

World War II left imprint on St. Laurent

Exhibition, wartime housing and Canadair are worth a look

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

During this year's 50th anniversary of D-Day, an unlikely but appropriate destination for a pilgrimage is St. Laurent. Not one, but three opportunities to ponder the impact of World War II on the Montreal area are offered to those venturing up Laurentian Blvd.

The first stop is a visit to the current exhibition at the Musée d'Art de St. Laurent, *Génie en Vol: Cinquante Ans d'Évolution Aéronautique*, which continues until Sept. 25. A fascinating look at the history of aviation, the show charts the rise of Canadair, our country's foremost aircraft manufacturer since its inception in 1944.

The second stopover is a walk through the neighborhood of 400 nearly identical houses constructed during the war by Wartime Housing Ltd. Built in 1943 to accommodate the workers employed by wartime industries in St. Laurent, the houses are all still standing and many are still occupied by their original inhabitants.

Finally, the architectural pilgrim can pay homage to the Canadair factory buildings on Laurentian Blvd.: this is where Canadian Vickers (and after 1944 Canadair) constructed aircraft which helped to bring an end to World War II.

Génie en Vol is a provocative show of models, photographs, cut-away engines, aircraft parts, videos, and other material recounting the development of aeronautical engineering over the past half century. It occupies about one-third of the Musée d'Art de St. Laurent.

The museum itself is a fascinating chapter in building reuse and relocation. The structure was formerly a Presbyterian church on Dorchester St. (now René Lévesque Blvd.) on the present site of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel; it was carefully dismantled in 1930 to become the chapel of Le Collège de St. Laurent, and was subsequently transformed into a museum in 1975. Today the building's pointed arches and soaring vaults seem a fitting venue for a show on the technology of flight.

The exhibition is particularly interesting at points where the unlikely marriage of airplanes and sacred space is emphasized. For example, the entrance to the show is through a mockup of a biplane wing, framed by a 1930s wooden propeller and a stuffed bald eagle. A few feet further in, a large model of a plane suspended from the church's rafters seems to fly in tandem with one of the many angels which decorate the former church's roof structure.

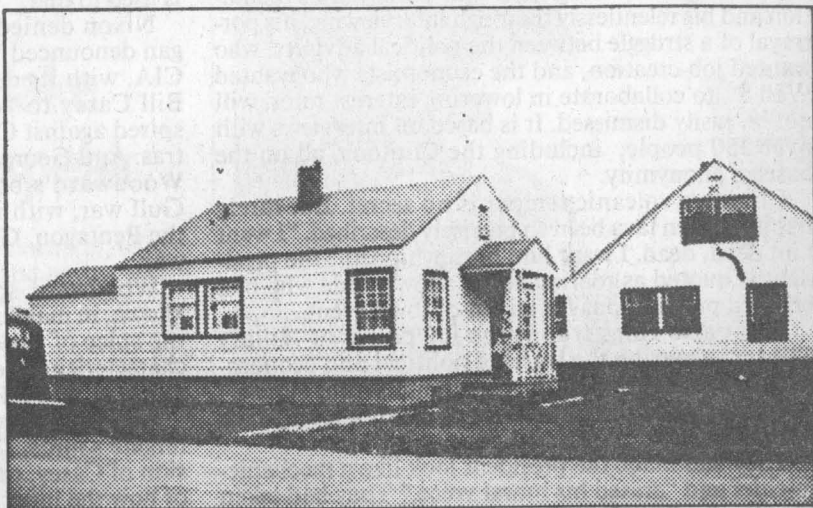
The show's strength is in the dozens of models that curators Michel Bélisle and Hélène Jasmin have brought together: from an exquisite little model of the R-100 dirigible moored at the tower at St. Hubert to large-scale models of Canadair's 1992 Regional Jet, the first twin jet designed specifically for regional transportation. Lots of cutaway sections provide glimpses into engines, landing gear and fuselages of the 1990s.

This technical material is fleshed out by historical images of Leonardo da Vinci (the first thinker seriously to investigate flight), St. Barbara (the patron saint of engineers), and the Wright brothers (the first people to achieve sustained, controlled flight in 1903).

