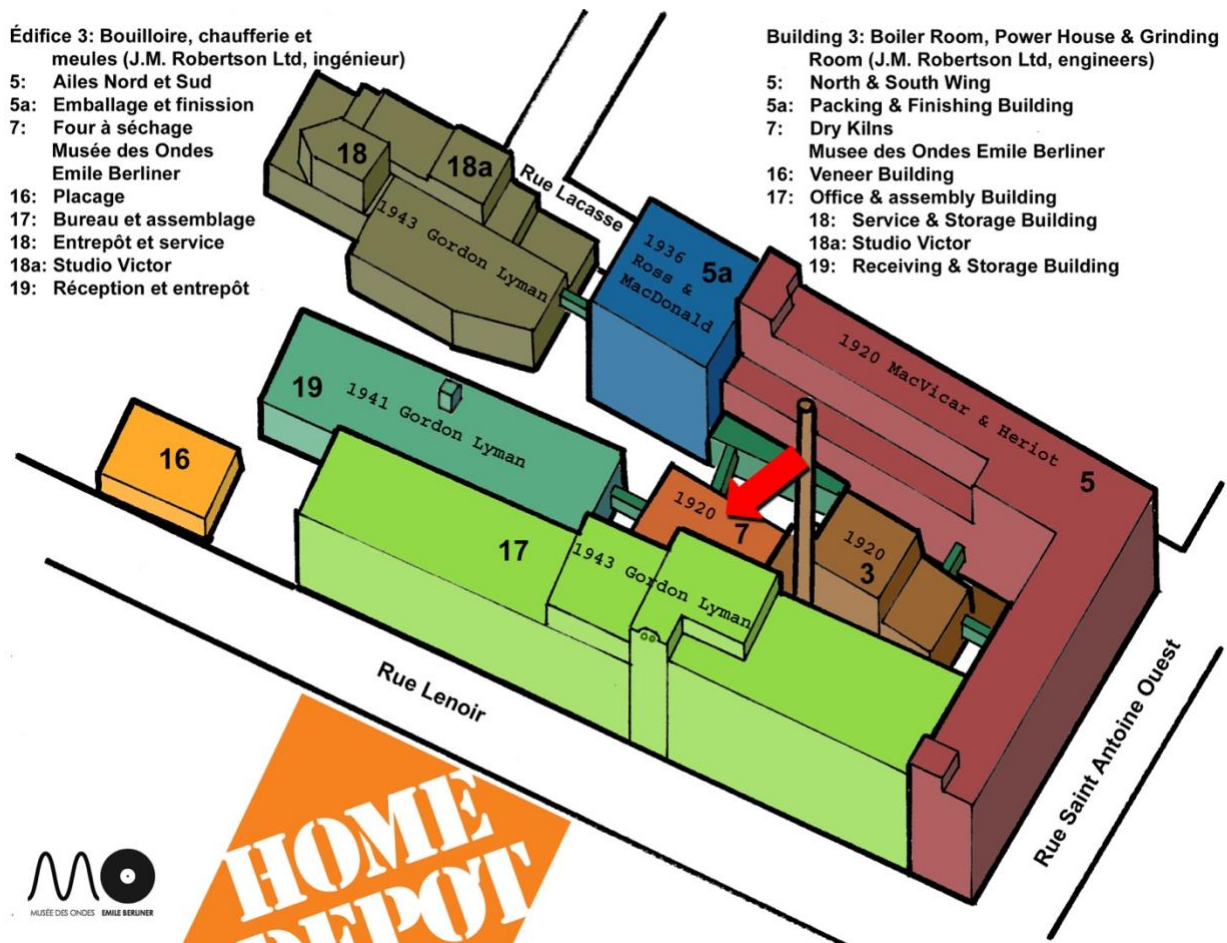


The Musée des ondes Emile Berliner, an Industrial History Museum for Sound Recording in Montreal

By Anja Borck, PhD

INTRODUCTION

Enthusiasts founded the Musée des ondes Emile Berliner (MOEB) in 1992 in Montreal's former factory and headquarters of the Berliner Gram-o-phone Company. The MOEB has its location in the building's inner courtyard of the U-shaped complex. The museum is dedicated to the history of sound recording and electromagnetic wave technology and directly linked to the history of the former factory. I got involved with the MOEB in 2014. Since 2017, I am in a director position and have set my goal to professionalize the formerly volunteer run organization.



