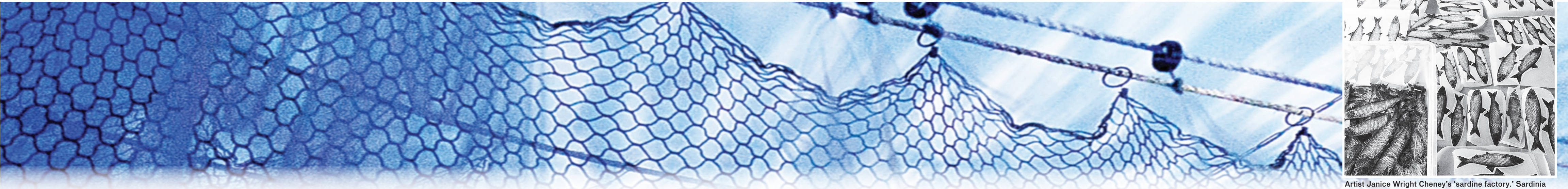


salon focus



Artist Janice Wright Cheney's 'sardine factory.' Sardinia uses handmade, life-sized recycled plastic sardines. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

# A place of magic

In partnership with Saint John firm Acre Architects, Fredericton artist Janice Wright Cheney will be transforming one of the Port City's most underused urban areas. These artists are reimagining our shared spaces during Third Shift, a night of immersive art. By Karen Pinchin

It's around noon on a Wednesday in July, and four people – architects Monica Adair, Stephen Kopp and Kale Harper, plus Fredericton artist Janice Wright Cheney – are lying on their backs in front of Saint John City Hall. A fast-walking woman, wearing a pantsuit and carrying a briefcase, shoots the group a weird look and veers around them but they don't seem to notice: their attention is on the smooth, undulating cantilevered ceiling over this open terrace, and they're seeing the future.

If everything goes according to plan, on the night of Aug. 18, the collaborative installation Hotel Sardinia: The Next Progression will take over this glass-and-concrete space as part of the third annual Third Shift art festival. And while viewers will experience a lush undersea universe of gorgeous projections, shimmering soundscapes and colourful inflatable couches, the questions nestled within the work are profound: Who has the right to public space, but also public resources? What do we owe the past, but also to the next generation? What can we learn from millions of fish, swimming in an imaginary ocean, wheeling and hurtling toward what lies ahead?

Born out of Wright Cheney's 2016 artist residency at the Tides Institute in Eastport, Maine, Sardinia is an immersive piece based around a looped underwater video of sardines. Originally developed for exhibition within a dilapidated church, it was inspired by Eastport's historically vibrant sardine fishing and canning industry, which started collapsing in the 1970s from overfishing and the growing popularity of canned tuna. Its last working

cannery closed in 2010.

"The story of the fisheries, of Eastport, of abundance and decline, that's our story too," says Wright Cheney, who teaches at Fredericton's New Brunswick College of Craft and Design. In her research, she discovered that many small New Brunswick fishing communities, from Grand Manan to Saint John, historically sent fish to Eastport for processing. During boom times, a plane used to go up and spot massive schools of fish along the coast.

"Instead of fishermen going out aimlessly, hoping to run into them, now they knew the exact co-ordinates," says Wright Cheney, describing one school a photographer saw from a plane that was 35 miles long, 7 miles wide and 7 miles deep. "Isn't that incredible? And this was the use of technology that led to overfishing. And why not, right?"

For Wright Cheney, who explores themes of wilderness and our relationship with nature in her art, Sardinia is an imaginary kingdom, a conceptual what-if of a place where sardines still form free-wheeling balls and where populations were never over-fished. It's set to an undulating soundscape made by her son, David Cheney, in collaboration with Fredericton musician Charlie Harding, and surrounded by hanging layers of rope, tulle and fishing nets dotted with handmade, life-sized recycled plastic sardines. Sardinia is simultaneously nostalgic and futuristic, and that rang true for Acre Architects, who put together the group's proposal for Third Shift.

"There's this nostalgia for when there were so many people in Saint John, and



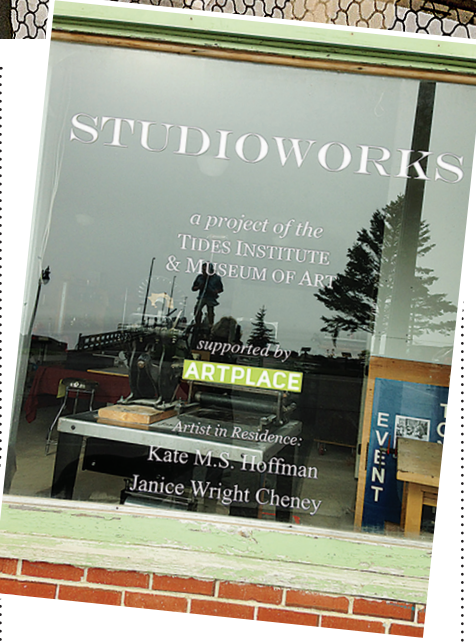
Fredericton artist Janice Wright Cheney works on Sardinia. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

things were so great. There's also this nostalgia for a time where there was this abundance in the fisheries. This is a fictitious Hotel Sardinia, a place of magic where everything is in abundance, in that moment of revival. We're not looking at where things went wrong in the fisheries and in urban renewal, but of a promise of something greater," says Adair. "They were dreamers. Now we need to actually make it happen."

