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TAKING THE TRIP FROM THE CITY OF URBAN

A kaleidoscopic tableau of paper lanterns transforms Montreal's Botanical Garden into an explosion of colors and shapes for the annual Magic of Lanterns festival. "The designs, created each year around a new theme, were delightfully inventive and whimsical," says photographer Will van Overbeek.



MONTREAL IN PLAY

Take a fun-loving citizenry, edgy galleries, a merry-go-round of festivals, and that little thing called Cirque du Soleil, and you can't not have a good time in Montreal.

By Adam Sachs Photography by Will van Overbeek



MONTREAL

is like a contortionist. It twists, adapts, folds onto itself in surprising ways. Preternaturally flexible, it is spectacle and entertainment and living thing all at once. Frankly it's kind of crazy that it works at all. But you can't look away.

"It's a question of the spine," says Elena Fomina, a contortion teacher at the city's École Nationale de Cirque—National Circus School. "When I look at the natural flexibility of a back, I can tell whether there is potential. You cannot make a normal person into a great contortionist." Contortionists, apparently, have to be born with elasticity.

Morning sunlight fills the gymnasium where what looks like a surrealist P.E. class is under way. A young woman leaps gracefully onto a narrow bar held at shoulder height by two muscular students. A comic juggler practices throwing himself, repeatedly, against the padded floor. In French with a Slavic lilt, Fomina tells me that before teaching, she toured the world as a member of a swinging-trapeze act.

So you can fly? I ask her. "Yes," she says matter-of-factly.

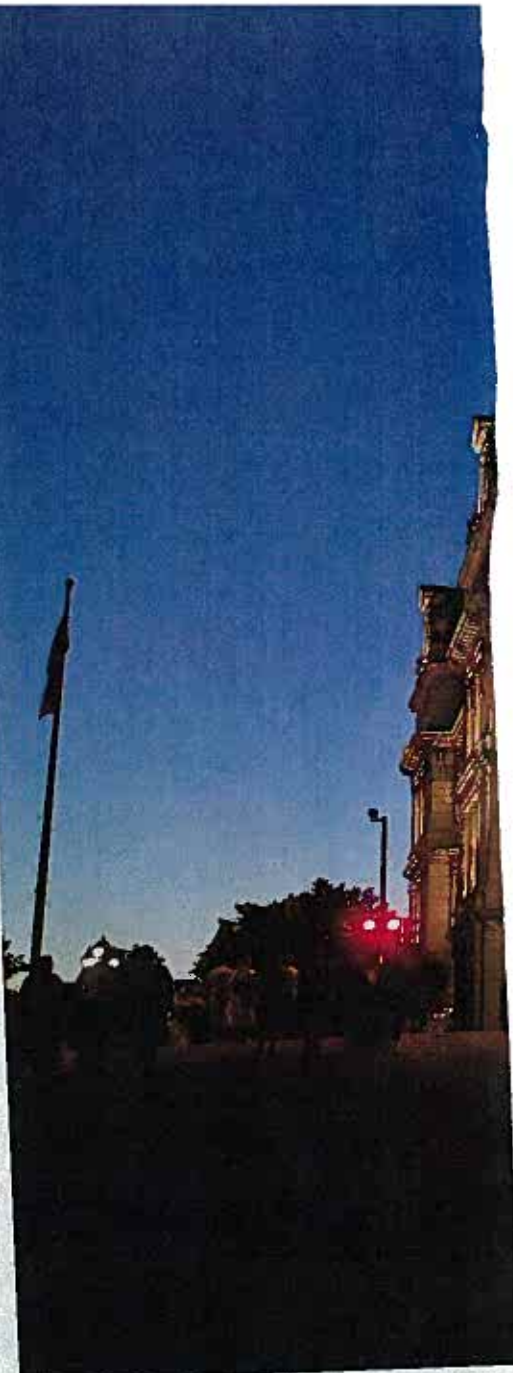
The National Circus School is housed in a modern steel-and-glass structure in

an industrial part of Montreal. Next door sits the international headquarters of the world-famous Cirque du Soleil; beyond that lies a large arena that is home to other homegrown circus troupes. This ensemble, a complex called TOHU and known as "la cité des arts du cirque," is surprisingly vast for a place few would even imagine exists. A giant dream factory that covers nearly 475 acres, it is where every costume and prop for every Cirque du Soleil show is produced, and where future generations of gravity-defying, juggling, human-pretzel performers are learning new tricks.

