



LANDSCAPE

THE ELEPHANT IN THE BACKYARD

An old tree was hogging water and making tables tilt

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THE TREE IN STÉPHANE OUELLET’S BACKYARD WAS ruining a good thing. The yard, once an urban refuge, was now a place where only the tree was thriving. The roots of the 100-year-old poplar were turning the rubber tiles that covered the ground into small hills. There was no level surface for tables and chairs. What’s more, the holes in the rubber tiles were getting clogged with plant matter, impeding drainage and attracting insects because of moisture.

Stéphane was discouraged about gardening. The Plateau Mont Royal resident had tried for 10 years to grow various types of plants, only to witness the large tree hog their water. The tree is an old urban survivor that offers shade to both Stéphane’s and his neighbour’s yard, and provides beauty as well as some insulation from noise on nearby St. Laurent Blvd. On the other hand, it’s a pushy poplar that upstages Stéphane’s passion for outdoor dining.


For architect Francis Berthiaume of Atelier Tautem, there was no question that the tree should stay, and while he wanted to dial down its disruptiveness, it was important that it remain the star of the backyard. He did just that. The tree is now at the centre of a yard that is level, where water gets directed to plants, and where unwanted animals are kept out. The space remains a private retreat in a bustling Montreal neighbourhood.

The work began last spring, when Berthiaume went to the root of the problem, so to speak. His plan involved installing 16 six-foot aluminum stakes in the ground of the 650-square-foot area. It provided a solid foundation for a ground-floor outdoor deck. He ensured the stakes did not touch the tree’s roots, and to improve drainage, put a four-foot-deep layer of gravel close to the house. He attached the stakes to the cedar deck so it is high enough above the

ground to prevent interference from tree roots. On the deck, Berthiaume created an intimate space, defined by four vertical wooden columns that are braced at the top by horizontal galvanized steel beams. Inside the space sits the now-stable outdoor dining table and chairs. “I wanted it to be like an island in the middle of a lake,” says Berthiaume of the spot that’s discreetly lit by an oil lamp, which hangs at the table’s centre from a thin cable strung across the structure. *EF*

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Berthiaume built a narrow rectangular Japanese-style border under one of the beams. The Montreal-based architect, who has revitalized park chalets and built green roofs, reversed Stéphane's unlucky streak with plants through the use of another underground trick. This one involves an impermeable membrane and a separate irrigation system, which saves the plants from the tree's insatiable thirst. Stéphane is pleased. "The best surprise is to see plants grow," he says.

The Japanese border delineates the dining area from the lounging area. A sofa nestles against a high white wall on one side of the yard. The wall serves as an occasional projection area for Stéphane. "There's a projector that I use with my laptop. I can show pictures from my trips," he says. The walls have been covered with a geotextile that protects them from the weather and provides another layer of sound insulation. Along the other wall are slats that support grape vines. 

The base of each pillar is made of galvanized steel, making the wood less vulnerable to rot from ground-level moisture. The deck is made of untreated, unstained red cedar. Stéphane does not mind the cedar going grey. "The colour can come from the plants and not the wood," he says.

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The sofa is by Umbra. For rain, Stéphane has a canvas cloth that covers the top of the four-pillar structure and snaps onto the beams. Unseen in the yard is a series of grills that keeps away burrowing animals.

Stéphane, a doctor who has to work some nights, appreciates being able to use his backyard for his daytime snoozes. “I can now go into my yard and sleep in the middle of the day without hearing any noise,” he says. With fewer insects to bother him, he keeps his back door and adjacent garage window of the revamped porte-cochère open for long periods. He recalls a dinner party he had following the completion last summer of his

backyard. “I was having dinner with two good friends,” he says.” It was an impromptu meal. I remember we had buffalo mozzarella. By the end of the night we were saying that we have to vacation in Tuscany. And we did!” Stéphane can relax more in this outdoor space and let conversation go where it likes, without worrying about unsteady tables. “We had just brought things out of the fridge. We had cheese, we had basil and we started to dream.” ☛

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