



Photo Paul Lalime, 1946 (private collection)



City of Saguenay Archives

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THE HISTORY OF ARVIDA COMBINES TECHNICAL PROWESS, RECORD-BREAKING ACHIEVEMENTS, AND GREAT FEATS OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING.

To concoct this picturesque landscape featuring such varied housing within an optimal time frame, Arvida's builders, led by engineer Harold Wake, implemented an industrial design and construction process, a corollary to the town's industrial vocation. Traditional North American wood-frame construction allowed models to proliferate thanks to an array of architectural components (such as cornices, balustrades, and doors), so that on only four foundation squares, with some variations in placement, the houses of the "city built in 135 days" give the impression of having been built individually, over the centuries. The overall planning and scope of the site justified the establishment of a sawmill, where the home components, numbered according to the models, were pre-cut, then to be distributed on the house lots and simply assembled with hammer and nails.

Arvida was completed in three main construction phases, the last beginning at the time of World War II and ending around 1950. The meticulous architectural and urban control of the construction process was such that a large number of renowned engineers, architects, and urban planners were required. They followed in each other's footsteps, including on the Arvida Planning Committee, created in 1942 by the company to assist the municipality in urban landscape management.

During the Second World War, Arvida became one of the best-kept strategic sites in Canada, equipped with anti-aircraft guns, its days punctuated by blackout exercises. Arvida's factories produced up to 90% of the aluminum of the British Empire, leading more than one commentator to say that the world would not have been the same without Arvida.



Arvida is a "company town," a planned industrial city built in 1926 by Alcoa and its subsidiary, the Aluminum Company of Canada. The result of an unprecedented industrial and avant-garde social project, it bears the name of the president of the company, American businessman and philanthropist Arthur Vining Davis, who dreamed of creating "a desirable place to live."

In this region that was then considered so remote that it was said to be "450 miles north of Boston," the massive hydroelectric potential of the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean area made an integrated aluminum plant combining the electrolytic processing of bauxite and alumina imaginable; its size was more than ten times that of the factories of the time. But rather than merely constructing ordinary housing for the workers, a city for some 25,000 people was built, with a downtown centre, shops, a hospital, churches, gardens, and schools, as well as single-family dwellings for all Arvidians, including workers, specialized employees, professionals, and merchants. More than 2,000 houses (according to 126 different models) were built from 1926 to 1950 in a picturesque landscape, designed to promote a feeling of belonging and permanence.

A true work of art, as seen in its graphic elaboration and the quality of its design, Arvida's city plan reflects an original urban planning synthesis, bringing together various advanced methods, invented and tested in both North America and Europe. Nestled around the plant at its heart, Arvida is subdivided by function and into districts delimited by the slopes of natural valleys: these "coulees" dictate street patterns and create the picturesque arrangement of the town, which is surrounded by a green belt and sprinkled with parks and gardens. The majestic downtown, with its arrow-straight main streets and regular commercial blocks, exudes modernity, completing the image of a town that was called "The Washington of the North."

Designed in 1926 by the engineer of Danish origin Hjalmar Ejnar Skougør and New York architect and town planner Harry Beardslee Brainerd, Arvida's plan also marks a milestone in the history of urban planning as it deliberately reversed the representation of the city as seat of power. Neither dominated by a church or a castle, nor hierarchized in space, Arvida is instead finely divided into thousands of residential plots, turning home ownership into freehold and, everyone being equal, abolishing typical company-town segregation based on class or race. People of more than 30 ethnic origins came to make up Arvidian society.



Photo Marianne Charland

# ARVIDA

## THE ALUMINUM CITY



GRAPHISME KR&AZ



E. J. Barotti, 1936 (private coll.)

Arvida was incorporated into the town of Jonquière in 1975, itself absorbed by the City of Saguenay in 2002. Arvida's founding company, which became Alcan in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, was acquired by Rio Tinto in 2007; its aluminum plant, retooled thanks to advanced technologies, remains active today.

Since its entry into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Arvida's social and industrial project has come to be seen as an exceptional example of urban heritage. The town has been designated as a National Historic Site of Canada and the government of Quebec has declared it a heritage site, the most important designation according to the Quebec Cultural Heritage Act. The aluminum town is a candidate for Canada's World Heritage Tentative List.



The Saguenay Inn, Library and Archives Canada



**1** The central *coulée*

A characteristic feature of the region's soil, this natural change in ground level embodies the spatial dimensions of Arvida's plan, revealing the skillful integration of nature into town planning, and defines the central area reserved for educational and religious institutions. The low-lying structures of the schools and churches (with no visual enclosures) to be found in this vast undulating parkland increase the garden-city look of the urban project.

