

A firm case

Saint John architecture firm Acre Architects recaps its first few years and offers a blueprint for the future of regional construction with the exhibition *Building East*. Story by Mike Landry

Monica Adair used to drive past New Brunswick Housing's 180-unit townhouse complex in north end Saint John, called the Rifle Range, on her way uptown. Its dispirited design made things challenging on days when the co-founder of Acre Architects was trying to get inspired for projects.

If Adair, an architect interested in new projects, can't be inspired by her built surroundings, she understands why other people in the Port City struggle with understanding new architecture.

To address this and provide precedents for the city, and New Brunswick/Atlantic Canada at large, Acre Architects has put together *Building East*, an exhibition of the firm's work to date, which opens Jan. 18, at the Saint John Arts Centre.

"If you're not given the chance to see things differently, then how can you, especially in architecture?" Adair asks. "Fashion is somewhat accessible, and people have a hard time with that, let alone in their buildings that cost millions of dollars in investment."

Acre Architects was founded in 2009. It features a collective of collaborators anchored by partners Adair, her husband Stephen Kopp, and associate architect John Leroux. Last summer, the firm was part of the Canadian entry to the prestigious Venice Biennale in Architecture in 2012.

Building East will feature scale models of the firm's projects, as well as photographic documentation – from Mark Hemmings, Sean McGrath and Thaddeus Holownia – of the various stages of the firm's process.

The exhibition is the firm's attempt to articulate the ideals and vision behind its mission to revitalize architecture in the region.

"We want to give a glimpse that it's managing environment, sustainability, engineering. It's managing the aesthetics, the site, the regional components and the clients desires," Adair says. "There are all these factors that lead into: what is architecture?"

"We're not explaining everything. It's not like we're taking a project and showing how it came to be. We're just giving parts of it."

The firm had discussed whether its was jumping the gun in exhibiting a retrospective of Acre's work not yet five years into existence, but felt it crucial it be done.

"By no means are these are final projects," Adair says. "We have so much more we want to do. But architecture is not being discussed, and contemporary architecture is not even being looked at. I would argue that contemporary art at a high level is not being matched here to a national calibre, and I do not want to

practise architecture that does not meet that benchmark."

The firm selected its project for the Venice Biennale in Architecture to illustrate the invite to *Building East*. The abstract-looking model "embodies the way (new architecture) has to be based on an idea."

"It has to be based on an idea that's bigger than aesthetics, and that's not the driving force in architecture by any means," Adair says.

She points to one of Chicago's slogans, "What Chicago makes, makes Chicago," as an inspiration for thinking beyond what is, toward what could be. Adair says she wants to encourage developers and citizens not to settle when it comes to the built landscape.

"If we don't demand the most, then that's what we put in, and that's complacency," she says. "It does matter. We are what we create, and if we don't do something with that high value, we're going to lose out in the end."

Adair clarifies that this doesn't mean always doing something innovative, new and different. It's a question of being mindful of everything, from the smallest detail up. She says this is a trait on the

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rise with individuals, but not with the municipal mindsets.

"If you're willing to say, 'Good enough,' or 'That's all we can do,' or if you're not willing to look at the potential of all the factors that are there, those (buildings) really leave scars on our city. Spaces that matter, look at who we are, take into account the site, its history and the objective of the program."

"If you don't at least try, we're going to end up with a city that everyone says, 'It's OK, because they're in Atlantic Canada – they're trying.' We shouldn't have that. We should be able to say, 'This is a place

architecture



Three Acre Architects-designed homes completed in 2012 (clockwise from left): Into the Wild, in Saint John; Tinkers, on the Kingston Peninsula; and Martinon Monter, in Saint John. PHOTOS: MARK HEMMINGS

that inspires."

She knows people in the region are tied to heritage ideals that established our cities, but insists that new buildings can speak that vernacular as well.

"What is it in those inlays and those incredibly detailed hinges? What's in there is the craft, the idea of someone giving a thoughtful level to the details. We often touch on that when we try to give luxury. And we try to do that, but with something that's more approachable today."

"Those details, they're something that when you touch resonates with you. It's the idea of actually finishing things on sides you don't see."

"We know in our hearts that this is not enough. And this means we have to take charge and lead to where we want to be. This city, we know we're not exercising our potential ... Trying to find meaning is built on the place, where it comes from. I want Saint John, I want New Brunswick to feel that they can lead that."