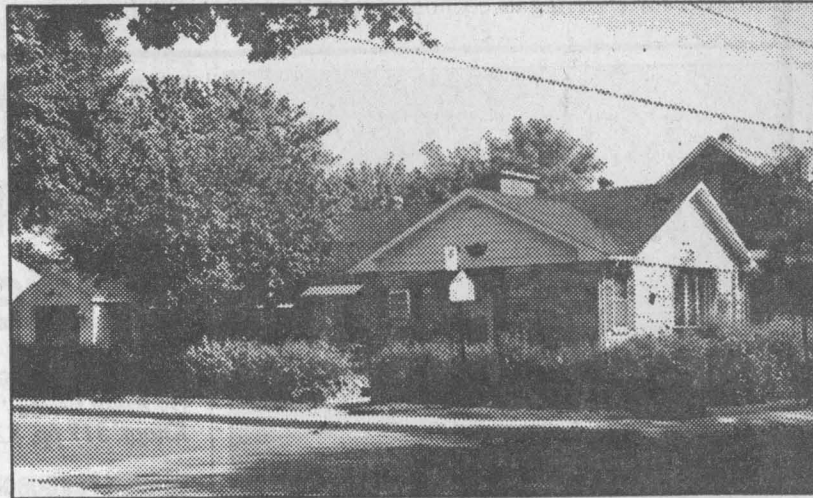
One of the highlights of the show is a simulated cockpit. Near this point, a mannequin sporting the beige, army-like uniform of Trans-Canadian Airlines stewardesses of the late 1940s, seems to direct visitors into the museum's permanent collection of traditional Quebec sculpture and furniture. The juxtaposition is tantalizing.

One of the few images in the show to picture the men and women who worked at Canadair is in the back corner of the exhibition. This historic photograph shows hundreds of workers leaving the Laurentian Blvd. aircraft factory — on foot. Where were they headed?

It is worthwhile today to trace the steps of these workers to their "temporary" homes (south of Henri Bourassa Blvd.), built in the middle of what was then farmland. Constructed by Wartime Housing Ltd., which was empowered in 1941 to contract out the building of emergency housing across Canada, these units comprise only a subgroup of thousands of similar houses built across the country. Strolling through streets with idyllic names like de la Sorbonne, Oxford and de Londres, it takes some effort today to imagine how these houses were erected in great haste, on temporary wood post footings, with no interior finishes. Known to residents as "Mudville," the wartime neighborhood had no sidewalks or paved roads. There was a war to be fought and niceties had to wait.



How the wartimes houses looked when they were new.



JOSEE LAMOTHE

The same houses, much altered, today.

The houses came in three basic types: four rooms, a larger four-room model and six rooms. It is hard now to identify these distinct types; each and every one of the houses has, over the last 50 years, been modified to some extent. The idea of dismantling the dwellings and re-erecting them somewhere else was quietly abandoned after D-Day; the houses were offered for sale by the government to either their occupants or to returning veterans.

"People have changed," recounts longtime resident Curtis Ingerville. "We had lots of energy but not much money." The enormous amount of labor invested in the houses by residents themselves may account for the large number of longtime residents in the wartime neighborhood. The houses today generally sell for about \$100,000; most of the original tenants purchased them for just under \$3,000.

The first work to be done — even before the houses were sold about 1950 — was the construction of proper foundations. At the time, some newly minted homeowners took advantage of the government's commitment to provide the houses with foundations by paying extra and expanding the foundation to the size of a full basement. Many others excavated their own basements; gruelling work which took place between shifts at Canadair. Today the varying heights of the once-identical houses is telling evidence of this difficult process.

Even though the change from a house sitting on wood posts to one on snug foundations meant an improvement in winter living conditions, the next change for most people was the replacement of the coal-fired space heater to an oil-burning one. With this modification, the characteristic coalshed became obsolete, which inspired many residents to begin to expand their tiny kitchens into the shed area.

By this time, the baby boom was filling the nurseries all over North America. Inevitably, the babies of the 1950s became the teenagers of the 1960s and 1970s, and predictably, the houses were expanded: sometimes vertically, sometimes front-to-back, and sometimes laterally.

This expansion of the house beyond its "envelope" brought with it the renewal of the houses' original asbestos shingles or wood clapboard. As a result, the wartime houses, oddly enough, the neighborhood never acquired a distinctive name — comprise today an amazing collection of exterior cladding materials: from aluminum to steel to vinyl, with various types of brick punctuating an already varied palette.

The neighborhood's assortment of window and door construction is equally mesmerizing. Some houses still sport the original wooden double-hung windows and solid doors, while most use examples of almost every window and door type marketed in Quebec during the last 50 years.

