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WORKPLACE On the Grid

Sid Lee Architecture has transformed part of I. M. Pei's Place Ville Marie in downtown Montreal into a living, breathing office.

By Rita Lobo



At the heart of efforts to revitalize Montreal's downtown business center is I. M. Pei's iconic Place Ville Marie, a cruciform skyscraper that dominates the city's skyline. At street level, Place Ville Marie is just as consequential, supplying a green esplanade in a part of the city that can feel gray and inaccessible. For decades, four quadrants at the base of the tower were the home of the Royal Bank of Canada, but three of the blocks have now been taken over by poly-creative agency Sid Lee, whose architecture arm carried out a root-and-branch redesign to bring the space into the 21st century.



FROM LEFT: DAVID BOYER; COURTESY MAXIME BROUILLET



Occupying three of the four quadrants that make up the podium level of I. M. Pei's cruciform Place Ville Marie skyscraper in Montreal, the Biosquare is a new office for creative agency Sid Lee. The workplace appears suspended in a three-dimensional matrix of white lines that was inspired by the 1962 development's original infinite grid motif.



The goal of the project was to make the interior of the 1962 building feel fresh and welcoming for the new generation of creative staff working there. To achieve that, Jean Pelland, architect and principal partner at Sid Lee Architecture, and his team drew inspiration from the infinite grid motif of the Place Ville Marie development and imbued every element of the design with it, creating a continuity between the public esplanade outside and offices inside. The result is the illusion of an infinite floating lattice that's accented by the vibrant green of tropical plants. It has aptly been christened the Biosquare.

"It was based on the modern design principles, which dictated how the original building was constructed—with an infinite grid which runs through all four quadrants that make Place Ville Marie's base," explains

Pelland. "We thought it would be interesting to do the same in a microcosm."

The matrixlike system creates the illusion of a fully open workspace with an uninterrupted view of the plaza outside from the ground-floor entrance and café, while housing electrical components and creating opportunities to insert subtle partitions. Above, as if floating, two mezzanines connected by three bridges form the main workspaces, which are bathed in natural light from the skylights above.

"The infinite grid allows for everything to be interconnected, and provides a structure for lighting, dividing walls, and suspended greenery," says Pelland. "It also allows for a metamorphosis of these different environments but always with an underlying fine linear structure that ties everything together."

Sid Lee Architecture uncovered the building's original travertine floors in main collaborative zones, where extensive plantings and wooden furniture keep the space from feeling sterile. Workspaces are located on open mezzanines, giving the entire office a feeling of lightness and connection, while affording workstations some privacy. Lighting was provided by local studio Lambert & Fils.



The structure was custom-fabricated from steel and sits atop the bush-hammered stone of the ground-floor café, kitchen, and washrooms. The work and meeting spaces suspended above are fluid, with open meeting areas at the center of each floating quadrant. The original travertine floors were restored during the renovation, and several skylights were enlarged to create a sense of airiness. There is little in the way of decoration save the voluminous tropical foliage deployed strategically around the main space. A living wall at ground level is integrated into a gender-neutral bathroom, and the structure surrounding the staircase in the southwest quadrant has integrated planters. “There are so many plants we need a gardener,” says Pelland. Between the foliage and the zenithal lighting from above, visitors get the impression of entering not an office but a greenhouse.

The overall effect is bright and fluid, insistent on letting materials speak for themselves as metal, glass, and minerals are suspended, almost weightless, in an optical illusion of grids and greenery. The Biosquare is a natural extension of Pei’s right-angled geometry, which has defined Place Ville Marie for six decades, but with softer touches and welcoming edges. As a functional workplace, it centers its inhabitants and their well-being. **M**



A dark conference room features a black table with a metallic base and provides sharp contrast to the all-white-everything design of a lounge space nearby. These breakout rooms were intended to be immersive experiences that allow workers to lose themselves in their creative projects.