Light Fantastic:

An Account of the Verdun Dance Pavilion, Montreal

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Introduction

> **“**The Pavilion, looking over the river, is the ideal place where the 'light fantastic' can be practised in surroundings that lead, not only to pleasure and relaxation, but to the improvement of health.”[1]
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> “[T]his institution, like all public dance-halls run for profit, is rated as a Centre for Delinquency.”[2]

On any given summer evening, excluding Sundays, between 1928 and 1946 the youth of the City of Verdun and its surrounding area could walk the boardwalk tracing along the banks of the St. Lawrence River until they reached the Verdun Dance Pavilion, a low-lying municipally owned structure in Woodland Park. Each year the Pavilion's season would commence roughly at the end of May, around Victoria day weekend (then Empire Day), and would remain open until early September. These dates were always dependent on the weather and would vary from year to year. Built in 1928, the Pavilion remained installed on the bank of the St. Lawrence river until its demolition in 1970. It served a number of purposes, first as a seasonal dance pavilion, and later as a club house for boating and tennis clubs, as well as a restaurant servicing the adjacent boardwalk.

This investigation of the Pavilion proved to be challenging. It concerned a building that no longer exists, a municipal structure whose common architecture and use appeared to have permitted engineers, councillors, inspectors, and operators, authority to forgo any responsibilities in its documentation. By considering the Pavilion as part of an architectural typology of seasonal dancing facilities, I was able to refer to other similar structures from seemingly disconnected

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1 Advertisement for the Pavilion's 1943 opening event. *The Guardian*, 7 May 1943.

2 Letter from Verdun Ministerial Association to the City Council, 7 March 1936. Verdun Borough Archives.

localities (in the cottage country of Ontario or the outskirts of Chicago). I identified the conventions of the Pavilion's architecture and considered how they ordered public performance, sociability, consumption, and recreation. I considered how the "scenes", the social groups which frequented these type of sites, made use of them as a countercultural platform by exploiting their intermediate position as both a public and private space. I investigated the physical qualities of the site but also considered how a site's aesthetic characteristics may yield to the pressures exerted by its occupants, revealing intriguing architectural distortions.

Throughout my research the Pavilion has been an elusive subject, cunningly evading any direct visual consideration. Photographs of the Pavilion throughout its forty odd year existence offered only obscured views of the structure. Only at the very end of my research process did a full view of the Pavilion surface. Just weeks before its destruction, a Verdun newspaper called *The Messenger* published a photo of the decaying Pavilion (see Fig. 1). Surrounded by a deep winter's snow, with its windows shuttered, the low lying building sat quietly, "ready for demolition" as the headline read, as behind it loomed a newly constructed thirteen-story residential tower, The Manor retirement building.[3]

The Pavilion played host to a public who made use of the site not only for music and dancing but also as a place in which hegemonic linguistic, political, sexual, and social boundaries could be blurred. In my research into the history behind the now lost Pavilion, I have consulted documents within the Verdun Borough Archives, newspaper articles from the years of the Pavilion's operation, published studies of Montreal's Big Band era, and have benefited from a few serendipitous encounters through the Société d'histoire et de généalogie de Verdun. Through

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[3] *The Messenger* 14 Jan. 1970.

this material I recover the history of the Verdun Dance Pavilion, seeking too the mysterious "light fantastic", not in the natural environment around the site but rather between the shared and performed identities which I argue also constituted the Pavilion's surroundings and are essential to its definition as a public space.

Context and history

During the Pavilion's first few decades of operation, the city of Verdun stood as Québec's third largest municipality. Primarily a working-class neighbourhood at just six square kilometres, during the Pavilion's inaugural summer the population was reported to be 46 477 people. By the Second World War the population would grow to 70 000.[4] Located south-west of Montreal's city centre, Verdun's southern limits were defined by the St. Lawrence river. Unlike the river shores of Montreal, which were congested by the port and a range of transport and heavy industries, Verdun's riverfront, while prone to flooding, was primarily green parkland where facilities for leisure outweighed those of industry. The riverfront was defined by a five kilometre boardwalk which extended westward from the neighbouring Pointe Saint-Charles area towards the Lachine Rapids. The constructed wooden path was dotted with parks, playgrounds, swimming areas, tennis courts, and a marina.

As a municipal building, the Verdun Dance Pavilion was constructed to accommodate no particular trend in dancing or music, nor any specific demographic; as the Mayor of Verdun Hervé Ferland stated in 1936 it was to be "used for the benefit of the population."[5] In 1932

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4 *The Messenger* 16 Aug. 1928; Serge Marc Durflinger, *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Québec* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006) x.