The wonderful unity evident in

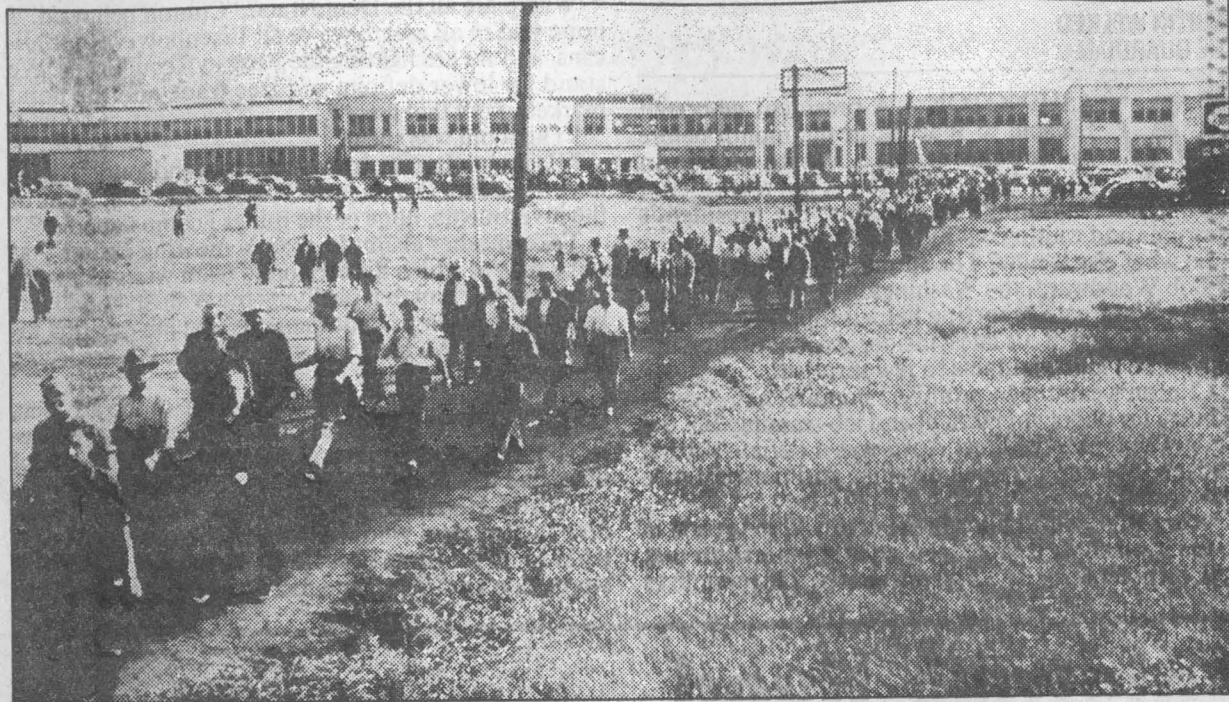
early photos, taken when there were only three types of houses set in a pasture, is a stark contrast to the current riot of materials and house forms, now shaded by mature trees of every variety. While the original wartime houses recall the uniforms that were a feature of that era, the "excess of textures and shapes now evident in the neighborhood is perhaps as clear a reflection of our current society, with its emphasis on individual freedom.

A stroll around St. Laurent on a sunny afternoon in the 1990s inspires the questions of how and why, on the one hand, the area has changed so radically since those hurried days of the 1940s. On the other hand, it is interesting to note how slowly housing technology has changed, relative to that of aircraft.

There are many things to ponder while facing the long factory facade of Canadair along Laurentian Blvd.: war and peace, collectivism and individualism, of fast and slow change. This is exactly what museums are supposed to do.

