

Le Théâtre Petit Cercle

TED CAVANAGH
 RICHARD KROEKER
 ROGER MULLIN
 ALDEN NEUFELD
 Dalhousie University

Le Theatre Petit Cercle playfully engages the infamous southeasterly winds in this collaborative design/build project moored to a playground slide. Student architects and the community of Cheticamp, Nova Scotia combined efforts to make Architecture that builds on community spirit and a sense of place. In this French-speaking community, the powerful southeasters are called "Suettes" and reach speeds of 200 kph. In 2004, the town celebrated 400 years of European settlement in Canada by hosting a festival, Le Troisième Congrès Mondiale Acadien. Throughout the province 100 family reunions took place, some attracting thousands of descendants. Organizers prepared some temporary outdoor sites and talked optimistically about founding a permanent summer theatre camp in an old playground behind the school.

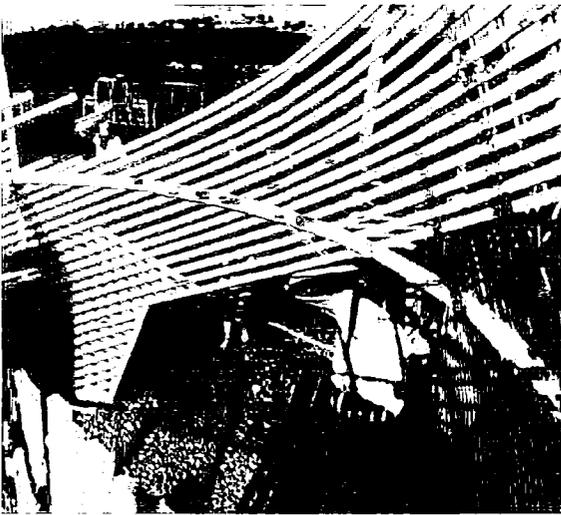
Three instructors and 23 students went to work constructing a permanent outdoor children's theatre for the festival as well as a future theatre camp. Beginning with a surrealistic, derelict playground on a plateau behind the school and \$2000, they designed, built and raised money for the theatre. Scavenging forays into the community with sketchbooks and measuring tapes produced inspiration and some building materials: beach washed cobbles, old bleachers, playground equipment, and wooden slats. Using lessons learned from local wharves constructed with wood cribs filled with rock ballast, the building uses rock-ballasted wooden cribwork for the walls and to create a permanent theatre with minimal wind resistance. Working as designer builders, the

students developed confidence and initiative in sorting out details and working on sub-projects nested within the developing design framework.



Like a boat swinging downwind of its anchor, prow into the wind, the theatre is anchored at one entrance by a playground slide. It's a permanent theatre, "transparent to the wind," heavy enough to be anchored on the site, yet perforated to reduce the extreme wind load. The theatre has rocks in its pockets: river

cobbles placed in a slatted wood wall cavity two meters high. The slatted wooden sides offer little resistance to the wind, breaking up the laminar flow along its surfaces and inside the theatre to create shelter. Some existing weathered bleachers were modified to seat an audience of 180, the seat heights reduced in the front rows to suit younger children. The lens-shape theatre measures 75 feet by 32 feet bringing the audience very close to the stage. Acting as a mooring post, a helical playground slide with its wind sock banner marks the main children's access, and



suggests members of the audience make an exciting, sliding "grand entry." A low, child-height entry resulted from the diagonal geometry of the wood cladding. A higher entrance is at the opposite end through a space that serves as a ticketing point or a spot for puppet shows or other small-audience performances. Each entry doubles as a stage wing during the performances. The walls are woven onto a frame of sixteen-foot, vertical ribs made from double one-by-fours laminated to each side of tapered wood blocking spacers. One-by-three slats are set diagonally and screwed onto the inside and outside surfaces of the ribs. The slats act as cross bracing and create a four-inch "cavity" filled part way up with rock to ballast the light wooden structure during a Svette. Like boat hulls or baskets, the three dimensional curvature creates overall stiffness with a relatively thin material. The entire wall assembly appears to float above the ground. Larger stones were suspended from the framing under the floor decking where it would work most effectively in anchoring the

structure creating a weighty structure that is transparent to the wind. The ground inside the theatre is smooth local stone that drains easily. The stone extends slightly beyond the footprint of the building forming a kind of moat that serves to differentiate the wooden structure from the ground and prevents grass from invading the structure. This design evolved out of pragmatic and aesthetic considerations many of them discovered in the field. For example, siting the theatre became a subject of debate. Explorations of the on-site slide revealed a huge concrete foundation, and early plans to bring the slide to the theatre were abandoned in favor of keeping the slide where it was and locating the theater around it. Rain that filled the excavation became a way of leveling the base and establishing drainage. The crib work was its own scaffolding and the curvature in plan was adjusted to the maximum bending the green one-by-threes would tolerate.

The ten-day construction period generated genuine excitement in the community and strength of purpose in the architect/builders, engendering a shared sense of ownership. The structure functions as a successful children's theatre in this unique French-speaking town and part of a very significant festival. The theatre people are impressed by the acoustics and the way the building tempers the climate. They are already planning night time musical shows and imagining various lighting effects. Qualities of the theatre resulted from design decisions synchronized during the immediacy of construction, particularly those that mediated the climate and reflected local culture.

In fifteen days, the theatre was designed, built and nearly paid for. Now, an additional \$300,000 has been raised to complete the rest of the theatre camp, building on community spirit and a sense of place. Join us and architectural students from Norway, Ireland, and Iceland as we design and build the next stages of this project in July and September 2006.

Winner of the 2005 gold at the National Post Design Exchange Awards for the best public and commercial building in Canada.