

"If we are going to get Montrealers back in the water, we have to do... something shocking and amazing." Pierre Lussier, environmental consultant

WATERFRONT VIEWS

Here are two Montrealers' visions for the Old Port. Imagine swimming in the Jacques Cartier basin or snowboarding at the Alexandra pier. During this calm (so far) municipal election, do you have visions for Montreal that transcend politics and potholes? To share them online, go to montrealgazette.com and click on the Sound Off link

Making waves at the Old Port

MICHELLE LALONDE
THE GAZETTE

What will it take to get Montrealers back in the swim? Pierre Lussier says Montreal needs a big splash of an idea to break through the psychological barrier that is keeping people out of the rivers and lakes that surround this island city.

"If we are going to get Montrealers back in the water, we have to do something truly striking, something shocking and amazing that will grab their imagination."

Environmental consultant Lussier, an incurable swimming enthusiast, is one of the founders of Corporation St. Laurent, a non-profit group that since 1991 has been raising public awareness of issues touching the St. Lawrence River basin and the Great Lakes. He also runs Quebec's version of Earth Day and is a founding member of the Société des gens de baignade, a group pushing for more natural swimming areas on the island of Montreal.

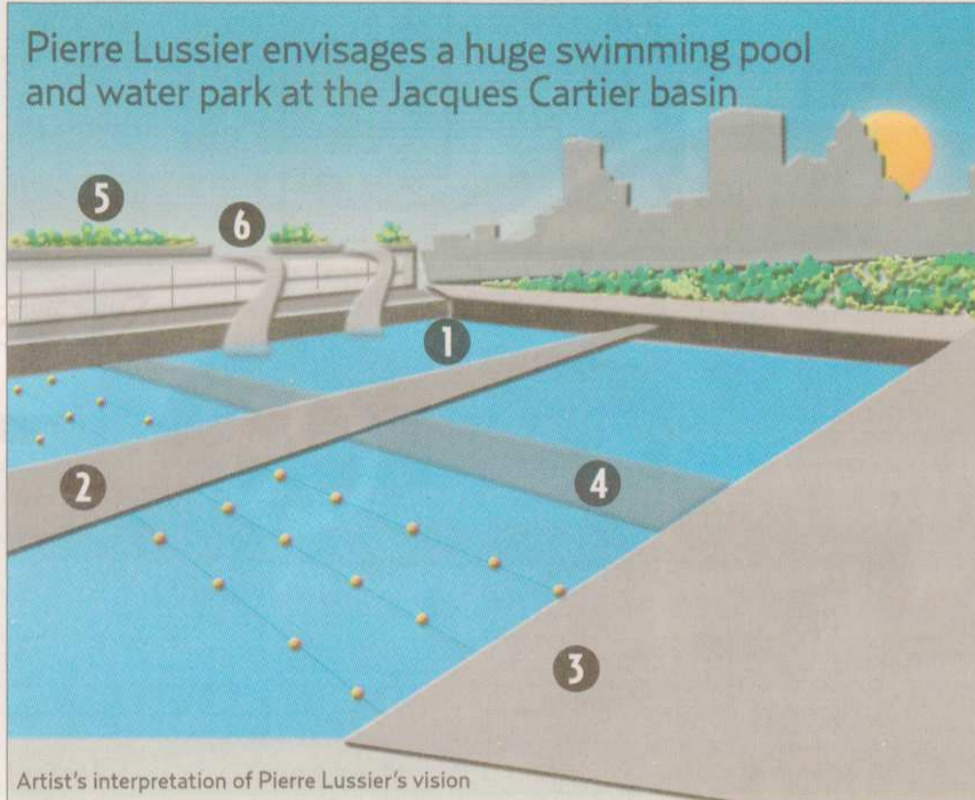
What Lussier envisages is a huge "swimming pool" and water park, not hidden off in one of the far-flung boroughs of the island but in the heart of Old Montreal. He imagines hundreds of people swimming, sunbathing, diving and frolicking in one of the most highly frequented tourist spots in the city.

The site Lussier has his eye on is the Jacques Cartier basin, a huge rectangle of natural river water between the Jacques Cartier and King Edward piers, in the Old Port, directly down the road from city hall. The basin is about half a kilometre long and 250 metres wide.

The location is excellent for swimming, Lussier explains, because the two piers protect swimmers from the wind and the river's current.

Lussier has already been swimming in the basin a couple of times for publicity stunts, called "splashes," organized by the Société des gens de baignade. To draw public attention to the fact that the water is clean, the group has twice rallied dozens of volunteers to don life jackets and jump into the basin.

