

Spirit Place Concept, Height, Stack Up Just Fine

By ANGELA MOMBOURQUETTE Don't Get Me Started
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An artist's rendering of Spirit Place, the mixed-used development the board of St. John's United Church has planned for the corner of Windsor and Willow streets. Some neighbours have complained that the proposal is too high for the area.

IS IT ABOUT the building, or is it about the proposed "clientele"? Well, let's assume for the moment that it's just about the building.

The board of St. John's United Church in Halifax has proposed a mixed-use development called Spirit Place at the corner of Windsor and Willow streets, where the congregation's church has stood, unused, for a couple of years. The goal of the proposed development is, according to the group's website, "to create an affirming, welcoming space to live, gather, and worship for everyone, including seniors of moderate means, and seniors of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) community."

Neighbours have suggested that the building's design does not fit with the area. Specifically, and inevitably, because we are talking about Halifax here: too high. This,

despite the fact that the proposed seven-storey design is actually only 15 feet taller than the roofline of the church.

So how does a church come to be in the business of building a housing complex? Louisa Horne is a member of the congregation and a volunteer on the board that's behind the proposal. "We are a community church. The majority of people who come to our church live within walking distance. So we began to ask, 'What are we being called to do in the future? Where should we be in three to five years?' And we started a process where people told us that one of the needs that they saw was for seniors housing in that neighbourhood."

Horne says that if you look at a map of the peninsula and draw crisscrossed lines, the proposed development falls smack in the middle. "That area has a lot to offer for seniors," she says. "Many of those in our congregation who are able to walk to church know that they are not going to be able to stay in their big houses forever, and they don't want to move to the 'burbs. They want to stay where they can walk to the doctor and the grocery store and the pharmacy. And there are just very few options for housing.

"So what came out loud and clear from our planning was that if we look to the future of a community church located in the centre of Halifax, being an integral and engaged part of that community would mean addressing that particular need."

So, let's talk about the height. You can see an artist's rendering of the proposed design at spiritplace.ca/redevelopment-plan. I'd call it a perfectly appropriate size and scale for a neighbourhood that spans residential and commercial uses. Will the building create shadow problems for the neighbours?

"Very few," says Horne. "The architects have this amazing software that can look at every hour of every day of the year as the sun changes, and the information that they have is that the impact is extremely minimal in terms of light and shadow. It's almost negligible."

So what's the real problem here? "I suppose that every project is going to have people who are opposed," admits Horne. "Change itself is sometimes a challenge. We've been there for 100 years and hope to be there for 100 more, continuing with the social justice work that we do. So we just take it step by step."

And, not to put too fine a point on it, if a medium-density housing complex were being built in my neighbourhood, I would ask this simple question: who has the most potential to be seriously awesome neighbours? Gay seniors, of course. Imagine the incredible dinner party circuit.

The next step will be public consultations, schedule to be determined by Halifax regional council.

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