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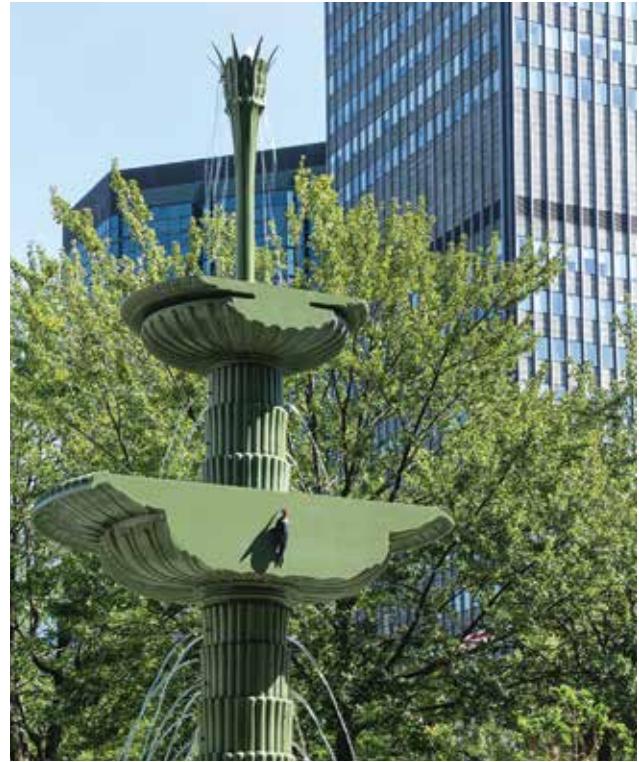
CLAUDE CORMIER CRACKS A SMILE.

BY BRIAN BARTH

When Claude Cormier, ASLA, and I pull up to Dorchester Square in Montreal, a man is leaning against the grand fountain, with its three Victorian bowls, all painted a very Victorian shade of green, smoking a cigarette. When we get out of the car, I realize it's not a cigarette, but a joint. "If you want to buy pot in Montreal, this is where you do it," says Cormier, in heavily accented English—and he begins to tell me the story of how his firm transformed this historic park into a place that winks at the past, while winking in a few other directions as well.

First developed in the 1860s, Dorchester Square is an oasis of ornate statuary (Queen Victoria; a military horse; and Wilfrid Laurier, Canada's first Francophone prime minister, are all commemorated) and manicured flower beds set amid regal edifices that testify to the city's railroad-era wealth. Claude Cormier + Associés has been working on improvements to the park (as well as an adjacent green space, Place du Canada) since 2000. In 2015, the firm was selected to restore the northern end of Dorchester Square, a section of which had been lopped off long ago and repurposed for

OPPOSITE
A drawing of Dorchester Square in Montreal expresses the vibrant redesign by Claude Cormier + Associés.



RIGHT
The design of the fountain's central column was based on the stem of *Equisetum*.

OPPOSITE
Claude Cormier, ASLA, designed bridges, which double as romantic viewing platforms, over the entrances to a pair of underground parking decks.

parking. There had not been a fountain in the park previously, but Cormier thought it would make a fitting focal point. Dorchester Square sits on top of an underground garage, and there was a load-bearing column positioned in just the right place to support a 30-foot-high steel fountain at the end of the park's long axis. There was only one problem: The city said it needed a few extra feet to accommodate the tourist buses that embark from the adjacent block. Those few feet nixed the alignment with the supporting column.

"The city said, get rid of your fountain and design something else," Cormier tells me, patting the fountain. "And I thought, no, I'm not taking out the fountain."

A solution emerged: leave the fountain but slice a few feet off one side of it to accommodate the buses. Viewed from the park, it would look like a classic Victorian-era fountain. Viewed from the

RAPHAEL THIBODEAU, TOP LEFT: JEAN-FRANÇOIS SAVARIA, OPPOSITE



RIGHT
Berczy Park's Victorian-ish fountain is an ode to dog lovers, complete with a "collar" of metal studs around the basin.

BOTTOM
The Blue Stick Garden installation exemplifies Cormier's blending of fine art and landscape design.