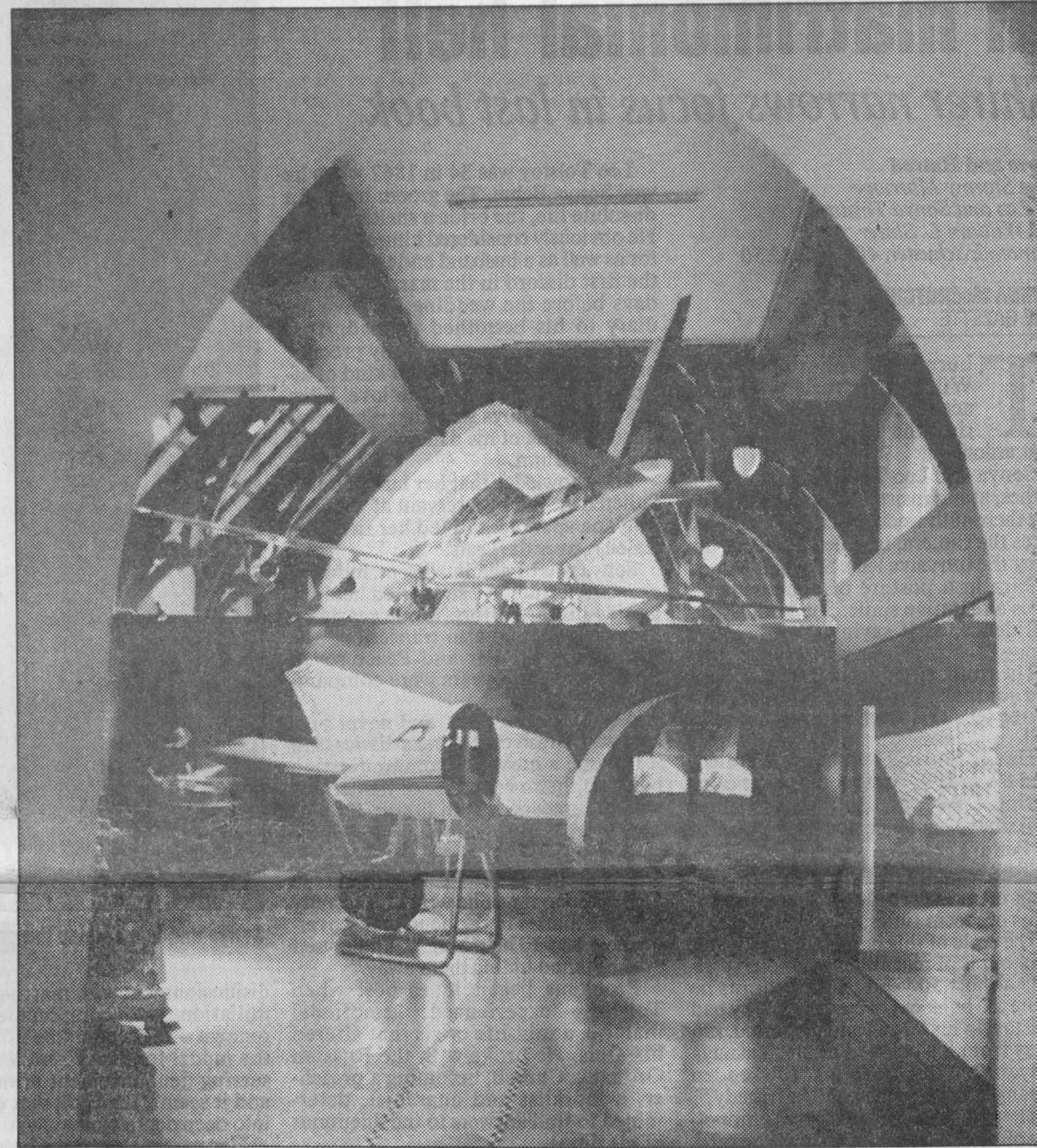
■ Annmarie Adams and Pieter Sijpkens teach in the school of architecture at McGill University.

■ The Musée d'Art de Ville St. Laurent is open Tuesday to Sunday, 12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m., except Wednesday when it is open until 9 p.m. It's at 615 St. Croix Ave., St. Laurent. Information: 747-7367.