During the festival, for five hours between 7 p.m. and midnight on Aug. 18, Saint Johners will have opportunity to reimagine their city via 14 contemporary art projects in "vacant and under-utilized areas," according to Emily Saab, Third Space Gallery's executive director and an assisting co-ordinator for the festival. She says Hotel Sardinia was a perfect fit for this year's theme of time, transience and occupancy.

"We recognize that Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation takes places within unceded territory of the Wolastoqiyik, Mi'kmaq and Passamaquoddy First Nations, as well as in Canada's first incorporated city, so we really want to investigate time, and really think about this 150-year-plus context," says Saab, who says this year's jury really aimed for a diverse range of art and artists, including Indigenous voices. "The history of this area is far beyond 150 years and Hotel Sardinia responds really well in that local context."

With Saint John's city hall set to move from its current location, Kopp says this collaboration was a great opportunity for Acre to stretch beyond the bricks-and-wood revitalization and infill projects on which they're building much of their



Sardinia was born out of artist Janice Wright Cheney's 2016 residency at the Tides Institute in Eastport, Maine. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

local reputation, and shift the focus toward the largely failed promise of modernism in Saint John. And so, the piece is also named for Progression, the fibreglass sculpture of graduated red, orange and yellow vertical slabs on a dark grey background by Claude Roussell that hangs above the plaza. The work was commissioned in 1971, the year city hall moved to this location, and installed in 1972.

"Although some bad moves happened in the '60s and '70s, like destroying this whole block, it's still a part of our past. Exploring that is more interesting for us," says Kopp, standing on the plaza, gesturing towards a shuttered bank branch behind him. "We don't want to get Saint John stuck in a pattern of only fixing up brick buildings, and we don't want to recreate the past. We're looking to what's



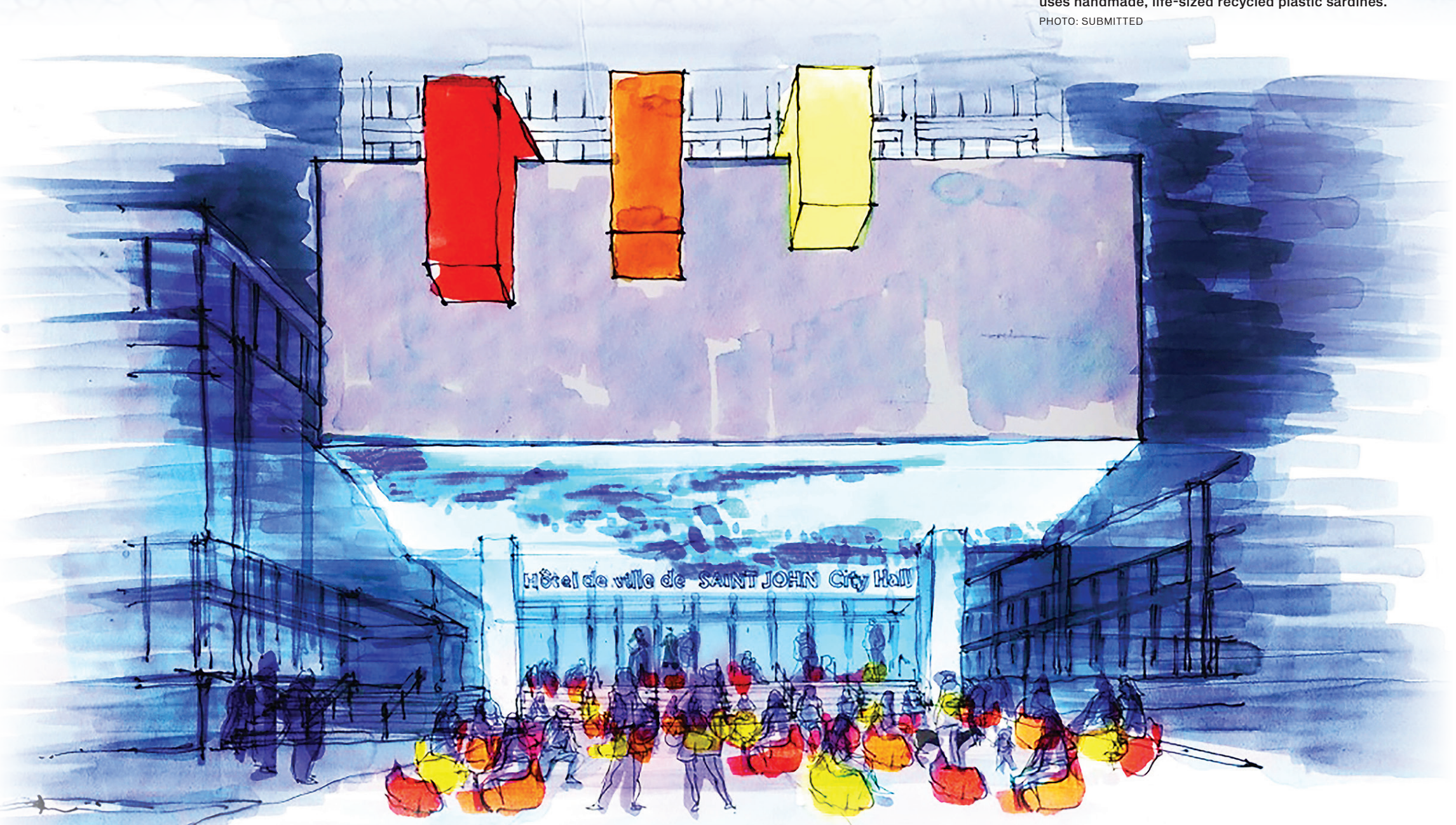
"There's this nostalgia for when there were so many people in Saint John, and things were so great."

