

# Jacques Bilodeau: Watch Your Step

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Opening spread for "Watch Your Step" by Gary Michael Dault, *Canadian Art*, Winter 2012, pp 122–6 / photo Alex Meyboom

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"Space exists in slumber until we awaken it."  
—Frederick Kiesler, *Inside the Endless House* (1966)

You enter artist-designer-architect [Jacques Bilodeau](#)'s two-storey residence and workshop on rue des Carrières in northeast Montreal—a small industrial building that was formerly a bolt factory—more or less expecting to find a conventionally stark modernist interior (probably white, with beefy I-beams, perhaps with nautical-style tubular railings and historically impeccable chairs). What you find instead is a sort of Plato's cave of blue-black steel, all hollows and shadows.

The crepuscular light in the interior of the des Carrières studio, quite impossible to predict from outside, is the result of Bilodeau's deft positioning of panels, passages and slabs of steel—of which the cavernous space seems almost entirely forged—which create a dark, burnished labyrinth. The steel plates and passages form separations, partitions and intervals that rhythmically animate and articulate the structure in tandem with, and counterpointed by, vast blocks of open space that vie with the heavy, dark metals for visual supremacy. Altogether, the place feels like some advanced Lego model, with half of the bricks made of pure light.

Much of the orchestration of this dark-bright, heavy-light, push-pull tectonic display of juxtaposed visual stresses and relaxations is bound up with Bilodeau's trademark use of panels that slide and regroup into alternate configurations. Much of it is the result, as well, of his pursuit of the sort of topological continuity that results from an eschewing of furniture in the conventional sense for the furniture-like employment of extended steel surfaces that, when cut, crimped, folded and welded, become the interior's smoothly integrated chairs, benches, tables and work surfaces. I suspect that Bilodeau would agree with the French architect and furniture designer Bernard Cache, who has referred to furniture as nothing more than "an interior replication of architecture." In Cache's view—and surely Bilodeau's as well—doors are walls and vice versa (in the des Carrières studio, one wall lifts like the overhead door of a loading bay, entirely erasing the difference between inside and outside), closets and even workrooms are simply boxes in a bigger box, and tables, chairs, benches and shelves are no more than smaller, elevated floors.

Bilodeau's sculptural wielding of architectural discontinuities within the performance envelope of a bounded space requires, in any user of such space, an ongoing attentiveness. His framings and de-framings, his

spatial compressions and sudden releases cannot be passively enjoyed but, as blue-black “folds of thought” (to paraphrase Stéphane Mallarmé), generate an active enough presence on their own to demand active participation rather than just passive visitation.

As photographer Jacques Perron puts it in his excellent 2008 book *Jacques Bilodeau: Habiter/Inhabited*, Bilodeau’s dwellings are invariably composed of blocks of space “opening and closing according to the vantage point determined by our wanderings.” Asked about his spatial objectives as a designer—in an interview by Éric Le Coguiec included in the Perron book—Bilodeau stresses that everything he does “aims to keep the body alert.” He continues, “A space is a living body that needs to be appropriated in order to inhabit it. The effort that must be exerted mobilizes the body through its destabilization, which has the effect of projecting it into engaged action. This is an indicator that we are alive.” Le Coguiec alludes to Le Corbusier’s idea of the revelations inherent in the “architectural walk.” Bilodeau accedes to this. “You’re right,” he says. “I often imagine my dwellings as a function of wandering around.”

There is an argument to be made that Bilodeau’s love of a vital “wandering around,” even inside a bounded space, is a small-scale version of the *dérive*, or drift, the perceptually heightened walk so beloved of Guy Debord and the Situationist International—of whom Bilodeau has been an attentive student. It was this concept of “the continuous *dérive*,” a by-product of what the situationists called “unitary urbanism,” that would result (presumably) in everyone’s living “in his own cathedral,” as the French theorist Ivan Chatcheglov put it in “Formulary for a New Urbanism” (1953), exploring “rooms more conducive to visions than any drug, and houses where it will be impossible not to fall in love.”



Middle spread for “Watch Your Step” by Gary Michael Dault, *Canadian Art*, Winter 2012, pp 122–6

*Dérive* or not, Bilodeau the designer shares with Debord and the Dutch situationist artist [Constant Nieuwenhuys](#) a delight in the possibility of a “New Babylon” (Constant’s term) of buildings and, within them, spaces devoted entirely to the excitement (much of it bodily) of continuous experimentation. Bilodeau has always subjected his personal live-work spaces to continuous experimentation. And when he designs a space for a particularly adventurous client, he can provide for that client the same kind of morphological fluidity that he normally expects to provide only for himself.

