

# ia architect

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF AIA IOWA

## Come Together: Strengthening Our Social Infrastructure

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# April is Architecture Month in Iowa



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IOWA ARCHITECT MAGAZINE SPRING 2025



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# editor's letter



**Grant Nordby, AIA**  
Editor, Iowa Architect

Three years after the COVID-19 pandemic forced the world into a traumatizing lockdown, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy proclaimed an epidemic of “loneliness and social isolation.” Prior to either, Robert Putnam (in *Bowling Alone*) and Ray Oldenburg (*Third Places*) had each raised the alarm over America’s atrophying social infrastructure. Today, social media has optimized for “engagement,” turning that substitute commons into an addictive arena of disinformation and discord, leading to tragic real-world impacts. What is happening and how do we fix it?

Architects don’t have all the answers, but our work crafting public space is near the heart of the matter. Sustaining social cohesion requires deep listening and understanding at all scales and domains. That includes the physical world of the city, which has only gained importance to our well-being as we have retreated from the shared commons we sorely need.

Last visited in Fall 2022, we return once more to social infrastructure. We will examine the post-pandemic “return to work” and to public places used for entertainment, learning, companionship, and recreation. Let’s relearn together how good design gently leads us back out into healthful public life.

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## Celebrating Dedication to Community Through the Citizen Architect Program

AIA Iowa recognizes members who advocate for the profession through community leadership.

WORDS : JESSICA SEARS

Beginning in 2008, the American Institute of Architects, Iowa Chapter's (AIA Iowa) Citizen Architect Program recognizes AIA Iowa members who represent AIA's values in their communities through acts of public service. Those eligible to participate are any AIA Iowa members who serve as an appointed or elected member of a government committee, council, or body at the local, county, regional, or state level, or any member who serves as a volunteer for a nonprofit organization that benefits people in need, their community, or the state—all while advocating for AIA Iowa's core principles of quality design, sustainability, or livable communities.



Joe Feldmann, AIA, associate principal at OPN Architects, is one of this year's participants and is being recognized for his versatility and dedication to all facets of community impact through architecture.

Feldmann dubs himself a "lifer" at OPN Architects, where he's worked since graduating college. He's worked on or had some involvement in every type of project imaginable—from labs to higher education buildings at Iowa State University—and, most recently, he's worked with Polk County on public projects.

"I believe that architecture can help create an identity of a space or place, whether that's preserving something old that's already there or creating some new identity for a community to gather around," says Feldmann. He believes it always starts with function, meaning that it should serve a purpose, but it should also be a link between society and cohesion and interaction between community members. It doesn't always need to be a physical space either; sometimes it's the absence of a building that can create the

same space. "I think the best architecture is rallied around by its community. They protect it, they preserve it ... and it promotes quality of life [and] economic growth."

Feldmann has worked on myriad projects that have been both rewarding and promoted community growth. He's worked on the Krause Gateway Center in Des Moines, Iowa, which was a collaboration with Renzo Piano Building Workshop. "But I think some of the most rewarding projects are the ones in your local community, creating a space for a forum or for citizens to come and voice their opinions, to gather, to collaborate, and show community pride." Recently, Feldmann worked on the Polk County Life Services Building, a

renovation of an existing building, which opened recently. It created a new space for a behavioral health urgent care and crisis center. Projects like these have been some of the most rewarding for Feldmann.

"Philanthropy means finding ways to best utilize the skills that you've been given to give back to your community," explains Feldmann. It's not necessarily about putting your hand in every project or on a board but instead figuring out your skillsets and how you can best use them to serve your community. For Feldmann, this means using his time, effort, and talents. Architects have a certain knowledge and aptitude that they bring to the table, and Feldmann continues to use this to give back to his community.

THANK YOU TO ALL WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE  
2025 AIA IOWA CITIZEN ARCHITECT PROGRAM.

### Citizen Architect Program Participants

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## 'THE COST IS TOO D\*\*\* HIGH' ATTAINABLE HOUSING

WORDS : GRANT NORDBY, AIA

Housing affordability is a hot topic for good reason: Average home prices are 50 percent higher than before the 2008 Great Recession, and those prices were half again higher than in the late '90s. Nearly one-third of all households are cost-burdened. *Half* of renters are. The home price to household income ratio now exceeds the pre-recession record, at more than seven times.

What's happening and how can we help? Theories abound, but several stand out.

### Long-Term Causes

For decades, **design and construction labor has grown more expensive** due to the far-reaching Baumol effect, in which productivity growth per man-hour in industries like tech and manufacturing makes labor-intensive industries like construction relatively more expensive.

#### Labor supply is constrained.

Newbies aren't replacing enough baby boomers. The market compensated by substituting undocumented laborers: One-fifth of construction workers are now undocumented. If they're deported, labor costs skyrocket. Tariffs similarly raise material costs.

**Capital concentration and growth in metro areas make housing expensive there.**

This is the Baumol effect in communities: More money chasing finite assets raises prices. And building new just costs more. We are seeing both in "second cities" like Denver and Austin, to which households have fled from unaffordable Silicon Valley. Even in Iowa, housing is most expensive in growing metros. Rural areas are gradually losing residents and capital, so existing housing there is cheap.

**Households are shrinking while homes are growing.** Single-person households have more than doubled since 1960, outnumbering those with children. Yet the average new house size has grown from 1,660 square feet in 1973 to 2,500 in 2022—doubling area per person. "Starter" homes fell from 40 percent of new starts in 1982 to 7 percent by 2020. This mismatch of supply and demand results from perverse incentives to build the biggest detached house buyers can afford.

**Seventy-five percent of American cities' area is zoned exclusively for single-family houses.** That means middle-scaled, "house-like" homes for small households—like accessory dwelling units (ADUs), cottage courts, and townhomes—are missing, zoned out of existence. Small households today must choose a too-big house or a hulking apartment building.