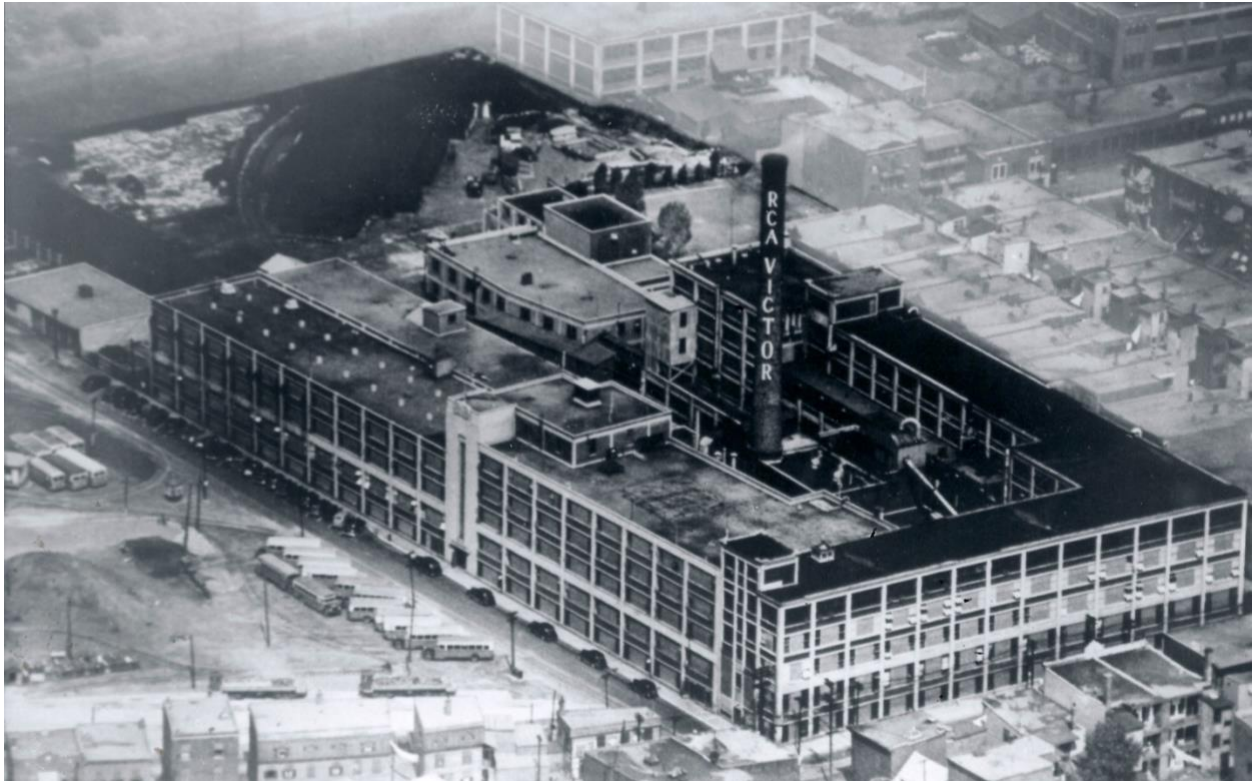
The image shows a rendering with dates and architects. The arrow indicates the place of the museum.

THE LOCATION

The Berliner Gram-o-phone company established a branch in Montreal in 1899, ten years after Emile Berliner had patented his gramophone, the flat disc with lateral cut and a cutting apparatus. In 1900, he moved his headquarters to Montreal. He built the Saint-Henri Factory when rented spaces became too restricting because his business grew enormously fast. It was in

Montreal where Emile Berliner had his greatest success in the mass-music industry, which he had created through his invention. Two buildings which he had built in 1907 and 1910 were later demolished, but the impressive extension of 1920 is still fully intact. In 1924, the Berliner Gramophone company merged with the American Victor Talking Machine Company to merge only five years later with the Radio Corporation of America to form RCA Victor.

Since 2008, the last two owners started major restorations of the factory, including the replacement of the windows. After three decades of low rents and a broad mix of uses, today the building serves mostly as a commercial and office space.



Except for some small modifications, the building remained in the condition from 1943, until 2017.

