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## THE GAZETTE'S VIEW

# The payoff of daring to dream big dreams

Place Ville Marie and the Champlain Bridge are contemporaries, but that's the only respect in which they are comparable. One is a source of pride, the other an embarrassment.

Both are observing their 50th anniversary this year: Place Ville Marie was inaugurated in September 1962, three months after the Champlain was opened to traffic.

In the case of the former, this golden anniversary is cause for celebrating a job supremely well done. In the case of the latter, it is occasion to consider what went wrong and how the job can be better done next time.

Fifty years on, PVM is no longer the tallest building in the city, but it stands as an iconic Montreal landmark, still arguably the classiest business address in town. The gracefully aging "Grande Dame de Montréal" is almost fully occupied, and the \$25 million a year in tax revenue it generates represents city hall's largest account. About 10,000 people work in the complex, which means there are more people in it on a given weekday than live in 90 per cent of Quebec's municipalities.

Its office rents are among the 10 highest in

the city, and tenants include some of the rare corporate head offices that have not fled town.

It has grown steadily in value, from the \$80 million it cost to build it to the \$700 million it is worth today.

It is a historic building. As civil engineer Roger Nicolet, who worked on the project, put it, PVM changed the face of Montreal and was emblematic of Quebec's transition to modernity. It pioneered the concept of underground retailing, later emulated at prestige addresses elsewhere.

What distinguished Place Ville Marie was a combination of world-class design – by internationally renowned architects I.M. Pei and Henry Cobb – and first-rate materials, notably structural steel as opposed to the exposed concrete so typical of much of the city's second-rate buildings.

The Champlain Bridge, meanwhile, is typical of so much of Quebec's public infrastructure from those early Quiet Revolution days, built in a hurry and on the cheap. It has deteriorated to such a state of decrepitude that it is beyond sustainable repair. The unavoidable decision has been made to build a replacement.

Some might blanch in these tight-money times at the thought of applying the same esthetic and structural considerations that were brought to PVM to the building of the



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After 50 years, Place Ville Marie still stands proudly as a source of pride in Montreal.

new Champlain (or whatever the replacement structure might be named).

But serious consideration should be given to what some prominent local figures, including real-estate executive Stephen Leopold and lawyer/diplomat Yves Fortier, have proposed, which is that the new bridge be beautiful as well as functional: a structure that would be a distinguishing advertisement for Montreal the world over, much as the Sydney Opera

House is for that city, the Golden Gate Bridge for San Francisco, or the Guggenheim Museum for Bilbao. They argue that apart from being a spectacular sight, it could be a signature showcase for clean, green electricity, equipped with wind and water turbines that would power spectacular lighting and heat the roadbed to keep it free of ice and snow.

To accomplish something like that, all three levels of government, as well as the private sector, would have to pitch in. The cost would be significantly greater than it would be for a simply utilitarian structure. But if done properly, the new bridge could be a priceless symbol of a resurgent 21st-century Montreal.

It has been suggested that if that is what Montreal wants, Montrealers should pay the full cost of it and not add to the tax burden of other Canadians. But such cheese-paring parochialism ignores the fact that the Champlain Bridge, as will be its successor, is a vital Canadian asset, the busiest bridge in the country and essential to moving goods and people to and from the rest of the country and beyond.

It would be a daring undertaking, but daring to dream big is not necessarily misguided. Place Ville Marie stands as glowing proof of that a half-century later. The new bridge could stand the same way, and for far longer, if we dare to meet the challenge it offers.