



LANDSCAPES + PAYSAGES

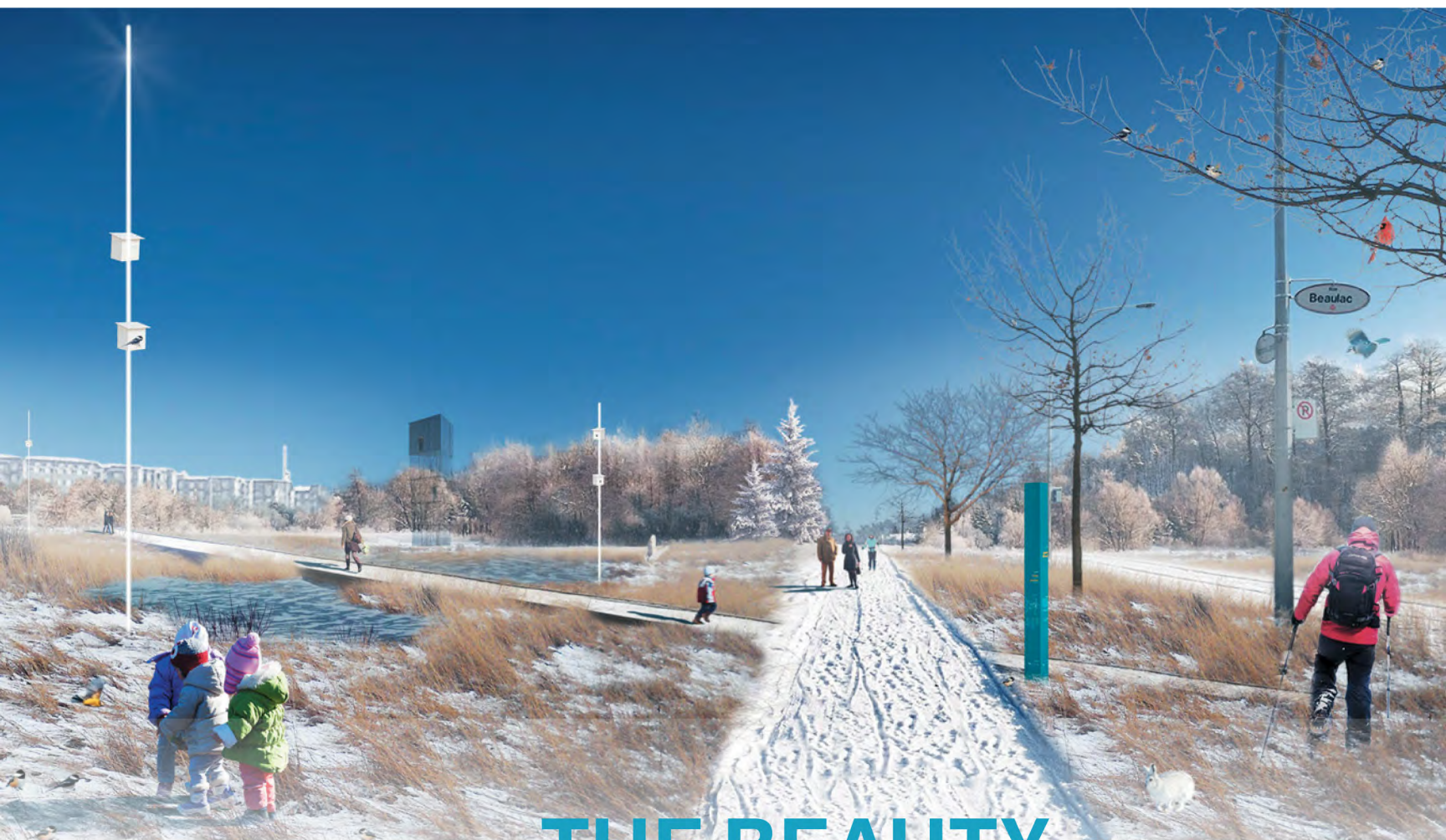
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THE CANADIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS
L'ASSOCIATION DES ARCHITECTES PAYSAGISTES DU CANADA

beauté



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THE BEAUTY OF LIVING INFRASTRUCTURE

PETER SOLAND

“For those contemplating the universe with an artist’s eye, it is grace that is read through beauty, and it is goodness that appears through grace...”

