



CANADIAN ARCHITECT

FOR ART'S SAKE

A NEW QUEBEC ARTISTS' CENTRE IS AN ELEGANT ARGUMENT FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG, CREATIVE FIRMS THROUGH ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN COMPETITIONS.



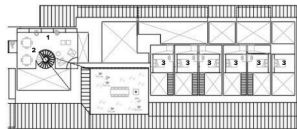
COURTESY EST-NORD-EST

TOP Est-Nord-Est's new home is the outcome of a design competition, won by emerging Quebec City firm Bourgeois / Lechasseur architectes. **ABOVE** For decades, Est-Nord-Est operated from makeshift facilities: an old concrete block structure, to which discarded portable classrooms had been added for use as studios by resident artists.

PROJECT Est-Nord-Est, résidence d'artistes, St-Jean-Port-Joli, Quebec
ARCHITECT Bourgeois / Lechasseur architectes
TEXT Odile Hénault
PHOTOS Adrien Williams, unless otherwise noted

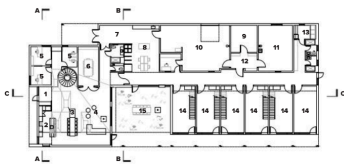
In May 2019, a small centre dedicated to research and experimentation in contemporary art inaugurated its new home in the historic village of Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, along the St. Lawrence River. Normally, this kind of event would not register with the architectural community, but Centre Est-Nord-Est is different. The work of Bourgeois Lechasseur architectes, it is contemporary yet deeply rooted in tradition. And it could not have happened without Quebec's unique competition system.

Centre Est-Nord-Est belongs to a well-established international network of residencies, providing artists from around the world with an opportunity to spend a few weeks away from their home, discovering new perspectives and sharing with people engaged in similar artistic ventures. Since its founding in 1992, Est-Nord-Est had occupied makeshift facilities, too cold to be used during the winter and unable to provide accommodation for its visiting artists. After years of dreaming and fundraising, Est-Nord-Est was finally able to embark on the long trek that would lead to its new building. A lot of hope was placed in the competition process.



MEZZANINE

- 1 ARCHIVE AND LIBRARY
- 2 READING LOUNGE
- 3 INDIVIDUAL STUDIO SLEEPING AREA



MAIN FLOOR

- 1 VESTIBULE
- 2 KITCHEN
- 3 DINING
- 4 LOUNGE
- 5 OFFICE
- 6 MEETING ROOM
- 7 LOADING
- 8 SHARED STUDIO
- 9 STORAGE
- 10 WOOD SHOP
- 11 METAL SHOP
- 12 WORKSHOP VESTIBULE
- 13 LAUNDRY
- 14 INDIVIDUAL STUDIOS
- 15 COURTYARD



A few years earlier, architect Todd Saunders had set the bar very high with his widely praised Fogo Island Studios and Inn in Newfoundland. Money did not seem to be an issue in Fogo, but it definitely was a constraint in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli. With a \$2.3 M construction budget for a 590-square-metre building, Est-Nord-Est launched its competition in 2017. It attracted responses from 22 Quebec firms, from which the five-member jury proceeded to shortlist four relatively young teams to go on to the design stage.

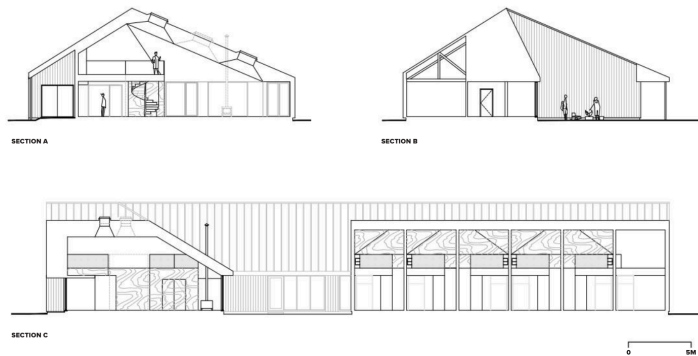
One of the four finalists—and the eventual winner—stood out from the outset. Bourgeois Lechasseur architectes was founded by then-recent graduates Olivier Bourgeois and Régis Lechasseur. In his masters' thesis project, Bourgeois had researched and designed an unusual *Domaine d'artistes* for a Magdalen Islands coastal community.¹ The project caught the eye of Todd Saunders, which led to Bourgeois joining his team in Bergen, Norway, as work started on the Fogo Island studios.

