

Les Bassins du Nouveau Havre

Mémoire

by

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Mémoire on the Project by Karine Ter-Stepanian, Ph.D., Architect

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Introduction

Canada Lands Company's (CLC) proposed development of *Les Bassins du Nouveau Havre* (the Project), to be carried out on the Lachine Canal National Historic Site of Canada, a 19th century cradle of Canadian industry, raises several crucial concerns and questions. These are fundamental issues, as they stem from the overall development concept, and the proposed approach involves a complete rehabilitation of the area. They concern the architectural and urban integration of the Project, its implementation in view of the site's prominent position within the City of Montreal and proximity to a waterfront bank, consideration for the well-being of both the Project's future occupants and general users of the site and its immediate surroundings.

Preserving a National Historic Landmark

Far too often, enthusiasm for 'the new' leads us to launch into development initiatives without giving much thought to the consequences. Unfortunately, history is often the forgotten victim of this rush to innovate. In Canada, a country with a comparatively 'short' history, it is particularly imperative that we respect this heritage. The Lachine Canal, with its Saint-Gabriel Basin and Basins 3 and 4, constitutes an important part of this history. It contributed to what Canada is today, a flourishing and progressive industrial nation. Much history is linked to the opening of the Lachine Canal, to visionary citizens, such as Dollier de Casson, François de Salignac Fénélon, and, later, John Richardson, Thomas Burnett and John Redpath. Their hopes and dreams of progress became reality thanks to the blood, the sweat, and the hard work of thousands. Today we do not know their names, those men and women who carved out the future of our country, thus contributing to our well-being. The question remains: as the civilized society that we proudly claim to be, do we not have a moral obligation to recognize this important period in the life of this country? Do we have the right to erase the traces of this past, disregarding the significance of the site where the Project is to be implemented, annihilating all physical evidence of its existence?

We have already witnessed the first step in this process of destruction when, 30 years ago, the Basins were filled up with excess soil from the construction of the Montreal metro system. There seemed to be no reason for this, though some explanations could be offered: a more authoritarian approach was common at the time, there was little or no consideration for historical, environmental or cultural preservation. Today we are more aware of the vital importance of these issues. Nevertheless, we are on the verge

of repeating the same mistakes, as this Project will do irrevocable damage to this important historic site, destroying forever its great potential to become a signature landmark for the lower part of Montreal centre—as important as Mount Royal is to the upper city centre.

Site, Program, Master Plan and Urban Integration

In our estimation, the Master Plan of the Project as presented by CLC will negatively alter the potential of this exceptional site located on the north bank of the Lachine Canal.

The site is unique for several reasons:

- Location: close proximity to the water;
- Setting: it is located on the same waterfront that extends westward from Old Montreal, forming part of a continuous strip from the Old Port waterfront;
- Proximity to Montreal city centre and the Old Port: great potential for tourist activities;
- Dimensions: ±470m along the Lachine Canal from Richmond Street to Du Seminaire Street¹, equivalent to the length of 4-5 city blocks, and about ± 200m from the waterfront to Ottawa Street, equivalent to the length of 2 city blocks;
- Preconditions: half of this site (the west portion) is presently free of structures and streets and is well proportioned (measuring approximately ±200m by ±200m).

In other words, all of these characteristics entail that this site be treated with special consideration, using rules applicable to sites possessing the unique potential to become landmarks. While we cannot go into the proposed Master Plan in depth, a few matters should be mentioned.

The proposed construction of decorative water features on the former locations of Saint-Gabriel Basin and Basins 3 and 4 is not only costly, but is of little functional use. These ornamental artificial water pools, which surround some buildings and are squeezed between others, are excessive in scale and in sensibility for the site. They will only become a source of unnecessary and superfluous maintenance expenses as well as wasteful energy consumption.

The proposed open spaces, the size (60m, 55m, 20m)² of which is likened to that of Montreal's main streets and squares (e.g. McGill College Avenue, Victoria Square, *Cours Le Royer*), will not be used to total capacity, and will become 'lost' areas. McGill College Avenue and Victoria Square are Montreal's main arteries. *Cours Le Royer* is the heart of much activity in Old Montreal. That is, these avenues and areas have entirely different functions and different locations, whereas each Project's open spaces will be used only or mostly by local residents and will unfortunately represent a regrettable waste of otherwise very distinctive land.

The impact to the existing street network and the waterfront opening are also of concern. Guy Street, one of Montreal's main north-south arteries, is blocked at its south end by the Project's buildings, preventing the possibility of opening the street onto the Lachine Canal. While there are numerous examples in world architecture where impressive buildings—major civic landmarks—mark the end-points of important streets, there is no such intention here. The same potential restriction applies to Saint-Thomas Street (though it is not an important street at present).

The proposed 'Public Square' on Ottawa Street is too small and too far from the Lachine Canal itself, the most attractive part of the area. Similar to projected 'Public Parks' located on the north part of the Basins 3 and 4, it will become purposeless and, most likely, neglected area.

Building density and building height, as proposed, is also questionable. The proposed height is unjustified. Why 6/8 floors, rather than 12/15? The latter would fulfill the program's density requirements, but would free up a significant portion of land for other uses. Why couldn't families with children also live in multistory buildings, particularly since they would already be using elevators in the 6/8-storey buildings? Why not erect two high-rises, forming an impressive landmark for the site, rather than three 20-storey buildings? In our estimation, it is in here that CLC should be looking for profitability: higher floor, better view, higher price.