5 Letter to city clerk from Mayor of Verdun Hervé Ferland, 9 Mar. 1936. Verdun Borough Archives.

American sociologist Paul G. Cressey provided a glossary of dance hall typologies in his study of pay-to-dance Taxi-Dance Halls around the United States. The Dance Pavilion:

> represents a small expenditure of money, is a rudely equipped open-air dance platform or pavilion, located in an outlying part of the city where low rents can be secured. It is seasonal, provides an opportunity for summer dancing only, and has low admission charges. Frequently associated with amusement parks and picnic grounds, it provides an opportunity for young people of the poorer classes to attend. The patrons are a more homogeneous group than in the cabaret or the dance palace.[6]

The Pavilion was a broad single story rectangular wooden structure. Its polished dance floor delimited by a waist high railing was reported to be able to accommodate 350 couples.[7] The barrier surrounding the dance floor was to facilitate "jitney" dancing, a pay-by-the-dance system which required patrons to purchase individual tickets for each dance on top of their initial entrance fee (see Fig. 2.). Summer to summer the Pavilion's fees would fluctuate; its operators would honour the "jitney" system one year and offer an all inclusive admission another. Often the admission fees, "jitney" or not, were set at a lower price for women than those for men.

When presented with an image of the interior of the Verdun Pavilion, art historian Janice Anderson found it very similar to the Rondeau Park Pavilion, Grand Bend, which she frequented during her youth in Ontario.[8] She observed that with little seating provided, the enthused patrons would cycle around the dance floor and band, smoking and conversing, all the while observing

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6 Paul G. Cressy, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life* (New York: AMS Press, 1971) 22-23.

7 *The Guardian* 22 May 1931.

8 Anderson's summer job throughout the mid 1960s was working and boarding at an ice cream parlour across the road from the Rondeau Park Pavilion. This pavilion is one of many structures accounted for in Peter Young's *Let's Dance: A Celebration of Ontario's Dance Halls and Summer Dance Pavilions.*

those performing in the centre of the space.[9] This quality of the Rondeau Park Pavilion's architecture demonstrates it worked as site which enabled patrons to see and be seen. The open ceiling contributed to the vastness of the space, something Anderson likened to a barn in its simplicity and scale. She recalled the interior environment to be "atmospheric"; the windows were often shuttered, letting in little of the cool summer breeze or an evening sunset. She remarked that it was common for the female dancers to attend without the accompaniment of their boyfriends. In another era this would be called "going stag."[10]

According to Anderson, the main attraction for the young patrons was the cyclical social walking around the dance floor, punctuated by the "occasional dancing". When asked to draw out a floor plan of the dance pavilion, Anderson commenced by drawing an oval shape to delineate the dance floor with the band playing at the base of this form, and a larger oval was drawn around this area with the space between them to signify the waiting area. When asked whether the Rondeau Park Pavilion itself was in fact rounded or oval shaped, Anderson returned to a photo of this building published in Peter Young's survey of Ontario's pavilions and proceeded to draw a rectangle over top of the oval-shaped dance floor, traced out just minutes before. She admitted that perhaps the primary activity of cycling around the dance area had in fact shaped her memory of the site's basic architectural elements.[11] These social gestures, repeated summer after summer, had rounded off the site's corners. Anderson's cognitive map of

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[9] Email exchange with Janice Anderson, 24 April 2009.

[10] Peter Young in *Let's Dance: A Celebration of Ontario's Dance Halls and Summer Dance Pavilions* presents a written account by Isabel Archer who recalls her mid-adolescence during the early 1940s as spent at Woodstock, Ontario summer dance pavilion. She wrote: "My girlfriends and I would walk all the way to the park, dance all evening and walk home. We liked to go stag. It was more fun to dance with lots of partners, rather than just one date. When I say I danced all evening, I mean I danced all evening. Although it was war time, it was a good time for me with lots of boys to dance with, and always good crowds. There was rarely a fight or any trouble" (51).

[11] Interview with Janice Anderson, 27 April 2009; email exchange with Janice Anderson, 24 April 2009.

Rondeau Park Pavilion offers a curious yet illuminating insight for my larger project to explore the Verdun Dance Pavilion. Her corporeal memories demonstrate that structures like dance pavilions, while rudimentary in their construction, can not be read simply as a square peg, for through use over time and an accumulation of experiences and histories, they may in fact become a round hole.[12]

Patrons of the Verdun Dance Pavilion could indulge in cigarettes, candy and chocolate bars, all sold within the venue, but the sale of alcohol was strictly forbidden within the city limits of Verdun. Prohibition had been enforced throughout Canada to varying degrees in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and while Québec only briefly adopted prohibition, Verdun had long been a dry city with no "Commission" stores and no taverns within the city's limits. The summer the Pavilion opened the City held a referendum on the issue of permitting grocers within the city limits to sell beer, yet continued to restrict the consumption of alcohol in public to restaurants.[13] Despite prohibition laws, as Jack De Long recalls of the summer dance pavilions which dotted Ontario's Georgian Bay area, alcoholic drinks still made their way to the pavilions, being consumed outside or around the venue.[14]

In 1928, one Mr. J. Meldrum submitted a request to construct a dance pavilion and refreshment booth next to the tennis courts in the riverside Woodland park found at the foot of Woodland Road and LaSalle Boulevard. The city of Verdun granted Meldrum the permit and

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[12] Dolores Hayden argues that "cognitive mapping is a tool for discovering fuller territorial information about contemporary populations" the study of individuals perceptions of the city present results which "vary in size as well as in … memorable features." Cognitive mapping reveals the constraints and limitations placed on what Lefebvre refers to as the space of social reproduction, ultimately cognitive mapping may be used as a tool to reveal hidden hierarchies and powers at play within a social site (27).