Henri Bergson

For those contemplating the universe with an artist’s eye, it is grace that is read through beauty, and it is goodness that appears through grace...Henri Bergson

WHETHER SEEN FROM above or from street level, it is difficult to find anything beautiful about the Montreal borough of Saint-Laurent. Expressways and power lines, urban development centred on parking lots, mediocre periurban development: as a living space, the area is a reflection of late 20th century industrial society. It is a territory where the rapid transformation of hundreds of hectares of agricultural land created a monotonous, functionalist organism, a sterile anthropic environment and an enormous heat island. In many ways, Saint-Laurent represents the broken promises of a putative automobile-age utopia.

And yet Saint-Laurent is also a place where more than 100,000 people live and work. It is run by a particularly enlightened municipal government that has demonstrated leadership on environmental quality. For at least a decade, the borough has taken pains to adopt



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the best urban and environmental practices. Its actions have been organized around the remains of old transportation routes, a handful of still-wooded parcels and peripheral eco-territories on the banks of the Rivière des Prairies.

Our firm has the great privilege of being in a position to contribute to the borough's efforts, through the drafting of the *Plan directeur d'aménagement du Corridor de biodiversité de Saint-Laurent* (Saint-Laurent biodiversity corridor master plan), prepared in close collaboration with LAND Italia, Table architecture and Biodiversité conseil. The opportunity to draft this master plan – the product of years of internal planning and coordination – came to us thanks to a nationwide multidisciplinary landscape architecture competition won jointly by the four firms in 2018. It goes without saying that the credit for all this work also goes to the borough's professionals, who will take charge of the master plan's promotion and gradual implementation.

The Biodiversity Corridor is landscape infrastructure superimposed on the existing urban order, creating diagonal links between a highly fragmented set of environments and sites. Unlike a transportation corridor, this is multifunctional infrastructure that encompasses urban design, landscape design, biology and mobility. Underpinning the creation of the Corridor is a holistic vision that marries the *logic of life* with the logic of urbanization by integrating new designs into the borough's pre-existing urban and social fabric. The vision also includes plans for the addition of an even larger territory, going beyond administrative boundaries and the distinction between public and private spaces.



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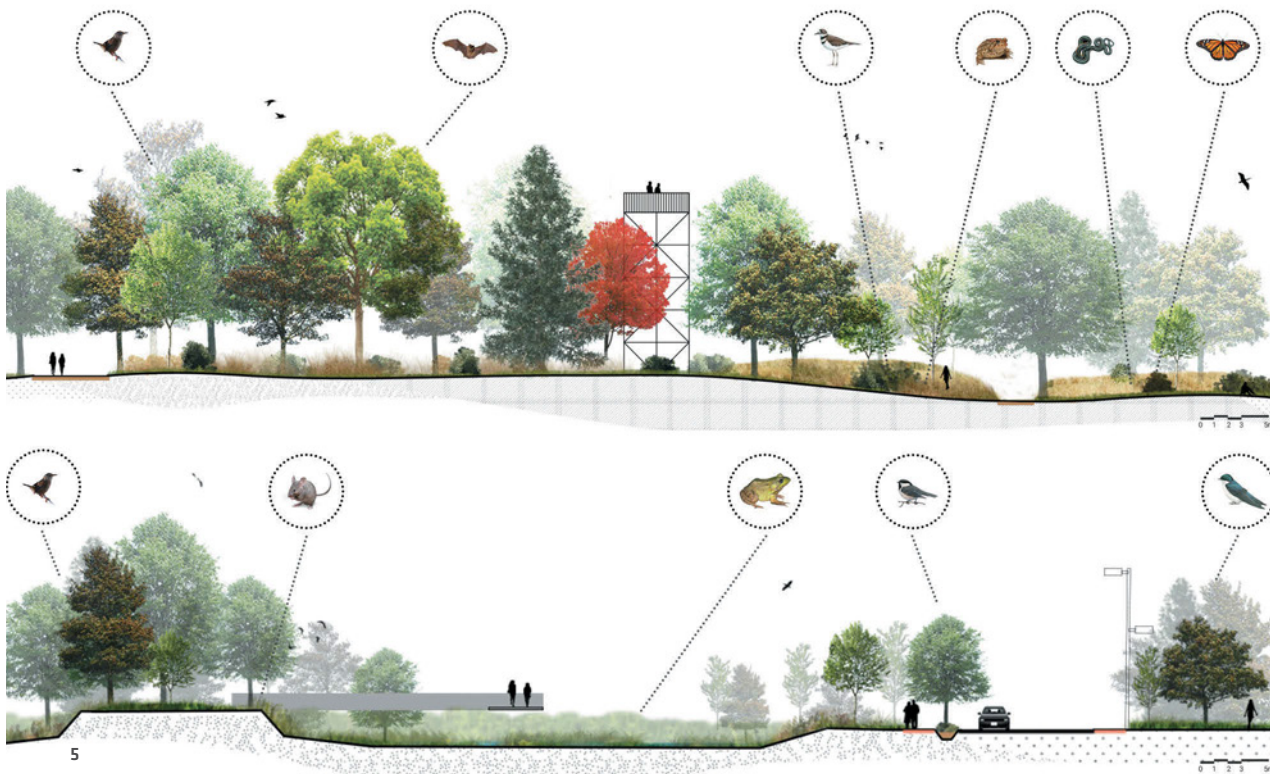


