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GREATER SAINT JOHN

"It's going to be a landmark for the city." JODY MCCAIRNS

DEVELOPER SEES PROMISE IN 131-YEAR-OLD UPTOWN CHURCH



APRIL CUNNINGHAM CONVERSATIONS

Inside the Gothic Arches, the air is musty and cold. A trickle of light shines through massive, intricate stained-glass windows and pews are stacked along the building's edge. It's been years since anyone worshipped inside this 131-year-old church, located on the highest piece of land in the uptown.

But if Jody McCairns's vision becomes a reality, it would become the home of 75 modern condominiums in a new development he believes could change the face of architecture in the Maritimes.

McCairns purchased the property at the corner of Wentworth and Princess streets about a year ago, moving here from Toronto with his wife, Lisa Santos, to put down roots and take on his first independent construction project.

"There were a lot of sleepless nights before, just kind of wondering if it was the right decision, and a lot of sleepless nights after," McCairns, 37, said of the purchase. "But no regrets. None at all."

He has now formed Ethos Development Group with a partner and works from the kitchen table of his Orange Street apartment. But for now, all the focus is on getting the Gothic Arches condominium project off the ground.

Working with Acre Architects in Saint John, McCairns recently released conceptual drawings of the new development, expected to cost between \$15- and \$20-million.

The drawings are striking, combining old and new.

"It's certainly going to be the pre-eminent building of the uptown. It's going to be a landmark for the city," McCairns says, standing in the vast empty space of the church, where the ceilings are 25



PHOTO: SUBMITTED

metres high. "It's going to be a talking point, whether you love it or hate it."

The plan – still a concept, since zoning and engineering issues have not been finalized – is to construct a 10-storey tower next to the old church.

Construction of the tower would require McCairns to tear down a structure on Leinster Street, dating back to 1880, which used to be a school.

The tower would have 51 units, with another 24 inside the old church.

There would be parking available underground, including under the church, which is "going to be a bit of an engineering feat." The design follows what McCairns sees as a global trend of repurposing historic buildings with a modern twist. He has seen about 20 such church retrofit projects in Toronto.

"They've been able to breathe a new vitality into the buildings. They're too important to our built heritage. Too important architecturally, and they're just too beautiful to demolish," he says.

It would be cheaper to build on an empty plot of land, but McCairns – a former construction project manager with a background in business development – said the extra money and effort should pay off.

"The end result is a completely unique space that I think is going to completely change the way people in Saint John

view the limits to some of these challenging sites," he says. "Saint John has a wealth of under-utilized, beautiful antique buildings, and I think this might encourage repurposing and redevelopment."

The idea is to offer high-end, modern condos while keeping the historic flavour of the church, which is situated next to a heritage district. The softwood pews will be part of each unit. Mahogany and other wood salvaged from the construction might be used for elements such as kitchen islands.

Thick columns in the old church and original stain glass (designed by a Canadian "master," J.C. Spence, McCairns says) might also become a part of some units, and upgrades will be available, such as lantern-style lights that now hang from the towering church ceiling.

Prices are expected to vary depending on the size and style of the unit. The more historic units will likely be more expensive, he says.

"I don't think that we want to make this from a price-point, out of reach for most people," McCairns says. "We're definitely going to be building higher-end units, but they simply cannot be luxury units solely because we don't feel the market can bear that right now."

If all goes as planned, McCairns is confident construction could start in a year.



Jody McCairns, owner of the Gothic Arches, is planning to develop the old church into condos. PHOTO: KATE BRAYDON/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

He said the age of the building does not give him the luxury of time.

He hopes to market to both locals and energy sector professionals who may move here to work on such projects as the proposed west-east oil pipeline and marine terminal, examples of anticipated projects that gave him confidence to move ahead.

According to property records, McCairns paid \$100,000 for the church, which was in danger of being demolished three years ago. He said "time will tell" if it was a good deal.

But one thing's for sure – with sky-high real estate prices, there's no way the he could have taken on such a start-up project in a market like Toronto, he says.

As the wind howls on a grey November day, McCairns only sees light in the dim, cold church.

"What's not to like?" he says.

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