

*International*

# Architecture & Design

## OPEN HOUSE

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES IN  
A **NEW ZEALAND** BEACH HOUSE  
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CHIC FARMHOUSE  
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**FRANCE**

CENTURY COTTAGE  
REVIVAL ON  
**GEORGIAN BAY**

GORGEOUS  
GARDEN  
FURNITURE

THE NEW  
**VERSAILLES**  
WATER THEATRE  
OPENS WITH A  
SPLASH

CANADIAN EDITION  
SUMMER 2015

SUMMER 2015 \$6.95 CDN



# DESIGN *phile*

## Happy dance

NEWS  
GOODS  
GADGETS  
PEOPLE  
PLACES

Two centuries after the French Revolution, a baroque symbol of a monarch's excess is revitalized as an elegant modern playground for the people.

By Ellen Himelfarb



Apollo's Entrance, The Rigaudon of Peace and The Bourée of Achilles, three fountains created by the Murano glass sculptor Jean-Michel Othoniel for the new Water Theatre Grove at the gardens of Versailles.

Versailles, France



**LEFT:** The Water Theatre Grove was designed by André Le Nôtre, landscape architect to Louis XIV, in the 17th century. The king used it as an outdoor stage, though the setting was theatrical in itself, with powerful water jets that cascaded onto the baroque scene. **BELOW:** A 1720 plan of the Water Theatre, with the amphitheatre at the centre. **BOTTOM:** Master gardener Louis Benech (left) choosing plants for the new Water Theatre Grove.



Part of the undeniable beauty of Versailles is that it never changes. Bistros come and go in Paris, and fashion designers get hot, then burn out and disappear. But Versailles, it is always thus.

Since this spring, however, that statement is not altogether true. The launch in May of the new Water Theatre Grove, designed by master French gardener Louis Benech, marked the first contemporary addition to the gardens of the Palace of Versailles since the French Revolution. It also returned a four-hectare patch of green to a splendour it hasn't enjoyed for nearly 250 years.

The Water Theatre Grove was one of the most glorious expanses in Versailles's great estate, designed by André Le Nôtre for Louis XIV in the 17th century. A baroque outdoor stage for palace spectacles, crossed with topiary and lavish fountains, it was a fantastical symbol of the Sun King's reign. Alas, in 1775, his great-great-grandson Louis XVI levelled the grove for a series of lawns, and a run of storms in the 1990s destroyed it for good.

Benech pipped hundreds of landscape architects for the post of chief resurrector of the ruin with what he calls a 21st-century manifestation of Renaissance ideals. "Versailles is based on old mythology," he says. "It doesn't speak to our generation. But the ideals of Louis XIV still do speak to us." Benech's open,



BOTTOM LEFT: THOMAS GARNIER. BOTTOM RIGHT AND OPPOSITE: PHILIPPE CHANCEL

contemporary “stage” is flavoured with iris, heliobore and a “strong vocabulary” of exotic kitchen garden plants amid a carpet of periwinkle. (“A range of plants was not the main target of gardeners in the 17th century,” says Benech.) He planted oak, beech and chestnut trees younger than usual, so they would root more firmly than established trees. None will grow higher than the 55 feet stipulated by Le Nôtre centuries ago, but they will offer plenty of shade in summer.

Perhaps Benech’s boldest decision was to invite the Parisian glass sculptor Jean-Michel Othoniel to tackle the requisite fountains—another proviso in the scheme. “I believed asking an artist would help focalize attention while

the garden matures,” Benech says. “My dream of that garden is as it will look in 30 years.”

Othoniel accepted the commission with grace, but the pressure, he says, was intense. “It was really stressful for me to come up with a connection between my work and these historic gardens.”