[13] *The Messenger* 13 Aug. 1928.

[14] J. F. De Long, *Summer Dance Pavilions: Bay of Quinte Area* (Ameliasburg: 7th Town Historical Society, 2003) 1.

funded the labour for the construction through their employment relief program. The contract between Meldrum and the City stipulated that the building once constructed would remain the sole property of the City, the agreement was to be renewed ten years following its signing.

The Pavilion was reported to have cost $ 10 000 to construct.[15] The name of the contractor is not known; the lease indicates the plans to the Pavilion were to be drawn up by Meldrum at his expense and submitted to the approval of the city engineer. Its dance floor was 120 by 60 feet.[16] In later advertisements it was touted to be the "best dance floor in Canada," though aside from endorsement directly from its operators there appears to be little evidence to either support or rebut this claim. Local business owner J. P. Dupuis supplied the lumber for its erection.[17]

After a number of years in operation Meldrum later moved his interests into a company known as Amusements and Concessions Inc. The extension of the lease in 1936 was a lengthy ordeal within city hall. Three organizations opposed the renewal of the lease with Meldrum and his new company. The protests were articulated by a group of citizens forming the Verdun Dancing Pavilion Syndicate, the Verdun Ministerial Association, The Verdun League of Property Owners Inc, and the Non-Affiliated Veterans of Verdun. The Verdun Dancing Pavilion Syndicate was composed of a grouping of professional dance instructors who offered to pay three times the present annual rent to operate a dancing school and host events out of the boardwalk pavilion.

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[15] This number was reported by *The Messenger*, in a letter dated June 23rd 1928 addressed to the Secretary-Treasurer of the City of Verdun indicated that the cost of construction and equipment was $12 681.78.

[16] *The Messenger*, 24 April 1928.

[17] The recognition of this contribution came rather later in the Pavilion's career as dancing facility. It was mentioned in a large ad published by the Pavilion in a 1941 edition of *The Guardian*, thirteen years after its erection. J.P. Dupuis is also the name of Verdun's thirteenth mayor. He later served as an alderman on the city council. As the Pavilion was a municipal property there is good chance that alderman Dupuis was also the lumber merchant honoured in the advertisement.

Their letter was printed in a local newspaper called *The Guardian*, under the headline, "Will Verdun Citizens Control Dance Pavilion?"[18] The Verdun Ministerial Association's letter was signed by two members of the Protestant clergy who expressed concern for the safety and health the city's youth.[19] Both the Non-Affiliated Veterans of Verdun and The Verdun League of Property Owners Inc. protested the present rent which they found too low and out of balance with other leases in buildings of a similar value in the city. Despite the multiple contestations fielded by the city council, they did, if hesitantly, decide to renew the Pavilion's lease for another ten years. The agreement was governed under the conditions of the Wartime Rental Regulations Act. Soon after the new lease was signed the city issued plans to erect a public bandstand in Woodland Park just east of the Pavilion. The bandstand was completed in 1938 and served as a social and moral alternative to the nocturnal activities at the Pavilion, playing host to family orientated spectacles and regular outdoor Sunday church services, the only day of the week that the Pavilion was closed.

As the 1930s progressed the growing popularity of swing and jazz brought in a rotating cast of local band leaders and their orchestras to the Pavilion. The performers would stay on for the summer, playing most nights of the week from late spring to the onset of fall. By Big Band music's height of popularity in the mid 1940s, Verdun's pavilion was a distinct and fashionable alternative to Montreal's downtown dance halls.[20] One advertisement announced it as "the answer to the delightful dance palace."[21]

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[18] *The Guardian*, 13 July 1936.

[19] Letter from Verdun Ministerial Association to Verdun City Council, 4 Mar. 1936, Verdun Borough Archives.

[20] William Weintraub, *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and '50s* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1996) 127.

[21] *The Messenger*, 10 June 1938.

In November 1945 after disputes over taxi permits, the city council refused the Pavilion's operators requests to lift certain traffic limitations stipulated in their lease. Amusements and Concessions Inc. responded with a cynical and sarcastic letter to the council delivered under a fictional name of "The Verdun Amusements and Distractions." With a sneering tone the letter accused "certain aldermen" of taking bribes.[22] This proved to be the last straw between the organization and the city and the council began to discuss the "disposition of the Dance Pavilion."[23] The lease was not renewed for 1946, nor was the live music and dancing format; rather the council began to seek out new tenders and a much less public role for their building.