There is no direct correlation between a child's educational achievements and physical fitness and the height of the residence in which they are raised. However, there are studies illustrating the importance of urban parks in child development.

Urban Park

The proposed Project intends to cover 83% of the total land area with concrete, leaving only 17% of the area green. Moreover, only 13% is publicly accessible green space, a portion of which is allocated to pedestrian pathways, leaving less than 10% of this area actually 'green.'

Parks have long been recognized as major contributors to the physical and aesthetic quality of urban neighborhoods. They are valuable contributors to youth development and public health and also create job opportunities. Having green space in an area leads to higher real estate prices in neighboring areas, which is a benefit to future occupants and local business.

The west portion of the site offers a unique opportunity for the creation of an exceptional urban park. As mentioned above, the site is well proportioned for an urban park of sufficient size and status to be able to accommodate several distinctive features and facilities.

Physical Activity and Public Health

A number of socio-demographic, health and educational studies carried out in recent years have identified the accessibility of recreational facilities as an important determining factor in levels of physical activity of children, youth and adults. As green spaces in our ever-growing urban centres are becoming less available and more difficult to access, our priority should be to attend to these valuable areas with special care. It is our responsibility to implement them in the best possible way, as open green space is such an important positive factor in human development.

Several of these studies highlight the following main conclusions:

The importance of safety and accessibility of urban parks:

“Expanding park access and safety, particularly for adolescents living in urban areas, is a promising strategy for promoting physical activity among youth.”³

Physical activity requires motivation:

“To promote physical activity in children, planners need to design environments that support active living....”⁴

Correlation between access to recreational facilities and physical fitness:

*“The current findings are consistent with a recent study that found that the number of recreational facilities was positively associated with physical activity....”*³

The importance of interesting and challenging play equipment:

*“[It] may be that children are traveling to parks that are more appealing and offer more facilities. In a qualitative study that explored parents’ (n=78) perceptions of the influences on children’s active free play, the availability of interesting and challenging play equipment was identified as an important factor that motivates children and parents to visit particular parks.”*⁵

Though the existence of green space is not sufficient to ensure that users will partake in physical activity, green space—especially when open and available—should be exploited in order to furnish the necessary facilities and equipment to motivate such activity.

Waterfront

Another important issue that needs to be addressed is the Project’s waterfront treatment. Waterfront is an important and valuable property in any city. We know from the history of civilization that settlements situated along water arteries have usually had a significant economic advantage over inland communities. The understanding of the vital role of water is very profound in human beings; the depth of this appreciation can be seen in the careful and considered architectural treatment of riverbanks, lake shores and sea coasts in our historic world cities. These waterside sites were privileged for development; it is therefore in waterfront areas that we find the most beautiful buildings, palaces and other structures.

This need for special attention to waterfront architecture is even more pronounced today, as urbanisation intensifies globally at the same time that natural resources and available land for development diminish. Sensitivity to these issues is making people question the way we build, particularly in rapidly-growing urban areas. The best present-day examples of waterfront revitalization projects from around the world adhere to the following main ‘maxims’: maximum openness, maximum visibility, maximum accessibility, and maximum respect to cultural heritage by highlighting prior uses.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Architectural development should be concentrated on the east portion of the site, leaving the west portion for an urban park.

- The urban park, named *Le parc du Canal*, should stretch from Richmond Street to the border of the existing Canada Post building. In addition to the neighboring St. Gabriel Archaeological Park (which we hope will soon will be completed), *Le parc du Canal* should be a place that recognizes the history of the Lachine Canal. It should serve as (and be physically marked by) a monument to the men and women who contributed to Canadian progress through their vision, dedication and hard labour.
- One or both of Basins 3 or 4 should be restored to their former state (and depths), be re-connected to the Lachine Canal, and form an integral part of *Le parc du Canal*. The restored Basin (or Basins) would be accessible to the public and will have a marina and facilities for summer (e.g. kayaking, water sports) and winter (e.g. skating) activities for children, youth and adults.
- The existing stables (located on Basin Street) should be integrated with *Le parc du Canal* and offer horse and pony-riding activities, as well as riding lessons in the park. Basin Street should be open to pedestrian and bicycle traffic only for its entire length. Playgrounds, climbing facilities and other park equipment should be installed.
- Residential development should only be carried out on the east portion of the site (the part occupied by Canada Post). Two high-rise buildings properly located will add to the Montreal cityscape without jeopardizing the Project's social objective of providing a certain percentage of social and affordable housing. However, it is unclear why on this site CLC is allocating more social and affordable housing than that stipulated by City of Montreal policy which is 30%?
- Special attention should be paid to the waterfront buildings. To ensure that construction quality meets the requirements for waterfront buildings, CLC should ensure that developers bidding on these lands are those with respectable portfolios and proof of outstanding and recognized experience in developing specialized signature locations.

It should not be forgotten that this land has considerable importance. As a Canadian historic site in a centralized urban location, it has no ‘single’ owner, and belongs to no ‘one’ neighborhood. Bearing the imprint of the history of the country, the site therefore belongs to the country at large, and to future generations. It is thus not for one company, nor one group of people, to decide its future—regardless of formal ownership of the land.

The present document does not touch on the subject of municipal regulations, as it is our strong hope that more progressive rules and regulations may still be adopted before bulldozers start churning the ground beneath this historic area—the type of legislation that may lead to a more intelligent way of building, and of living, for everyone.

In the end, the testimonial we currently read on the Parks Canada website, which declares Lachine Canal to be one of Canada’s ‘Natural Wonders and Cultural Treasures’ will, we sincerely believe, be respected.

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