OPPOSITE
An annual installation over Saint-Catherine Street in Montreal, 18 Shades of Gay, has become a summer tourist attraction.



road, it would look like someone had taken a knife to a fountain-shaped cake. To make that side more interesting, Cormier proposed a small addition: a sculpture of a pileated woodpecker alighted on the flat back of the fountain's middle basin. One presumes the fountain is circular; it's arresting to walk past and realize it's not—and then, a creature clinging to the back!

The man with the joint stood beneath the 19-inch reddened sculpture and continued puffing as we talked. "Slicing it became kind of a fun element," Cormier says. It was mid-November, and the remnants of the season's first snow blanketed the park.

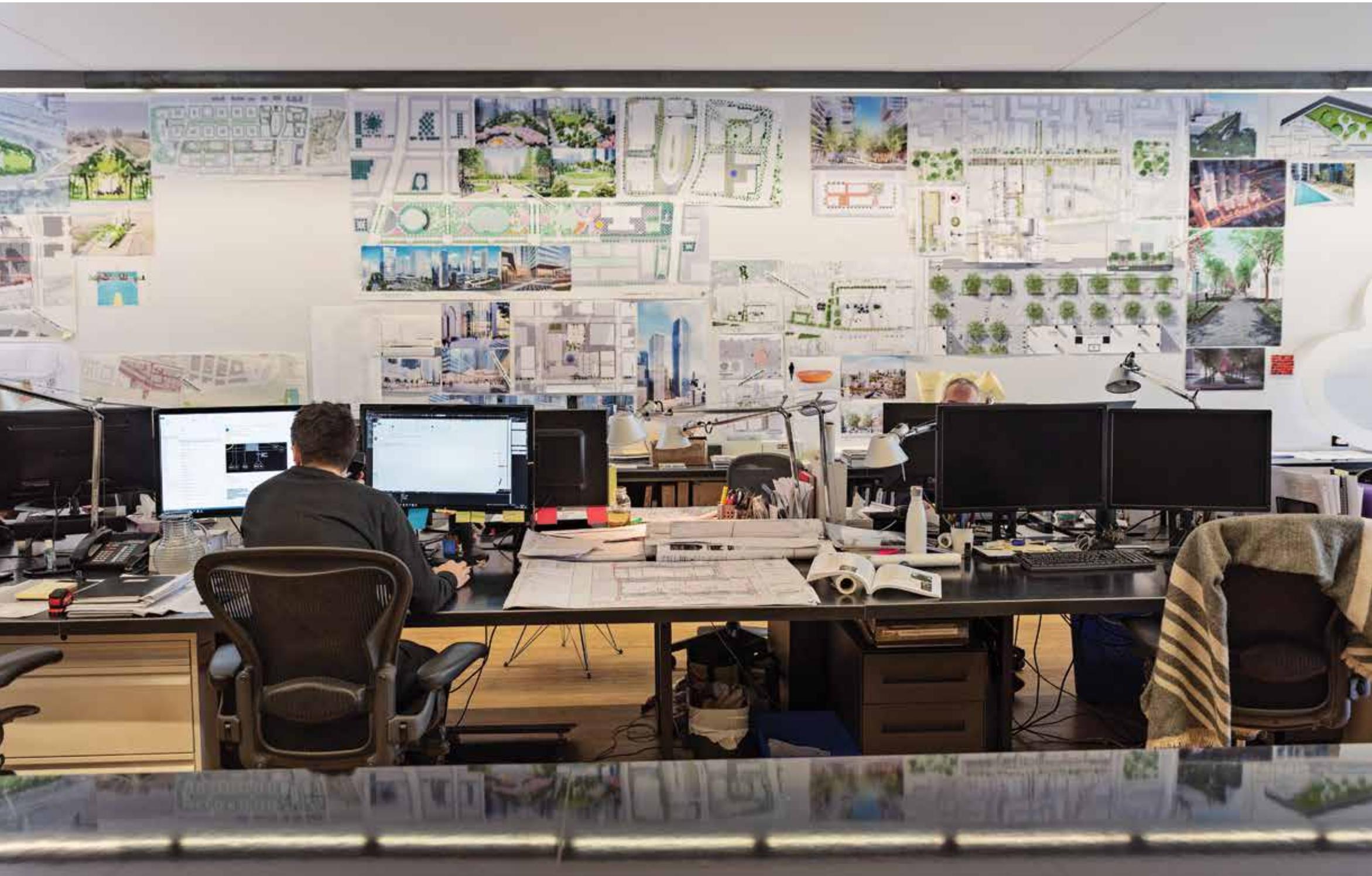
Cormier was dressed in a shiny green jacket, with an enormous gray scarf coiled around his neck. He keeps his hair coiffed in a wispy point, like a wizard—or a woodpecker. Municipal officials did not see the fun in the design at first—"the ministry of culture was freaking out"—but they came around, he says, letting out a gleeful cackle that I soon grew accustomed to hearing each time he told me of another triumph over lowest-common-denominator design.