THE MUSEUM

Since 2019, the MOEB occupies three rooms. On the second floor are 1. a temporary exhibition room with an attached office space, where we have also our reference library and a small archive, 2. a permanent exhibition room with a small office setup for the collection manager besides a table used as workshop for volunteers. On the ground floor is our collection room with high-density rolling shelves where we store approximately 2500 objects and 25 000 sound recordings. In the collection room is also a workspace for the acquisition committee and a large workshop for maintenance. There is unfortunately no direct access between the rooms on the second floor and the collection room, while the rooms are one on top of the other. Some of our larger objects are outsourced in an external storage that our borough provided us with. Throughout the building, we distributed 10 curated showcases with mini-exhibitions. This year, we added tracks to some corridors for poster exhibitions.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUSEUM

In 1994, volunteers donated the first objects for a collection and in 1996, the museum started to apply for a yearly grant from the City of Montreal for temporary exhibitions. At that time, the museum occupied two rooms, was fully volunteer run with occasional summer students and had an annual budget of around \$20 000. Quite early on, some volunteers had created a web-page to feature the museum and its services online. The museum opened for 12 hours per week. Our yearly visitor numbers were around 1000 people per year and we had a membership of up to 70.

A feature that developed over some years was a meeting of technicians that gathered one to two times a week in additional squatted rooms. They called themselves the *Club des vieille lampes* (the Club of the Old Tubes). This group of 12 to 15 volunteers with professional backgrounds in sound technology became the backbone of the museum. Mostly retired men joined this group.

In 2014, when the museum started to pay for one full-time position, federal grants from the museum assistance program became available. The federal program supports producing or hosting travelling exhibitions and upgrades for the collection management. Since 2017, we received a traveling exhibition grant and a grant for the collection management. We have not yet hosted a travelling exhibition from another institution. We further applied twice successfully to a digitizing grant by the Library and Archives of Canada which helped us to create an online archive project – the **Emile Berliner Sound and Image Archives**.

We were fortunate to win the federal grant for celebrating the Centennial of Broadcast in Canada short before the outbreak of the pandemic. It was the largest sum we received, so far, a bit over 120 000 \$. We used most of this sum for an extensive online portal when in person visits became impossible by March 2020.

In the past five years, we convinced the borough council to support our museum financially with annually \$ 10 000 which is matched by the City of Montreal. However, for the first two years of local governmental support, the city refused two of our temporary exhibition applications. The museum ended up with some debts which we reduced by me donating part of my salary back to the museum. Over two years, the donation covered 18 month of salary with a value of \$38 000 dollar.

PROVINCIAL RECOGNITION AND CURRENT SITUATION

Already in 1992, the founders aimed for the museum to gain provincial recognition. With a recognition in place, a museum gains access to grants for operational costs. However, the museum's timing was unlucky because the provincial government froze the application process for 20 years! Only in 2017 did the government open the application process again. The conditions to become recognized have slightly changed and include the need for a permanent exhibition, which we opened in 2019 and extended opening hours of 36 hours per week. There are no grants available to us to fulfil these conditions and it is a great challenge to comply to them. There are many other requirements which we have already in place, such as creating or participating in events open to the public for no charge, educational programming, publications, internal regulations and policies etc. In the fall of 2020 we should receive the outcome of our pending application for recognition which we expect to be positive.

Since 2019, we have beside the one full-time employment, two part-time contracted professionals, up to 6 intern students, over 80 volunteers of which approximately 20 are also members of the CDVL. Our visitor numbers before the pandemic had increased to 4000. We

confidently aimed for 5000 plus for 2020 before we were forced to close to the public. Our membership remained at 70 members but is currently lower than before the pandemic. The annual budget for 2019 has come to \$ 227 000 and is around \$240 000 in 2020.

I will stress in my presentation the sources of our funding because it dictates highly the directions open to museums here in Canada. Many Canadians assume that all museums are fully funded by the government and only ask for private support for special projects while it is the opposite. We need to self-generate money to operate our museum and can finance special projects through government funding. Only the few large museums in the province of Quebec enjoy guaranteed public funding, either from the provincial government or the City of Montreal. The smaller a museum is, the less funding opportunities there are. Growth for us is a question of survival and it is threatened by constant risk of debts. Unmanaged debts will cut an organization off the option to apply for any funding and will decrease public support.

MOEB ONLINE

Besides the **museum's web-page** and the afore mentioned online archive we have a large virtual presence with a website celebrating the **Centennial of Broadcasting in Canada**, financed by the Federal Government of Canada), and a library catalogue for the **Tracy, Todd and Oliver Berliner Reference Library**. The Centennial of Broadcasting in Canada gained us and our partner the Governor General History Award 2020, a recognition given to eight individuals and three Canadian organizations. Our membership publication of past years is also accessible online.



Except for the library catalogue, which uses an external platform (library thing), the websites are completely bilingual, French and English. The MOEB has further a Facebook page with 1500 followers and the museum feeds an Instagram account. We are mentioned several times a year in the local press print and online, sometimes even in the national press and got recently invited by the BBC for their international online podcast program **Forum**.

