

Reviving Maple Leaf Gardens

By Peter Saunders

Toronto's fabled Maple Leaf Gardens—previously home to major-league hockey, big-name concerts, boxing and other sporting events—recently emerged from a decade of disuse. Its new anchor tenant was not a sports team or event management company, but instead Loblaws, a grocery retail chain with stores across Ontario and Quebec. To appeal to urban consumers and win over skeptical traditionalists, the transformation of the vast, empty space had to set new standards for point-of-purchase (POP) signage and related design elements.

This process began in 2010 with a creative pitch session that pitted five design firms against each other to determine which could live up to Loblaws' daunting mandate: "Create the best food store in the world."

While most of these contenders were North American firms, it was a foreign team that ended up scoring the deal: Landini Associates, a multidisciplinary retail design and branding consultancy based in Sydney, Australia.

"We do not actively promote our services, as most inquiries come through word of mouth," says Mark Landini, creative director. "We won the job because Loblaws felt our concept matched its vision for an urban food store."

In this case, the architectural firm already assigned to redesign Maple Leaf Gardens, Toronto-based Turner Fleischer Architects, was aware of Landini's work because one of its principals visits his relatives in Australia regularly.

"It was circuitous," says Landini. "I had never been to Canada before. We were flown over for a briefing, to see Maple Leaf Gardens, some Loblaws stores and



some of their competitors. I also spent a few days just walking around Toronto."

As he continued to visit the city, his walking tours helped him grasp the cultural importance of the heritage site.

"I understood how iconic Maple Leaf Gardens was when I noticed every bar and shop had ice hockey on TV," he says. "In Australia, the closest equivalent is rugby, but Canadians' mania for hockey eclipses that! The arena had also hosted the Beatles, Elvis Presley and the boxer Cassius Clay, later known as Muhammad Ali. So, when the building was shut down, the social context changed. The new store would need to be more than a supermarket. It would have to revitalize this part of the city with a new sense of place. There's no reason it shouldn't be part of the community."

New and old

With a proposal for a grocery store that would look like no other Loblaws location, Landini was tasked with enhancing the customer experience by providing input for interior and graphic design, signage, uniforms and written communications.

"People are increasingly demanding more of an experience from their grocery store," he says. "Shoppers don't just want to be presented with aisles of food. They want more of a 'market' experience, with visible food preparation, authenticity, tasting and something new happening all of the time. They want to be entertained. Our intention was to create a modern version of a market town square—a super market, rather than a supermarket."

In addition to bringing the store to the forefront of international urban retail design and creating new elements that could be rolled out in the future at other stores, another primary goal for the firm was to recognize the history of the iconic building.

"Maple Leaf Gardens was massive, brutal and 'ugly-beautiful,'" says Landini. "We wanted to pay homage to the history of the building in a vibrant, living way, making it a part of the design by exposing the walls,



commissioning a sculpture of reclaimed stadium seats and reusing lights and signage fonts."

One of those fonts had been used originally to stencil in seat numbers.

"When we first visited the site, the construction crews had started pulling the insides of the arena out and we saw the stencil font left behind," says Landini. "It was well worth saving and so we reused it throughout the building."

The seat-based sculpture, meanwhile, formed a giant blue maple leaf, the logo of the Toronto hockey team for whom the arena was home.

"We came up with the concept with Landini and removed the cushions from the seats before giving them to an artist," says Mario Fatica, vice-president (VP) of planning and development for Loblaw Companies.

"The leaf is a type of storytelling, using the materials of the building's history," says Landini. "Around the sculpture, you can see the ghosts of staircases and radiators past. Old, exposed columns are crumbling. It all adds to the look."

Other original seats were added to an in-store café, where they can still be used for

With the opening of Loblaws' new store, the heritage building has emerged from a decade of disuse.

The mandate was to create the best food store in the world.



Whether customers enter from the corner of Church and Carlton Streets (left) or from the underground garage (right), they are greeted by the Loblaws logo.

their original purpose. On the walls, old murals were recreated and new ones added.

Another form of homage was the integration of some of the original ice-rink light fixtures. This and other illumination work was overseen by Mark Schembri, VP of store maintenance for Loblaw Companies.