ARCHIVES DE VILLE ST. LAURENT

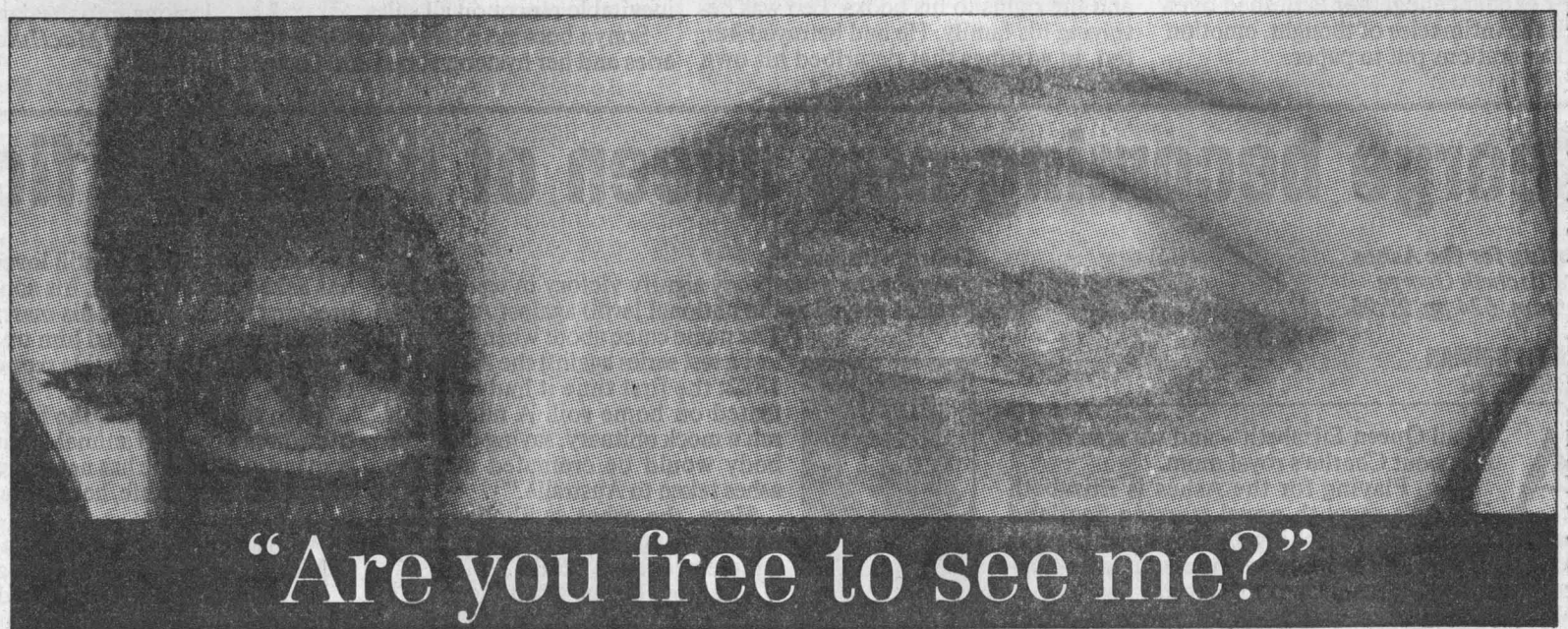
Workers leaving the Canadair plant on foot.



GAZETTE, NANCY ACKERMAN

A view of *Génie en Vol*, at the Musée d'Art de St. Laurent.

Art Galleries



"Are you free to see me?"

■ ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion
until September 4

Organized by the Guggenheim Museum, New York, the Roy Lichtenstein exhibition presents twenty years of photographic expression by Quebec artist Serge Tousignant.

■ JIM DINE: DRAWING FROM THE GLYPTOTHEK

Benaiah Gibb Pavilion
until September 11

The Jim Dine exhibition, organized by the Madison Art Center, Wisconsin, includes sixty drawings, most of them inspired by the collection of Greek and Roman sculpture at the Munich Glyptothek. These drawings dating from 1987 to 1990 shed new light on the work of American artist Jim Dine.

■ SERGE TOUSIGNANT

Benaiah Gibb Pavilion
until September 18

This exhibition organized by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography presents twenty years of photographic expression by Quebec artist Serge Tousignant.

■ TAMARA DE LEMPICKA

Benaiah Gibb Pavilion
until October 2

Tamara de Lempicka's work is characterized by strong volumes and pure colours. The fifty paintings included in this exhibition — portraits of men displaying their social standing, elegantly made-up women in revealing dresses and voluptuously curved nudes — emanate sensuality and a thirst for life's pleasures.

Guided Tours

On Wednesdays

Roy Lichtenstein

In English: 2 p.m. and 5.30 p.m.

In French: 11 a.m., 11.30 a.m. and 6 p.m.

Highlights of the Collection

In English: 11 a.m. In French: 2 p.m.

Free with admission to the exhibition or the Permanent Collection.

Esso-Sundays

On Sundays

Always dreamed of creating a comic strip? Take advantage of the Roy Lichtenstein exhibition and become a comic strip designer for an hour by joining an Esso-Sunday workshop.

Free with admission to the Permanent Collection. Passes available at the Information Desk. Carrefour, Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion (1 p.m., 2 p.m., 3 p.m. and 4 p.m.)

The Museum is open from Tuesday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; until 9 p.m. on Wednesday.

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and get in free at all times!



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The Gazette

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