“A library is, today, one of the rare buildings where people can really touch architecture,” says architect Éric Pelletier. “It is among the few public buildings, accessible and free, where everyone can have a special relationship with architecture. Libraries still have to play that role, to create opportunities to discover architecture, to make people aware of something different than what they are used to.”

Pelletier has been highly invested in designing new libraries across Quebec, including the celebrated Grande Bibliothèque du Québec in Montreal (2005, Patkau Architects with Croft Pelletier and Menkes Shooner Dagenais), the Bibliothèque de Charlesbourg (2006, Croft Pelletier) and the Bibliothèque de Montmagny (2013, Éric Pelletier architectes). Thanks to Quebec’s strong program of architectural competitions, libraries have played an important role in the emergence of a younger generation of architects. Increasingly, they also act as invaluable “third places”—community anchors outside of the home and the workplace where people come to socialize.

While he has a number of public and academic libraries on the boards, Pelletier’s most recent completed library is the Bibliothèque du Boisé. Located in Montreal’s Saint-Laurent borough, the library was inaugurated in 2013 and designed by the joint venture Cardinal Hardy |
Labonté Marcil | Éric Pelletier architectes (Cardinal Hardy and Éric Pelletier have since merged with Lemay). The new library refines some of the ideas developed in Pelletier’s earlier projects—for example, a spatial organization that divides vast open volumes with wood elements and height variations—but it is also a unique building shaped by its particular geographical, social and urban contexts.

The design emerged from a single-stage competition held in 2009, which called for a building combining one of the largest public libraries in Quebec with an exhibition and archive centre for the nearby Musée des maîtres et artisans du Québec. In a move uncommon to design competitions in Quebec, the proposals had to target a LEED Platinum standard from the competition stage. With the area’s multicultural and multilingual population, the design also had to accommodate an appropriately large collection to address the needs of its diverse users. This vast program was to fit within a long, narrow site stretched between the Parc Marcel-Laurin’s preserved woodlands (a rare sight on Île de Montréal), and Boulevard Thimens, a suburban artery lined with large apartment slabs. The site’s surroundings also include a shopping centre, a New Urbanist residential development, a high school, and a sports complex (currently being expanded following another design competition).

Led by Pelletier, the winning design team responded to this car-oriented context with a building that asserts a strong visual presence with an undulating rooftopscape topped with a skylight tower—which simultaneously defers to its environment by taking a low-key position within its site. To avoid creating a library that acts as a wall between the boulevard and the woodlands, the architects buried the archive centre underground, and stretched the remaining program to create as narrow a building as possible. Compositionally, the massing suggests a solid block anchored to the ground, serving as a counterpoint to the floating rooftopscape and extending the building into the landscape on Boulevard Thimens. The volume was pinched vertically and horizontally at its centre point to create a pathway going over the building, offering a physical connection between the city and the park. Generous windows visually link between the woodlands, the path and the library’s interior.

The pinch point divides the building into two large spaces that can be operated separately. To the west is the two-storey library along with several meeting rooms; to the east is the underground archive centre, topped by an exhibition space, library services and additional meeting rooms. The massive overhanging zinc rooftopscape covering both spaces allows for light and sound control, protecting the library from the airplane corridor overhead.
The vast library volume is further divided by ceiling changes and integrated furniture, creating tailored spaces for its diverse clientele. The generous main-floor spaces devoted to children are particularly stimulating: youngsters occupy a shiny brightly coloured area, while wooden seats and tables sprawl through the stretch dedicated to older children. Teenagers have their own zone upstairs, isolated from the main collection to contain noise, but it is visible from the library’s entrance.

Both floors are marked by the presence of a fold in the roof that brings light all the way to the ground level and visually organizes the space. The fold also makes the wooden ceiling visible throughout the interior, underlining the roofscape’s structuring presence. A monumental concrete stair, situated close to the fold, emerges from the ground floor. It acts as a link between the lighter second floor and the massive
Concrete elements that anchor the ground floor in both the library block and exhibition and archive block. The collection and reading spaces are complemented with purpose-built furniture designed by the architect team. This includes shelving units that integrate presentation cabinets, as well as communal reading tables.

As much as the design is informed by its context and site, Bibliothèque du Boisé is first and foremost a building to be enjoyed from the interior. The elevations, intended to disappear behind the woodlands on one side and planted tree rows along the boulevard, are currently very present visually. The overall concept of bringing roof and ground topographies together at the building’s midpoint is simple and strong (even if not entirely original), and supports the library’s spatial organization.

Without experiencing the interior, however, it initially appears too form-driven from the exterior. From the woodlands, the function of the fold facing Parc Marcel-Laurin is difficult to understand, while from the boulevard, the idea of a solid mass housing archival and exhibition spaces is muddied by a compositional mix of concrete, stone and glazing. Inside, this mass is mostly rendered in concrete, making it much easier to perceive and comprehend. This formalism is not, however, necessarily a problem, as the design ultimately defers to the surrounding natural
context and offers dynamic interior spaces, as it was intended to.

The sustainability measures that the competition called for were implemented subtly, without any grand gestures. Rather, the design team aimed for a seamless integration of environmental principles, their preferred approach to all projects. For example, they worked carefully to bring in plenty of natural light, and focused artificial lighting strategies on low-energy task lighting ideal for reading, a proven measure used in earlier libraries. A geothermal field, along with green roofs and reflective white roofs, was also incorporated. The architects succeeded in convincing the client and its neighbours to share access roads and parking spaces in order to reduce hard surfaces on site.

The library is visually and physically busy, and this is a measure of its success. It is filled with natural light that changes throughout the day, and is bustling with energy from its many users, in large part young people that will hopefully remain regular library users as they grow older. Its relatively simple organization is appropriated by groups of diverse cultures and ages; through porous divisions, this energy is made visible, but rendered unobtrusive.

The Bibliothèque du Boisé is no doubt a 21st-century library: not through flashy details or a focus on digital tools and transformations, but through its embrace of activity and energy. It balances the social role of the library with plenty of books that make its large multilingual collection easily accessible. It creates a place that cannot be mistaken for a solemn library devoted exclusively to private reading, even if quiet spaces are created through the building’s proximity to the woodlands. This is a library in which to engage, meet friends, enjoy the changes of the immediate natural world, and learn to love the pleasure of reading. As Pelletier puts it, going there is a learning experience—it is a place for opening people’s minds.

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