When the refurbished park opened last summer, Cormier told the *Montreal Gazette*, "All my best projects have been rejected at the beginning."



INDUSTRIOSUS PHOTOGRAPHY TOP: CLAUDE CORMIER + ASSOCIES BOTTOM: RAPHAEL THIBODEAU, OPPOSITE





DAVID GRAL PHOTOGRAPHY, TOP RIGHT AND OPPOSITE



Cormier's portfolio is like a menagerie. In addition to the Dorchester Square woodpecker, there's Berczy Park on the east side of downtown Toronto (see "Best in Show," LAM, September 2017), where a motley pack of dog statues stands around a giant water bowl of a fountain, their open mouths doubling as spray nozzles; a pair of yellow warblers spies on the scene from a lamppost. About a mile away, on the west side of downtown, Cormier has designed a cat park—mice and bird statues included, plus catnip—featuring a long, sloping water feature, which has yet to be built. "You know that song by the Pet Shop Boys about East End boys and West End girls?" he asks. "We're going to have East End dogs and West End cats." Cormier designed a plaza in Mount Vernon, Ohio, currently under construction, with sculptures of 18 dogs, two birds, a cat, an apple, and a pony. "We call it the Dog and Pony Show," he says.

But this is not a one-trick firm. The massing of colorful objects—painted sticks, beach umbrellas, "call-before-you-dig" markers—is another running

ABOVE
Marc Hallé, Cormier, and Amy René consult at the firm's office in Montreal.

OPPOSITE
Cormier's firm, founded in 1995, has grown to a staff of 15.



motif. Perhaps Cormier's most Instagrammable installation is the nearly 200,000 plastic balls that have hung above a one-kilometer stretch of Saint-Catherine Street in Montreal's Gay Village for the past nine summers. For the first six seasons, it was pink balls; for the past three, a rainbow array—18 Shades of Gay, he calls it.

Some of his work is less design than fine art. He took me to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where his piece *Les Peluches*—an 8-by-19-foot mosaic composed of more than 3,000 stuffed animals nailed to plywood backing—peers at visitors as they enter the children's wing of the museum. The multihued bears, monkeys, giraffes, bunnies, and dogs (every Saturday morning for years, Cormier visited Salvation Army stores around the city and bought every stuffed animal they had) overlap with one another in an undulating tableau. "It's like the planting plan of a mixed border...kids loooovvv it," he says.

Victorian fountains, vivid color combinations, and tongue-in-cheek play are Cormier's trademarks, but he's equally conversant in native plants, storm-water retention, and transit-oriented development

ABOVE
At Evergreen Brick Works, Cormier opened up the pavement with a series of circular planters.

OPPOSITE
Plantings at the Brick Works have a weedy, wild aesthetic.