The Zoot Suit Disturbances

The narrative of the Verdun Dance Pavilion follows a basic story arc with everything ascending to the summer of 1944 and descending afterwards. On Saturday, July 3rd of that year a group of over a hundred stationed sailors worked their way along the Verdun Boardwalk, forcing their way into a dance at the Pavilion to confront around sixty zoot suiters Reports of the conflict indicated that sailors had first ordered "all girls off the premises" except two who were wearing "the feminine equivalent to the Zoot Suit"; equally all young men not dressed in suits were also forced to leave.[24] The zoot suit as a fashion had a number of variations but is best understood as an assemblage of high-waist, billowing pants with tapered ankles, a dress shirt with tie, and a broad-shouldered coat often extending down to the knees. Accessories could include a long watch chain and a hat. Zoot suits were not commercially manufactured and had to be constructed

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[22] Letter from The Verdun Amusement & Distractions (Amusements and Concessions Inc.) to the City Council of Verdun, 22 Nov. 1945, Verdun Borough Archives.

[23] Extract from Report of a Meeting of the City Council, 25 Mar. 1946, Verdun Borough Archives.

[24] *The Messenger* 8 June 1944.

by a tailor, often a costly affair during a war time economy. Historical studies of "the feminine equivalent to the Zoot Suit", let alone the feminine equivalent to the zoot suiter, remain largely to be written. Catherine S. Ramírez has recently published an investigation of the Mexican American woman zoot suiter, or pachuca, of the Los Angeles area. Their attire is described as "a cardigan or V-neck sweater and a long, broad-shouldered "finger-tip" coat; a knee-length (and therefore relatively short) pleated skirt; fishnet stockings or bobby socks; and platform heels, saddle shoes, or *huarache* sandles." It was also common for female zoot suiters to wear the masculine version of the zoot suit.[25]

During the violent conflict at the Pavilion the sailors ripped and tore the suits of off the men and women.[26] The assailed climbed up into the rafters above the dance floor in an attempt to escape from the rancourous seamen. The police did not intervene on the altercation and waited outside to collect the zoot suiters as they emerged from the Pavilion "stripped of their finery."[27] One report indicated the band also clad in zoot suits played on through out the brawl.[28] The conflict that evening was part of a week long clash between the two groups which had commenced in downtown Montreal. Within the Montreal area the Pavilion was "a known haunt for Zoot Suiters" and eventually drew in the sailors.[29]

The sailors' and zoot suiters' violent brawl drew attention from the authorities and left the

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[25] Catherine S. Rameríez, *The Woman in The Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) xii.

[26] *The Messenger* 8 June 1944.

[27] *The Messenger* 8 June 1944.

[28] John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montréal*, (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1988) 112 Although not indicated by John Gilmore the band was that of Rolland David, who had also performed with his orchestra the year before, Rolland is later misidentified as being the owner of the club in a Military report on the incidents referenced by Serge Durflinger.

[29] Durflinger 162.

Pavilion badly damaged. It was featured in the local newspapers for the weeks that followed, and at the suggestion of the city council the event was addressed by the Navy's offices in Ottawa. No charges were laid upon the sailors but the Pavilion remained off limits to all Navy personal for the rest of the summer.[30] The exact reason for attacks is unclear although the zoot suit style of dress with its excessive use of fabric during a period of war time rationing was ostensibly viewed by many as an anti-war statement. Just a year prior, violent riots had erupted in Los Angeles between Hispanic zoot suiters and sailors. The zoot suit style was a cross-cultural phenomenon, a countercultural statement which brought into question racial prejudices, traditional gender roles, and broader hegemonic political thought. It found popularity within a diverse range of communities, from the west to east coast of the United States, to the United Kingdom and France, and evidently Québec. Reports and comments on the riots had a difficult time placing the demographics that made up the Zoot Suiters. Various sources reported that Italians, French speaking, English speaking, Jews, or Syrians constituted the group.[31]

Reports on the zoot suit disturbances of these summer nights offer the only explicit illustration of who used the Pavilion. Accounts of the zoot suit crowd and their occupation of the Pavilion reveal a distinctly different image from the representations of its patrons in its seasonal advertisements. Early publicity for the Pavilion presented the healthy benefits of dancing and an active lifestyle. A 1931 ad encouraged readers and potential patrons to indulge in “Dancing as your doctor prescribes it” and “dance yourself to health!” Later ads featured graphics of a pair of formally dressed couples engaged in a just as formal foxtrot. A 1941 ad for the Pavilion's seasonal opening did feature a crowd, again formally dressed, yet engaged in a riotous excess of

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[30] *The Messenger* 8 June 1944.