His “aha” moment happened in Boston. While doing a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Othoniel came across a rare 1701 book by choreographer Raoul Auger Feuillet, illustrating dance notations for a ballet performed back in Louis XIV’s day. The calligraphic interpretation of the choreography shared the same abstract, minimalist swoops

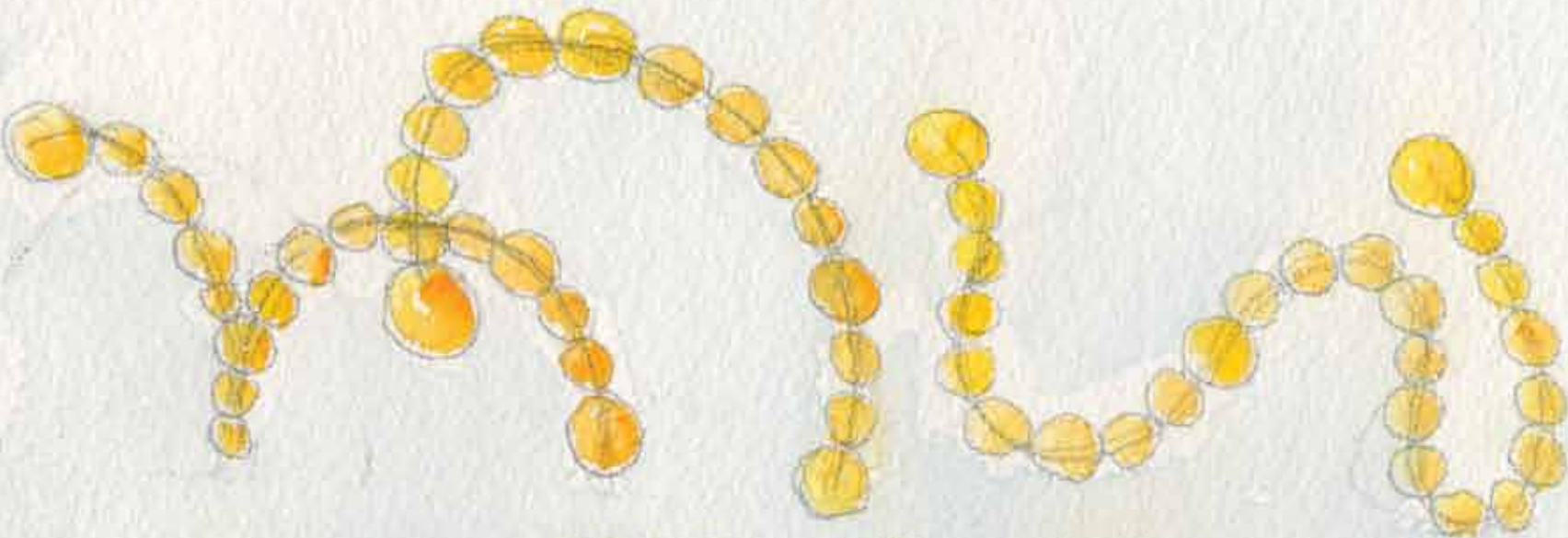
and curls of the artist’s own sketches. “It formed that connection to my own style,” says Othoniel. “It was my key to entering the world of today.”

Othoniel went to work on three amorphous fountains “strung” with 1,751 blown-glass “beads” stuffed with gold leaf to reflect the Sun King’s favourite hue. Titled *Les Belles Danses*, the fountains evoke the fanciful arabesques of the ballet, as noted by Feuillet. The artist and his team took up residency in the château’s apothecary for a year to work on the construction.

The fountains not only bring to life those long-forgotten dance notations, but they also preserve the tradition of *les grandes eaux* (spectacle) at Versailles. Othoniel and the château’s

engineers rigged up a vast mechanical system underground that allows the water jets to defy gravity. And he designed the trajectory of each of those jets to mimic the line of falling water from the historic tiered fountain at the centre of Le Nôtre’s original plan.

The place is welcoming to all in a way that Versailles never was in Louis XIV’s heyday. Benech has carved out discovery trails with custom benches that invite visitors to sit and relish the different points of view. Yet there are links to the past everywhere. One of those benches was cast in contemporary concrete and paired with fluted red-marble legs. It’s inscribed with the message “Versailles XXI.”



**ABOVE:** Othoniel transformed his sketches into a dynamic floating abstract artwork. The jets of water, powered by a sophisticated mechanism underground, follow the same trajectory of the traditional fountain at the centre of the original gardens. Photo: Thomas Garnier  
**LEFT:** Othoniel (far left) with an associate in his glass studio. He spent a year creating the nearly 2,000 glass globes, each filled with gold leaf, in a reference to the material most associated with the Sun King. Photo: Philippe Chancel  
**OPPOSITE:** A watercolour rendering of Louis Benech’s redesigned grove, as it will look when the young trees mature. Illustration by Fabrice Moireau.