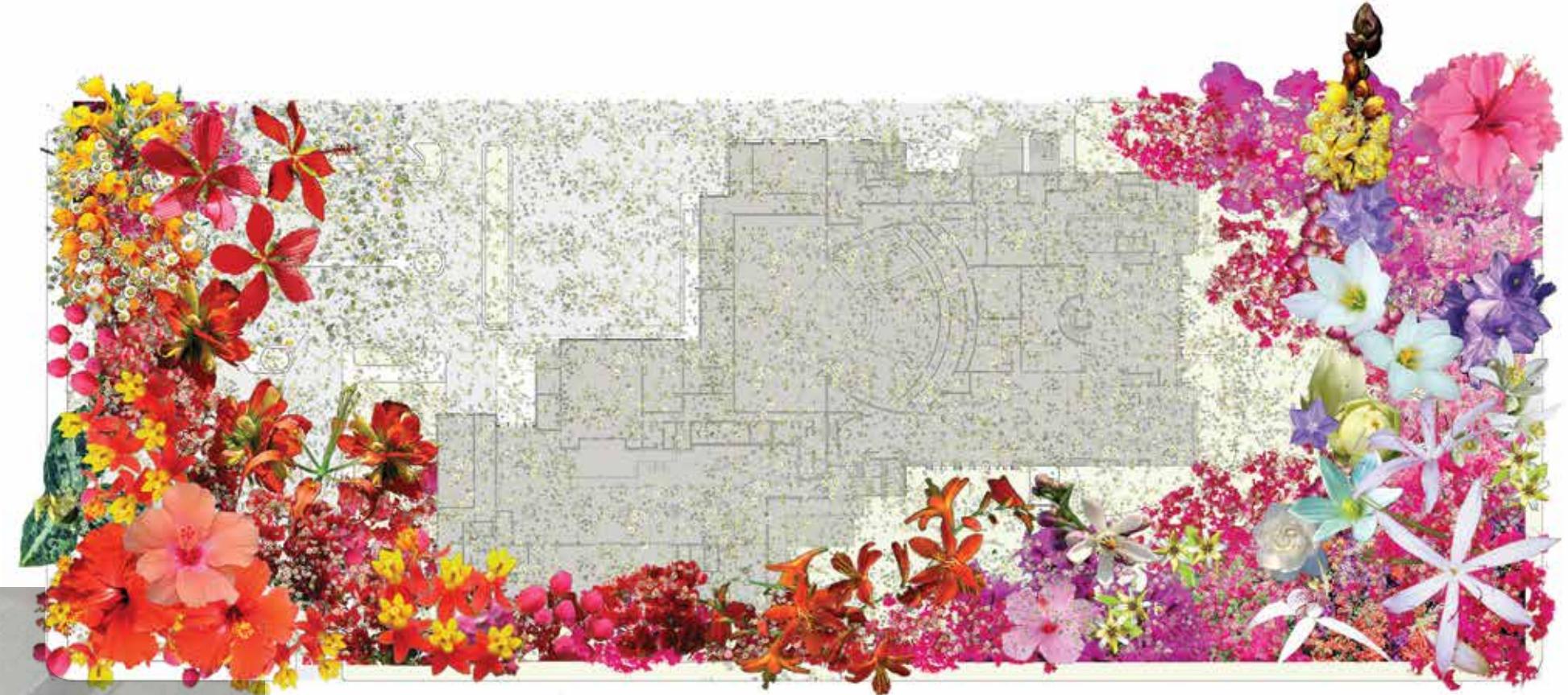
GUILLAUME PARADIS, CLAUDE CORMIER + ASSOCIES, TOP LEFT: INDUSTRIOUS PHOTOGRAPHY, OPPOSITE

**“CLAUDE WAS ALWAYS CLAUDE.
WATCHING SOMEBODY LIKE
THAT IS LIKE WATCHING
A FLOWER FLOWER.”**

—MARTHA SCHWARTZ, FASLA



CLAUDE CORMIER + ASSOCIES



master plans. You'll find his handiwork in the naturalized swaths of prairie grasses that blanket the grounds of the Douglas Cardinal-designed Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec, and in the reclaimed ruins of the Evergreen Brick Works, a factory-turned-environmental-center in Toronto, where Cormier designed a curated weedscape to match the industrial-decay feel of the site. Plans for the 150-acre Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, a site clustered around a new transit station in suburban Toronto, currently occupy much of his office's attention.

Cormier's oeuvre includes the occasional somber space. In September 2017, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau inaugurated the National Holocaust Monument in Ottawa, a collaboration among Cormier, the landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky, the architect Daniel Libeskind, and the planning firm Lord Cultural Resources. "We do happy stuff; we don't do dark," Cormier says. "We didn't want to do this; we said no twice. Daniel finally said, 'Hey, if I just do it myself, it's going to be a dark pit... This is exactly why I want you on the team—because you bring your hope and optimism.'"

"I'm a little farm boy," Cormier tells me, as we sit in a conference room at his office in Montreal's Rosemont neighborhood. He grew up outside Quebec City on a dairy and maple syrup farm. Cormier's father, who died when he was 17, urged him to study agronomy, which he did at the University of Guelph. His focus was on plant breeding: "My dream was to invent a new flower." He decided to pursue a degree in landscape architecture at the University of Toronto, which meant living in a large cosmopolitan city for the first time in his life. "Nightclubs, museums, urban density—I loved it. It was a transformation of the farm boy into a city boy."