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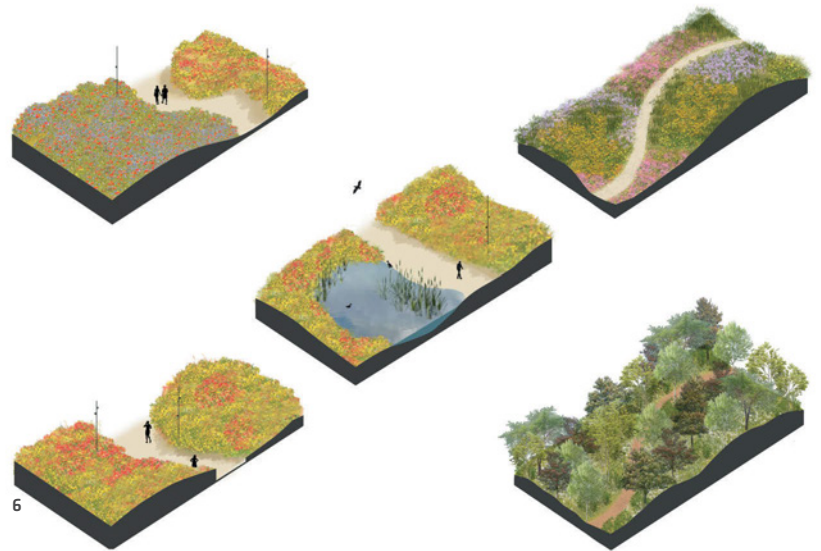
One of the key aspects of our proposal involves the transformation of three long segments of Hydro-Québec rights-of-way into a vast flowery meadow. Like a large green canvas, the meadow's impressive scale will allow it to connect existing and newly created fauna habitats. Our project could also be described as a three-dimensional landscape composition: in addition to the richness of the new habitats, microtopographies will create inner spaces that break the horizon through the introduction of vertical vistas, and generate places and paths for discovery. There are also a multi-purpose trail and clearings in the vegetation to facilitate active transportation and local social activities.

1 WINTER VIEW OF THE PROJECT **2** TYPOLOGY OF NEW ENVIRONMENTS **3** VIEW OF THE FLOWER MEADOW PLANTED IN THE HYDRO-QUÉBEC RIGHT-OF-WAY ALONG CAVENDISH BOULEVARD **4** VIEW OF THE NEW MOBILITY FEATURES NEAR POIRIER BLVD.

IMAGES LAND ITALIA + CIVILITI + TABLE ARCHITECTURE + BIODIVERSITÉ CONSEIL



Can we say that “beauty” resides primarily in the natural fact – in the inherent goodness of nature? For urbanites such as ourselves, a flowery meadow sparks a feeling of wonderment, and sometimes a state of grace. Whether the meadow is indigenous or the result of an agricultural parcel being abandoned, or takes root in a former railroad right-of-way in a decidedly urban setting, we can only marvel at its captivating qualities. The textures, colours and smells of plants, swaying in the breeze or transformed by shadow and light, give us a soothing aesthetic experience. As a matter of fact, isn’t the beauty here that of life itself, its free spread, its intrinsic design? And yet, even though this new landscape is designed as a living painting, it has been created *ex nihilo* thanks to the mastery of two natural sciences, biology and ecology. These disciplines allow us to support life, even at the scale of habitats essential to the survival of small amphibians and bats.