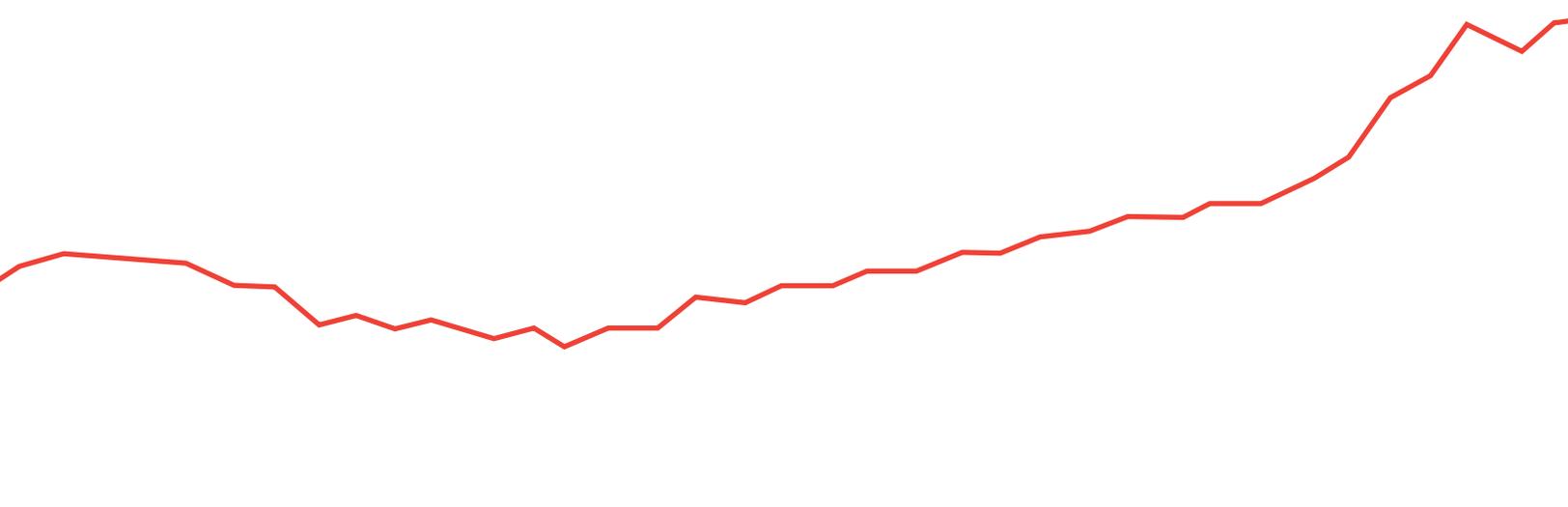
We haven't built at the Goldilocks balance in size for nearly 100 years. The premium that buyers pay for the few new developments indicates unmet demand.

**Builder-developers don't know what the market wants.** University of Iowa planning professor Jerry Anthony, Ph.D., reports that speculative builders don't believe smaller lots and homes will sell, instead deciding "based on what their gut is telling them." They build large homes on large lots, ignoring needs of singles, new households, and even retirees "who have lots of cash to spend in the local economy."

### Short-Term Causes

**COVID-19-restricted supply and stimulus-induced demand inflated costs.** Governments "printed money" to counteract COVID-19 lockdown shocks. Demand for goods overloaded pandemic-tangled supply chains, resulting in material cost spikes and stalled construction projects.

**The Federal Reserve raised interest rates to slow inflation by making loans more expensive.** This stalled new construction even longer. High mortgage rates delay households "trading up," trapping others in high-rent situations. Des Moines-based sustainable developers



Scott and Molly Cutler explain: “Interest rates are high, making it difficult to buy. High interest rates and rising construction costs also make construction expensive, which makes rental housing more expensive to build, and so puts upward pressure on rental rates.”

**Property taxes and home insurance have risen sharply** due to inflated values and construction costs, plus insurers pricing in sharply growing climate risks. Those risks in Iowa include floods, droughts, windstorms, and hailstorms. Insurers are leaving Florida and California due to rising hurricane and fire risks.

#### **What Can Be Done?**

**Make design, review, and construction time more efficient without cutting value.** How? Free pre-reviewed plans, prefabrication, and workforce education on cost-saving practices.

Homebuilders reuse cheap plans to keep their soft costs down, but these rarely optimize space or energy to reduce residents’ costs. How to reduce builders’ and residents’ costs? Pre-reviewed plans. A well-managed program can leverage economies of scale to provide the best designs to everyone. Pre-review shortens delays and reduces risk. Free plans reduce soft costs and optimize for efficiency. Plans for “middle” home types—ADUs, cottage courts, and townhomes—can come with resources on these rare housing types becoming allowed through zoning reform (see next column). This also helps homeowners seeking on-site independent living for family members or rental income to offset their own expenses.

**Factory-made housing** carries stigma from 1970s trailer parks, but modular homes today are indistinguishable from many stick-built tract homes. Prefabricating off-site reduces labor

costs, saves material, and yields warmer, tighter construction. State and local regulations should allow manufactured homes everywhere permitted by homeowners associations.

#### **Increase and improve trade, landlord, and designer workforce education.**

Primary and secondary trade programs abound, but continuing education lags as new technologies outpace skillsets. New landlords need training. Pre-reviewed plan programs can apply architects’ best designs to the production of single-family homes, now dominated by cheap nonlicensed designers. Forward-thinking states support such programs to strengthen their workforce.

**Reduce red tape in high-cost areas and migrate jobs to lower-cost ones.** Form-based zoning and pre-review eliminate costly and subjective design reviews. Iowa’s efficient design and construction workforce can remotely supplement other regions.

#### **Allow housing types that meet the unmet needs of small households.**

Initiate form-based zoning reform permitting “gentle density” in more

areas. These are attainable, house-like “missing middle” building types, camouflaged to mimic single-family neighborhoods. They offer the comforts of home at a lower price point, giving new households and older adults the independence they desire. These can sensitively foster chance meetings on-foot, strengthening neighborhoods.

