

Acre Architects push the boundaries with Building East by Hilary Paige Smith

The potential of a city

Emerging firm Acre Architects is breaking new ground in the province, in every sense of the phrase.

The Port City company, led by

Monica Adair and Stephen Kopp, is known for breaking convention and innovative design. The firm's projects, in partnership with some local artists, are being showcased at the Saint John Arts Centre this season. Building East, curated by Acre, is an exhibition that pushes the boundaries of traditional architecture and introduces Canada's original city to original, more challenging designs.

"While we're in love with the city, we're also in love with the potential of how much more it could actually be today," Adair said, adding

that the firm has an appreciation for Saint John's rich heritage architecture. "We're forward thinking."

The City of Saint John Gallery is lined with photographs of Acre's completed projects, taken by Mark Hemmings. They present different perspectives and takes on the architecture, evoking different emotions and new feelings about the work. Photographer Thaddeus Holownia also has two photographs on display: one before a project broke ground and the other mid-construction.

Adair said she finds these moments exciting because they're full of potential and vulnerability. Local photo-

grapher Sean McGrath also details the model-making process with a series of candid shots. His contribution helps people understand the research and creative process that goes into architecture.

The models themselves are on display in the centre of the City Gallery, white replicas on glossy red tables. "I think there's something really pleasurable about exploring at that scale," Adair said, showcasing a model of the gallery and the exhibition itself. She said tangible models offer something computer-generated models don't. At Acre, they work with both.

"We don't choose one over the other, but we do think it's something that

a computer doesn't offer. The ability to feel it, see it."

Adair said the work is meant to raise questions about concepts of familiarity and expectations.

"It may be straightforward in the presentation in that it's photography, but I think the works themselves are all going to be challenging," she said. "If they're not, then I don't think we're doing our job."

For Acre Architects, Building East is an exploration. Adair said Atlantic Canada should have an identity built on its archi-

ture. She said there is an opportunity for this coast to define itself, and not in the way that is expected.

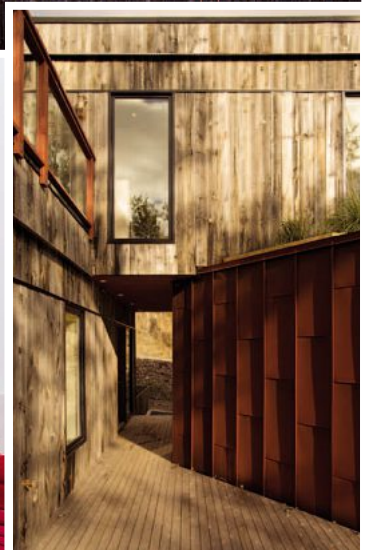
"We can get beyond lighthouses and dories, which are important, but we can start to define ourselves by who we are today and what we want to be," she said. "What we do today becomes our legacy and our future."

Adair said the exhibition has already gotten great reviews from the community.

She said they hope to tour Building East across the region in other cities like Fredericton and Moncton, but she's also interested to see how rural communities respond to the work.



Monica Adair and Stephen Kopp of Acre Architects have been compiling photographs of their work and creating physical scale models for the exhibit, Building East, which is now on display at the Saint John Arts Centre. The exhibit focuses on architecture that's unusual for Atlantic Canada, and hopes to push some boundaries. Photo credit: Sean McGrath. Some of the projects being focused on in the exhibit include the In Transit bus stop (top right); just below is Into the Wild - the first residential property the firm has worked on; The Hugo Bureau can be seen to the immediate right; and an image of Tinker's Orchard is located top left. Photo credit: Mark Hemmings.



ACRE ARCHITECTS

Acre Architects has been in business for the past two years. Monica Adair, originally from Saint John, and Stephen Kopp are both master of architecture graduates from the University of Toronto. They came to the Port City and set up shop, incorporating fellow professionals like award-winning architect and author John Leroux. Some of their projects include Into the Wild, a bright contemporary home in the heart of the city; the In Transit bus stop and public art piece; and Tinker's Orchard, a cider house and headquarters for a local apple orchard. Acre Architects is also the firm behind the design for Majumder Manor, a boutique hotel project for comedian Shaun Majumder in his rural Newfoundland hometown. Majumder Manor is the subject of a documentary series currently airing on W Network. Visit theacre.ca for more info.

BUILDING EAST

Saint John Building East opened on Jan. 18 and runs until March 15 at the City of Saint John Gallery, Saint John Arts Centre, 20 Hazen Ave., 633-4870.