Can we find beauty in the deliberate actions that transform a sterile lawn into a colourful environment, reaffirming the primacy of life over industrial infrastructure? Does beauty reside in the act itself, in the astonishing action taken, in the alignment of meaning and action, in the harmony between intent and intervention? In the master plan, do we see the creative dynamic that values the process rather than the result, the *doing* instead of the *being*? Taking action would merely be good, and beauty would be found elsewhere, outside the appearance of a manufactured nature.

Could beauty ultimately reside in the sublime, in encountering a vast periurban space that is essentially inaccessible to the imagination? Could it be found in our capacity to take a radical and outsized action, through which we confront something larger than ourselves? For example, could the monumental architecture of a bridge or its span across a deep valley – over a perilous void

5 CONCEPTUAL CROSS-SECTIONS **6** COMPLEMENTARITY AND INTERACTIONS. THE BIODIVERSITY CORRIDOR IS GROUNDED IN THE CONCEPT OF SYNERGY. THROUGH THE CREATION OF A VARIETY OF NEW HABITATS, LANDSCAPES AND SOCIAL SPACES, THE MASTER PLAN PROMOTES COMPLEMENTARITY AND INTERACTION AMONG FLORA, WATER, FAUNA AND THEIR HABITATS, AND HUMAN ACTIVITY. THESE AXONOMETRIES ILLUSTRATE VARIED LANDSCAPES WHERE DIFFERENT NATURAL SETTINGS COEXIST AND INTERACT. **7** FAUNA ENHANCEMENT PLAN. THE TERRITORY IS HOME TO SEVERAL FAUNA SPECIES ADAPTABLE TO URBAN CONDITIONS, INCLUDING A WIDE VARIETY OF BIRDS AND INSECTS. THE BIODIVERSITY CORRIDOR PROJECT MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO ENHANCE THE EXISTING HABITAT AND CREATE A NETWORK OF MORE SUBSTANTIAL BORDERS AND HABITATS FOR FAUNA.

IMAGES LAND ITALIA + CIVILITI + TABLE ARCHITECTURE + BIODIVERSITÉ CONSEIL

– be the source of its beauty? And what about the Biodiversity Corridor? Should we characterize it as a defiant rebuke to the excess and extravagance of automobile culture and the inhospitable environment it has left in its wake?

Our proposal's favourable reception at the competition stage, and the positive response to the master plan, lead us to believe that the project's beauty resides first and foremost in the *will* and creative effort that went into producing something *good* and *necessary* in response to environmental conditions that led to a divorce between the living and the urban. During the public presentations, we felt the attraction of this correspondence between *dessin* (design) and *dessein* (intention), recognizing a space where creativity and an ambitious collective project intersect. Doing good through beauty, making beauty with goodness: is it still possible to believe in disinterested actions that advance the human project?

Does beauty reside in the act itself, in the astonishing action taken, in the alignment of meaning and action, in the harmony between intent and intervention?

The Corridor plunges us into a philosophical dilemma in which ethics are measured against aesthetics, and vice versa; where moral beauty, good gestures and even virtue collide with a society that no longer recognizes, in the ethics/aesthetics pairing, one of the fundamental preconditions for being.

Innocence or experience: the Biodiversity Corridor highlights some ways in which design can affect a large territory. It puts landscape architecture at the heart of the invention of new kinds of infrastructure – in this case, living infrastructure that has the power to transform our relationship with the built environment and the city. The role of the living in the landscape project situates the discipline of landscape architecture at the foundation and centre of new land-use planning practices. Disrupting the monotonous, single-purpose sterility of anthropic landscapes from which life has been banished, bringing back life of every kind, letting nature reclaim its rightful place: this is the power of the master plan for the Biodiversity Corridor.

If cities have traditionally been designed as humanized territory, the Biodiversity Corridor points the way to a new paradigm: making the city a refuge for all life forms, using novel landscapes that are not quite squares or gardens, not quite prairies, nor even ecoterritories, protected spaces located on the edge of peopled neighbourhoods. This is a bold project for urban landscape architecture. We have before us a program that aims to define a new relationship between the anthropic and the natural, a new synergy at the heart of neighbourhoods lacking in vegetation cover and natural habitats.