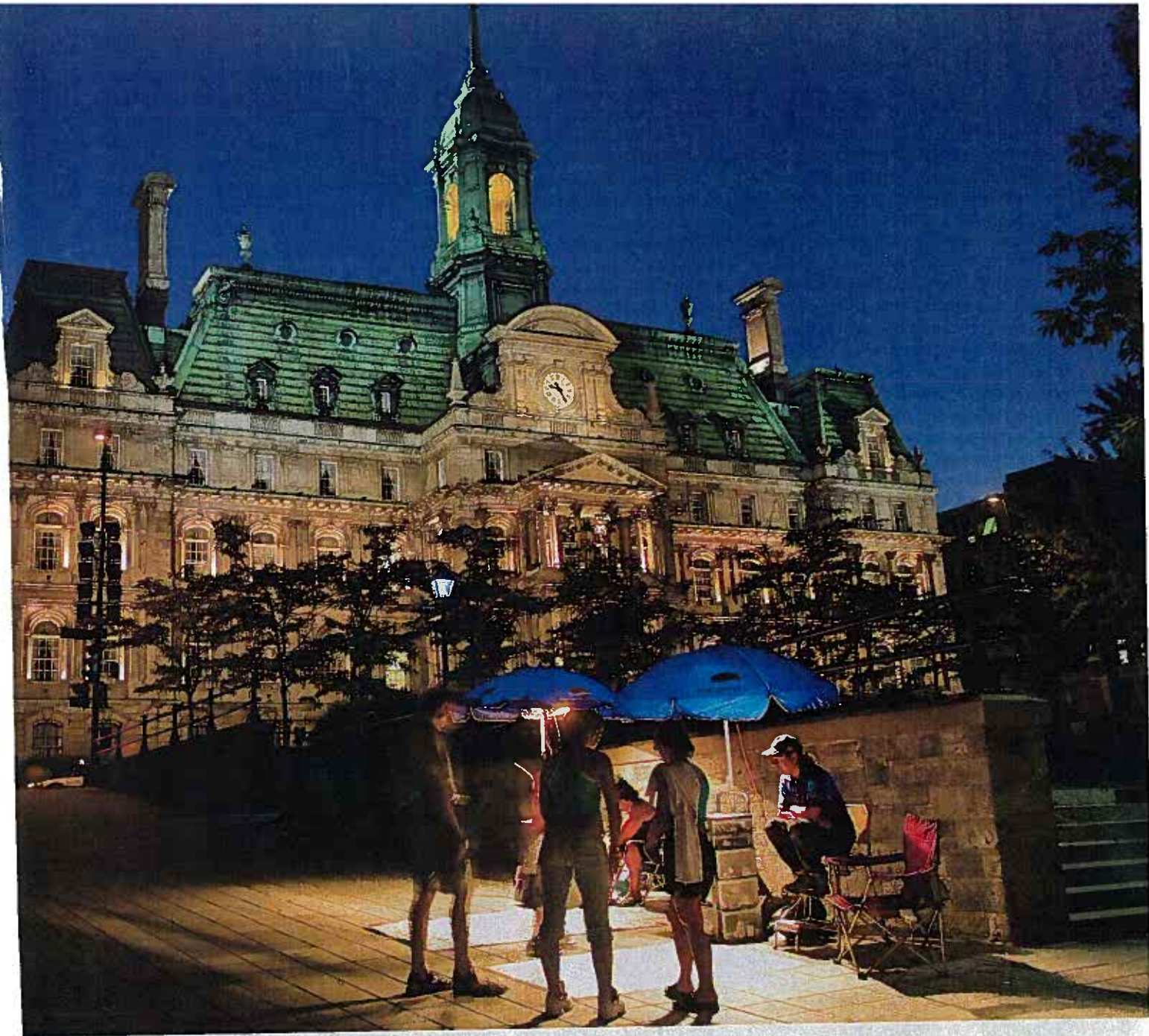
This city within a city is a place that takes its playing seriously—which is true, too, of the larger metropolis enveloping it. We tourists tend to experience other people's cities as entertainments: three-ring diversions of eating, shopping, and sight-seeing. But just as founder Guy Laliberté envisioned Cirque du Soleil as a theatrical show that didn't need a big top, Montreal