**Stop subsidizing wasteful construction, often in risky areas.** Tie incentives to compact development needing less tax-funded infrastructure. Plan locations outside rising floodplains. Strengthen energy codes reducing climate risks while saving residents money. Doing so reduces costs for everyone.

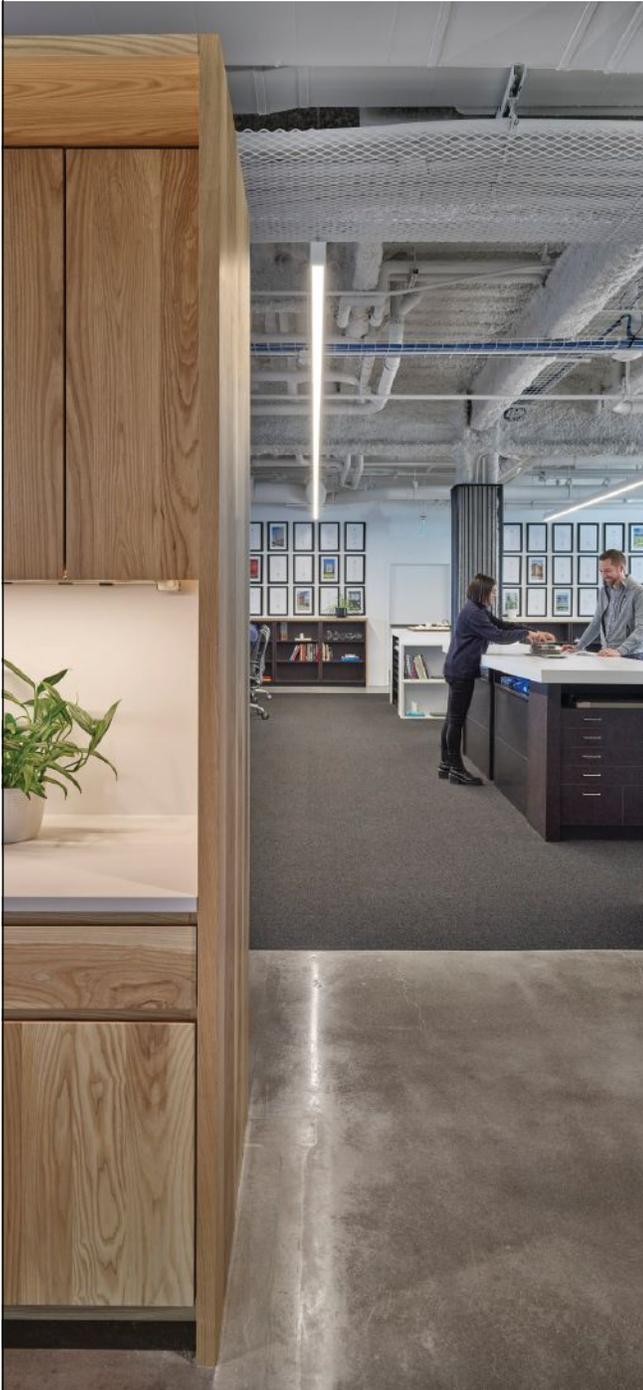
Factors driving up housing costs can be reduced through these strategies. Architects and government officials should leverage their expertise to help others understand ways they can help, too.

*Print-edition readers: The digital version of this article contains in-text links to information sources. It may be viewed free of charge at: [www.aiaiowa.org/page/iaarchitectmagazine](http://www.aiaiowa.org/page/iaarchitectmagazine).*

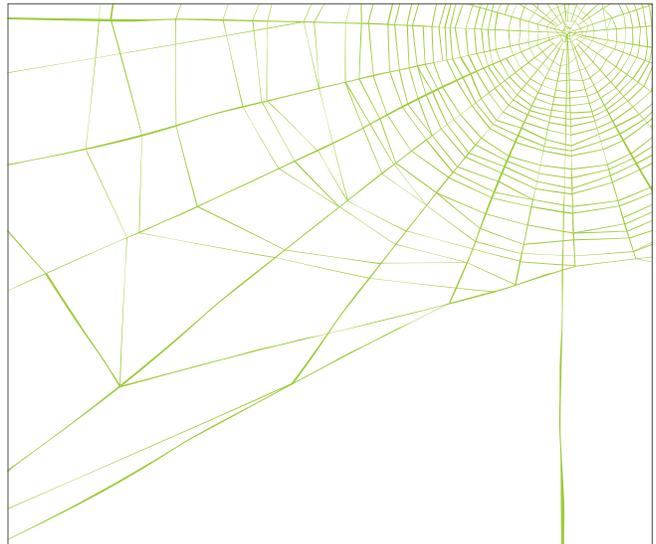
“Households are shrinking while homes are growing. Single-person households have more than doubled since 1960, outnumbering those with children. Yet the average new house size has grown from 1,660 square feet in 1973 to 2,500 in 2022—doubling area per person.”

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# on the boards

Projects  
In Progress



## Innovation Center



Sioux City, Iowa

PLaN Architecture

With increased remote working, co-working, and other changes in the workplace, a group of community leaders has envisioned a place that can foster interaction and creativity and build a sort of collaborative energy in downtown Sioux City that can be sustained into the future.

The concept includes building uses that could supplement each other. These uses include tech lab spaces, co-working spaces, conference spaces, a food court, and even indoor and outdoor entertainment spaces. The intent is to create a

place that fosters collaboration and social interaction in formal and informal ways. Each space has some level of communal space for individuals working or enjoying time together.

The formerly vacant warehouse was chosen for this space not only to reinvigorate the district but also for reuse sustainability. The building has access to urban amenities, it has a structure to support the various uses, and with its dock/patio, it has a potential for creating interior/exterior communal spaces for eating, presentations, and other entertainment.

