

Montreal gas station to fill up once again

In its new incarnation, the Mies van der Rohe design will house two community pavilions – one for young users, one for older ones



DAVE LEBLANC

daveleblanc@globeandmail.com

It's been called the most beautiful gas station in the world. So beautiful, in fact, a movie, *Regular or Super: Views on Mies van der Rohe*, featured it in 2004. And now it's getting a beautiful new life.

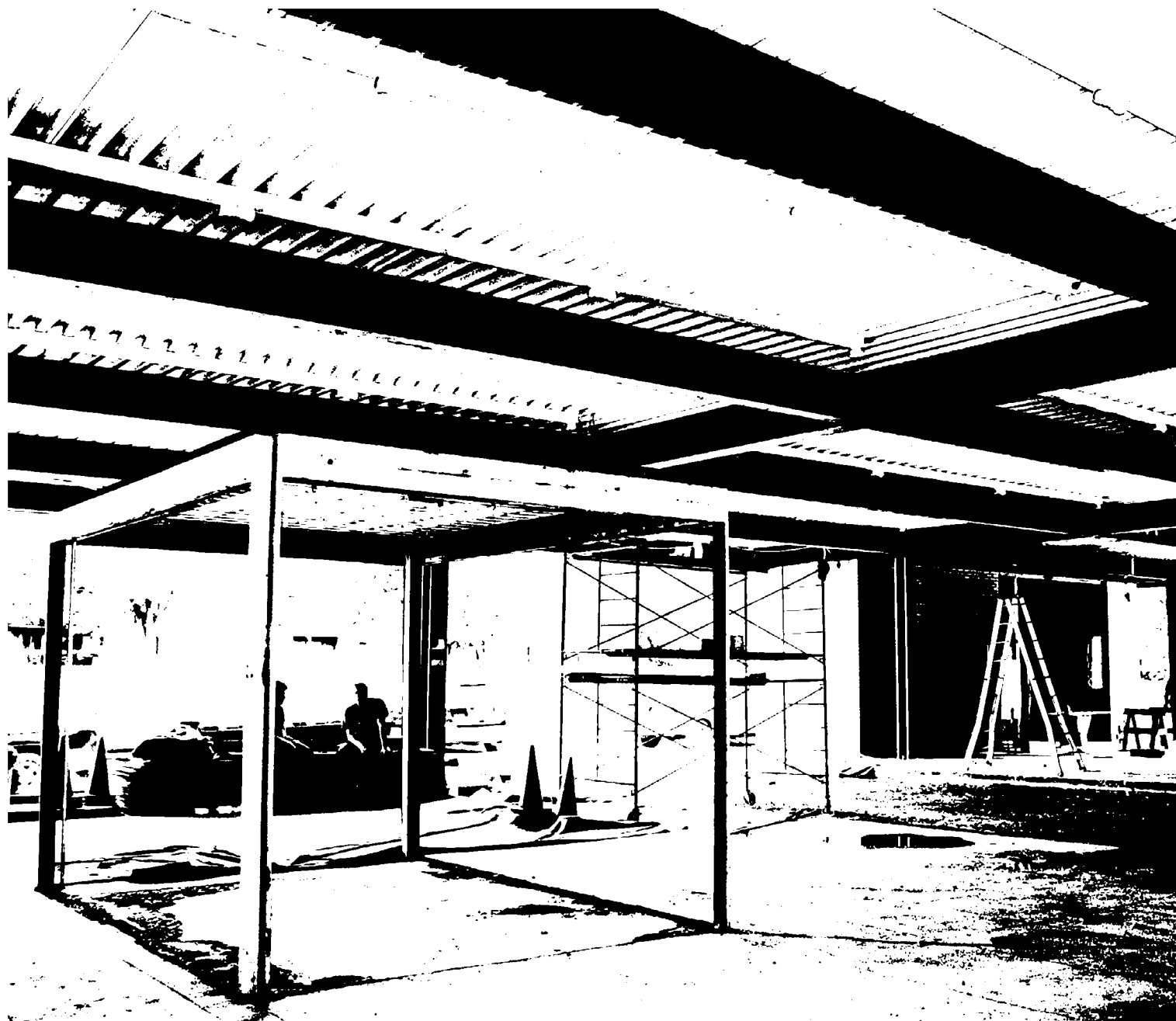
Long, low and in his trademark black steel, the shuttered-since-2008 Esso station by Bauhaus master Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, at boulevard de l'Île des Soeurs and rue Berlioz in Montreal's Nuns' Island community, currently lies stripped of a little of its beauty – huge sheets of glass and their associated mullions have been numbered and disassembled for restoration – but by fall, the building will be buzzing with youth and seniors as a *maison des générations*.