is a place where the sense of play and originality is free-form and freewheeling. Low rents, a thriving creative class, lively outdoor cafés, and parks in every neighborhood: Enjoying yourself here is a form of collective street theater.

A francophone pocket on a generally English-speaking continent, an island that until recently was iced in every winter, Montreal also knows how to amuse itself with all kinds of festivals for all kinds of folks—jazz, indie, rock, film, art, dance, comedy. Ruby Roy, a knowledgeable local



Old World symbols like the ornate City Hall (above, right) serve as backdrop to Montreal's always enterprising street life. It's all hockey, all—or most—of the time at Chez Serge (above), a sports club that turns unabashedly boisterous when it comes to Montreal's champion Canadiens hockey team.



guide who is deeply in love with everything about Montreal except the winters, put it to me this way: "Our festivals are now international attractions, but we did not start them to attract outsiders. They really were for Montrealers—which is why they're all a little different." Note that this enthusiasm for the arts isn't an obsession with box-office takes. "This is a city where documentaries sell out," says Roy.

And while it's a city where anyone who is asked will tell anyone who will listen that it never takes itself too seriously, there is also something sweetly sincere if not outright boastful about its encouragement of every niche hobby, pastime, and

distraction. "Outside Argentina, no one tango dances more than we do," Roy says with civic pride. Take that Ottawa!

Back at the circus school, I ask Fomina if there is a Montreal style of contortion. Her face brightens. "Our style is more rhythmic and dynamic," she says, seeming to speak for all her fellow Montrealers, not only the supple-spined. "It doesn't just show what the body can do; it also shows emotions. It is artistic, expressionistic." The same can be said for this city that created and supported such an unusual industry: Like its circus performers, Montreal is imaginative, kinetic—and always part of the show.

I HAD ARRIVED somewhere between Montreal's summer, when it is an outdoor playland, and winter, when it tends toward tundra. The sky that greeted me was experimenting with different moods: iffy, then sunny, then wet. The locals were unfazed. Even on a gray day as seen from a taxi, the city is pleasant viewing. If, as the late urban theorist Jane Jacobs said, "new ideas require old buildings," the stone edifices of Old Montreal provide much to riff on: the rough-hewn fieldstones of French-built structures, the clean lines of the Brits' cut stones, the red sandstone used by the Scots. Up from the Old Port are buildings in art deco and Chicago styles, and elegant

town houses with that Montreal curiosity, exterior rather than interior stairways winding up to the second floor, like urban kudzu. The Olympic Stadium is visible in the distance and the retro-futuristic cubist curiosity Habitat 67 rises across the St. Lawrence River. A pleasure here is that when you are in one neighborhood, you completely forget that an altogether different-looking spot lies just a few blocks away—like the renewable novelty of certain women who change hairstyles to become a completely different person.

Huge chunks of city space are given over to play—such as Parc Jean-Drapeau, which spreads over the islands of Notre-Dame and Sainte-Hélène, and offers inline skating along a race-car circuit and beach volleyball on Plage Jean-Drapeau. There is even a bit of rapids on the river, prompting the intrepid—or delusional—to bring surfboards. In another inspired bit of swords-into-plowshares repurposing, the city's first jail, under Jacques Cartier Bridge, was converted into a public wine cellar.