Architect-theorist Greg Lynn observes in his book *Animate Form* (1999) that, for the most part, architects have maintained “an ethics of statics in their discipline.” On account of “its dedication to permanence,” Lynn notes, “architecture is one of the last modes of thought based on the inert.”

Not Bilodeau’s. As much a work of sculpture as interior design, his Chateaubriand project (2006), a 4,000-square-foot residence reborn from a Montreal industrial building, is essentially a four-storey staircase library, the banister-shelves of which ascend, dizzyingly, to the sky (climbing leads to the transcendental, does it not?). His even more radical *Résidence Claude Cormier*, made in collaboration with the landscape architect Claude Cormier in 2003, is part-sculpture, part-work of architecture and part-sensory laboratory, and trades spectacularly in

the disorienting but galvanizing imperatives of the oblique.

The Cormier residence is, in fact, a vivid expression of ideas first presented in 1963 by the Architecture Principe group—led by the French architect Claude Parent and the French urban theorist Paul Virilio—which have been an important part of Bilodeau's thinking since he discovered them in 1968. Central to the group was the use of inclined planes to foster what they term “habitable circulation”—a happy by-product of “the architecture of effort” and a bulwark against conventional spatial limitation. In the Cormier project, as described by Perron, “an inclined plane, activated by a hydraulic jack, revealed a gaping space containing a kitchen. Ground became ceiling; surface became underside, and, amazingly, was covered by mirrors. The resulting mirror image turned the space upside down as if being absorbed into itself.” Here, as Parent wrote in *Vivre à l'oblique*, the oblique function “awakens and catalyzes man, quite the opposite of the languid comfort that dulls, even kills, the mental state.”

Bilodeau's most recent manifestation of this romancing of the oblique was his theatrical site-specific installation *Instabilisateur/Pendular Destabilizer*, shown at Montreal's [Galerie Joyce Yahouda](#) in spring 2011. Initially, the work looked simple and straightforward: an elevated wooden floor—almost the area of the gallery's actual floor—was held aloft on an hydraulic armature that supported it au point, as it were, so that it was free to incline whenever visitors climbed onto it. Animated entirely by the direction, weight and persistence of the visitors' footsteps, the *Instabilisateur* proceeded to live up to its name, tilting and righting itself, dipping and weaving, depending on who had climbed aboard and where they walked once they were up there.

*Instabilisateur/Pendular Destabilizer* was like an enlarged detail from one of Bilodeau's challenging interiors: a live-in—or, in this case, a live-on—plateau, the single purpose of which was to sweep you back into your body and ignite in you an acute sense of corporeal awareness inescapably legislated by the work's responsive restlessness.

The afternoon I visited Bilodeau, it was a pleasure to see, suspended from the ceiling, one of his *Faire son trou/Making His Hole* works. I had seen one of these before, at Joyce Yahouda's booth at the Toronto International Art Fair two years earlier, and it was my introduction to Bilodeau and his work. A *Faire son trou* is a gigantic cube of thick grey felt that has been gathered up to resemble a huge cloth bag—hammock-like, nest-like, womb-like, cell-like—into which you feel almost irresistibly compelled to burrow. If you do, you find a number of hanging electric switches that you can push to activate a motor that raises, lowers or otherwise adjusts the felt, allowing you to customize your new dangling, nacelle-like environment.

Perron draws attention to the way in which this “topological curiosity, whose two sides form one single surface,” echoes the Möbius strip. “Despite the elegance of the forms, the action takes place on the inside,” he writes. “With the cell acting as a second skin, extension or continuation of the body, more than any other of Bilodeau's works, this amazing mechanism offers the possibility of *being concealed* from the world.... Displaying a new form of sobriety, *Faire son trou* condenses and intensifies Jacques Bilodeau's unremitting investigations, his quest for a site to be-close-to-oneself.”

Bilodeau began his career studying interior design. He is now as far from what is usually thought of as interior design as Dorothy from her sepia-toned Kansas. As we snack on prosciutto and ripe figs, I ask him about this remarkable trajectory of his. He rather dismisses that which can be merely learned. “But,” he smiles, “I've had my body all my life.”