[31] Durflinger 162.

celebration, drink, and amusements (see Fig. 3). A band with a conductor played in the background, while the foreground offered graphics of a martini glass, some noise makes, and a pamphlet with the year 1939 printed on it. The graphic was clearly a stock image left over from a New Years celebration now a few years expired. While continuing to shroud the patrons of the Pavilion, the inclusion of a martini glass, considering the Pavilion was not permitted to sell alcohol, is an added irony.

Zoot Suiters are considered by Luis Alvarez in his book, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* as a group which forms a "subaltern counterpublic" who are capable of creating spaces which "facilitate the circulation of social discourse and behaviour counter to the dominant culture."[32] They were a scene which for a moment "haunted" the Pavilion. As such the Pavilion stands as a unique example of the intrinsic tension that lies between the scene and the city, a contract, which as Alan Blum understands it, arranges "libidinal circuits of intoxicated sociality."[33] Erotic allusions aside, it is scenes that tenaciously perform the lived experience of a locality and serve as invaluable historical, social, and political markers in the study of public space.

The riots both literally and physically put the Pavilion and its scene in danger of exposure. Alan Blum notes that with the theatricality of scenes comes the danger of exposure. The transgression of a scene lies "in its exhibitionism and in the spectacle of its claim to mark itself off from the routinization of everyday life."[34] In the case of the Verdun zoot suit

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[32] Alvarez's perception of Zoot Suiters as a subaltern counterpublics is an extension of the ideas of social theorist Michael Warner who introduces the concept in "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49-89.

[33] Alan Blum, "Scenes," *Public* 21-22 (2003): 16-18.

[34] Blum 16-18.

disturbances, the sailors attacked the formal characteristics of the scene. Through violent attempts at physical humiliation they removed the costuming, which they believed was the vital source of the scene. At the same time the Pavilion's capacity to act as a site which may host and accommodate the scene had also been exposed. Uncovering this group is just what Ernest S. Reed, a member of the local clergy, called for in his weekly column for *The Guardian*, "Church Editor's Corner." Reed's commentary is written in defence of the sailors and commands a respect for them and the responsibilities they have taken up at a time of war. The clergyman suggests a more sinister role for the countercultural group asking that "If any groups are using 'zoot-suiters' to nefarious ends, let these groups be exposed." Here the zoot suiters, in all their theatricality, are imagined to be but a cover, a facade for the international threat of fascism. Reed regards the group's countercultural "practice" of difference and self-determination of identity as a process encouraging disunion within society. The zoot suiters "are doing just what Hitler wants." By challenging the homogeneity of society, they serve as "the most despicable kind of 'fifth columnists.'"[35]

(W)holes

The diverse range of documents which contributed to my investigation into the Pavilion offered little information on its physical construction; as a result I was left with a *hole.* Incidents such as the riots and other points of contention or action act as delimiters, applying pressures to the interior and exterior of a vague site, concentrating upon it, and contributing to a resonant image of the site's architectural characteristics. It was reported that the zoot suiters climbed into

[35] *The Guardian* 8 June 1944.

the rafters to escape the sailors. Passages like this found in the study of a space and its scene aid in creating another sort of *whole*.

Sarah E. Chinn locates the increased popularity in dancing and dance hall facilities through out the first half of the twentieth century as a key component to the development of a modern adolescence. She notes that "the space of dancing is the space of adolescent independence, of fun and heterosociality, of flirting, of asserting a specific kind of urban American identity."[36] Chinn later moves on state that since dance halls were "commercialized rather than strictly communal institutions, dance halls popularized the idea of leisure as inextricable from capitalism." While this phenomenon is not exclusive to dance facilities but also shared amongst amusement parks and other leisure facilities, they were "central commercial establishments" that adolescents made their own.[37] The Pavilion, along with the city's autumnal and winter dance halls, offered a generation of youth, working throughout the second world war, a space that was their own, beyond parental supervision, where social and sexual experimentation could take place.

Luis Alvarez further considered the zoot suiters' occupation of dance halls as a testament of their refusal "to allow work to become the primary signifier of their identity." Sites such as the Pavilion served as a place where the "fluidity of the zoot suiters social movements" could leave behind "the disciplined, controlled workspace" of the war industry.[38] In his commentary on the Verdun disturbances, Ernest S. Reed criticizes the zoot suiters for denial of the orderliness of the workspace. While they may have had an organized and recognizable scene, for Reed they were

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[36] Sarah E. Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the -Century America*, (Newark : Rutgers University Press, 2009) 103.

[37] Chinn 104.

[38] Alvarez 150.