This experience with the typology perhaps explains why Bourgeois' team took a few liberties with the program requirements. The brief asked for a multifunctional space, two workshops, an assembly area, six studios, five bedrooms, various administrative spaces and a small library. The most public component—the multifunctional room—was meant as a meeting point for the artists, as well as a bridge to the community at large. The residential facilities, a first in the Centre's history, would allow invited artists to spend all their time on the premises, rather than travelling back and forth between the building and rented rooms in the village centre, a few kilometres away.

ABOVE At the heart of the project, a multipurpose room opens onto a courtyard used by staff, resident artists, and guests during public events.

OPPOSITE A sweeping stair leads up to a library and reading mezzanine.





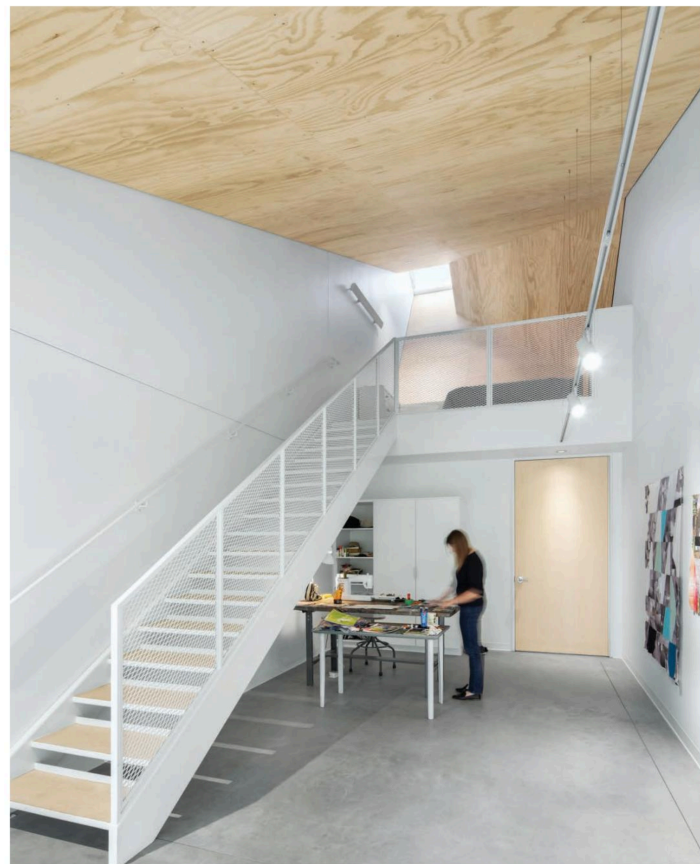
Bourgeois Lechasseur's proposal was distinct from the other entries in its handling of the overall volume and its innovative studio configuration.⁷ For this narrow site—close to the St. Lawrence, yet removed from river views—inspiration came from the land rather than the water, and more particularly, from the imposing barns still dotting the countryside all over Quebec. Both Bourgeois and Lechasseur were raised in small communities, away from larger cities. Their understanding of vernacular architecture led them to devise a long monolithic volume with a sloping roof, totally in tune with its rural context.

The shape of the roof allowed the architects to deploy a series of mezzanines in the studios, instead of building a second floor as stipulated by the program. The studio configuration offers a flexible, expandable workspace for resident artists, elegantly addressing a long-standing issue with the former facility's rigid layout. Sculptors could have all the space they needed for their experimental work, while photographers (or other artists working from a laptop) could enjoy a larger living area.

