

Acre Architects Designing Apartment Complex That Will Replace ‘Jellybean Buildings’

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Image: courtesy of Hemmings House Pictures.

SAINT JOHN – The nonprofit housing group building a mixed-income apartment complex at the corner of Union Street and Wellington Row has hired a local firm to design a project they believe will win the hearts and minds of even those who were upset to see the “Jellybean” buildings torn down last spring.

Stephen Kopp, a partner at [Acre Architects](#), the Saint John firm that won the tender [issued last April](#), says [Saint John Non Profit Housing](#) wants them to design a signature building for that site.

“They want to push the envelope on what people think of low-cost housing,” said Kopp in a recent interview. “That excited us. Some people just want to put up a box and get subsidized units. Cost is always a major concern with a project like this, but they want to do something really interesting, really beautiful, fits the community, fits the scale of the neighbourhood.

“They want to keep the construction costs where they can be competitive, but at the same time, they don’t want this be an average building. They want this to be the best housing in the city.”

Lisa Keenan, the president of Saint John Non Profit Housing, says the location is ideal for people of all income levels.

“It’s a great place,” said Keenan. “You can walk across the street to go to work in Brunswick Square. You can go to the City Market. You have a lot of facilities in that area where you really don’t need a car. You can just walk to them.”

Keenan is also encouraged by the other developments in the Wellington Row/Union Street area. She says their housing project will be a “gem” in a part of the Uptown in the midst of a period of revitalization.

“There is quite a bit of activity within the last year with the building of the new liquor store, and a couple of business people have purchased buildings in that area and are going through with renovations,” she said. “I think it’s really going to be a gem as far as the city is concerned. A lot of people use that street when they drive into work. So it’s going to be a very happening place and I think that will be good for the city as a whole.”

Kopp says Acre – an award-winning firm that has been involved in Uptown [renovation and design projects](#) like Picaroons and Port City Royal – loves both “the challenge of creating a place where people want to live” and being part of the revitalization of an important uptown street.

“We can make a difference in people’s lives,” he said. “It has an impact on multiple levels – one for the immediate area, spurring change on the street, and for the people [who will live] there.”

Kopp highlights the developments that are already complete or underway on Wellington Row – the liquor store, the Fundy Engineering building and the Cooke acquisition of the old synagogue.

“It’s going to be back to being a really nice street. It’s a walkable street,” said Kopp. “This building will [also] be seen from King and Germain, which is one of the pivotal intersections in Saint John.”



Image: courtesy of Hemmings House Pictures.

Keenan and Kopp say the building will have as many 40 apartments, a 50/50 mix of subsidized and market-price one- and two-bedroom apartments. They also plan to have a commercial tenant on the ground floor – something like a restaurant says Keenan.

They won't know for sure, though, until the board approves a final design and funding partners are in place. They hope to have designs finalized in the next few months and begin construction by the end of the year.

Keenan says they hope to complete the building within two years and anticipate a great demand when it opens. Saint John Non Profit Housing has other fully occupied buildings uptown like the [Admiral Beatty Complex](#) and [Leinster Court](#).

"We have waiting lists at all of our buildings," said Keenan, "and a couple of people have specifically said they want to live in [the new] building because of its location. We are fairly confident it will be fully rented once the project is complete."

There will be considerable enthusiasm for this new project, but Keenan and Kopp are nonetheless aware that many people in the city loved the "Jellybean" buildings and didn't want to see them torn down for a new development.

Kopp said they are focused on designing a building that will suit the neighbourhood and get everyone excited.

"The past is what it is now," said Kopp. "Our challenge is always to make something that fits into the neighbourhood. It's inspired by the past but still creates something that's a [step] forward ... It's hard to predict how the community will react but I think people are eager to see something happen.

"I think people will react in a positive way. We want them to be excited about it. The people that were into the Jellybean [buildings], I think they're going to be pleased with what we're going to do."

Keenan is confident they'll win over most people with the new building.

"Hopefully the people that are upset with the demolition of the Jellybean buildings will come on board," she said. "We're doing the best that we can with the project and I think that a majority of the people will be very happy with the new project. We can't go back, we just have to keep our eyes on going forward, and come up with a nice design that fits in well with the neighbourhood."