"It's super," Lussier said. "The



Artist's interpretation of Pierre Lussier's vision

ILLUSTRATION THE GAZETTE



The Jacques Cartier Basin is now used as a marina. DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

A basin for swimmers

- 1 Marina could be moved to one of the other basins.
- 2 Ramp access to docks would be preserved.
- 3 Wooden docks around the edges of the water would be widened to provide room for sunbathing and picnicking.
- 4 A gridwork floor suspended below the water surface would create shallow areas, with stairs and ramps.
- 5 A terrace and gardens would be built on top of this hangar, where patrons could sip drinks or have a bite to eat.
- 6 Water slides of various sizes and designs would descend from this terrace area down into the water.

water is about 17 or 18 degrees in the summer, and there is no chlorine. It's a great feeling. There is a certain energy to swimming in that spot. You are up to your neck in real river water and you have this fabulous view of downtown Montreal."

Currently, the basin is home to a small marina as well as a docking area for several commercial ferry operations. Lussier suggests these could be moved to one of the other basins in the Old Port or to the newly remade Peel basin.

There are already ramps down from the piers to the water's edge, and there are wooden docks around the edges of the water. These docks could be widened to provide room for sunbathing and picnicking.

A gridwork floor suspended between the piers below the water surface would create shallow areas, with stairs and ramps allowing for easy access to the swimming areas. At the end of the piers, where the swimming area would open into the river, Lussier suggests a net, or other porous

barrier to keep over-enthusiastic swimmers from venturing into the fast-moving current.

Along the King Edward pier, directly behind the Montreal Science Centre, a hangar now houses some boutiques at ground level and a parking garage over them. Lussier suggests putting a terrace and gardens on top of this hangar, where patrons could sip drinks, have a bite to eat and watch the water sports below.

He even envisions water slides of various sizes and designs descending from this terrace area down into the water. There could be several diving towers, an area for lane-swimming, and lots of room for kids and adults just to frolic in shallow water. A series of floating docks could separate the different activity areas.

"Why not a floating bar, too?" says Lussier, only half-joking. "Why not kayaks and pedal boats?"

"This would get Montreal talked about all over the world."

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Jump in – the water's clean, tests show

With 75 kilometres of shoreline around the island, half of it publicly or institutionally owned, there is no reason why most Montreal residents can't have a beach or public waterfront park within a reasonable distance from their homes, say Montreal beach advocates.

Local environmental groups like Comité ZIP Ville-Marie and ZIP Jacques-Cartier have begun to agitate for the reopening of old beaches and the creation of new access points for swimming, kayaking and other water sports.

In fact, with the help of Health Canada, those two groups have identified 28 spots where it would make sense to invest in infrastructure – like boardwalks, ramps, docks with ladders, change rooms, etc. – to encourage swimming and other recreational activities.

But Pierre Lussier, spokesperson for the Corporation St. Laurent, a non-profit organization advocating for the St. Lawrence

River and Great Lakes, said these projects can't really take off until people get their heads around the idea that it is safe, healthy and fun to swim in the bodies of water that surround us.

During the 1990s, the city spent about \$2 billion hooking virtually every home and business on the island into a system of collector pipes to bring waste water to purification facilities.

For seven years now, the city has been rigorously testing the water at 118 sample points around the island every few days throughout the spring and summer to test the impact of the cleanup on water quality.

The results are remarkable. "There has been a drastic change," said Guy Deschamps, a biologist with the city of Montreal's environment department, who is in charge of the city's water quality testing program.

The standard for safe swimming is water that contains less than 200 milligrams of fecal col-

iforms per 100 millilitres of water. Where counts for this bacteria used to routinely register in the thousands, now about two-thirds of the testing sites show counts of lower than 200 mg per 100 mL of water (the standard for safe swimming) about 99 per cent of the time.

The Jacques Cartier basin is one of the regular testing points, and it consistently comes up swimmable, Deschamps confirmed. Moving the boats out would further improve the water quality, he said.

In fact, Deschamps himself has participated in two "splash" events in the Old Port, such as his confidence in the cleanliness of the water there. (He notes that he participated as a private citizen, not in his capacity as a city employee).

For a daily update on water quality at dozens of points around Montreal island, check out www.rsma.qc.ca

All action: Half-pipe and surf pool part of architect's vision

Geneviève Bégin's design will bring 'action sports' to the Old Port



DAVID THEODORE
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

If architectural intern Geneviève Bégin has her way, the Old Port will soon have a recreational centre for "action sports" enthusiasts on the Alexandra pier.