THE NIGHT I GOT TO TOWN, I went to see a local writer, Adam Gollner, at a café and performance space called Casa del Popolo on Boulevard St-Laurent. Gollner often writes about Montreal, but tonight he was giving a talk about his book *The Fruit Hunters*, on exotic fruits of the world and those who quest for them. Before passing around a giant coco-de-mer fruit from the Seychelles, Gollner talked about the roles of natural selection and human selection in the evolution of fruit. I found myself thinking about how cities, too, are the result of centuries of trial and self-selection. Why does Montreal become a city of the arts while Toronto becomes a hub of commerce? Partially it's circumstantial (it gets cold here; you better have a hobby come winter), eventually it's self-fulfilling (if you want to be in the circus, move to the city that has the top circus school). Later I asked Gollner why he thought the city was so conducive to the arts.

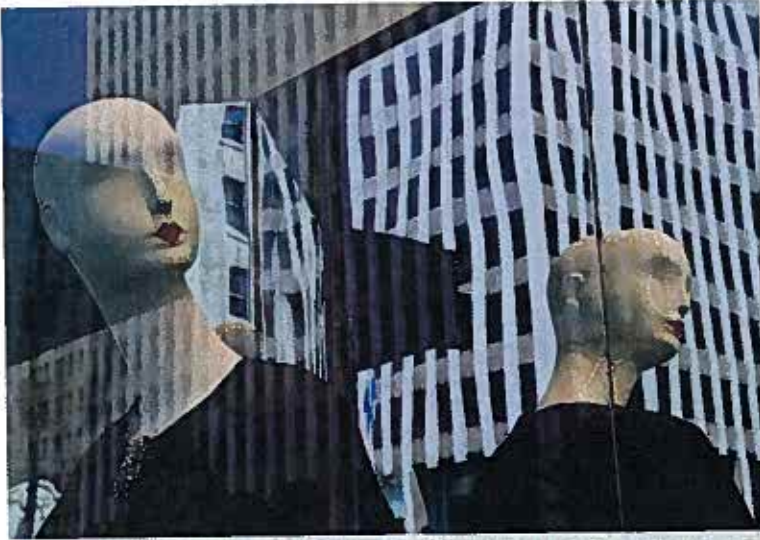
"The allure of Montreal is that it's the only place in the Western world where

you can still be a bohemian," he said. "One of the ways the Quebec region has traditionally defined itself is in opposition to things. We have that indie-rock resistance to big American corporate life, a resistance mirrored in the idea that this is a French province that has fought for separatism."

Added to this jumble is an English distaste for appearing to embrace success, along with what Gollner calls "the Nordic instinct to band together to fight the elements." The early settlers were "fat priests guzzling the best wine in the frozen hinterland. That was the Montreal dynamic from the beginning: Though you're in a strange place, you can still live well. You may be broke, radical, and a leftist separatist, but you'll still drink Poiré William at the end of a feast and stomp on your hat, saying if we don't protect the French language, we're going to turn into Louisiana."

Barry Lazar, a local journalist and filmmaker who moderated Gollner's presentation, agrees there is some especially playful thing in the Montreal air. In his





Tête-à-tête? A ruby-lipped mannequin meets her match in a playful store-window reflection along Rue Sherbrooke, a premier Montreal shopping street known in the early 1900s for its wealthy residents. A proud parade stilt-walker (right) shows off an inventive blue-on-blue costume during Montreal's performance-packed International Jazz Festival. Lord of the rings, performer Stéphane Gentilini (opposite), a member of Montreal-based Cirque Éloize, hoops it up while balancing on one leg.



case that air for a while smelled heavily of smoked meat, when he was producing a documentary on Schwartz's Deli, the venerable "charcuterie Hébraïque" down Boulevard St-Laurent, where meats come in three degrees of fattiness and a frankfurter is considered a side dish. "Now I'm working on a film about a local hip-hop klezmer musician named SoCalled." It's common to have this kind of conversation in Montreal.

I caught a taxi in a misty drizzle and headed down to Au Pied de Cochon, a restaurant known for such rich dishes as foie-gras poutine, stuffed pig's feet, and tripe pizza—all of which should come with their own medical-alert bracelets—to meet up with Mike Boone, a salty veteran city columnist for the *Montreal Gazette*. Montreal, he tells me, tends to define itself in opposition to Toronto, a place that Boone derides with typical local chauvinism as "Cleveland with Medicare." But it is Montreal's own internal struggles and contradictions, he contends, that make it such a lively and accommodating place to live. Accommodating, with one big exception.