After a few years of working at firms in Toronto and Montreal, Cormier completed a master's program in design studies at Harvard's Graduate School of Design (GSD). He says his time at the GSD inspired him with two seemingly contradictory theories of landscape architecture: Olmstedian and Schwartzian. When he opened his firm in 1995, he was determined to marry the late 19th-century designs of the City Beautiful movement with the late 20th-century postmodernism of Martha Schwartz, FASLA.

ABOVE
Cirque du Soleil hired the firm to create an intensely floral design for the Jackie Gleason Theater in Miami Beach.

OPPOSITE
Though the company later abandoned the project and the design was never realized, the exuberance is unmistakable.



DAVID GRAL PHOTOGRAPHY, OPPOSITE

LEFT
Concrete form tubes double as a filing system.

"Martha is mom and Olmsted is dad," Cormier says, cracking himself up. The common ground he finds between the two is the ability to design landscapes of enduring resonance. "Olmsted's reference is nature; Martha's references come from visual art, from culture. I think I fit right between the two. I think it's important to understand history, but not as a mere copy of the past—using it to create something that fits with the now, and that could fit in the future somehow."

Schwartz recalls meeting Cormier when she began teaching at Harvard in the early 1990s. "The people who are most interesting to me are the ones on the fringe of things, people who don't quite fit, who are going on their own track," she says of her first impression of him, when I reach her by phone. "Claude was always Claude. Watching somebody like that is like watching a flower flower."

It is from this marriage of Olmsted's and Schwartz's visions that Cormier's philosophy of "artificial, not fake" has emerged. His perspective is that the naturalized look of Olmsted's Central Park is as artificial as Schwartz's Bagel Garden. "Let's be honest about this inauthenticity, and let's at least be authentic with our ideas," he says.

For instance, no one mistakes Cormier's animal statues for wildlife. His Lipstick Forest installation at the Montreal Convention Centre—52 concrete tree trunks painted neon pink—is more Andy Warhol than Andy Goldsworthy. Whatever the materials, his goal is to stamp an indelible sense of identity on the space.



“CLAUDE’S WORK FEELS LIKE IT COMES FROM HIS HEART; IT’S EMOTIVE, ROMANTIC; IT CONNECTS PEOPLE TO THE ISSUES IN A DIFFERENT WAY.”

—GINA FORD, FASLA

“I think we have a role as designers to create something that is expressive,” he says. “A park is a park, yes, but what is distinctive about that park, instead of just being a green place with play structures and benches? I think we can do more than that; I think we can have other personalities than just being green. This is where the notion of art becomes important, the notion of identity, the notion of having a clear, singular idea that holds the project together.”

Another Cormier-ism is “serious fun,” which is also the title of a forthcoming book on his practice by Susan Herrington and Marc Treib, Honorary ASLA.

Cormier lives downstairs from his office in a fun-house sort of space designed by the artist/architect Jacques Bilodeau. A gorilla-like sculpture made from the large shaggy brushes of a commercial car wash looms over you, menacingly, when you walk in the door. In lieu of stairs, the architect designed sloped floors in some places, as a topographical reference. Cormier pushes a button and one sloped floor angles up like a trapdoor, revealing a sunken kitchen and connecting it to the living room. Mirrored surfaces abound, on ceilings and elsewhere. A stuffed puppy with a large pair of bunny ears stitched onto its head sits in front of a small oval mirror on the living room floor, seemingly admiring himself. “He’s very narcissistic,” Cormier says.

Upstairs in the office things are bit more serious, but still plenty fun. It’s a Monday morning and

the staff of 15 is working diligently at a long row of computer stations. Cookies, exquisitely designed to mimic the dogs of Berczy Park (a gift from the contractor), are preserved in a glass case. A chain saw sits on a shelf next to a pink hard hat. There’s a large stuffed giraffe and clear plastic trash bags filled with colored balls. Cormier’s “fun” is not for its own sake, but rather a considered response to the challenges of building landscapes that go beyond checking the boxes of safety and sustainability to evoke an emotional response.

Gina Ford, FASLA, a cofounder of Agency Landscape + Planning, thinks the profession could benefit from lightening up. She remembers meeting Cormier on a rooftop deck after a Cultural Landscape Foundation event in Toronto—“We just hit it off and giggled the night away”—and they soon organized an ASLA conference panel on “joy in the landscape,” she says.