"not conscientious objectors," but rather "young people who are making good wages in war industries and who spend their leisure time sniping at those in the armed services." They fell into a different category: "chisellers of the lowest kind."[39]

The Pavilion for the zoot suiters was not just an escape from factory work; it was an environment where the pressures of a society at war, which continually applied homogenous definitions of identity, community, and nationalism, could be evacuated under the cover of a summer's night. Alvarez notes that the zoot scene, with its "open, uneven, and unorganized character" spread across a broad assortment of localities, did not share one specific political position. Rather "they were linked through their sharing of the everyday cultural practices and social relationships that stemmed from their race, class, and gender positions."[40]

The Pavilion was a modest structure. Without the band, without the dancers, it remains just a barn-like room with a polished dance floor and a snack bar. Will Straw finds that a study of scenes "invites us to delineate [the city's] underlying order...it allows an order to intrude upon our sense of the city as merely aesthetic – that is, as a space of sensation and theatricalized encounter." A study of a scene is a formative academic exercise, and as Straw notes, observations of these "orders" are not simply experiments to view how collectively determined identity may activate, abuse, or stretch the conventions of architecture but that this very congregation "intrudes upon" the observer's, the historian's, own perspective. Studies of scenes and their sites can serve as a methodological device which bridges the locality under study with an expansive and fluid community, situating a sociable architectural site within a broader political and social context. While the definition of "scenes" remains slippery within the field of the humanities,

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[39] *The Guardian* 8 June 1944.

[40] Alvarez 139.

their study allows for both the disturbing a site and investigating its disturbances.[41]

This is not to diminish the qualities of the Pavilion's architecture. As mentioned before, the interior arrangement of the space was arranged to order and control the flow of dancing, and those who were caught out of that order were encouraged to consume and observe. The scene does not simply interpret the architectural protocol of the site as it refashions it. As the zoot suiters left their warehouse and industry jobs at the end of the day and on those summer evenings, they constituted what Barry Shank considers as "an overproductive signifying community."[42] In occupying the Pavilion, the scene both satisfied and surpassed the site's predetermined architectural boundaries.

After the Dance Pavilion

Following the cessation of dance events the city council decided to divide the dance pavilion into three spaces. In the summer of 1946 a restaurant assumed the space facing the boardwalk, serving hot dogs and soda pop to its summer patrons. The remaining space was divided between two local members-only groups, the Verdun Yacht Club and Woodland Park Tennis Club, housing their respective club houses. Despite the changes in occupancy and use, the space remained known as The Pavilion or "The Pav" throughout city documents and to the general public. Since the 1930s the Verdun Yacht Club had been operating out of a temporary clubhouse installed on the river's shores. For years they had been making requests for the city to construct for them more suitable accommodations. Following the cessation of the Pavilion's operations, the council offered the club a place in the newly divided Pavilion. The third and final

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41 Will Straw, "Scenes and Sensibilities," *Public* 21-22 (2003): 252 – 253.

42 Barry Shank quoted in Straw 252.

space was occupied by the Verdun Tennis Club who were already managing the neighbouring courts.

Although nothing occurred to match the energy or contestation resulting from the disturbances of the summer of 1944, the common community of Verdun, who also made use of the waterfront, did feel the presence of these now more established groups. One drawn out dispute occurred between the Yacht Club and citizens who had long moored their boats by the Pavilion. The city had agreed to design and construct a wharf for the club under the condition that it be available for the citizens to use as well, free of charge. Upon installation of the wharf the city council began to field complaints from citizens who had returned to the wharf to find that their boats had been towed down the river and abandoned in the marshy weeds which lined much of the river's shore. Complaints to the Yacht Club only resulted in the citizens being told that they could use the wharf if they were members of the Club. The annual membership was $15 a year and, as one citizen pointed out, their boats alone cost $25 and they could not afford such a fee.[43]

By the 1960s the building and the boardwalk were beginning to show their age. Falling into disrepair, its degrading state was subject to complaints from the public. In 1966 the council began to consider the Pavilion's demolition and what could take its place.[44] In a letter to the City Council, the restaurant's operator Rolland Guilbert describes the state of Woodland Park and the waterfront, which tells of the city's negligence. Guilbert's letter requests a reduction in rent, citing a lack of activity around the boardwalk as the bandstand remains permanently closed, sports are no longer held in the park, parking around the area remains restricted, and that the

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[43] Letter From Bill & John Scott to E. Wilson, Mayor of Verdun, 21 May 1948. Verdun Borough Archives.