Underneath that long cantilevered roof, lead architect Eric Gauthier points to where the two glass pavilions will be rebuilt to their original 3,000- and 1,000-square-foot specifications – one room for young users and one for older ones – and laughs as he slaps one of the 12 massive columns: “These are not real I-beams,” says the 50-year-old principal at Les Architectes FABG, who was selected to restore Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome at Expo 67 in the 1990s. “They are made up I-beams with [steel] plates that have square edges. [Mies] was an aesthete: He thought, ‘I’ll do proper I-beams’... all the connections are welded, it’s a crazy way to do things.”

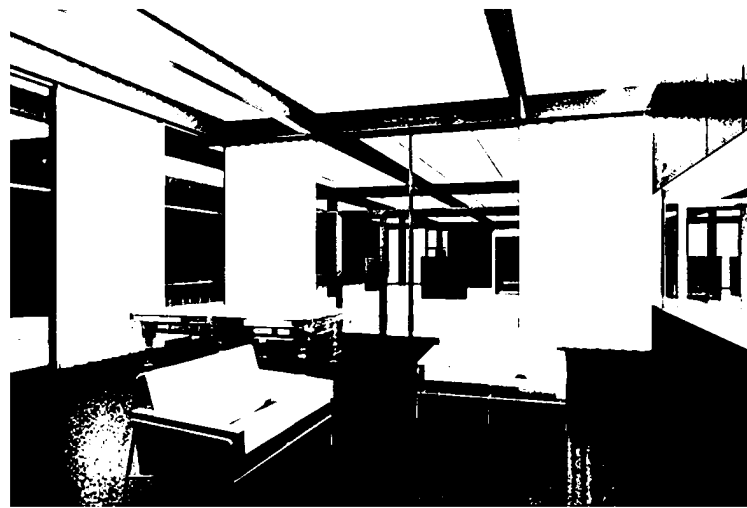
Crazy, perhaps, but the incredible strength from overengineering means many massive Montreal snowfalls have been shrugged off since 1968, the year of the station's construction and one year before the architect's death.

It's made for an easy restoration, too. With such a robust structure, the team has concerned itself thus far with underground repairs and the installation of a new geothermal system. Other than the removal of glass and mullions, the only evidence of above-ground work is the sandblasting of brick walls in the garage area, now restored to their original buff yellow. On the underside of the roof, dozens of new fluorescent fixtures remain in their original configuration, and although Mr. Gauthier says with a chuckle, “I never thought that I would be duplicating and restoring fluorescent lighting,” he understands that the illuminated geometric “stripes” are just as crucial to the composition as the grid of crisscrossing roof beams. It's a Mies thing, and it's beautiful.

Between the two pavilions, Mr. Gauthier is retaining the square concrete island where the gas pumps were located. In place of each pump there will be boxes to the same scale; these



Elements of the original gas station design remain: The small cashier booth will act as a key depot for an auto-share program. DAVE LEBLANC



Furniture in the refurbished project will most likely be black or white to follow the ceiling pattern established by the black beams below the white metal decking. RENDERINGS BY LES ARCHITECTES FABG

will house exhaust and intake vents for the geothermal unit. These replicas, he says, are “important to understand that it was a gas station.” The small cashier booth will be restored and will act as a key depot for an auto-share program.

Although much attention is being paid to the original design, and Mr. Gauthier certainly has the chops to tackle such a modernist icon – a few years ago he designed a one-storey community centre in Pierrefonds that looks very Miesian – he stresses he's not a member of the “church of Mies.”

“Like with Buckminster Fuller, we tried to keep a critical eye,” he says, adding that if he had gone through the “torturous” process of worrying about every nut and bolt and whether Mies would have approved, he would have gone mad. And since the gas station is also attributed to local architect Paul H. Lapointe, and, further, since the Bauhaus master was in his final years at the time of the design, it's likely he just checked the drawings and signed off on them: “It doesn't bear the excellence [of his hand] ... how do you say in English? – there are pedestrian things in the approach.”

Pedestrian or not, FABG is taking great pains to get it right. Furniture, Mr. Gauthier says, will “disappear” so as to not compete and it will most likely be

black or white to follow the ceiling pattern established by the black beams below the white metal decking. For elegance, texture and privacy, the architect is toying with the idea of thick, black velvet drapes, which will echo the influence of Mies's collaborator, textile and furniture designer Lilly Reich.

Unlike the cozy charm of a Victorian or Arts and Crafts room, rigid modernist spaces aren't as easy to love for some. That's why this adaptive reuse into a community centre filled with life and laughter is such an excellent choice: Much like the smart decision by Toronto developer Camrost-Felcorp to allow the impressive lobby of the former Imperial Oil building on St. Clair Avenue West to be used as a café or restaurant, what was once a perfunctory act of filling up or buying a candy bar on Nuns' Island will be replaced by sitting, relaxing and getting to know the space – some may even walk from the Mies-designed rental apartment tower two blocks away – which will, in turn, cement a sense of ownership and pride.

“I think it's enough to do the project,” Mr. Gauthier says with a smile. “I'm not trying to be interesting and original and counteracting [the original scheme]. Maybe the strength of it – the roof, the glass – will be enough.”