“Our profession can feel a little bit gloomy and kind of stuck in the land of mapping and analysis,” she continues. “Claude is just so stunningly fun, and I think his work is expressive of that. It’s really important for our profession to relate to people in a nonheady way and bring a sense of optimism and joy to the work that we do, even when we’re tackling really tough environmental challenges or social issues. Claude’s work feels like it comes from his heart; it’s emotive, romantic; it connects people to the issues in a different

DAVID GIRAL PHOTOGRAPHY, OPPOSITE

OPPOSITE
Cormier’s lighthearted approach belies a dogged work ethic.



DOUBLE SPACE PHOTOGRAPHY; TOP RIGHT, MICHAEL MIRAZZI OPPOSITE



way. His 18 Shades of Gay piece really speaks to that—it's something fun, but it's also celebrating something that needs more visibility."

Getting fun projects built is not always fun. When Cormier was hired in the late 1990s to create an indoor garden in the lobby of the Montreal Convention Centre, the client envisioned live plants. Cormier's proposal of concrete tree trunks, painted pink—what eventually became the Lipstick Forest—was not well received. "I remember a meeting early on when we presented it—fucking dead silence. It freaked them out."

He managed to persuade the client eventually, but that was only the first challenge. The contractors did not hide their hostility toward the project, forcing Cormier's team to bring in the trunks through an entrance on the far side of the building, which he says led to some of them getting damaged as they were schlepped on carts to the installation site. "The builder[s] hated us; they did everything they could to make sure that we would fail," Cormier says, as we wander among the trunks. "I remember when we brought in the first one, it created such a commotion—oh, my God!" he says, laughing. "There were like 600 men working on the building, and my team of guys comes in with this pink tree. They were calling us faggots."

ABOVE
In a rare departure from his portfolio of lighthearted designs, Cormier was the landscape architect for the National Holocaust Monument in Ottawa.

OPPOSITE
The project was a collaboration with the architect Daniel Libeskind and the photographer Edward Burtynsky.

BELOW AND OPPOSITE
Lipstick Forest, in the lobby of the Montreal Convention Centre, is Cormier's take on an indoor garden.

The climate surrounding his other projects has rarely been so overtly bigoted, but Cormier says that, in one way or another, they're often just as fraught. "They may look cute, but they're hell—they're all hell, all of them," he says, with a glint in his eyes.

Bernard Plante, the former executive director of the Commercial Development Corporation of the Village, who hired Cormier for the balls project, affirms this. "We had the fire department, the police department, and the administration of the city against us. They had tons of reasons for not authorizing our project. But Claude never takes no for an answer!" He says it would not have happened without "Claude's aura and tenacity."



Cormier says it's not just tenacity, but a chess-like approach to getting his way. At Clock Tower Beach, a project in Montreal's historic port, the beach section of the project was nearly nixed for budget reasons, until Cormier figured out he could save C\$3 million—roughly the cost of installing a sandy strand and blue umbrellas—by creating bioswales in the parking lot that precluded the need for an expensive drainage system (Sugar Beach in Toronto, a similar project, won an ASLA Honor Award in 2012). He is currently part of a team developing a plan to re-envision Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital campus. In keeping with Victorian-era notions of nature as healer, the regal buildings of the late 19th-century campus were integrated with the adjacent

JEAN-FRANÇOIS VÉZINA, BOTTOM AND OPPOSITE



Mount Royal Park (designed by Olmsted), but the flow between the hospital and the park has been clogged by other buildings that were plopped into the interstitial spaces over the years. Cormier would like to see those buildings removed—a big request.

"At the beginning of each project there is resistance, resistance, resistance," he says, while we talk at the Montreal Convention Centre. He describes his strategy as "kind of a *ménage à trois* thing"—"I'm only a third of the project. The client and the approval process are the other

thirds, and you have to make sure everyone gets something. It's a lot of work—*fuuuck*," he says, looking exhausted at the thought. But then he smiles, a bit devilishly, and I think to myself that Cormier's legacy will not be some postmodern theory about landscape design, but his doggedness. "The common denominator of our projects is perseverance. Eventually there's a moment in each project where it flips," he says, as we leave the Lipstick Forest. Patting a pink trunk, he adds, "Twenty years later, they're still here." •

BRIAN BARTH IS A JOURNALIST BASED IN TORONTO.