[44] Memorandum to the Verdun City Council from G. Gagnon, c.a., 20 April 1966. Verdun Borough Archives.

boardwalk is a refuge for “bums” who don't have “5 cents” to spend and occupy themselves in breaking things.[45]

In the years to follow the pavilion only fell into greater disrepair, and local respect for the pavilion and the waterfront had waned. Guilbert's report to the city in 1966 was not unfounded; between 1968 and 1969 the pavilion and the waterfront facilities fell victim to a number of acts of vandalism. The interior of the pavilion was damaged and 70 stone pillars lining the boardwalk were “smashed” in what is reported to be an annual autumnal occurrence. Interviewed by *The Messenger*, Verdun Inspector Arthur Servant expressed concern that “nobody ever reports the vandals to police. I'm sure that local residents must witness the goings on, but they fail to notify police. We have to discover the damages ourselves.”[46] The inspector's open inquiry, expressed to everybody and nobody, is indicative of the blind eye turned by the community towards the aging boardwalk and former dance pavilion. An article published in *The Messenger* in 1969 assured readers and potential patrons that despite the exterior appearance of the Pavilion, which might suggest the building is doomed for demolition, the Verdun Yacht Club is still alive.[47]

In a 1968 letter to the city council the Yacht Club requests a meeting with councillors after catching numerous rumours of the building's imminent demolition. The rumour was well founded; the city was planning to construct a home for senior citizens at the cost of two million dollars. The thirteen-story tower would house two hundred and eighty-four pensioners with nurses on staff and a private parkland bordering the river. The first floor of the building composed a broad platform, which served both as an awning for pedestrians and as a

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[45] Letter from Rolland Guilbert to the Verdun City Council, 29 May 1966. Verdun Borough Archives.

[46] *The Messenger* 12 Nov. 1969

[47] *The Messenger* 23 Apr. 1969

platform from which the tower emerged. Constructed principally out of reinforced concrete which was later covered with brick, with no balconies, the tower would be the city's tallest structure. This initial Senior Citizens' Home along with the two others to follow it in the coming decade offered Verdun the chance to catch up to Nun's Island's increasingly modern sky line, which proudly displayed a fifteen-story apartment building constructed in 1962 which was associated with renowned architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969). Not without a bureaucratic tone, the Senior Citizen's Home was a strikingly modern construction in face of the vernacular and plain wooden structure that was the Pavilion.

In the spring of 1969 the committee of the Woodland Tennis Club commenced their regular summer season column in *The Messenger*, noting that this would be their last season in the present club house. The column opened with a short report account for the delay in the opening of the club. The clubhouse had been broken into and "ransacked", the damages amounting to $ 400, mainly due to vandalism to the walls and plumbing, theft from the lockers as well of the club's trophies.[48] Around a month before the Tennis Club's delayed opening for the season, the City held a ground breaking ceremony for the Senior Citizens' Home, later to be called the Manor. To close their season and congratulate the winners of the tournaments, the Club held what would be last dance and social event at the Pavilion on October 4th 1969.[49] At the dawn of 1970 *The Messenger* ran a photograph of the pavilion in its present state. Under the advisory of Hydro-Québec and architect J.M. Dubé, the city council decided to bring the pavilion down.[50] The article offers a brief remembrance of the Pavilion, "once the best swinging place in

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[48] *The Messenger* 28 May 1969.

[49] *The Messenger* 1 Oct. 1969.

[50] *The Messenger* Jan. 7 1970.

Verdun of the young-folk," reminding readers that throughout "the 1950s and before then, the Pavilion was used mainly by the teenagers – not only from Verdun – but Pointe St. Charles and LaSalle areas. It was a place where teenagers used to gather and dance to their favourite music."[51] There is no mention of the Pavilion's defining and declining moment with the zoot suit disturbances, nor of the great players who provided the requisite music summer after summer. Even the restaurant, hidden on the riverside of the building, is ignored, and the Yacht Club, which has since moved out, also goes unmentioned. As this study has revealed, by the 1950s the Pavilion had long stopped hosting dances for "the teenagers" of Verdun. This brief remembrance offered by the local paper provides further evidence of how the social history surrounding the Pavilion was understood to be insignificant to the public's knowledge, the "the young-folk" of the Pavilion's dancing days were now middle aged. Just a few weeks after the publication of this photo, and after over 40 years on the riverfront, the Pavilion was demolished to accommodate the installation of a series of underground electrical conduits for the Senior Citizens Home.

Conclusion

Near the completion of this paper I received a phone call from Patrice Byloos, archivist for the borough of Verdun. I had spoken with him the other week requesting the final documents pertaining to demolition of the Pavilion, the letters from Hydro Québec, and the architect J.M. Dubé which I assumed must have been archived if they had been presented to and discussed by the city council. Patrice informed me that he could find no trace of these documents. We discussed the conundrums of this building: as a municipal structure certain processes were

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[51] *The Messenger* Jan. 7 1970.

skipped over such as permits for its construction and demolition, and its change of usage and multiple roles. First as dance pavilion, then as a space shared by the Pavilion Restaurant, the Verdun Yacht Club, and the Woodland Park Tennis Club, documents pertaining to the building were spread thinly throughout the collection.