"This was a very different project for us," he says. "Landini had a strong vision for lighting the space. We needed big, chunky lighting fixtures to illuminate big, chunky signs. When you walk in, we wanted a streetscape view, with light columns along your path. And we have some of the original light cans from the old ceiling. We took them down and maintained the shrouds but switched them to metal halide lighting. There are six of those near the store entrance."

When customer use the main entrance at the corner of Carlton and Church Streets, one of the first signs they see is the Loblaws store logo in channel letters. These are internally illuminated with light-emitting diodes (LEDs). For shoppers arriving by car, meanwhile, the underground garage is brightly lit by a strip of LEDs all around its perimeter, lighting wall graphics representing various teams that once played at the Gardens—not just hockey, but also indoor soccer and basketball.

Inside the store, too, most of the lighting is directional, not ambient.

"Every light has a home and we had to choose a flood or spot for each," says Schembri. "The devil is in the details. We have two floods on each aisle and spots pumping onto the aisle end displays. When you drive by the store, you can see very

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A font originally used to stencil in arena seat numbers has now been recreated on signs throughout the building.

clearly inside. For the cheese wall, most types of lighting would hurt the product, so we used LEDs on each shelf, doubling them up where there was signage in front."

"The lighting is the unsung hero that helped deliver our vision," says Landini. "The signage is beautifully lit."

Developing displays

The interior décor scheme used new stainless steel and blond wood grain surfaces, glossy black tiles and a vibrant red and orange floor, inspired by the colours in the Loblaw's store logo.

"The architects were responsible for the base building, providing the shell and putting the floor in, and we decided what

would go inside that shell, down to the bolt and weld," Landini explains. "We had a good working relationship with them and with the retailer's own project management team, which helped source local materials and fittings."

That said, Landini also took a hands-on approach to the project.

"We handled specifications and documentation in Australia, then sent them to the clients, architects and suppliers, but we also came over on a regular basis to meet with the contractors and look at cardboard and medium-density fibreboard (MDF) mock-ups and final prototypes," he says. "It wasn't a case of issuing the drawings and then showing up once the store opened. It had to be more

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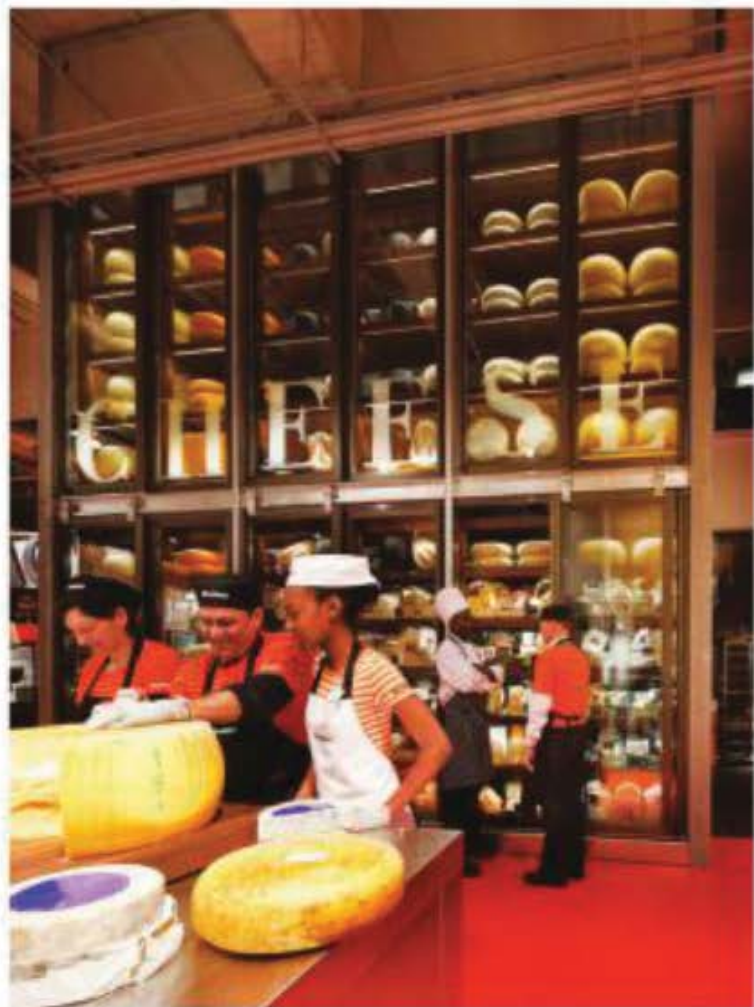


