

**What's Past is Prolog:
Caserne Dalhousie in Québec City, the Ex-Machina multimedia center
by Plante et Julien, architects**

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Suspense, for a modern-day audience, is often a major part of the experience of drama. Actions proceed but the true identity of the actors may remain in doubt until the very end of a performance. As long as they remain unanticipated, plot twists have the power to surprise and sometimes shock audiences. Shakespeare, while familiar with the uses of surprise, would from time to time tell his audience everything right at the start of a play, as, for example, in the opening prolog of *Romeo and Juliet*. Accustomed to suspense, wondering what is next or who is responsible, a modern audience, after learning the outline of the coming tragedy of star-crossed lovers, might be forgiven if it simply got up and walked out after the first minute. But no one leaves the theater. Shakespeare evidently knew, and we can still appreciate, that drama loses nothing when characters and plot are known beforehand. Knowing a character's past or a story's outcome may, in the right hands, be the beginning of an affecting and memorable narrative. In fact, theatergoers in Shakespeare's time as well as our own often come to a play with intimate knowledge of it and their familiarity only adds to the inspiration or disquiet felt upon leaving.

There are no surprises--at least no architectural ones--in the Caserne Dalhousie, a multimedia production center designed by architects Plante et Julien of Quebec City and run by theater director Robert Lepage and his company Ex Machina. The architects have clearly laid out, like a theatrical prolog, an architectural plot. The client required the ultimate in flexibility and theater technology, and the site required restraint and respect for the surrounding historic district. As a result, the design solution clearly reveals two halves: an obsolete fire station dating from 1912 is retained and restored for the front of the building and a dark, mostly windowless mass is built to serve as the primary "production area" (there is no longer a "stage"), at the back of the building. While the firehouse was a condition of the site and, in this way, given to the architects, the way that it has been incorporated into the larger design provides the key to a very deep sense of drama attained by the architecture.

Front and back, old and new, fire station and theater are the *dramatis personae* of an architectural and urban play that derives its dramatic quality not from any spatial surprises within, but from their seemingly irreconcilable differences, which are clearly pronounced before one even goes inside. From the very start, the Caserne is an architecture of encounter: between the needs of an innovative theater director and an existing, sometimes inflexible building stock; between the unaccustomed patterns of circulation required by modern theater and the maintenance of a distinctive urban character; between a deeply felt pressure for creative development and cultural identity and the conventions of historic preservation. In what seems at first to be a simple design move, the architects have begun a dialogue, the very foundation of dramatic action. Each in its own distinctive voice, the two halves of the Caserne Dalhousie introduce a set of issues about how architecture relates to client and program, to site, and to the ongoing development of contemporary architecture.

For example, in the language of modern architecture, the austere dark box of the performance space represents the frank rejection of applied ornament that distinguished modern architecture early in the twentieth century. The form tells us that architectural expressiveness has been subordinated in service to function and, since the tradition of experimental theater from which the program springs is wholly internalized and dependent on technology, the mass is quite

literally closed to the street. We have no clue whether the performance inside is Pirandello or Pinocchio. The firehouse, in this case, would represent the sort of historicizing architecture modernism repudiated: a decorative program drawn from the mid-nineteenth century commissions of Napoleon III in Paris gilding a fire-fighting station half a century later and thousands of kilometers away. Despite the firehouse's oversized doors, it might just as well be a post office or police station; the function, in other words, has been subordinated to the form. Plante et Julien have recognized this defining moment in the history of modern architecture by keeping each form distinct, making each resolute. They have recreated an historically specific moment prior to the reconciliation of modern and historicist architecture known as postmodernism.

However moving though, any drama would be brief where differences in character are too sharply drawn and truly insurmountable. By bringing these two disparate forms together, the architects emphasize neither the prosaic compromises late in the twentieth century nor the historical triumph of one style over another early in the century. Rather, they rehearse the very process of architectural change, and, by extension, cultural evolution. Moreover, they reveal the transformative power of dialogue, the often overlooked struggle at the heart of even the simplest, let alone artistic, communication. Specifically, the firehouse was in its time dedicated to the most conservative of functions: self-preservation. The contemporary state of fire-fighting technology accounted for the extra-human size doors and the isolated tovertop, where a lone pair of eyes scoured rooftops night and day for smoke. There are of course still fires in Quebec City but none that this building will help extinguish. It is, in a word, obsolete. It remained for the commission by Lepage and ExMachina, with its avant-garde ideals of theatrical performance, its up-to-the-minute equipment, and its global stage, to appreciate the firehouse's civic sensibility and gracious address to the street, something modern architecture has been notably unable to do. At the same time, the cubic form of the performance space would be inconceivable in this location without its firehouse facade. The historic firehouse is the condition upon which the modern theater here is premised. As the literal and figurative entry to a center of technical and creative progress, the obsolete firehouse offers a profound critique of modernism's mistaken view of history. In its new role, opposite the performance space, the firehouse reveals its former dismissal by architectural modernism to be a misguided act of hubris. While formally antithetical, these two elements are shown to be inescapably bound to one another. Just as when Hamlet learns of a murder most foul from the ghost of his father, what appeared at first to be two stages in an historical process is seen to be two conflicted aspects of the same soul.

