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Office Lobbies

A lobby is just a place to walk through on your way to somewhere else. Or is it somewhere to linger a few moments, take in your surroundings and think about where you've been and where you're going?

This existential question came to mind as I looked at several of Montreal's unusual office lobbies with an eye to what the architects were trying to convey. Some of the lobbies were grand airy spaces, built with luxurious materials and classical design elements that gave passers-through a sense of being in an Italian villa. Others were utilitarian and spare, yet featured little treasures like a hidden work of art or a vintage barber shop. In every case the lobbies encoded a message, about the inhabitants of the floors above it or the way visitors might feel as they walk by.

Heritage Montreal's Dinu Bumbaru accompanied me on my first lobby walk, engaging me in a Socratic discussion about cornices, different types of marble, and the seemingly infinite and ornate Canada Post mailboxes set into each lobby wall. Our first stop, the Canada Cement Building on Cathcart, just south of Philip's Square, is an imposing, grandiose space created in 1920 out of – you guessed it – cement. But instead of that raw, gritty effect of sidewalk, the walls look just like sandstone and take on a warm earthy look, especially in contrast to the polished brass doors and the gloss of the Missisquoi marble tiles on the floor. "This lobby is prestige," says Bumbaru, looking around. "It's like one of the Italian

buildings of the renaissance.” As the company headquarters, the architect, Ernst Barrott, clearly wanted to make a statement. Whether that statement was originally about permanence, stability or style, the effect belies the heavy materials used. Shallow, discrete arches over the doorways, high plaster ceilings with trompe l’oeil designs and stenciling, and doorways leading to other doorways give one the impression of endless space. Although it does feel vault-like – reminding me of the cool, echoey feeling of a Romanesque church, it does not feel closed-in. Bumbaru points out the classical elements, like the ‘emphasis’ on the columns -- they’re not as straight as they look -- and the vaulting over the doorways that create the illusion that the ceilings and walls are not pressing down on you. The details and craftsmanship in the building are impressive, from the Doric pillars echoed in the pilasters near the brass elevator doors, to the palmettes in the lintels and the tiny columns appearing once again in the friezes, all softly lit by recessed lighting and art deco lamps. There are even heated benches to sit on, and if you’re feeling peckish, there is a true-to-form, oak-cabinetted cigar and sandwich shop, owned by the same family since 1936. Chuck Raphael, of Chuck’s Epicurean Delights (otherwise known as Le Sandwicherie) took over the business from his uncle 44 years ago, and showed me the oak and glass cases custom built for cigarettes, cigars and candy. While I looked around, office workers from the building upstairs dashed in to pick up toasted bagels and soup, which miraculously appeared from a hidden kitchen. There is more to this lobby than meets the eye, I think, as we move on.

Crossing the square we enter 1255 Phillip’s Square, built in 1948 on the former site of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. It was built by David Jerome Spence, the architect of the Linton and Grosvenor Apartments, and features a geometric, streamlined look, more reminiscent of an ocean liner than of a renaissance palace. “If you like Art Deco, this is it,” says Bumbaru, pointing out

the vintage Canada Mail box, the purple and yellow limestone and the flowing lines and sense of continuity between the inside and the outside of the building. The copper on the exterior is reflected within, where there is true commercial feeling, constant comings and goings and deals in the making.

This is not at all the case in the Belgo Building, just a few doors down at 372 Ste. Catherine Street. Built around 1910 to house the warehouse and manufacturing space of the garment and fur trade, it now hosts mainly artists' and dance studios. Walking up the grand staircase – wide enough to accommodate huge bags of samples or piles of pelts – we are greeted by the vision of office workers on their lunch hour practicing yoga on floor mats. The lobby has a chic, down-at-the-heels feeling, as if you are on a wide avenue in Europe, with beautiful, well-lit corridors and intersections populated with real people, not just suits and ties.

The Sternthal Building at 1435 Ste. Alexandre is next on the itinerary. This is either 50's kitsch or a classic, depending on your taste. With strong symmetry and a rhythm of circular disks lighting the highly polished black marble floors and stairs, you feel as if you're in a retro vision of the future, maybe an office building for the Jetson family, or, as Bumbaru says a cross between an office building and a planetarium. "The lobby is pretty much intact as to its original finishes: stainless steel, granite, black marble and big round lights. It works well and gives a certain distinction to the building," says Roseanne Moss, an architect with Fournier, Gersovitz and Moss, who have their offices upstairs. Originally designed for furriers, the building has gone through various incarnations since, including a stint as a centre for jewellers and more recently, for high tech start-ups. All co-exist and meet up in the elevators, says Moss. Check out the perfectly preserved and still operational barber shop at the back of the lobby, complete with rotating blue and red pole and ornate leather chairs. On your way out the door, turn around and

take in how architect Harry Meyerovitch (sp?) designed the Sternthal building's exterior walls to tilt out at an angle, like the plate glass walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The lettering on the sign has a vintage look, as if this is not so much an office building as a monument to the modern era of offices.

The same Sternthal family also commissioned the fabulously modern City Centre building from the same architects. It's located just around the corner on 1450 City Councillors Street. The exterior of this building, built in 1957, looks like a theatre marquee, with an asymmetrical overhang at the entrance and a pattern of circular lights both inside and out. But the highlight is the wall-size Alfred Pellán mosaic at the back of the lobby. The Sternthal family held a competition to determine who would create a piece of art for this lobby. The fact that Pellán won was not a foregone conclusion. "Pellán was not that well known then as he became, so the mural was quite forward-looking. It's quite a hidden treasure in the city," says Moss. Predating the rule that compels public spaces to devote 1% of building costs to art (the PQ instituted this in 1981) a Pellán in this private, commercial environment was precocious. This piece of art depicting a dreaming, reclining figure and a real working clock -- was ahead of its time not only in its modern aesthetic but in its theme of work as a fugue state.

No tour of office lobbies would be complete without the Sun Life building at 1155 Metcalfe. With enormous brass doors decorated with bas reliefs, repeating massive Corinthian pillars and an opulent interior crafted of brass, gold leaf and green marble, the effect is stately and uplifting. The scale is so grand, the use of staircases, monuments and alternating colours of marble, bronze, ebony and teak so masterful, that the effect is like being in a cathedral. This is one building that -- inaugurated in 1918 and a constant visual presence in the city since then -- succeeds in making passersby slow down and reflect on what has changed around them and just what has stayed the same.

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