

Technological progress in past centuries has claimed architecture as its slave, and some traces of it can be seen in the remnants of industrial cities in almost every urban setting. In Montreal, the Lachine canal is the main reminder of such a past. The site illustrates Montréal's central importance in Canada's economic development, the keystone to local industry, and yet a short lived development. Critical changes in the world towards globalization and innovation left many buildings losing purpose or need. Currently people are finding new purposes for some of the structures; however, some of the buildings remain abandoned due to their inefficiency or compromised structural stability. One of those buildings is a three-story structure, which used to be a signaling and dispatching building for the Canadian National Railway system. There is emphasis on the word 'used to' as it is not a signal tower at the moment, but more of a storage house with broken windows and sealed doors, left only as a veritable shed. Its owner, the Canadian National Railway, is indecisive as to its future as they failed to find a new use for it, and as it is at the moment, the building will be demolished and disappear forever. But in a poetic analogy of architecture, stone does not die, it is the music that is trapped within the material that will disappear. It is the music of dying Irish immigrants working 16 hours a day building and maintaining the canal, sounds of ships making rounds to the factories, the noise of new hydraulic locks along the canal, and finally the metallic, timed loud rhythm of the trains going over the bridge. The building was constructed in the 1930s when the Grand Trunk railroad (appropriated later by Canadian Railway) bridge over the canal was built. A three man operational house was put in place to facilitate the function of switching railway tracks for trains coming to and leaving Montreal, from among other destinations Toronto and New York. With the closure of the water transportation on the canal, the railway became the most important method of movement in the 1960s and 70s – with the Signal Tower playing a critical role in this technological marvel. From 1940 to 43 the area was connected to the electrical grid and many functions were modernized and updated. The CNR bridge was constructed, a large lift bridge, that dominated the landscape for over 20 years. This peak of engineering, within the twenty year window of the 'technological era', is directly linked to the switch house and shall be considered as part of the site program. As time went by, this technological portent was improved or substituted with another and yet another and again other necessary functions, which led to the abolition of man power in the switching of the tracks, and now a computerized grey metal electrical switch box, placed outside of the building, carries out the task. The only evidence of occasional human intervention on the site is a blue plastic potty, how ironic.



1923



1940



1943



1961

2007



The Bridge (or bridges really) play a significant part in forming the historical, economical and contextual narration of the site. The old Wellington Swing Bridge built in 1847 to allow the water transport to co-exist with an on-land crossing of the canal, are now rust-frozen with the tracks left as evidence of its former purpose. Currently there is the new C.N.R. Bridge, a fully functional connection for many VIA trains passing as frequently as 5 trains an hour, and two highways crossing in near proximity. Currently the bridge is fixed in place as no water traffic is to be accommodated. The Wellington basin itself, serving in the past as the connection between the old port and the canal, between large ships and smaller inland water transportation, is an ultimate gate-way oriented towards and connecting, as it seems, various important functions and locations. This context of interconnectivity is another indicator of the importance of this particular site not only to the Lachine Canal itself, but also to the Old Port and Montreal together.



1985

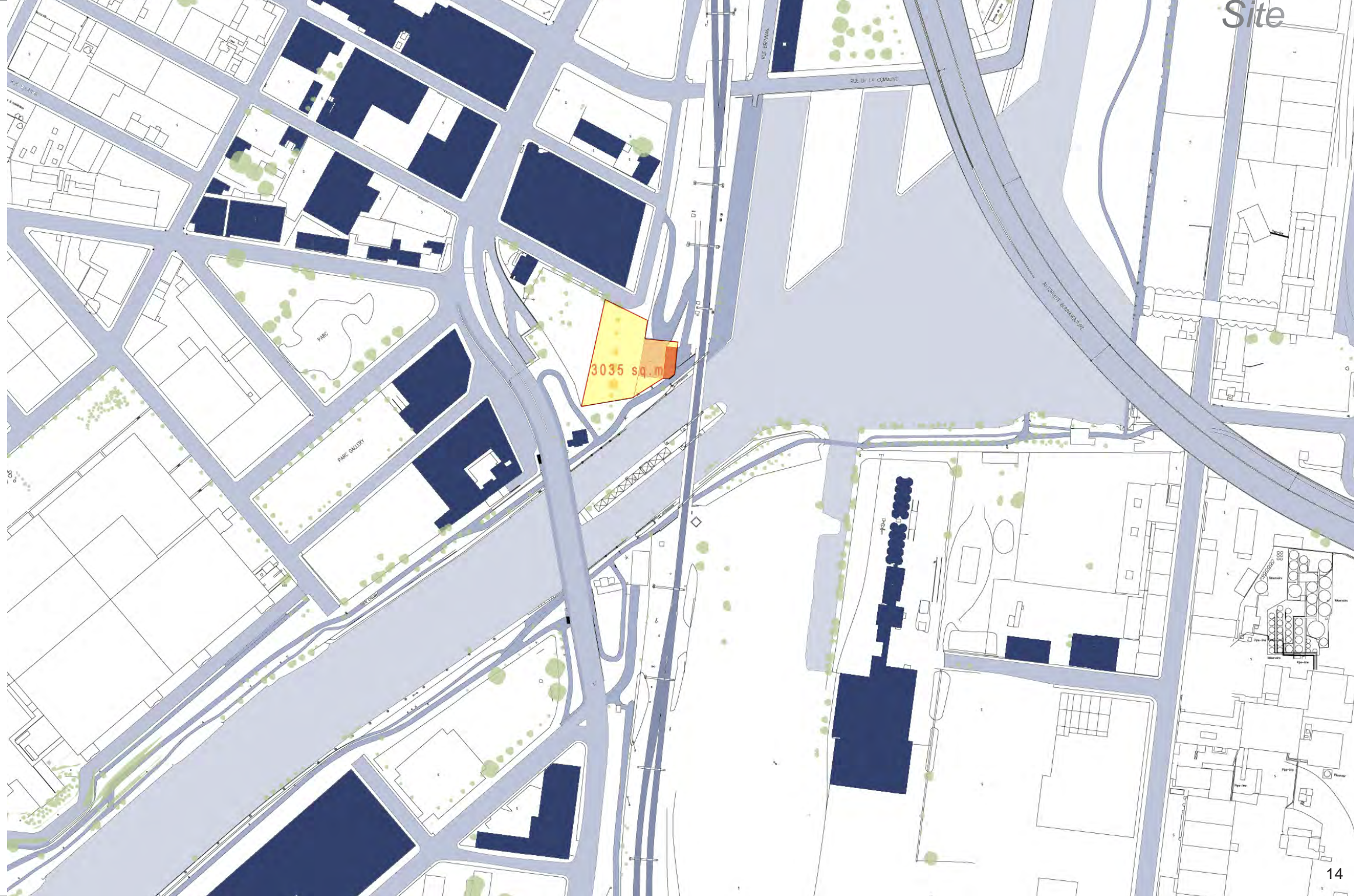


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1940

2006







*longitudinal section*



*lateral section*