By removing the brick infill and replacing it with glazing, redeveloping the dilapidated alley structure into a performance space, and reconstructing the dock, the building is better able to connect the interior and exterior, reinforcing the welcoming connective energy of the facility.



## Makoce Food Hub



Pine Ridge Reservation/  
Porcupine, South Dakota

Substance Architecture

The Makoce Food Hub will provide critical infrastructure to support Makoce Agriculture Development's mission of developing an indigenous agriculture and food system to regenerate equitable healthy communities, economies, and the environment. Designed for resiliency, it will support food distribution, education, and economic development for the Oglala Lakota community on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The 45,000-square-foot Food Hub will include a commercial kitchen; bakery; cafe; deli; market; meeting,

conference, and event spaces; food processing, packaging, and storage facilities; a greenhouse; and offices where local chefs, cooks, teachers, and leaders can not only prepare and sell their products but also share ideas and support each other in building a collaborative, local, regenerative food system for their community. The design incorporates durable building envelopes, redundant energy systems, and rainwater collection and filtration systems, resulting in an exemplary model of how resilient design can benefit underserved rural areas.



# Reichardt Community Recreation Center



**Des Moines, Iowa**

MA Architecture

The Reichardt Community Recreation Center is a 38,000-square-foot, two-story, new construction building that includes a gym, elevated walking track, indoor pool, fitness centers, and community rooms. The surrounding site design will include

an outdoor community lawn, native planting areas, a futsal court, and a new parking lot. The facility will be managed and maintained by the City of Des Moines Parks and Recreation Department. The project program and design were developed over a span of three years and included multiple public input opportunities, nearly 20 community meetings, and more than 250 touchpoints. The Reichardt Community Recreation Center will be welcoming, safe, and sustainable while uplifting community growth, gathering, and connections across generations.

The inclusive and equitable design process resulted in a building design that is highly reflective of the community and contextual surroundings. Considerable attention was given to the ways in which each facade is activated, with views of the activities within serving as a visual invitation to engage with the building. The warm material palette—composed of vertical precast panels, insulated metal panels, and a perforated screen—was highly influenced by community members while textually reflecting the palette of surrounding buildings and residences.

Energy efficiency, water efficiency, indoor environmental quality, material resources, and sustainable sites contribute to the environmental stewardship of this project. The building has been designed to be all-electric in support of future 100 percent renewable electricity. It is an excellent example of sustainable design that inspires this community.

The project is anticipated to be completed in spring 2026 and is targeting LEED Gold certification.



# River City Riverwalk



**Mason City, Iowa**

Bergland + Cram Architects

Willow Creek winds through Mason City, a town so entangled with its waterway that it is, in fact, the inspiration for the famed River City in the musical *The Music Man* written by native Meredith Willson. However, Mason City has long turned its back on Willow Creek, resulting in an overgrown, underutilized, and often visually hidden natural resource. The River City Riverwalk plan will open

up access and awareness as a guide to future phased development along the water's edge. The Riverwalk concept takes inspiration from song structure, creating various linked places articulated to the ideals of verse, chorus, and bridge. Separately, these spaces will offer pockets of varied or repeating experiences such as strips of nature respite, places for play, and a communal hearth. Strung together over time, these areas will announce a new brand for downtown that will leave a lasting and charismatic impression, much like a catchy tune.

An immersive and place-making sculpture inspired by stained glass, music, and architecture will be a focal point, speaking to the flow and movement of the creek.





# RUDD PUBLIC LIBRARY BEACON OF RESILIENCE

WORDS : KEVIN WAGNER, AIA IMAGES : ALEX MICHL, ASSOC. AIA ARCHITECT : OPN ARCHITECTS



In the heart of Rudd, Iowa, a small town with a population just over 300, the public library has always been more than a repository of books. It has served as a communal anchor, a space where generations gathered to learn, connect, and grow. However, on December 15, 2021, an EF1 tornado tore through the town, leaving widespread devastation in its wake. Among the damaged structures was the beloved Rudd Public Library, its roof torn away and much of the collection destroyed.

What could have been a tragic loss for this tight-knit community instead became a story of resilience, innovation, and thoughtful design. This project wasn't just about rebuilding what was lost; it was about creating something new, a space that honored Rudd's history while embracing the future. Leading this effort was Justin Bishop, AIA, a principal at OPN Architects and a Rudd native. "That's my hometown," Bishop shares. "Growing up there, I had memories of that library. My mom was even on the library board. So, for me, it was really a passion project to come back and be part of its rebirth."

The tornado's destruction was more than physical; it disrupted services that small-town institutions like the library provide. Relying primarily on insurance funds and modest contributions from the library board, the town rallied together. Rather than reconstructing on the original site, the new library found a home next to Rudd's Community Center, adjacent to playgrounds and ball fields. This relocation was more than practical; it redefined the library's role within the town's fabric. "It's a lot more visible now, right on the main road in and out of town," Bishop explains. "It's become more than just a building. It's a beacon of resilience."

At just 1,800 square feet, the Rudd Public Library is the smallest project Bishop has worked on, but its impact far exceeds its modest footprint. The design balances modern architectural principles with sustainability, technological innovation, and deep community roots. The exterior draws cues from the surrounding residential neighborhood, featuring a simple gable roof form and restrained palette of cement board panels, weathering steel panels, and commercial glazing. These materials were chosen for

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**Opposite, top left:** The materials used on the library's exterior were chosen for their durability, low maintenance, and modern aesthetic, all while blending seamlessly into the rural Iowa landscape. **At top:** A distinctive element of the project is the 3D-printed outdoor seating. **At bottom:** The design balances modern architectural principles with sustainability, technological innovation, and deep community roots. The exterior draws cues from the surrounding residential neighborhood, featuring a simple gable roof form and restrained palette of cement board panels, weathering steel panels, and commercial glazing.



their durability, low maintenance, and modern aesthetic, all while blending seamlessly into the rural Iowa landscape.