Photo by Trevor Meiss

Brushed brass was applied onto aluminum for the patisserie sign.



Extensive directional lighting was needed to deliver the designers' vision for in-store signage and décor.



The cheese wall uses LEDs, which are doubled up in areas where they need to backlight sign lettering.

"Our intention was to create a modern version of a market town square."

- Mark Landini, Landini Associates

collaborative and iterative. You can't write a spec for everything."

This was particularly true for the variety of signs and fixtures that were designed to expose, rather than hide, the building's age. Welded tin, for example, was intended to draw attention to its welds.

"Much of the directional and departmental signage is outsized to fit within the scale of the building," says Landini. "Each area uses a different sign type, including battered tin for the bakery, timber for sushi, impressed concrete for the deli and bent copper plumbing tube and neon for the grill. Many of these signs were inspired by what you might see along a city street."

Further, the large, permanent departmental signs would not be crowded by other POP displays.

"The display areas are product-intensive," says Landini. "We avoided design for design's sake. We didn't want anything to compete with the merchandise. And we didn't want anything thematic or gimmicky. You want a neutral environment that is still immediately identifiable as Loblaws. You want people to 'feel' the design rather than see it."

From vision to fabrication

Fabrication was contracted to Toronto-based Somerville Merchandising, known for custom manufacturing POP displays and retail fixtures. Working with the architects and designers for several months, Somerville produced signs for



Photos by Henrik Mehn



To create the sense of a marketplace with different shops, each department uses a different type of sign, including battered tin for the bakery (left) and impressed concrete for the deli (right.)



Photo courtesy Tom Sander Photography

A neon sign identifies the grill area.

installation throughout the store, using a variety of techniques and materials, including sheet metals, copper piping and printed substrates.

"We've worked with Loblaw's for 30 years," explains Ron March, Somerville's VP of sales. "When Landini was chosen to work on this store, he looked to supply from within Canada. We started in December 2010, moving from concepts through redesigns, and began to build components in spring 2011."

Testing various prototypes with Landini, Somerville turned the store vision into reality.

"They didn't want a typical look," says March. "Copper pipe fittings, for example, had to be aged to look rough, then clearcoated to seal them. With the bakery sign, we wanted soot marks. We digitally printed panels like chalkboards and applied a parchment-paper effect to the store aisle sign inserts. There is a real new-and-old look."

Like Landini, March emphasizes this process depended on collaboration.

"You can't get that look from drawings alone," he says. "We'd get ideas and put together samples. And you need people on-site to get everything right. Each department sign has its own look and feel."

As Somerville is accustomed to prototyping and one-offs, the company was equipped to handle almost all of the work in-house, other than some finishing that was subcontracted.

"We're a custom house and can jump from pillar to post," says March. "We applied brushed brass onto aluminum for the patisserie sign and hollowed out the centres of the sushi sign letters to save weight when they were mounted to the wall. We worked with Loblaw's regular installers. It was particularly challenging to mount the steel letters of the bakery sign onto giant beams and hide the brackets. They're more decorative than structural."



Photos by Trevor Mintz



Another recurring motif throughout the store replicates chalkboards. Some of these are digitally printed panels.



A hockey scoreboard font is used to indicate cash counter numbers.

Further, some of the techniques were entirely new to Somerville.

"There are signs with actual loaves of bread stuck to them!" March says. "We preprinted the boards, mounted the dried loaves onto them and then added a sealant to prevent them from decaying."

While much of the signage was customized to this degree just for Maple Leaf Gardens, some of the modular signs will provide a basis for new Loblaw's stores to come.