My experiences in the engineers' office were very similar. They held no files specific to the Pavilion. Dossiers on the Yacht Club, the bandshell, and Woodland Park, offered a few plans in which, at very best, the Pavilion was represented by a single rectangle. Even the plans concerning the Yacht Club ended up being sketches proposing the construction of a new club house just opposite of the Pavilion, which would permit them to evacuate the undesirable structure (see Fig. 4). Patrice characterized the whole topic of the Pavilion, in French, as "flou"; it is fuzzy, vague, and blurred. True the Pavilion is a slippery subject, often avoiding any direct consideration, appearing as a simple rectangle on plan or peeking out from behind the bandstand in a photograph. It revealed itself only during brief points of contestation or during the celebration of its seasonal return. Before ending our conversation Patrice asked, with interest, if he could keep looking for material on the Pavilion. The old boardwalk remains in Verdun, though it has since been paved. It no longer traces out the shoreline, which has now been extended away from the old promenade. The stone pillars are still standing, dispersed at regular intervals; they may be easy to miss but they exist as everyday monuments. They are delimiters of another time and space of leisure and sociability along the river. Whatever the "light fantastic" was, it hasn't faded since introduced in that 1943 advertisement; it continues to beckon and entice us as the summer night breeze rolls into town each year.

Figures

Fig. 1. The Verdun Dance Pavilion with newly constructed Senior Citizens' Home in the background. *The Messenger* 14 Jan. 1970.

Fig. 2. Interior view of the Pavilion. The exposed beams were painted with a decorative pattern. The entrance facing LaSalle Boulevard can be seen to the right. Next to the entrance is what appears to be a ticket booth, while the space at the far right end of the dance floor may have housed the concessions stand. It is most likely that the bands performed on the dance floor itself. The shutters to the windows are all open. *The Guardian*, 18 June 1931.

Fig. 3. *The Guardian*, 9 May 1941.

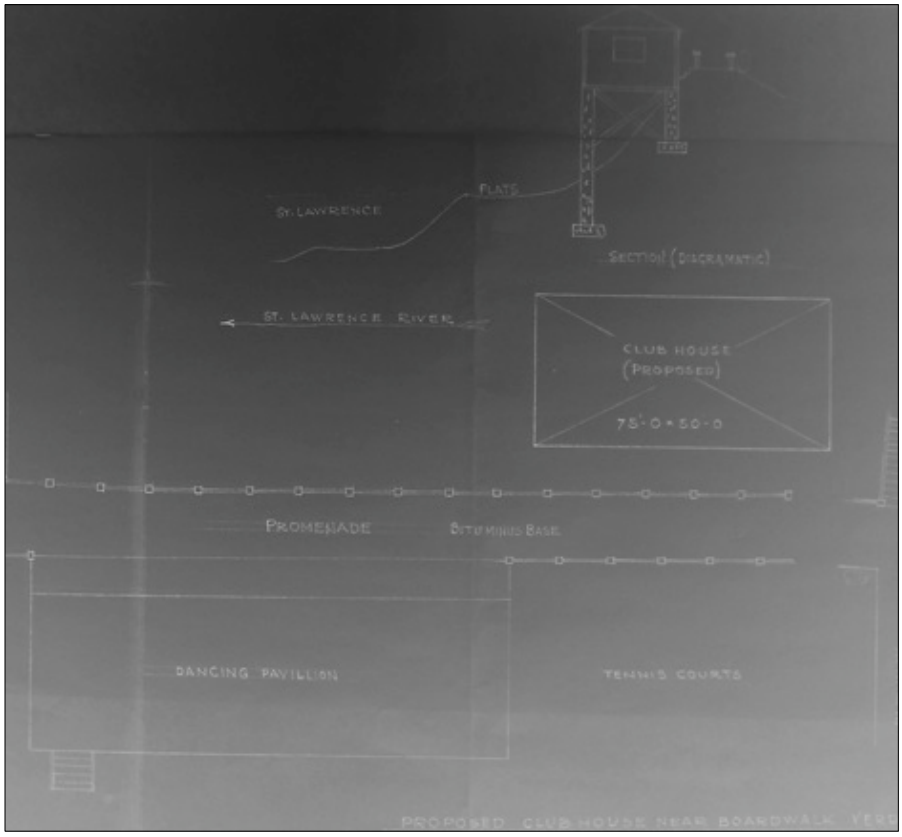

Fig. 4. Sketch submitted by Verdun Yacht Club proposing the construction of a club house opposite of the Pavilion (image inverted for legibility), 1948. Borough of Verdun Engineer's Office.

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Editor's note: Since the completion of this essay, Serge Marc Durflinger, also cited in the bibliography, below, republished his paper, "The Montreal and Verdun Zoot-Suit Disturbances of June 1944" on the Canadian Museum of Civilizations website (originally published in Serge Bernier, ed. *L'Impace de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale sur les sociétés canadienne et québecoise* (Montréal et Ottawa: UQAM et la Direction Histoire et patrimoine de la défense nationale, Ottawa, 1998): see "Military History", *Resources for Scholars: Canadian Museum of Civilizations*, 31 Aug. 2008, web (accessed 1 August 2010). Readers interested in this topic will wish to consult this source as well as those listed, below.

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