"Hockey," Boone says. "Spoiled by 24 Stanley Cups, we demand perfection—or, at minimum, artistry. Hockey is the secular religion here, a passion that transcends linguistic, ethnic, demographic, and socio-economic lines to unite all Montrealers."

THE NEXT DAY I walked down Rue de la Commune along the St. Lawrence River,

where bikes for rent encourage you to strike out along miles of paths snaking over to Île Sainte-Hélène and Île Notre-Dame, and through the city itself. From this part of Old Montreal I made my way west toward the commercial center, passing Victoria Square, where a statue of that English queen (looking very trim and youthful) faces a flowery art moderne gate originally made for the Paris Métro, a gift from France. At least one percent of all new public construction budgets in Montreal must be spent on public art, so there is always much to look at—even

when locals have fled the cold streets for the commercial catacombs below the city. And no building can be higher than the top line of the city's namesake summit, Mount Royal, which, with its park, is a communal as well as visual focal point of the city. Mount Royal Park was first landscaped by Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York's Central Park, who saw here an opportunity to make the urban mountain a central part of the city's enjoyments.

The sun had come out. This being a city of whim and indulgence, what I wanted was to wander around at leisure, then sit in the





Laser-beamed Tribe Hyper Club lures high-wattage patrons to come and play amid cool furnishings and tunes pumped out by a 100,000-watt sound system. "The place seemed very exclusive, throbbed with music, and was smoky with a theatrical artificial fog," says photographer van Overbeek.

sun, drink coffee, and chat. So I arranged to meet with Dennis Trudeau, a long-time television personality, cultural commentator, and all-around suave guy, at a café in the student area of St.-Denis. I took a long, looping route there, by way of the Mile End neighborhood, mostly so I could stop at Fairmount Bagels. Perhaps to offset a bitter winter, Montrealers prefer their bagels slightly sweet. Fairmount is known best for its classic small bagels, but it also makes a loony one called a "bozo," which is big, and twisted, and covered in sesame and poppy seeds. It took me most of my walk to finish it.

I found Trudeau waiting at a good seat out on the terrace. Montreal is frequently called the "Paris of North America," but Trudeau said Montreal should stand on its own strengths. "This is a city where you can do pretty much what you like, be it writing or painting or sculpture or inventing something different. It has attracted a lot of people for that reason.

It's hard to go anywhere else in Canada after Montreal. Now when I visit other cities I find something missing. Nice, but no garlic, you know?"

Joie de vivre is another term that bugs Trudeau. But, he says, "it is absolutely true here. People like to have parties. In a sense, even Cirque du Soleil is a big party organizer. When I get together with my francophone friends, all we do is laugh. Now, when you get together with your anglophone friends, it might not be so... hilarious...." He let the thought trail off.

"Montreal's biggest problem," he resumed, "is that it's on the periphery. This is the last big city in eastern North America before the North Pole. When you're on the edge, and things contract toward the center, you feel it first. We're on the edge, and we're different."

We sipped our warm coffee in the nippy air. "In March, on sunny days, this café will be open," Trudeau said, admiringly. "You can have horrible weather here, but

as soon as it is 45°F out, this is where Montrealers rush to. To the sunny side of the afternoon street."

Londoners have their forbearance. New Yorkers, grit. Montrealers, it seems, have a way of finding the sunny side of the afternoon street. I thought again of the circus school, where I'd watched a boy walk lightly forward and backward across a taut wire. "I asked him to visualize it," the boy's teacher told me. Maybe that's what Montreal itself is: a balancing act, a communal decision to keep spirits aloft in spite of weather and other daily challenges. A communal decision to have fun in life. "If he can see it in his head, he can do it," the tightwire teacher had said. "If not, he will fall."

Adam Sachs has written for GQ, Food and Wine, and National Geographic Adventure. Texas-based photographer Will van Overbeek last shot the feature story "Insiders Las Vegas" (July/August 2007).