Cost-effective strategies were employed throughout. Standard construction methods and materials helped control costs, while energy-efficient systems reduce long-term operational expenses. Large windows invite daylight deep into the interior, reducing reliance on artificial lighting and reinforcing the library's connection to the outdoors.

Inside, the library's layout is open and adaptable. A dedicated children's area provides young readers an inviting environment, while flexible seating arrangements accommodate both quiet study and social interaction. A new community meeting room has quickly become a hub for book clubs, children's programming, and local events. The library has seen a surge in engagement, with more than 50 new library cards issued immediately after reopening.

One distinctive element of the project is the 3D-printed outdoor seating, the result of an innovative partnership with Iowa State University College of Design's Computation & Construction Lab (CCL), the Department of Architecture, and the OPN Digital Practice Team. OPN's team collaborated with ISU's design students and faculty to develop custom benches for the library's outdoor spaces.

This partnership was more than a design exercise; it was a unique partnership that merged knowledge and resources to advance innovation in 3D printing and augmented reality technologies, materials, and methods. The resulting concrete benches feature sculptural forms that contrast with the library's clean architectural lines.

The installation not only provides practical seating for visitors, but it also symbolizes the library's commitment to innovation and learning. "It's exciting to see something so cutting-edge integrated into a small-town library," Bishop notes. "It's a testament to how design can connect people, not just within the community, but beyond it."

Since reopening in 2024, the Rudd Public Library has reestablished itself as the heart of the community. More than just a reconstruction, it's a living testament to how thoughtful design can enrich a community's cultural and social fabric. It honors the past, embraces the present, and looks confidently toward the future.

For Bishop, the project was deeply personal. "I will always cherish the opportunity to go back to my hometown and give back to the community," he reflects. "But engaging with people I've known my whole life, in a town where my family still lives—that was something special."

And now, with its doors open once again, the Rudd Public Library continues to write new chapters, anchored in resilience and inspired by design.





**Opposite, top left:** The outdoor concrete benches, produced using large-scale 3D printing techniques, feature sculptural forms that contrast with the library's clean architectural lines. **At middle:** The library's layout is open and adaptable. **At top:** Flexible seating arrangements accommodate both quiet study and social interaction. **At bottom:** Large windows invite daylight deep into the interior, reducing reliance on artificial lighting and reinforcing the library's connection to the outdoors.



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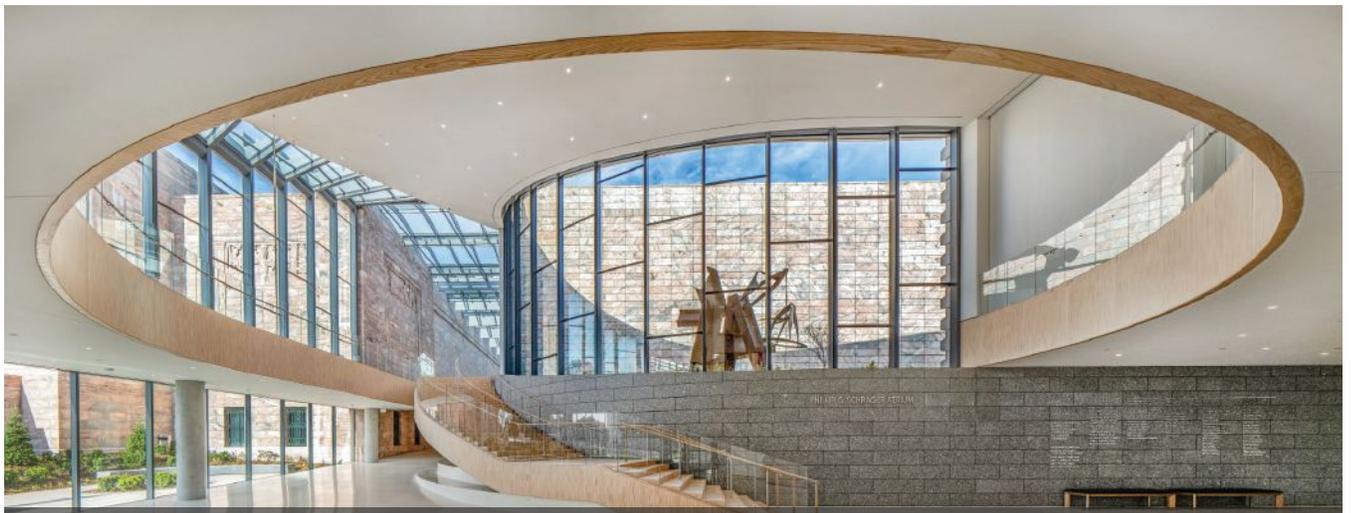
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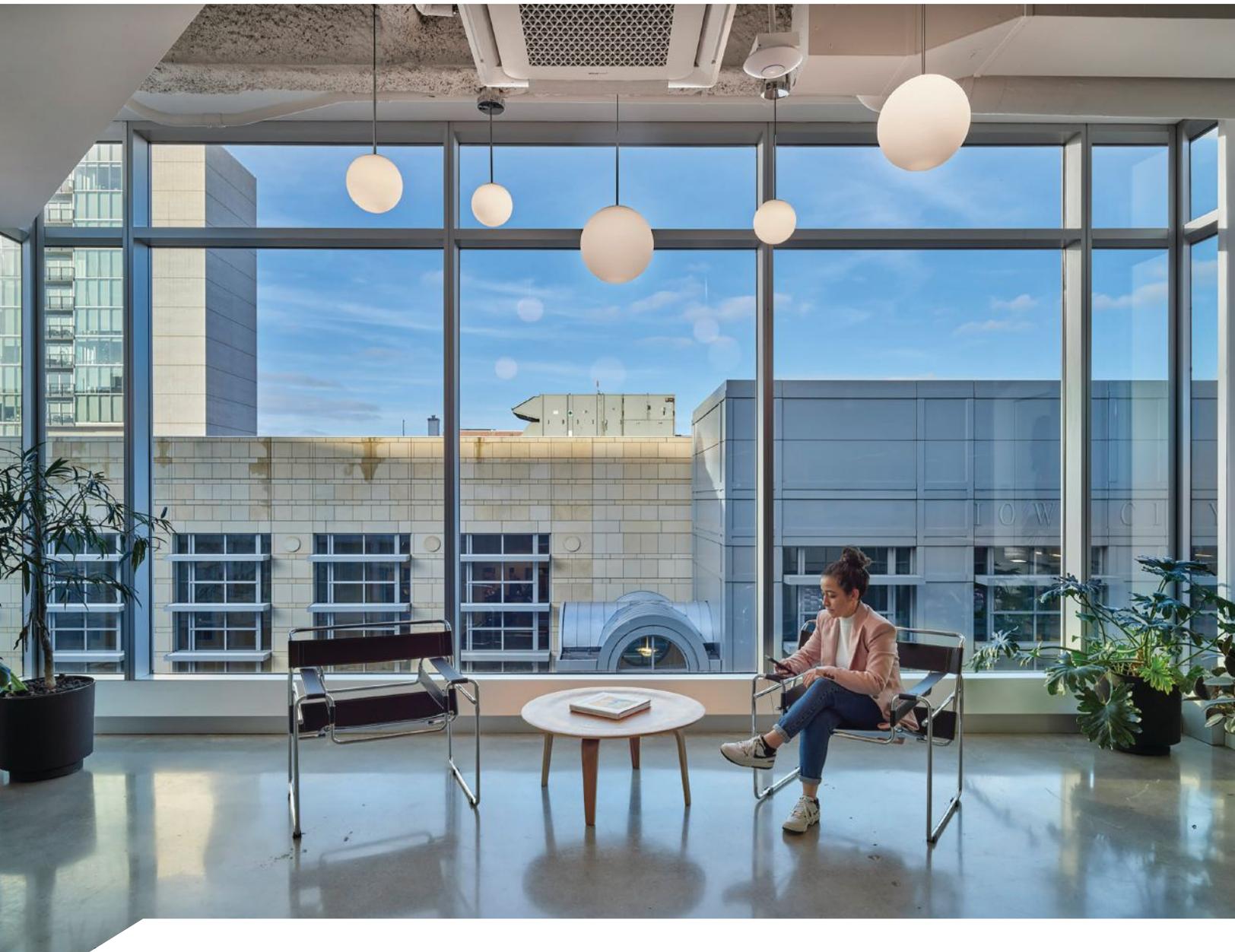
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# OFFICE RENOVATION