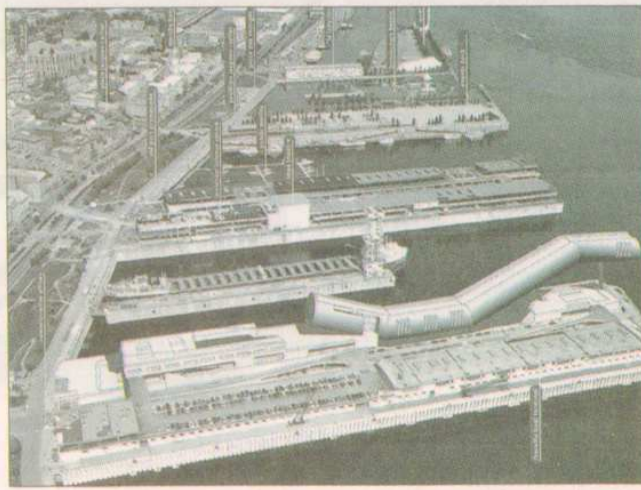
Bégin developed the prize-winning design last fall as her final project in the McGill University Masters of Architecture program. Right now, the pier houses the Iberville Passenger Terminal for cruise ships. She wants to renovate the pier's two-storey grain hangars and top them with a new 248-metre-long indoor snow park.

The popularity of indoor snow parks has mushroomed around the world. But in Japan, Dubai, and Europe, they are typically built in the suburbs next to shopping malls. Bégin thinks action sports should be a part of life downtown. "There's definitely an interest for action sports. It's part of every kid's life," said Bégin. "I want to make these new sports accessible to the urban community."

She calls the project "kink," re-

ferring to the bent part of a rail, a common obstacle found in snow and skate parks. Her plan calls for a skate park facing de la Commune St. for skateboarding, rollerblading, and bicycle motorcross racing. The dramatic, snaking tube, meant to symbolize the free-flowing motion of action sports, would contain an indoor version of the standard U-shaped half-pipe used for snowboarding and new school free-skiing. A wave pool underneath the tube would host wake surfing, a sport somewhere in between surfing and wakeboarding.

Bégin calls these activities action sports rather than extreme sports, because she has in mind a family-friendly place. These days, elite skateboarders manoeuvre on incredible nine-storey high Megaramps. Likewise, a typical run by an extreme snowboarder at St. Sauveur might mean a jump 20 metres through the air, followed by a technical trick performed on a long handrail. "There's such a big gap between what you can do when you're learning and that," said Bégin. Her centre would of-



Architect's illustration adds "action sports" plan to aerial view of the Alexandra pier (foreground) at the Old Port. The middle pier is the King Edward, home of the Montreal Science Centre, and the pier in the background is the Jacques Cartier.

ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF GENEVIÈVE BÉGIN

fer safe training for beginners as well as world-class competitions for experts.

And while "kink" would be geared to kids, the revitalized pier could offer something for everyone. Bégin found ways to

use the outside of the building, a nod to the way skateboarders ride over city benches, staircases, and plazas. Crisscrossing ramps would take casual strollers up to beach volleyball courts on the roof, or to decks for

a view of downtown. For lazy visitors, outdoor digital screens would project video replays of the inside action. In winter, the top of the tube would be packed with families tobogganing and kids luge racing. And just for fun, Bégin imagines using the 10-storey high lodge for BASE jumping, a dangerous sport that involves parachuting off fixed objects. Finally, there would be a recreational swimming pool at the end of the pier.

Last March, a lucky contact allowed Bégin to make an informal, unofficial presentation of her project to a few key board members from the Société du Vieux Port de Montréal. The society overlooks the development and promotion of recreation and tourism in the Old Port. It has a mandate to encourage a wide range of activities all year round. Right now it's studying the long-term planning of its territory, which projects like the proposed Casino on the Peel basin have put in the spotlight.

The society hasn't taken up Bégin's wild idea, but it's easy to see why her plan would stimulate discussion. The centre

would make Montreal a tourist destination for action sports lovers, especially during international competitions. It would offer something special at the Old Port to attract young kids and adolescents. It would connect the park promenade to the river, bringing joggers and pedestrians out to the end of the pier. It would offer unusual, spectacular views of the city and the river. And, in turn, it would be a striking, highly visible landmark.

Adventurous student projects are often impractical. Architecture schools encourage students to innovate and to take inspiration from avant-garde projects. This year, students are working on a downtown airport, a kite-shaped chronic-care hospital on Mount Royal, and a transformation of the Carmelite convent.

But it's not out of the question that student work becomes reality. Habitat 67, after all, began life as Moshe Safdie's final project at McGill. If "kink" was ever built, it would be right at home just across the water.

On the web: www.gbegin.com