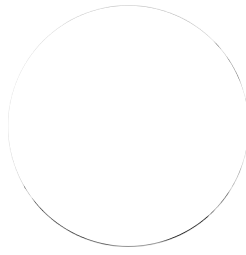




Features

Caserne

In Montréal, a design studio turns strong concepts into fruitful collaborations.



By Amanda McCorquodale

On an evening in late November 2019, hundreds of guests packed into a studio space in Montréal to celebrate the launch of Brasserie Caserne Brewing Co. The space was filled with exquisitely designed beer cans, growlers, coasters, calendars, posters, jackets, T-shirts and tote bags—all orange-hued marketing collateral of the Blonde, NEIPA and Gose brews being served.



© Samuel Pasquier



However, any partygoer taking a closer look would have noticed that the space was lacking any actual brewery accoutrement to indicate Caserne was really getting into the microbrew business. Indeed, the Brasserie Caserne Brewing Co. party was a branding stunt

so well executed that, in the end, Caserne creative directors Ugo Varin Lachapelle and Léo Breton-Allaire had to clarify to the microbrewery community that the well-enjoyed launch was all make-believe.

“We wanted to throw an event to bring together our staff, clients and community of collaborators,” says Breton-Allaire. “We also thought it would be a really good opportunity to showcase a complete branding project.” So they partnered with local brewery Brasseurs sur Demande to make a limited run of 300 one-party-only beers and then got to work designing the brand.

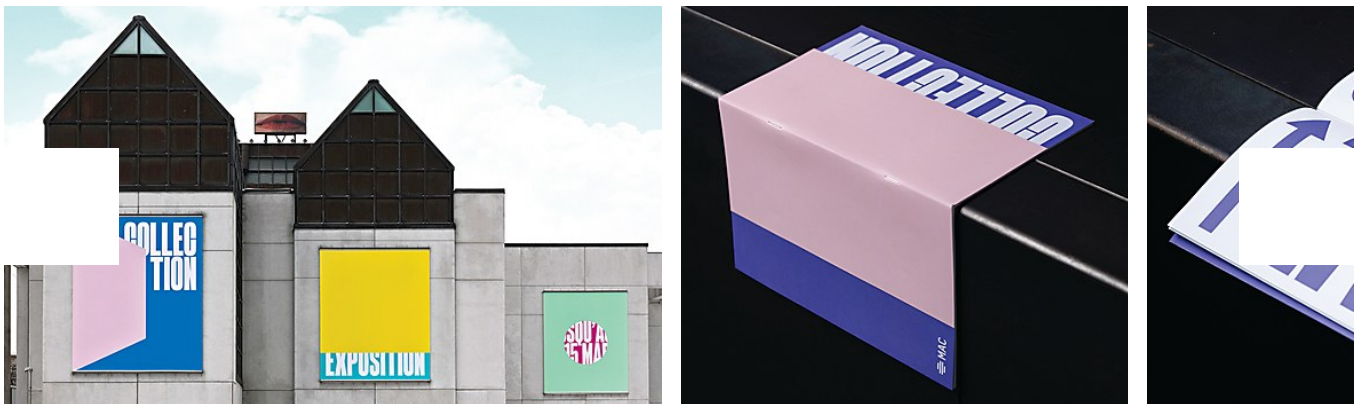
They enlisted the help of friends and former studio mates at the type foundry Coppers and Brasses to create a custom Caserne Brewery typeface. “There were a lot of microbreweries

Varin Lachapelle. The resulting typeface, which won a Type Directors Club 2020 Communication Design award, features steep angles and contrast, rounded characters of multiple widths, as well as pointy, aggressive serifs and terminals.

Caserne also created every single branding touchpoint, from packaging, print and clothing to even a video commissioned from direction studio Parade and producers Content Content. “The joke was that Léo and I were not in the studio anymore, that we were only brewing beer and not taking care of our clients,” explains Varin Lachapelle. The fictional brand launch won an *Applied Arts* 2020 Design award and a gold prize in Québec’s Association of Creative Communication Agencies’ 2020 Idéa contest.

Browse Projects

Click on an image to view more from each project



Pairing a strong central concept with flawlessly executed branding has become the calling card of the young Canadian studio, founded in 2012 by Varin Lachapelle and two partners, Elizabeth Beaudoin and David Tremblay. “The space we were working in had this fire station feel where we all lived and worked in the same place,” he says, “so we called the studio Caserne—French for fire station.” In 2015, Varin Lachapelle parted ways with the original partners and brought on Breton-Allaire, his friend and former classmate from the Université du Québec à Montréal.

hip-hop,” says Varin Lachapelle. “I think we are still inspired by that subculture. Looking back, Breton-Allaire says the first time he remembers being intrigued by graphic design was going to buy a skateboard. “I was about nine, and I was amazed that each brand had their own specific [board graphics],” he says.

Beyond the cultural reference points of being skater kids in the suburbs, Varin Lachapelle and Breton-Allaire both studied graphic design at Université du Québec à Montréal at a time when many of the professors hailed from Europe. “I think the program really instilled a European sensibility, that is, more of a focus on concept, in both of our design approaches,” says Varin Lachapelle.