Adair pauses, looking at one of the photographs that will be part of *Building East*, it's of the firm's recently completed project, *Tinkers*, an apple farm on the Kingston Peninsula. She knows not everyone can have that home, but people should be aware that it can exist in the province.

"People don't think they have influence on architecture, that they can influence developers. But they can. This is their city ... It can't be just about the people that live within that image, or acquire it – it's about how does it affect all of us and how can we be a part of it?"

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Building East will be on display at the City of Saint John Gallery, located in the Saint John Arts Centre, 20 Peel Plaza, from Jan. 18 to March. 16. There is an opening reception on Jan. 18 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.



Three photographs from Acre Architects' intensive model-building session in advance of its exhibition, *Building East*. Monica Adair (left), John Leroux and Stephen Kopp are in the top photo. PHOTOS: SEAN MCGRATH

Out of step with the world



TOM SMART
the curator

On a characteristically dreary Vancouver day, several years ago, I was in a musty storage vault near English Bay.

In that tiny room, I was given a glimpse of the world transformed into a radiant blaze of colour symbolizing the emancipation of the soul.

Not much larger than a one-car garage, the vault was packed with dozens of canvases painted late in the life of Group of Seven artist Lawren Harris. Rather than highly stylized landscapes of mountains, islands, lakes or icebergs, these paintings were vibrant abstractions, more expressions of pure energy than anything else.

I was reminded of this visit while reading the first biography of Harris, *Inward Journey: The Life of Lawren Harris* by Hamilton author, James King (Thomas Allen, 2012). The biography gives a very different perspective on this Canadian artist and icon of nationalism than has appeared in any of the previously issued group studies of his artistic brethren who, a century ago, established an indigenous school of landscape painting that plumbed the soul of a young, emerging Canada.

King's perspective is much more than the traditional description of an artist's output, parsed for clues pointing to stylistic influences and the development of a personal expressive mode. King does this, but he also lifts his subject's story by telling other truths about this complex, complicated man whose restraint and courage marked him as both an individual and a man of his times.

Harris possessed an unusually quizzical mind. Born into an industrious family who regarded worldly attainments as testaments of moral fibre, Harris went against type. The beneficiary of a legacy that was a boon to maintaining his high social status, he looked beyond the seen and sensed to glimpse something essential in life and art. The natural world reflected signs of eternity and that elusive

quality of perfection.

Landscapes were windows to see the origins and purpose of the universe and life. Under his brush, Harris gave us some of the most expressively revealing and boldly experimental landscape paintings, which still cast a spell over us. Chilling and sensuous, a Harris painting is much more than what is described

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through medium on canvas. His painterly alchemy transforms material and view into an event, more journey than destination. The attentive viewer is transported to a natural and non-denominational

state of grace.

However, as King reveals, Harris was not satisfied with standing still creatively or in any other way. In the courage to develop artistically, he also pushed the boundaries of manners and morals governing the proper Upper Canadian society in which he moved so deftly, yet which also restrained him intellectually and in the way he lived his life.

Harris embraced the strange beliefs of Theosophy, a quasi-religious philosophy that sought to unveil hidden meaning in the stuff of nature. Divine revelation was something that could be gained by combining a deep understanding of esoteric religions, the occult, with a profoundly contemplative frame of mind. The path to enlightenment offered by Theosophy opened creative avenues for Harris, and for many others of his generation looking for alternative ways to live in the dynamic period from the late 1920s to the outbreak of the Second World War.

King expertly traces this little known stage of Harris's life in which he abandoned a measure of artistic and critical success as an artist, and a very comfortable life. Grace, pure knowledge of the mysteries of nature and the divine, these drove his creative pursuits as he discarded pictorialism for symbolic abstraction as

a painter. They also caused him to turn his back on his marriage, take up with his friend's wife, and flee Canada for the U.S., where the process of re-creating himself and his art met fertile ground in New Hampshire and New Mexico.

In short, Harris forsook conformity in all its fashions and embarked on a journey of discovery. By channelling the energy he felt in the world around him, and by charting a kind of spiritual progression to a higher, extraordinary level of existence, he purged his life and his art of comfortable manners and modes. Abstraction and freedom from accepted conventions guided him on his quest for truth – to be attained as a consequence of a self-directed life, and embraced as an inward cleansing of heart and soul.

The paintings I saw stacked in that Vancouver storage locker exploded any preconceived notions I had that Harris was content with the life he inherited in the shadow of the First World War. The paintings that shone in that dim vault testified to a mind that found salvation in release. The purity of their colours radiated with the energy of the cosmos that originated in Harris's soul.

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