

The initial project:

For close to twenty years, the project of remodelling the Palais Montcalm – an Art Deco hall built in 1931, on the foundations of Quebec City's old Montcalm market – was repeatedly the subject of heated debates, only to be delayed and forgotten once again. This inaction had two causes: the lack of a viable use for the building, and the lack of political will to preserve and revitalize it.

The construction of the Grand Théâtre de Québec in the 1970s made the Palais Montcalm seem increasingly obsolete: the hall was notorious for uncomfortable seats, lack of legroom, an incongruous neo-Classical interior decor and, worst of all, poor sightlines. During the following decades, the hall was renovated on several occasions, to ensure code compliance and provide it with a new loading dock. Though necessary, these interventions were unfortunately carried out in a piecemeal fashion and on shoestring budgets, showing little concern for an overarching design intention or for the building's original design. Successive additions and repairs also disregarded the building's strategic position at one of the main gateways to the historic city – the civic square of Place d'Youville, which the Palais Montcalm overlooks and commemorates.

As public interest in the Palais Montcalm waned, the building narrowly escaped a radical remodelling in the 1990s, which would have seen it turned into a casino and hotel. In the end, the building was spared by mayor Jean-Paul L'Allier, who decided that Quebec City needed a dedicated concert hall, and that local chamber orchestra Les Violons du Roy required a permanent residence commensurate with its international reputation and that of its conductor Bernard Labadie.

In 2000, a province-wide request for proposals was held to select four architectural practices in what constituted the first architectural competition organized by the City of Quebec in collaboration with the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec. The winner of this competition was Le Consortium **M.:U.S.E.** | L'Architecte Jacques Plante | Les Architectes Bernard et Cloutier | St-Gelais Montminy architectes. The consortium's acronym stands for **M**ission: **U**rbanité **S**cénographie **E**space – that is, urbanity, stage design and spatiality, the three major themes of our project.

The project as completed:

The project as completed remains faithful to our conceptual intentions and is very close to the formal images and sensory environments proposed at the stage of the design competition.

The most significant change to the initial design was our decision to excavate below ground level, in order to lower the main level of the hall and its ventilation plenum and allow public access to the concert hall from ground level rather than from the second floor. In this way we avoided raising the building's roof above the adjacent city walls, preserved existing views on Place d'Youville and the mountains to the north, and maintained a more convivial relationship between the hall and pedestrians walking along narrow Dauphine Street.

This change to the original design also allowed us to reposition the concert hall's monumental stairway: this has been rotated 180 degrees from its original location, so that, as one reaches the top, one arrives in an existing foyer overlooking Place d'Youville. To either side, two additional stairways lead one to the upper foyers and balconies.

The ambience, appearance and layout of the concert hall benefited from a rethinking of finish and colour. In the completed project, foyers and auditorium constitute distinctive 'worlds'. The all-white foyers give free rein to a complex spatiality of stairways, landings and gangways: here, multiple levels relate to each other through shifting low- and high-angle views. This theatrical promenade confronts the visitor with the complexities of the interior space, the mural work of artist Rose-Marie Goulet, and Place d'Youville below. The new 'multilevel' foyer brings to mind that of the Pleyel concert hall, an Art Deco building in Paris recently renovated at great cost.

The auditorium's ambience has been similarly transformed. Originally designed with pale wood panelling, it now evokes the colour and brilliance of string instruments – violins or cellos – whose curves and deep colouring were already to be found on the hall's exterior screens, which conceal ventilation equipment from the street and affirm the building's new function.

The elaborate folds of the cognac-coloured wood panelling give the hall its true acoustic and architectural colour. Triangular panels alternately advance and recede in order to increase reverberation – a critical consideration in a hall whose parallel walls were not, by themselves, acoustically performing. Inspired by Louis Kahn's concert hall in Fort Wayne, the triangular panels lend rhythm and movement to a space that would otherwise have seemed monotonous. The alternating use of matte and glossy varnish reinforces the panels' geometric vibration and materializes the idea of assemblage so characteristic of Art Deco. Taken as a whole, the hall can be read as an allusion to the studies and cabinets designed in Paris by the great interior designers of the first decades of the twentieth century.

The analogy of the hall to a violin is clear to all users. It affirms the unity of stage and auditorium through the medium of the musical instrument. The space is warm and convivial, simple yet effective; it makes the audience feel at home, and thus democratizes an occasion which is all too often viewed as overly formal. That, at least, is what everyone has been telling us since the concert hall opened its doors last February 17.