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From Abstract to Concrete

A new home is taking shape out of the ideas and inspiration of a Saint John couple and their architects. BY SUZANNE ROBICHEAU

March

The team is now in place—Acre Architects, led by Monica Adair and Stephen Kopp; the engineers; and general contracting firm The Urban Farmer. In preparation for clearing the site, a geotechnical investigation will determine the best route to deliver utility services. But until the digging starts, there's no way to know how much rock needs to be excavated. Work begins on a 100-metre winding driveway from the road to the site.

Early April

The driveway is in, finally. Digging has been surprisingly easy. There has been only one change in the route, when an imposing layer of rock had to be accommodated. Meanwhile, the trenches being dug for the utilities have unearthed more obstacles. Besides trees, there are pipes, sandstone and a surprising amount of rubble from an old brick foundation that have to be removed. As excavators arrive to begin the next step in “taming” this wild site, Robert envisions his new

home, picturing himself “upstairs,” thanks to an early architectural rendering that depicted him there. “That’s the power of an image,” observes Adair.

Late April

Work is progressing—but the wettest spring on record in New Brunswick is causing unexpected delays. The excavation work for the foundation and basement level stretches into its fourth week. “There is rock where we didn’t want it, and no rock where we need it,” says Adair.

May

The building permit has been issued. It’s wonderful news for Judith and Robert—but not for some of the neighbours. They’re unhappy about losing access to a long-vacant lot they had come to view as a local park and nature preserve in the midst of the city. Most of them come around; a few do not.



[Part 3: THE BUILD]

One year ago, in the winter 2011 issue of *International Architecture & Design*, we introduced you to Robert Moore and Judith Mackin, who had purchased a rugged, steeply pitched lot in downtown Saint John with a view of the Bay of Fundy. Inspired by this still-natural green space in the heart of the city, the couple planned to build a new, modern house on it.

Enter Monica Adair and Stephen Kopp, principals of New Brunswick firm Acre Architects. They worked with Judith and Robert (*above*) to create a design—a multi-layered process that required going back to the drawing board when it was determined that the original design on the intended site would prove too costly and difficult to build. A second site was agreed upon, and a second design was developed. In the spring 2011 issue of *IA&D*, we presented their fully developed plans for their dream home. And as spring got underway in Saint John, the building began.

Writer Suzanne Robicheau has been tracking Judith and Robert’s project since the early design meetings with Kopp and Adair. As the excavation and building progressed over the spring, summer and fall of 2011, she monitored the house’s advances—and its setbacks—and witnessed first-hand its impressive, steady materialization. Here, Suzanne shares her record of the proceedings and brings *IA&D* readers up to date on the state of Judith and Robert’s dream home. —*The Editors*

Early April



Early July



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY ACRE ARCHITECTS/
PORTRAIT BY BRUCE MACNEIL

FROM THE GROUND UP



Early June

Excavation continues and the concrete footings are prepared for the house. It turns out that the digging can't go as deep as planned because of the rock. Instead, fill is required to get to a new grade; the house will sit a few feet higher than originally specified. The architects are unfazed. "Developing a site as wild as this one demands flexibility," notes Kopp.

Late June

The ICF foundation is poured for the main house. (ICF—insulating concrete form—is a system of formwork for concrete that provides permanent building insulation for energy-efficient reinforced-concrete walls.) The basement level is now complete. Revisiting the ground conditions with the engineers, the architects decide to change the elevation of the garage to reduce the amount of fill required. Everyone is tired of breaking and moving rock.

Early July

Framing for the main level begins. The garage foundation is set and a local teen mistakes the newly created space for a dirt bike arena. On a brighter note, a landscape design, developed through a charrette led by Acre and landscape architect Martha Desbiens, generates excitement all around. The immediate plans are to build gabion walls (retaining walls made of thick galvanized-wire "cages" filled with stone or sand) using rocks found on-site, a reflecting pool, a mini dog park for Judith and Robert's Boston terriers, plus a large deck for parties and as a possible venue for performances of Robert's plays.

Late July

The framing for the main level is complete. The walls for the basement level of the house have been erected and the main-floor joists are in place. The driveway has been prepped up to the appropriate level for crushed rock and pavement. Services are installed and are ready to be connected to the city main.

Early August

The subfloor on the main level is finished and a few pre-assembled walls have been erected. For Judith and Robert, it is the first time that the house asserts itself as "real." Explains Robert, "It was a deeply moving experience to be able to be inside, on the first floor, and have a physical sense of what it would be like to inhabit this house. Judith phoned Stephen to share her excitement and she was in tears. It took Stephen a few minutes to realize that there was nothing wrong."

Late August

Steel installation continues and the house starts to take shape, albeit in a skeletal form. The steel framework achieves some of the project's larger spans and carries the load of the large windows and the extended cantilever off the second-floor living area.

September



September

This is a month of transformation. The Urban Farmer team of general contractors erects wall panels prefabricated in their shop because of the damp conditions at the construction site. On the upper level, the flooring joists are installed and the subfloor is hammered into place. The upper walls and the steel framework are now also complete. No one is sorry to see the end of a summer that sent 85 days of rain.

Early October

Vandals do some minor damage and thieves make off with a time-lapse camera and some building supplies. Roof framing is complete for the green roof and deck areas. The electrical pole is up and the power is installed. The snow-fence siding (*right*) from Wyoming hasn't arrived yet, but it is en route. Close to midnight on October 8, Kopp and Adair meet Judith and Robert at the site to celebrate Judith's birthday. "By moonlight the rock was amazing," says Adair. "[When we're] standing at the crux of the garage pivot and looking in one direction, the site is so wild and remote. Turn in another direction and the project has an urban view of city lights."

Late October

As fall progresses and the trees shed their leaves, the view seems to expand. Adair remains hopeful that the gabion walls will be built before snow falls. Still to be done: the roof membrane, siding, windows and interior work. The house is expected to be watertight by mid-November, but completion of the house has been pushed to the new year. Judith and Robert aren't holding their breath. "Given the number of setbacks we've had, we aren't relying on these dates," admits Robert. No matter. He and Judith are confident that by Judith's next birthday they will be comfortably settled in their new home.

Late October



Saint John, N.B.

UPCYCLED SIDING

The siding for the house was harvested from a Wyoming snow fence—a structure that forces drifting snow to accumulate in a controlled manner. The boards have weathered to a rusty cinnamon colour that captures the metallic properties found in the local Saint John rock. The fence company had documented the original home of the boards and the landscape they stood on. After enduring many storms, the boards will live out their next life in a more protected landscape. —S.R.



Monica Adair and Stephen Kopp of Acre Architects

VITAL STATS

Property

2½ acres

Location

An infill lot in downtown Saint John, N.B.

Occupants

Owners Judith Mackin and Robert Moore. Their home will accommodate a family that includes Robert's 14-year-old daughter, Alexandra, who lives with them most weekends; Judith's 20-year-old son, Robyn, who visits often; Robert's oldest daughter, Jessica, and her fiancé, who are regular visitors. —S.R.

IA&D is following Judith Mackin and Robert Moore as they design and build their dream home. In future issues, we'll report on the interior finishing and completion of the project.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY ACRE ARCHITECTS/PORTRAIT (OPPOSITE) BY BRUCE MACNEIL