**WORDS** : ANNA AVERSING, ASSOC. AIA **IMAGES** : CAMERON CAMPBELL, AIA, INTEGRATED STUDIO **ARCHITECT** : NEUMANN MONSON ARCHITECTS



### **Prioritizing Communal Spaces: A Return to Togetherness**

The Neumann Monson Iowa City Studio Renovation offers a fresh take on the workplace, transforming a long-standing studio into a welcoming and adaptable environment that reflects how work and connection have changed. Located on the third floor of Plaza Towers above Iowa City's bustling pedestrian mall, the redesign moves beyond *fixing* the prototypical office layout. For this renovation, Neumann Monson aimed to create spaces where collaboration feels natural, materials connect to local craftsmanship, and flexibility supports the needs of a diverse

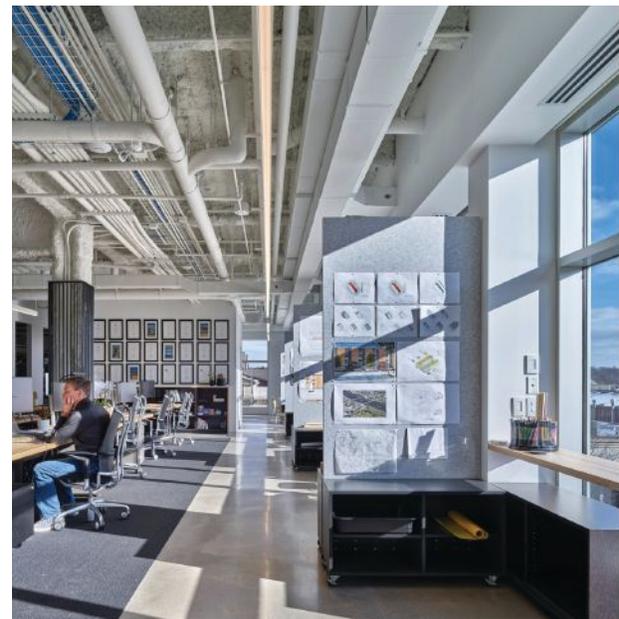
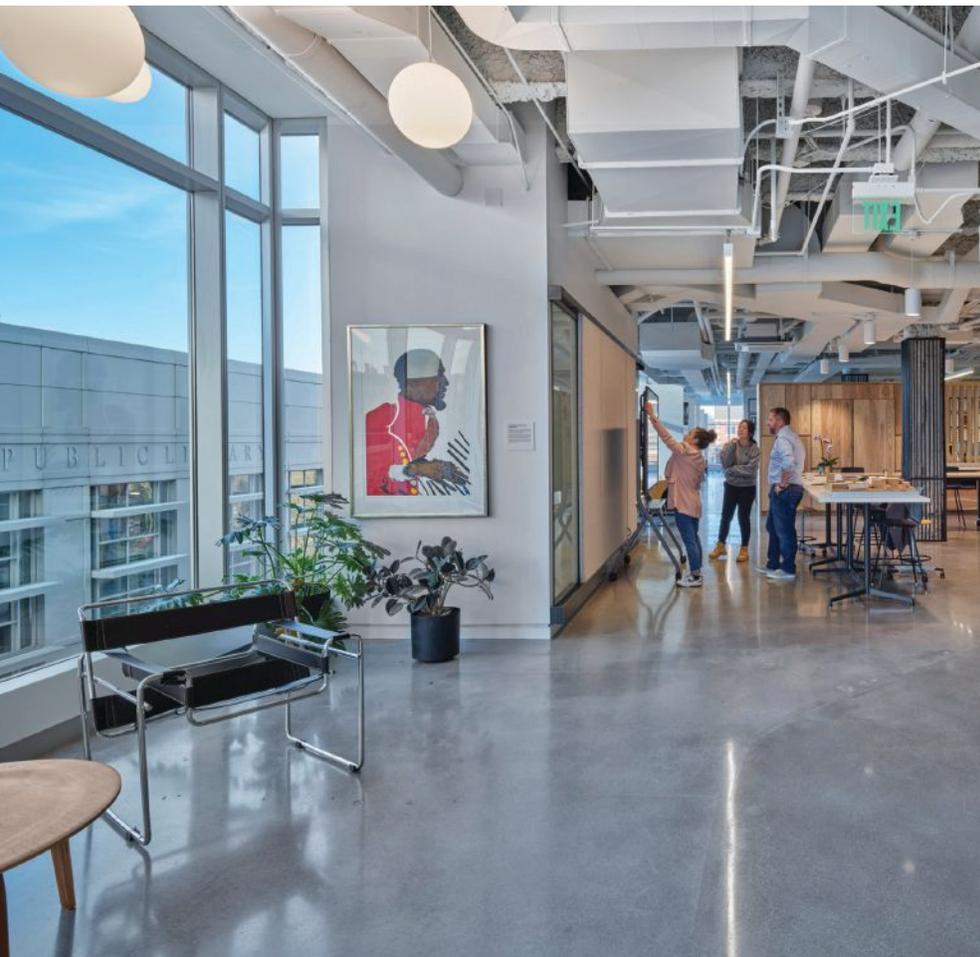
team. The result is a renovation that is less about trends and more about building a thoughtful, future-ready space rooted in community and purpose.

