher. The project was granted a 2014 Governor General’s Medal for Architecture and a 2013 Award of Excellence from the Ordre des Architectes du Québec.

- 1 **docomomo** Québec came into being following an initiative in 1988 to oppose the renovation of Westmount Square, designed by Mies in 1964. Mies’ Montréal projects were first documented in the journal *Architecture Québec*, No. 71, 1993.
- 2 France Vanlaethem and Sophie Mankowski (dir.), *Sur les Traces du Montréal Moderne et du Domaine de l’Estérel au Québec / Discovering Modern Montréal and the Estérel Resort in Québec*, Bruxelles, CIVA, Montréal, **docomomo** Québec, 2007, p. 137–147.
- 3 An emphyteutic lease is one which obliges the lessee to improve the leased property with construction.
- 4 *Les architectes FABG* [<http://www.arch-fabg.com/fabg.html>].
- 5 Jean-François Bedard, “La Station-Service de l’île des Soeurs”, *Architecture Québec*, *ibid.*, p. 20–21.
- 6 Benoît Malette, “Une Démarche Consensuelle”, in France Vanlaethem and Marie-Josée Therrien (dir.), *La Sauvegarde de l’Architecture Moderne*, Québec, Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2014, p. 147–153.
- 7 Ville de Montréal, “Règlement sur la citation à titre de monument historique de la station-service de Mies van der Rohe, située au 2001, rue Berlioz (arrondissement de Verdun)”, [http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/CONS_PAT_MTL_FR/MEDIA/DOCUMENTS/REGLEMENT_09-034_ESSO.pdf].
- 8 From the manuscript of the article on the service station published in *Continuité*, No. 143, Winter 2014, 26–29.
- 9 International Specialist Committees/Registers, **docomomo** International, “The Modern Movement and the World Heritage List. Advisory Report to ICOMOS”, Zeist, 30 Novembre 1997, p. 10.

France Vanlaethem

Chair of **docomomo** Québec. Graduated as an architect from the *École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture et des Arts Visuels – La Cambre* in Brussels. Professor Emeritus at the *Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)*. France Vanlaethem has published numerous articles and books on the history of modern architecture in Belgium and Québec and on the preservation of modern heritage.