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Discreet Heritage

An Architectural Endeavour In Old Montréal

by Erika Mayer

It's called the Zone Building and, after its readaptation from factory to multi-media special effects company in 1997, it has attracted the attention of many—not only architects, but the high-tech industry leaders and heritage activists. The trio of architects behind the project, Stéphane Pratte, Annie Lebel and Geneviève L'Heureux, call their architecture design firm *Atelier in situ*.

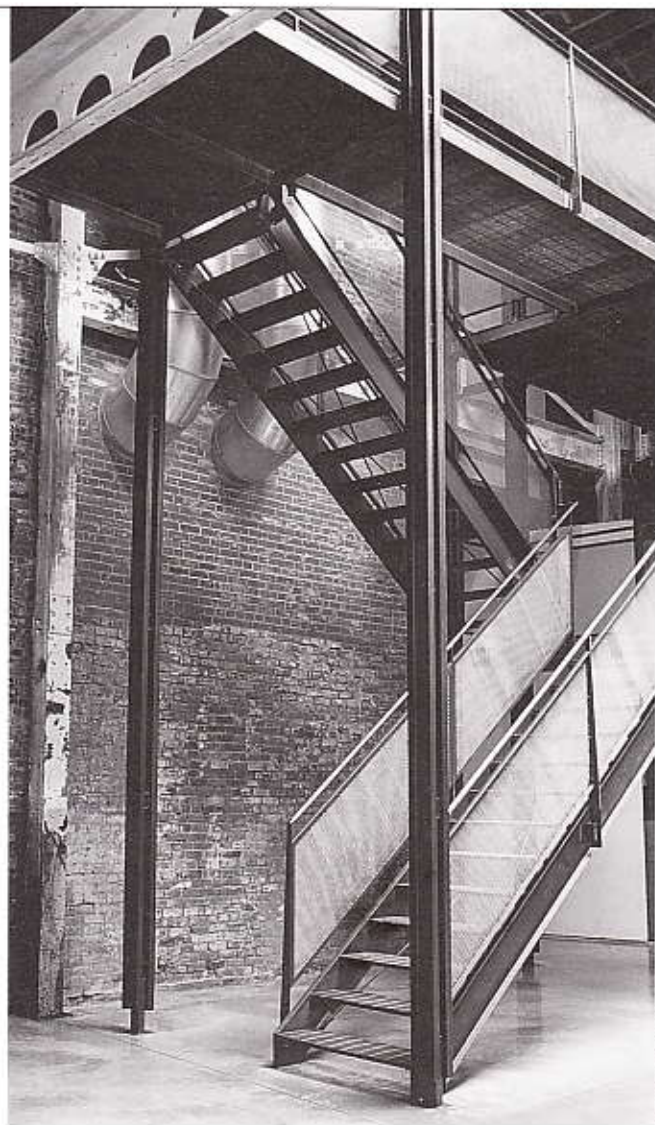


PHOTO: ERIKA MAYER

New structures, such as this staircase, use steel as a primary material because it is in keeping with the industrial nature of the original building.

Although formerly an 80-year-old ship machinery factory in the Old Port of Montréal, the building is celebrated today as a contemporary work of architecture. The original structure housed the J.R. Weir Marine Outfitters, manufacturers of massive steel boiler parts and other machinery for ships. The factory had not been designated and was never considered an "architectural gem" by heritage standards, but it has been an integral part of the area's industrial heritage. It operated in the Old Port from 1910 until the early 1990s when the company closed and abandoned the building. Several years later, high-tech guru Richard Szalwinski, founder and president of Discreet Logic, a leading company in the production of special effects systems and software, purchased the property and employed *Atelier in situ* to renovate his recently acquired building at 10 Duke Street.

Founded in 1995, *Atelier in situ* is just about that—in situ. The term refers to their creative design concept. "We look for a design that comes from the site—from the situation," says Annie Lebel, "and in this case it was the building itself." *Atelier in situ* actually moved into the factory at the beginning of the project and occupied it through its final completion. Just as the architects looked to the site for inspiration for the design of the Zone Building, Richard Szalwinski looked to his new headquarters as the driving force behind his company's new image. The result is an open-concept workplace that attracts and challenges the creative minds that make Discreet Logic the successful company that it is. And it works.

The building stretches along an entire block directly north of the Lachine Canal, its beautiful weathered red-brick façades almost unchanged from its earlier days. Fragments from the original signage of the J.R. Weir company have been recovered and repairs in the concrete foundation have been left exposed—a tribute to the building's age. Later additions to the original 1910 portion of the building enlarged the factory over time. The new design creates a space, which floats or fits within the old factory walls. Original windows and old brick walls tell a story of what once was, without being caught in a historic nostalgia.



The headquarters of Discreet Logic as seen from Brennan Street in Old Montréal. The original signage of the J.R. Weir Marine Outfitters has been recovered, leaving the building's exterior much as it was in the 1920s and 1930s.

Natural light pours into the double-height space of the foyer through reconstructed skylights, reflecting off the concrete floor. Huge wall sections hang suspended just centimetres above the floor's surface, their uniformly smooth texture and solid colour contrasting with the rough brick mass mottled by layers of paint from previous years. A new sleek, black, steel staircase pinned precisely to the existing building is juxtaposed with the original steel supporting columns that sit solidly in the concrete foundation.

There is an incredible sense that the architects have created an environment in which both the old and the new seem to feed off each other. This juxtaposition emphasizes the permanence of the existing building—the building as artifact—while highlighting the architects' more contemporary interventions and interpretations. Old cranes and crates, which are no longer functional, are framed as art objects throughout the building in the same way that the completely functional steel furniture designed by *Atelier in situ* is displayed amongst a wealth of historic artifacts. Both old and new elements become animated characters against backdrops of vivid colour.

The aim of the architects, as Lebel points out, was "...to respect the existing, but to transform it into a contemporary work of architecture. Basically, looking at the past and situating it in this time continuum." Not surprisingly, client, architects and the critics (from various domains) are very excited with the design. *Atelier in situ* was awarded the

Prix d'Orange by the heritage group Save Montréal in 1997 for the project, and in the following year received one of the most prestigious awards for architecture in Quebec, the Grand Prix d'Excellence, from the *Ordre des Architectes*.

In a world where the norm is the wrecking ball for old industrial buildings, this project offers a refreshing alternative—one obviously welcomed by heritage groups. But in the architectural world, it also demonstrates the potential of "found objects" (or "found buildings") and reinforces the notion that historical buildings can enhance contemporary design. The marks of the architect do not necessarily have to be buried amongst restoration or historic retrieval, but can, in fact, be heightened by the historic artifacts that surround them. For the public, the project demonstrates that there are other options for old buildings, providing that individuals recognize the potential in the built environment of their communities. As Annie Lebel points out, "It is a question of sensitizing the population." The more the public is aware of the value of old buildings and open to new initiatives, the more we will see projects which choose to preserve rather than demolish.

Erika Mayer, a recent graduate from the School of Architecture at Carleton University, was employed this past summer as a research assistant at Heritage Canada under the Young Canada Works program.