PARTNERSHIPS

Initially, I underestimated the usefulness and synergies of partnerships. I realized their importance through the requests in grant applications. While internships with our many local universities and colleges were fast established and are an annual feature, we now initiate more actively partnerships with organizations in Quebec and Ontario. Our longest standing and most successful partnership is with the *Société Québécoise de Collectionneurs de Radios Anciens* (SQCRA). They were our partners for the Centennial celebration. The Association québécoise pour le patrimoine industriel (AQPI), ARCMTL (a Montreal non-for-profit music archive), a Marconi offspring company, Ultra Electronics, the satellite producer MDA are some of our other partners. With AQPI, we shared our radio-history heritage path which is featured on their **website**. With ARCMTL we collaborate for a digitizing project funded by the federal government which is still in process.

Partnerships that we would like to foster more is to other small local museums. We have major difficulties to be visible, a problem we share with many other small museums. Museums in industrial sites are mostly outside city centers and therefore off common tourist routes. Our budget and our expertise in promoting our organization is underdeveloped, which is a known fact to us. We have not focused on collaborations with other organizations that use industrial buildings such as the Darling Foundry or museums representing local industries such as the

Ecomusée du fier monde, the printing museum or the aerospace museum. When I cross path with them, we confirm our interest in each other's support but there is no time and no energy left to put attempts into action. Most of the small museums have one to two employees only. Here AQPI could become a more supportive partner.

OUTLOOK

For a reflection on the aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemic it was too early when I was writing this presentation. I will update my talk before presenting it at the TICCIH conference. 2020 has change our museum because we increased our virtual presence to an unprecedented amount. Luckily, we did not endure financial problems while forced to stay closed for most of 2020. My main concern was the loss of the support of our volunteers as they are crucial to get much of the daily tasks done but this seem not to be the case. The other concern is the ongoing renovation and yearlong construction in and around the RCA building that is complicating our work and can make visiting the museum for the public more difficult.

What I am proud of is the changed in the number of young women over the past five years: female students and young professionals that we have engaged either as volunteers or as contracted staff members. The high interest by women in our mandate led to the decision to have a temporary exhibition about Women in Montreal's Music Industry in 2022 to 2023 which is gaining great interest.

The development of the MOEB is very dynamic and will continue to be that way for the next years. The museum exhibition areas may move again to, hopefully, higher visible rooms in the building. We need more space for the collection and for exhibitions. We also plan to increase the number of employees to gain eligibility for operational funding once we are recognized. Our visitor numbers must improve, we are aiming at an increase of 1000 visitors per year with a potential of 20 000 for which we need to be prepared. Financing our needs will remain difficult.

We will continue advocating for the heritage character of the RCA building and will continue to represent the buildings important history through our onsite engagement. We need to accept the many modifications made by the past and current owners which are partly necessary to secure the structure. However, many current modifications are structurally unnecessarily invasive but increase the profitability of the real-estate. Government programs stimulate the change of the windows to reduce energy consumption, for instance. I see the new windows as a great impact on the heritage value. The building loses the original windows which date back to the 1920s and to the 1940s. The building has been **inventoried** by the Quebec government without receiving heritage status. Nevertheless, the government report recognizes the factory's enormous importance, not just for the creation of the mass-music industry but also for the advancement of Canada's ambitious space program – the first Canadian satellites were produced in this complex by RCA Victor. I do not know of any limitations in place to control modifications on the building envelop and can only appeal and inform the owners. One of our founding members and professional industrial archaeologist, Jean Bélisle, has documented most modifications since around 1990 and is currently working on a detailed history of the site which we plan to publish.

CONCLUSION

Can our experiences as a site-specific museum in an industrial building be of use to other organizations occupying industrial sites? As much depends on the specific provincial regulations and opportunities, our experiences may be transferable inside of Quebec, probably to a lesser

part to organizations in other Canadian provinces. How relevant it can be outside of a Canadian context is difficult for me to judge. Presenting how the Musée des ondes Emile Berliner has recently developed, may give others in a similar situation some perspective.

When I came to the TICCIH conference in 2009, I was listening to Danish museum's curator Lars K. Christensen who present the idea of combining exhibition and interactive movies at one of Denmark's most important textile mills, the Brede Mill. This talk still inspires me to envision a meaningful inclusion of digital technology for our museum here in Saint Henri. I also visit whenever I can the Museum for Work in Hamburg, Germany which grew from a small grass-root movement to an impressive museum occupying today most of the former New York Rubber Factory besides including buildings in other parts of the city. The more I can experience the visions, successes and difficulties of organizations related to our own mandate and mission, the more likely will their work encourage me to see a perspective for our museum.