

I.M. Pei's legacy stands tall on Montreal skyline.

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The city is lucky to have one of his iconic buildings gracing its skyline. In a testament to its timelessness, Place Ville Marie is getting a makeover.

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JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE

The iconic Place Ville Marie building downtown, which was designed by world-famous architect I.M. Pei, is undergoing a major renovation.

When Place Ville Marie celebrated its 50th anniversary seven years back, a new sculpture by Montreal artist Nicolas Baier was unveiled on the public esplanade to mark the occasion.

Autoportrait, as the piece is known, is a boardroom scene encased in a glass box, where the tables, chairs, papers, pens and briefcases are covered in chrome. It's an acknowledgment to the important discussions and decisions that took place over half a century in the office towers looming above.

And in a subtle nod to the legendary architect who designed the iconic complex, Baier set a chromed pair of I.M. Pei's trademark eyeglasses on a corner of the expansive table.

Unfortunately, Baier's work was not on display last week when Pei died at age 102. Had it been, the installation would have been a fitting place for Montrealers to reflect on Pei's formidable international legacy in shaping modern cities, including this one. But the good news is it will return to its prime location this year when a revamped outdoor concourse reopens at Place Ville-Marie.

Montrealers are lucky to have an emblem of Pei's modern, soaring oeuvre gracing its skyline. The Chinese-born, American-based architect's buildings span the globe, from the glass pyramids in the courtyard of the Louvre in Paris to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, to the Miho Museum in Kyoto, Japan, to the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. They are known and appreciated the world over.

Place Ville Marie may not be as famous as these other buildings, but it is certainly a landmark in Montreal, with its choice placement at the foot of McGill College Ave. and beams of light projecting off the tower at night. It was a landmark project for Pei's partner, Henry N. Cobb, who took the design lead, and helped put their firm Pei Cobb Freed and Associates on the map

The complex has for 57 years been a symbol of this 377-year-old city's transition to the modern era. When Place Ville-Marie was being constructed between 1958 and 1962, Montreal was in the throes of transformation, both physical and spiritual.

Place Ville Marie heralded the shifting of the city's banking and business district from Old Montreal to downtown. It was among the first glass and steel skyscrapers to be erected, and arguably remains one of the most beautiful.

The railway chasm along what is now René Lévesque Blvd. (then Dorchester) was moved and covered, according to a 2015 article in the Urban History Review. The connection between Place Ville Marie and Gare Centrale formed the first leg of Montreal's popular underground city, now offering access to a nexus of out-of-town trains, commuter rail and the métro system.

Montreal was also in the midst of the Quiet Revolution as Place Ville Marie rose, morphing from a traditional society dominated by the influence of the Catholic Church to an open, forward-looking and diverse city. Even still, Pei

monumentalized Catholicism's centuries of sway over Montreal in the cross-shaped form of the majestic towers.

This brilliant intermarriage of history and modernity continues to define the best of Montreal.

Place Ville Marie, like this city, is still evolving with the times. Present owners Ivanhoe Cambridge (a real-estate arm of the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec) is investing \$200 million to overhaul and beautify the lower galleries, where there are shops and eateries.



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Construction site outside Place Ville Marie on Saturday.

The outdoor esplanade at the base of the towers is being retrofitted with a glass roof that will look down into an interior garden. The lush, interior green space will be the centrepiece of a new food court that will include stalls and kiosks, small cafés and fine dining restaurants.

The outside of the building will change little under the new plans, but the illumination of the inside will be dramatic, promises Sid Lee Architecture, which is overseeing the redesign. The giant skylight will bathe the once cavernous interior in natural light. And the greenery will breathe new life into a staid shopping experience, helping with the ongoing revitalization of downtown.

Even if Place Ville Marie houses the offices of law firms and corporations — distinctly private property — it has always included public space. An observation deck and restaurant crowning the structure provide sweeping views of the city, especially Mount Royal to the north and the St. Lawrence River to the south (although it costs money to go up there).

But the reconfiguration of the outdoor space below, allowing people strolling through to peek into the mall from above, may reinvigorate the terraces at the tower's base, windswept though they are during the long winter.

In any case, Baier's chrome installation, with its tribute to Pei's indelible influence on modern Montreal, will soon return to its prime place: at the foot of the existing tower and perched above the freshly exposed interior.

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CORRECTION: This story has been updated to reflect the significant contributions of Pei's partner, Henry N. Cobb.