After graduation, their paths diverged, with Varin Lachapelle taking the entrepreneurial route of starting his own studio and Breton-Allaire interning and ultimately becoming art director at ad agency Cossette. “I think I have a more dreamer approach, but that Léo is the leader—he’s really good at managing staff,” says Varin Lachapelle about their styles of work. “Without having worked together, I think we understood that we have a common vision about graphic design.”

That vision has served them well in the six years of working together at Caserne as they create brand identities, print and packaging for everything from cultural institutions to food and drink startups. “It may sound cliché, but our creative approach is to push for a solid idea first and then, after that’s established, we make sure that the visual stands out and speaks for itself,” says Breton-Allaire.

It may sound cliché, but our creative approach is to push for a solid idea first and then, after that’s established, we make sure

itself.” —Léo Breton-Allaire

They’ve earned a reputation as a studio with a strong concept-based design approach. In 2019, they were brought on to design for Festival Santa Teresa, a series of concerts held in Sainte-Thérèse, a suburb just north of Montréal. “The festival celebrates the vibe of the suburbs,” says Ricardo Perozo, communication project manager for Santa Teresa.

He says Caserne took the festival’s tagline—“In the name of the ’burbs. Amen.”—and tunneled it into something truly different. “They’re very good at seeing the potential behind the story,” Perozo says. “They used design to elevate—in a tongue-in-cheek kind of way—the clichés of suburbia. They were able to tap into all these graphic codes that are relevant right now but in a no-bullshit type of approach, where we’re just embracing what we are and where we come from. It really made it work.”

For the Santa Teresa project, Caserne knew that they wanted to play with the idea of the mixing of different age groups at the festival as well as the timeworn clichés of festivals, like drug use and bad toilets. They partnered with illustrator Brother Merle, who used to share space in their studio. “He is also from the Sainte-Thérèse suburb,” says Varin Lachapelle, “so he knew the exact types of caricatures to represent.”

In working with Caserne, Perozo says he was struck not only by the studio’s willingness to collaborate but also by the fact that the designers seem to thrive on it. “Studios typically want to keep all the work in-house,” says Perozo, “but with Caserne, you get the sense that they are driven by creating something truly unique and that they realize that knocking on others’ doors to collaborate is key to elevating the project to become something more.”

Vivianne Loranger, co-owner of Club Kombucha, the project most often associated with Caserne, says she was struck by how well Caserne not only collaborates with other creatives but also seamlessly integrated with their brand team. “They want our business to grow as much as we want it to,” she says. “I think this has a really big impact in the design process because when they have new ideas, they don’t hesitate to tell us.”

beverage positioned as an alternative to beer. At that time, most kombuchas were bottled and marketed as a wellness drink,” says Varin Lachapelle, “but Club Kombucha was after something different. They wanted to brand it as a lifestyle project, something lighter and more fun.”

To me, good design is something that makes my head turn to take another look. But even more than that, it must make me start thinking, ‘What’s the idea here? Where am I now and where do they want me to go?’” —Léo Breton-Allaire

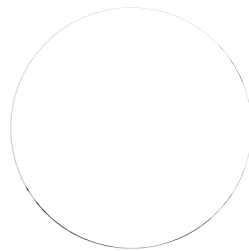
Caserne drew inspiration from the typography and design of old-school beer cans while experimenting with ways to make the packaging stand out on the shelf in a really bold way. Again, they partnered with Coppers and Brasses, with the C and / of the lettering playfully forming a ligature for an iconic logotype. They also used a color palette of turquoise, neon pink-orange and cobalt blue, colors not typically found on cans or on food packaging in general. “They were not too feminine and not too masculine,” says Varin Lachapelle of the colors that harken to the pop colors of the berry, grapefruit and ginger flavors inside the cans.

In addition to completing a rebrand of a record label and a project for a cannabis company in California, Caserne is currently working with Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (MAC). “Paprika, the studio that they’ve used in the past, is one we really look up to,” says Varin Lachapelle, “so being able to have them as a client is a really great achievement for our studio.”

an exhibition identity to highlight the diversity of the collection and the fact that many of the artworks had never been available to the public before. “We chose to use bold messages and shapes that suggest openings, such as windows, sliding doors and circles, as key campaign images that would invite people to discover the collection,” says Breton-Allaire. They also relied on expressively bright colors to contrast to the gray exterior of the building and dreary winter skies.

Varin Lachapelle and Breton-Allaire admit to using a classic approach in their creative process. What makes them stand out in the design community is their ability to tap into a network of like-minded creative professionals who complement their studio as well as their determination to design projects guided by a central idea, mission or story.

“To me, good design is something that makes my head turn to take another look,” says Breton-Allaire. “But even more than that, it must make me start thinking, ‘What’s the idea here? Where am I now and where do they want me to go?’” **ca**



Amanda McCorquodale (amandamcc.com) is a New York-based freelance writer and former Arts & Culture editor of the *Miami New Times*. In this issue, she writes about Caserne, a Montréal-based design studio that thrives on creative collaborations.