### **Embracing Flexibility: Designing for Individual and Collective Needs**

One of the primary lessons from the pandemic has been the importance of flexibility—both in how we work and in how spaces are designed. Neumann Monson emphasized that the current workplace culture demanded a shift away from rigid,

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**Opposite:** Flexibility became a cornerstone of the project, manifesting in adjustable desks, modular furniture, and diverse work environments, including focus rooms, open collaborative spaces, and private areas. **At top:** Beyond its sustainability benefits, wood from the Iowa City-area trees adds warmth to the space, countering the sterility of the previous design. It also serves as a cultural touchpoint, grounding the office in its local context and fostering a deeper connection to the community.



**At top:** Nicknamed the *forum*, the new centralized kitchen space became a standout success. Designed to mimic the warmth and familiarity of a home kitchen, it quickly became a hub of activity, with employees congregating for lunch and conversation. **Bottom left and right:** Versatile space for team critiques, presentations, and collaborative sessions flanks the center desk layout, creating spaces that facilitate both planned and impromptu interactions, strengthening the sense of community and collaboration.



**Above:** One of the central themes of the project was balancing personal and shared spaces—the “me” versus “we” dynamic. This balance was reflected in the layout, which combined private focus rooms with open workstations and communal areas.

one-size-fits-all designs. Flexibility became a cornerstone of the project, manifesting in adjustable desks, modular furniture, and diverse work environments, including focus rooms, open collaborative spaces, and private areas.

#### Feels More Like Home: A Return to Togetherness

The pandemic underscored the value of casual, spontaneous interactions in fostering community and collaboration. Recognizing this, the design team prioritized communal areas that encourage gathering and informal exchanges. Nicknamed the *forum*, the new centralized kitchen space became a standout success. Designed to mimic the warmth and familiarity of a home kitchen, it quickly became a hub of activity, with employees congregating for lunch and conversation.

This focus on communal spaces extended to other parts of the office as well. Versatile space for team critiques, presentations, and collaborative sessions flanks the center desk layout, creating spaces that facilitate both planned and impromptu interactions, strengthening the sense of community and collaboration.

#### Drawing Inspiration from Third Places

Ray Oldenburg’s concept of third places—informal public spaces that foster social interaction—was a guiding principle for this project. The design struck a balance between creating a workplace that felt welcoming and one that maintained its professional identity. The forum, kitchen, and lounge areas serve as third places within the office, blurring the lines between home, work, and community.

#### Biophilic Design: Connecting with Nature and Culture

The integration of biophilic elements in the project not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the office but also contributes to employees’ well-being and sense of connection. The use of ash wood sourced from local Iowa City-area trees is a standout feature. Beyond its sustainability benefits, the wood added warmth to the space, countering the sterility of the previous design. It also served as a cultural touchpoint, grounding the office in its local context and fostering a deeper connection to the community.

While the inclusion of plants was more about personalization than meeting sustainability certifications, project architect Andrew Evans, AIA, shares that “these elements still played a role in creating a more inviting and human-centered environment.”

#### Balancing ‘Me’ and ‘We’ Spaces

One of the central themes of the project was balancing personal and shared spaces—the “me” versus “we” dynamic. This balance was reflected in the layout, which combined private focus rooms with open workstations and communal areas.

The flexibility of the design extended to its adaptability. Nothing in the open office was fixed, allowing for desks and spaces to be rearranged as project needs evolved. This adaptability ensured that the office could continue to meet the changing demands of its users.

#### Lessons for Strengthening Social Infrastructure

This workplace renovation project offers several key takeaways for architects and designers seeking to strengthen social infrastructure:

- 1. Flexibility is key:** Spaces must be adaptable to accommodate diverse needs and changing work habits. Modular designs and multifunctional areas can help achieve this.
- 2. Prioritize communal spaces:** Designing spaces that encourage gathering and informal interactions can help rebuild a sense of community and collaboration.
- 3. Incorporate “third places”:** Creating welcoming, informal spaces within workplaces can foster social connections and enhance overall well-being.
- 4. Embrace biophilic design:** Integrating natural elements and local materials can create more inviting environments and strengthen cultural connections.
- 5. Balance individual and shared needs:** Thoughtful design should support both personal work and communal activities, ensuring that spaces cater to a wide range of users.