**4** Sainte-Thérèse-de-l'Enfant-Jésus Church

Concealing its modern concrete structure under red brick cladding and an interior décor of stucco, frescoes, and stained-glass windows designed by Guido Nincheri, the church, opened for worship in 1928, is a testament to the acquisition of construction expertise enabled by the building of the gigantic plant's industrial facilities. Over the years, Irish Catholic and Orthodox worshippers have been Orthodox to celebrate their rituals in the Roman Catholic church of this multi-confessional town.

**7** The institutional nucleus and First United and St. George the Martyr churches

The Arvida Protestant and Anglican church and school sector reflects the meticulous planning behind all Arvida's construction projects, dividing the town's space into its institutional, commercial, industrial, and residential functions. The grouping formed by the two churches is characteristic of an urban-planning trend manifested in Arvida in the 1940s: the building materials, architectural décor, and layout of these buildings join forces to create a picturesque ensemble with a subtle presence in the urban landscape. Several groups of houses [of the D5 model, for example] and the site of the Saguenay Inn **6** are good examples of this phenomenon.

**9** Monseigneur-Joseph-Lévêque park

In this planned town, where hundreds of trees were planted starting in 1927, renowned landscape architects designed high-quality public spaces with an abundance of vegetation. Monseigneur-Joseph-Lévêque park is the work of Frederic Gage Todd, often referred to as the "father of Canada's landscape architects," who drew up the plans in 1946 while chairing the Arvida Planning Committee. The park was restored in 2013 in accordance with the original plans.

**10** Pot rooms

Beginning in 1939, in just 32 months, a total of 19 new pot rooms were added to the previously built half dozen, a development allowed by the comprehensive town planning process and the hundreds of hectares set aside for this industrial expansion. These are the gabled facades and chimneys of the aluminum smelters that line Boulevard du Saguenay; further to the east, the Arvida Aluminium Smelter-AP60 Technology Centre became operational in 2014.



The discoveries made by way of this brochure can be complemented by a virtual heritage tour hosted by the Centre d'histoire Arvida and accessible at [citedelaluminium.ca](http://citedelaluminium.ca). This tour is part of a larger virtual exhibit, which in addition to the visit includes an educational program dedicated to the «town built in 135 days.»

The history and memory of Arvida are also reflected in the permanent outdoor exhibit pertaining to the Arvida workers, which is scattered throughout the downtown area (during the summer season) and can also be complemented by virtual content available on site or at [memoiresarvida.uqam.ca](http://memoiresarvida.uqam.ca).

**2** Arvida's former market: the Arthur Vining Davis space and the Arvida library

Tourism information, exhibition, virtual tour.

**3** Downtown

Designed like a metropolis' downtown, Arvida's central area consists of a mall (Davis Street), a square (Davis Square), and American-style city blocks accessed by lanes and elevated on regular lots that subdivide them, thus enabling property size to be adjusted according to buyer needs. Block A **3A** and Block B **3B**, built by the company in 1926 and 1927, include four lots featuring two buildings identical in all respects except for their alternative facades, proposed as models for merchants and business owners.

**5** The Arvida cross

The cross was inaugurated in 1952, at the time of Arvida's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is made from the company town's characteristic metal and pays tribute to workers in the aluminum industry.

**6** Shipshaw hydroelectric power station

Erected in just 18 months in 1941 to support war production, this power station, the third built to supply the Arvida plants, brings to mind the important connection between the exceptional hydraulic potential of the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region and the area's industrial boom, with Arvida marking its culmination.

**8** Castner Street

Castner Street was designed as a circle, a classic composition of urban planning, in this case with houses around an oval park. The street was completed in the 1940s and brings together several models of Arvida's neo-French-Canadian houses (notably M11, G2, H2, D5, H3, M9, and J3). These models represent a continuation of the initiative undertaken by the builders of the company town as early as 1926 (see, for example, type A houses) to use traditional architectural forms as a way of giving a local and venerable look to the urban landscape and strengthening the residents' feeling of belonging.

**11** Saguenay Inn and Brittany Row apartments

Built to accommodate visitors to Arvida as well as the engineers who stayed on a temporary basis, the complex formed by the company hotel and the apartment building facing it provides an exceptional example of the neo-vernacular architecture characteristic of Arvida, drawing upon heritage and traditional architecture to mark a person's belonging to a country or region. The building now houses the aluminum operations centre, which oversees the production of all Rio Tinto Aluminum plants.

**12** The aluminum bridge

The Arvida bridge is the only road bridge completely made of aluminum; the open-spandrel deck arch structure was designed to highlight the distinctive features of this "magic metal of the 20th century," as aluminum was called back in the day. The worldwide reputation of this technical feat, a true brand image, added to the renown of Arvida in the aftermath of the Second World War.

This map shows only a small part of the town of Arvida, which covers more than 2,400 hectares.  
For more information: [arvida.saguenay.ca](http://arvida.saguenay.ca)  
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