NOTRE-DAME-DE-GRÂCE AND ITS ARCHITECTURAL HOTSPOTS

by Camille Bédard

I will never forget NDG. It’s where I was born, where I grew up, and where I spent the first 24 years of my life. “My” NDG is a palimpsest: an architectural, cultural and human landscape that has metamorphosed since my pre-kindergarten years at the YMCA on Hampton.

Geographically, the neighbourhood is divided into “upper” and “lower” NDG. “Upper” NDG is built around Monkland Village, the Villa-Maria metro station and Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Church; “lower” NDG extends along Sherbrooke Street, linking Westmount to the West Island, starting at Vendôme station. Not nearly as cosmopolitan as Côte-des-Neiges, the other half of the borough, NDG is a residential upper middle class neighbourhood where English and French commingle, with Anglophones in slightly greater numbers!

DECARIE EXPRESSWAY
Around 1650, Jean Décarie settled on the plateau of Côteau Saint-Pierre, present-day NDG, which had long been farmland, known as “Montreal's orchard.” In addition to apples, the Gorman and Décarie families grew the famous Montreal melon in their fields, since paved over for the Decarie Expressway. This melon, also known as the “Montreal market musk melon,” with its light green flesh and hint of nutmeg flavour, could weigh up to seven kilograms. A veritable luxury item, it was exported to the east coast of the United States, where a single slice could fetch up to $1.50! In the post-war era, consumer habits changed and this capricious melon, very fragile to transport, fell out of favour. The 1950s saw the beginning of the construction of the Decarie Expressway, in response to Montreal’s entry onto the international scene under Drapeau: the expressway was completed just in time for Expo 67, while the Montreal melon became a thing of the past.

THE PINK HOUSE
Originally a trail marked out by First Nations, Côte-Saint-Antoine road was turned into a road suitable for vehicles by the Hurtubise and Décarie families towards the end of the 17th century, in order to link Ville-Marie to distant farmland. Several stone houses were built along this road, including the famous “pink house.” Like something from another planet, this colourful house among the traditional ancestral homes is one of the oldest in the neighbourhood, built in 1698 on land ceded by the Décarie family, who owned it until it was sold in 1925. In my child’s imagination, the pink house was a giant dollhouse, with dainty lace, delicate porcelain and flowered embroidery, perfect for teatime at the Décarie home!

VILLA MARIA
After spending five years weaving my way through its corridors, daydreaming in its classrooms and racing around its soccer field, Villa Maria remains one of my most important landmarks. Built in 1794, the main building was initially the residence of the Honourable Judge Monk, then the official residence of Canada’s governors general, and then Monkland’s Hotel in the mid-19th century. The Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame bought the estate in 1854 and founded Villa Maria, a bilingual private boarding school exclusively for young girls. While Villa Maria has not accommodated boarders for aeons, the high school opened its doors to boys in fall 2016 (at long last!), bringing an end to the reign of the blue plaid skirt.

BENNY FARM
Benny Farm was built in 1946-47 by the Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation (CHMC) to house veterans after the Second World War. Designed according to the principles of architect Harold Doran’s garden city, the vast 18-acre complex was comprised of sixplexes, green spaces and community gardens. In the 1990s, when the complex fell into disuse, the CHMC recommended that it be almost completely demolished. Several architectural firms, in particular L’OEUF, opposed this tabula rasa and came up with a radical counter-proposal to renovate the site and its buildings.
Since the turn of the millennium, Benny Farm has been providing social housing for low- and medium-income residents as well as community services such as the Centre sportif Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, which opened its doors to the public in January 2011.

**EMPERESS THEATRE**

I will never, ever forget watching the animated film *All Dogs Go to Heaven* at this neighbourhood cinema. It was the early 1990s: my older sister was on a kindergarten class outing, and my mother had volunteered to accompany them to the cinema. And so, my little sister and I got to join the ranks of the “big” kids from the Annex, across the street from Girouard Park.

This was not just any neighbourhood cinema: it was Cinema V, initially the Empress Theatre, built in 1927 by architect Alcide Chaussé and the prolific theatre decorator Emmanuel Briffa. It is the only surviving cinema among the five once frequented by NDG’s moviegoers. According to architectural typology, this is a classic atmospheric cinema with its auditorium that immerses audiences in a thematic setting and transports them to the frontier between reality and make-believe. At the Empress, the theme was ancient Egypt, with its bas-relief of scarab beetles, lotus flowers, hieroglyphics and busts of pharaohs, a décor clearly influenced by the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922.

Today, NDG is not the neighbourhood I once knew. “My” NDG is inhabited by ghosts: the Art Foli café, the most popular spot for birthday parties in elementary school; the Marie-Céline giftshop, run by three generations of women; the wooded area behind Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Church, where our 12th NDG scout group liked to play among the centuries-old trees, which have since been razed to make room for condo developments. And yet, despite fashions and trends, some “institutions” have stood the test of time: the vintage Chalet BBQ on Sherbrooke Street; the Pâtisserie de Nancy, with its homemade delicacies, especially the Suprême (with its heavenly and unlikely combination of lime, chestnuts, red berries and Breton shortbread); the Maison de la culture Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, with its shelves of comic books that I know like the back of my hand. NDG will always be the neighbourhood that watched me grow up, where I return every so often to visit my old house, to see familiar faces and to commune with the ghosts of wonderful times past.