The heart of the project remains the double-height multifunctional room, located close to the entrance. The room is filled with light flowing in from an exterior court as well as from skylights set in dramatic light wells. It serves as lounge, exhibition area, community kitchen, and dining room. A voluptuous spiral staircase leads up to the quieter library and office mezzanine.

Locally harvested white cedar was used for the exterior cladding, while sheet metal protects the huge roof. Given the institution's modest budget, interior finishes are mostly plywood, gypsum board and polished concrete. Acoustically treated gypsum panels were installed on

LEFT Each studio can be used flexibly as a workspace and living area, accommodating the needs of different types of artistic pursuits. **RIGHT** The use of mezzanines—rather than a second floor—simplified fire exiting and allowed for substantial cost savings within the tight budget.





some of the angled ceilings to keep sound reverberation to a minimum. Working within this simple palette, the architects gave considerable thought to natural light and to physical conditions conducive to reflection, quiet stimulation and experimentation.

As a critic, one's only concern reviewing this jewel of a building is that it may be the swan song for a unique program. Established in the early 90s, Quebec's competition process was designed to stimulate creativity and allow new talents to emerge from anonymity. Since then, numerous cultural facilities—often designed by young firms—have provided Quebecers with an amazing array of libraries, concert halls, theatres, museums, and interpretative centres.

Despite this success, resistance to the process was always lurking, slowly infiltrating the bureaucratic mechanisms responsible for competitions. Slowly but surely, requirements have become more stringent and risk-adverse. Today, there is little difference between competition invitations and regular RFPs. Younger teams—or talented firms with little experience in a particular building type—are almost automatically excluded from shortlists.

With this elegant, well-crafted building, where the architects were able to use their creativity to the fullest, one is reminded of the program's early days. In 1992, the Quebec Ministry of Culture organized two small-budget pilot competitions that were to have a tremendous impact. The Musée régional de Rimouski, by Dupuis LeTourneux, has become a vibrant regional institution, partly thanks to its physical transformation. And, apart from contributing to its remote Gaspé location, the

Centre d'interprétation du Bourg de Pabos, by Atelier Big City, created a momentum that resulted in a changed—and reinvigorated—culture of architectural practice in Quebec.

One of the Rimouski museum's designers—Jean-Pierre LeTourneux—was on the Est-Nord-Est jury, along with Marie-Chantal Croft, whose firm worked with Patkau Architects on a major project won by competition: the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec. Competitions were a turning point for both LeTourneux and Croft, who have since enjoyed highly successful careers. As they sat down in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli to select the four competing teams for Est-Nord-Est, one can presume they made a point of giving younger firms a chance.

Hopefully, the level of excellence achieved in this Centre will lead to a much-needed refresh of the competition system, pivoting it back towards its original goal of supporting talent and creativity. Such qualities are more often than not found in emerging architects.

1 Olivier Bourgeois' masters thesis project (in French) can be accessed at www.arc.ulaval.ca/files/arc/projetsetudiants/2006/Olivier_Boucher.pdf

2 Competition entries and related documents (in French) can be viewed at www.ccc.umontreal.ca/fiche_concours.php?cld=508&lang=fr

Odile Hénault is an architectural critic based in Quebec. She was the professional advisor who organized Quebec's two pilot competitions in the early 90s. She briefly served as director of the Centre Est-Nord-Est in 2009.

ABOVE A courtyard is framed by the centre's multi-purpose room and workshops. The centre's dramatic roofs are inspired by the region's traditional barns.

CLIENT EST-NORD-EST | **ARCHITECT TEAM** OLIVIER BOURGEOIS, RÉGIS LECHASSEUR, ROMY BROUSSEAU, PASCALE OUELLET-DOMPIERRE, VALÉRIE GAUTHIER, ISABELLE AUCLAIR, MAXIME ROUSSEAU | **STRUCTURAL** GÉNIE-PLUS | **CONTRACTOR** MARCEL CHAREST & FILS | **AREA** 951 M² | **BUDGET** \$2.3 M | **COMPLETION** JULY 2019