MONICA ADAIR

new. In a way, this is a test for us." The festival is also growing this year and reaching beyond its comfort zone of Canterbury Street. "We're not straying super-far but we are expanding," says Saab. "Projects are going to be going all the way down to the waterfront, and on King Street, which we've never done before."

Today, the current city hall site is awkward, its concrete slabs barren and unadorned, and two narrow, empty escalators churn in the tiny interior lobby. Most people, from office workers to teenagers, either walk quickly across the space or avoid it altogether, choosing to walk on the other side of the street. But where some see urban blight, Adair sees an underutilized public space bristling with potential. "Roussell, when he did his piece, he said that architecture needs art as a way to activate it," says Adair. "For this 'next progression,' we're saying that this building needs to turn to art to recreate its architecture. Hopefully people are going to see this place again, for the first time."

Her husband, Kopp, keeps threatening to open a coffee shop, says Adair, and thinks this sprawling patio would make an incredible European-style terrace, with bistro tables and a little bit of landscaping. "For Stephen, if it's not going to



The concept art for for Hotel Sardinia. PHOTO: ACRE ARCHITECTS

be a squash club it's going to be a café," she says with a laugh. "It's a great public plaza, close to the bus, you're in the centre of everything, including the boardwalk."

But can art and architecture transform perceptions of public space, and our obligations to our neighbours, our planet and its resources? "You don't want to be the person who comes in from away, saying look what happened here and shame on you, that's not what it's about. And I was thinking about that in Eastport as well," says Wright Cheney. "This piece is just asking people to consider, to reflect, back to a time of their grandparents, of their parents. It's our history."

Sometimes, she says, it's simply a matter of changing perspective. "This is about Eastport, but now it's also going to be about Saint John and the citizens of Saint John and their relationship with their city and its building and spaces," she says. "These works accrue in meaning for me. Now it's going to have this whole other layer."

For Acre, engaging with Third Shift is an annual statement, a chance to communicate their vision of their city to their neighbours and community. "It's easier to inspire than it is to fight," says Adair. "All you have in a city is your memories. It doesn't matter if a million people live in this city; if you can create something that affects the way you feel about your city, the city is that."

By creating this magical kingdom of Sardinia, under the hulking remains of a faded piece of futuristic art from a past era, they're hoping one night of magic can help reimagine shared space, shared resources and shared destiny. "Even people who missed Third Shift the first year talk about this magical night that they missed. But they weren't there," says Adair. "If you can create a memory, then it is forever that."



Progression, by Claude Roussell, on the facade of Saint John City Hall PHOTO: TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL ARCHIVE



Sardinia is set to an undulating soundscape made by the artist's son, David Cheney, in collaboration with Fredericton musician Charlie Harding. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



A building in Eastport, Maine, from when the town enjoyed a booming fishery industry. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



Stephen Kopp, from left, Janice Wright Cheney, Monica Adair and Kale Harper examine the cantilevered ceiling at Saint John City Hall. PHOTO: KAREN PINCHIN