The architects develop this reversal of roles in some detail. The "black box" is nothing new in architectural circles, the German artist and architect Frederick Kiesler had in the 1920's already advanced similar ideas. A theater should be as «limitless,» Kiesler thought, as the performances that had not yet even been conceived. The architectural solution usually involved a wrapper around some flexible space, which was the result of the long spans available with new materials. Now, at a time when structural audacity of deconstruction is still accepted, one might have thought the architects would have used their respect for the fire station facade as a ticket to some architectural pyrotechnics behind. Instead, the architects wrap the box in shades of night. The technology that the architects are concerned with here is no longer the changed methods and materials of construction, which so inspired modernists, but the technology of late-twentieth century communications, which has typically been a problem for architects because it is so minimally material and tends toward the anti-spatial, at least as architects conceive of space. Plante et Julien seem to have acknowledged these tendencies by being so literal about the black box, by flattening its possibilities for ornament into subtle patterns and mere gradations of reflected light. More than merely the formal counterpart to the front, the back

facade then suggests some sort of engagement with technology that modernists thought facades typically prohibited.

Similarly, the architects have cast the existing firehouse in a new role. Through a glass reveal at the main (east) elevation and an inset at the Ferry Boat Society Building (north) elevation, the masonry facade is shown to be a single bay deep. The architectural treatment announces that the function of the facade is precisely to front upon the street. Paradoxically then, the masonry firehouse may now be said to be functionally "transparent"; six or seven decades earlier it would have been functionally illegible, at least in the eyes of modernist architects, who, instead, would have applauded the wholly internalized approach of the black box performance space. The rich and varied interior life of the black box is given back to the city through the medium of the firehouse. The architects play with just these notions on Dalhousie Street, where the firehouse mansard is extended in glass, with just enough framing to make sure the transparency is made visible. Modernism was often devoid of civic gestures, as the opaque performance space seems to emphasize. But, with the glass mansard, modern architecture is caught in the act of trying on an unfamiliar costume, stretching, so to speak, its dramatic repertoire. To participate in a meaningful dialogue, both architecture and theater teach us, is to learn a new vocabulary.

In this sense, the firehouse facade is very much a mask in a way that Shakespeare himself would have appreciated. Audiences of Shakespearian drama are usually more aware of the use of masks than are the characters within the play. For instance, by covering her face, Julia in "Two Gentlemen of Verona" reveals more about herself to her lover than he could learn about her unmasked, and we learn something about the natures of love and foolishness. Through an act of empathy, an audience may appreciate the multiplying motives both of the mask and of the character behind the mask. The mask is a device that does not erase identity so much as realigns it. It adds pieces to the puzzle of identity. In architectural terms, a mask is developed "in section," that is, a way of understanding a building that emphasizes both the presence of the facade and how it relates to the rest of the building. One cannot help but wonder whether M. Lepage, who has had characters speak in different languages and has himself performed multiple roles in the same play, did not himself insist that the architects thematize the rich and ambiguous use of masks in theater.

Then again, perhaps it was the whole phenomenon of urban change that suggested to the architects this approach. The citizens of Québec could hardly have imagined in 1912 that their new firehouse would one day be part of a multimedia complex, a conception still half a century away, and a showcase for technologies not yet invented and talents not yet born. The architects of the original firehouse would also have been shocked to learn that one day their faith in the continuity of tradition, so apparent in their honor for the architectural past, would be banned. Plante et Julien seem, more than anything else, aware that they themselves may indeed one day be quite surprised at how things have turned out. Their building, it should be remembered, will likely outlast any single individual associated with it. Thus, rather than propose a suspenseful sequence of spaces or a surprise ending upon which appreciation of the whole project depends, the architects have suggested the city begin a dialogue about its future. Will each stage of urban development find its voice in the larger urban fabric? After all that the two halves of the Caserne Dalhousie say to one another, like two protagonists, they have something to say to the urban audience. Together, they say something entirely hopeful to the city of Québec, and anyone else who is listening, about the future of historic preservation: Québec City may be handsomely preserved without the touristic temptation of becoming a postcard of itself. Preservation does not require petrification. Allowing, indeed challenging, the historic architecture to find its own voice and validity may well be the architects' most notable achievement in this project.