"It will be possible to create a similar feel in a smaller, less expensive format, based on ceiling heights and other factors," says Landini. "It's like a big Lego or Meccano set that can be rolled out."

Indeed, Somerville carried forward some of the same sign concepts to another downtown Toronto Loblaw's store at Queen and Portland Streets, which was being developed at the same time.

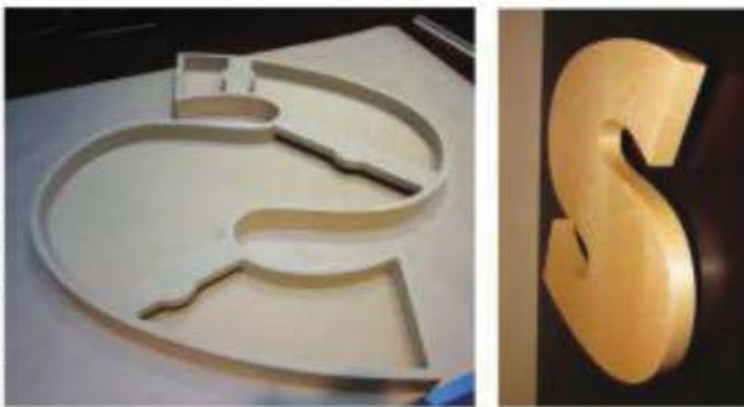
Preserving history

Another 'client' for the project was Toronto's municipal government, which had its own requirements for heritage building preservation.

"City officials wanted to ensure the heritage of the venue was protected," says Fatica. "We made sure to communicate with the city and residents about our plans."

"At first, the city wanted us to dedicate a small 'museum' to the history of Maple Leaf Gardens, but we didn't want to stick that in a corner," says Landini. "We felt it would be better to integrate it into the overall design. We marked a red dot on the floor where centre ice was, for example, and now shoppers take each others' photo there. We also found old images and incorporated them as graphics on pillars, seats and tables."

"They had researched 20 major events in the building's past," says March. "I went through books and the web to find photos from the Stanley Cup, the Ali boxing match, etc., then retouched and resized them for the pillars. So, choosing



Timber was used for the sushi sign letters, with hollowed-out centres to save weight when they were mounted to the wall.



When the building was ready to reopen, locals lined up for hours to see the reworked interior.

these images had a lot to do with the right scale for the format."

In some cases, new images had to be created. "With the Beatles, for example, we had to create our own for the space on the pillar, says March, "and for the final National Hockey League (NHL) game that was played at the Gardens, which I had attended, we ended up using my own ticket stub, blowing it up."

These images were simplified and applied to the pillars in a fashion not unlike the aforementioned stencil font.

"We cut vinyl masks for them," says March. "With this method, when you spray-paint them and then take them off the pillars, you leave the images behind."

Other photos were scanned and printed for insertion below the glass tabletops, forming collages. Meanwhile, temporary heritage boards were installed throughout the store, with permanent plaques expected later this year.

Outside, the existing brickwork of the building's art deco façade was cleaned and restored. A new marquee recreates old globe fixtures.

"There wasn't a lot left," says Landini. "The marquee isn't the original, but a restoration of an earlier version."

"There have been several marquees on Maple Leaf Gardens," says Fatica. "We went with the 1940s and '50s version."

Grand reopening

The 7,567-m² (81,450-sf) Loblaws at Maple Leaf Gardens opened on November 30, 2011, almost exactly 80 years after the building had originally opened. Customers lined up for hours to see the reworked interior.

"I was there at 4 a.m. the day it opened and there was already a long queue!" says Landini. "The first guy in line had been there all night. I've never had a queue like that to see our work before. It has really been embraced by the public."

"We are honoured to have had the opportunity to breathe new life into this iconic Canadian landmark," said Galen G. Weston, executive chair of Loblaw Companies, at the grand opening. "This building and its community inspired us to create an innovative store concept that captures the spirit of its original four walls."

With files from Loblaw Companies, Landini Associates and Somerville Merchandising. For more information, visit www.loblaw.ca, www.landiniassociates.com and www.somerville.ca.