#### Moving Forward

As we navigate the post-pandemic world, the role of architects in strengthening social infrastructure is more critical than ever. By designing spaces that promote connection, adaptability, and well-being, we can help rebuild the shared commons that are essential to a healthy and resilient society.

Des Moines Animal Services Facility:

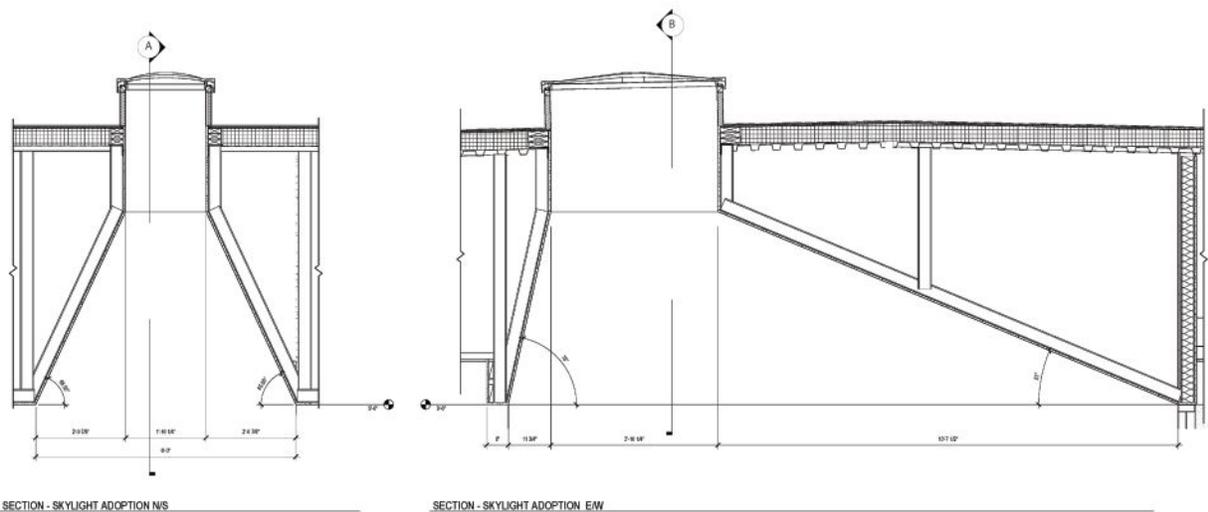
# INVITATION TO ADOPTION

**WORDS** : MICHAEL FOLSOM, STUDENT AFFILIATE OF AIA IOWA **IMAGES** : BEN EASTER PHOTOGRAPHY **ARCHITECT** : OFFICE OF HARTMAN SPILLER AND TRAPP

The building's exterior features a red cedar shiplap rainscreen atop a masonry base providing flood protection from the nearby Des Moines River. Coated with a UV-rated sealer to enhance longevity, the naturally rot-resistant cladding adds sustainable warmth to the exterior.







**Above:** To increase adoptable animals' visibility, inviting spaces appeal to people and pets, with plantings outside cat areas and large interior skylights providing sensory enrichment.

The 22,000-square-foot Des Moines Animal Services Facility is designed to change public perceptions of animal shelters, promoting engagement and adoption. Planned together with the Animal Rescue League, it provides indoor and outdoor spaces for gathering, learning, and relaxing. This affords animals and humans the opportunity to bond, meeting deep social and educational needs.

The City of Des Moines recognized the prior facility poorly represented Animal Services' modernized standards. The new facility unites beauty and functionality, better accommodating both visitors and adoptable pets. Design firm Office of Hartman Spiller and Trapp (Office HST) achieved this through low-lying forms activating the roadside space, naturally lit interiors, and playful wayfinding.

Anticipating future needs, the new facility is larger than its predecessor and tailors spaces for animals of varying health and temperaments. "Cat colony rooms" offer sociable cats communal living areas, while isolated kennels accommodate animals requiring special care. According to the design team, "Cats and dogs in close proximity can cause each other stress. ... We designed to reduce stress by separating the adoptable dog and cat corridors with core support spaces. This enables visitors to stroll the promenade and meet animals up for adoption while creating dedicated spaces for volunteers and staff to care for the animals. The layout ensures a dog never walks by a cat's window and a cat is never carried past a dog's play area."

The facility emulates both dog park and community center functions, "situating the shelter as a vital social infrastructure," per the design team. Spaces for seminars, training, and fundraising encourage public outreach, while trails allow dogs and people to interact. Benches—fashioned from aging on-site trees—provide rest along the trails. Crafted by subcontractor Woodruff Construction, the benches give a "sense of connection ... for anyone walking the trails," per the design team.

Indoors, dedicated adoption play areas foster interactions between visitors and animals. "Play areas situated at key points along the loop mean visitors can spend more time with the animals they form a special bond with," notes the design team. To increase adoptable animals' visibility, inviting spaces appeal to people and pets, with plantings outside cat areas and large interior skylights providing sensory enrichment.

The building's exterior features a red cedar shiplap rainscreen atop a masonry base providing flood protection from the nearby Des Moines River. Coated with a UV-rated sealer to enhance

longevity, the naturally rot-resistant cladding adds sustainable warmth to the exterior.

Office HST collaborated with the city and Genus Landscape to implement stormwater management strategies and enhance the native habitat. Low-carbon materials, an off-site solar array, and a geothermal heat pump system—designed by engineers at IMEG Corp.—were employed to minimize environmental impact, resulting in LEED Gold certification.

Daylight accentuates key areas, offering "numerous benefits for both humans and animals," including increased vitamin D production, emotional regulation, reduced irritability, and enhanced socialization. "Enriching views" foster interaction with the surrounding native landscapes.

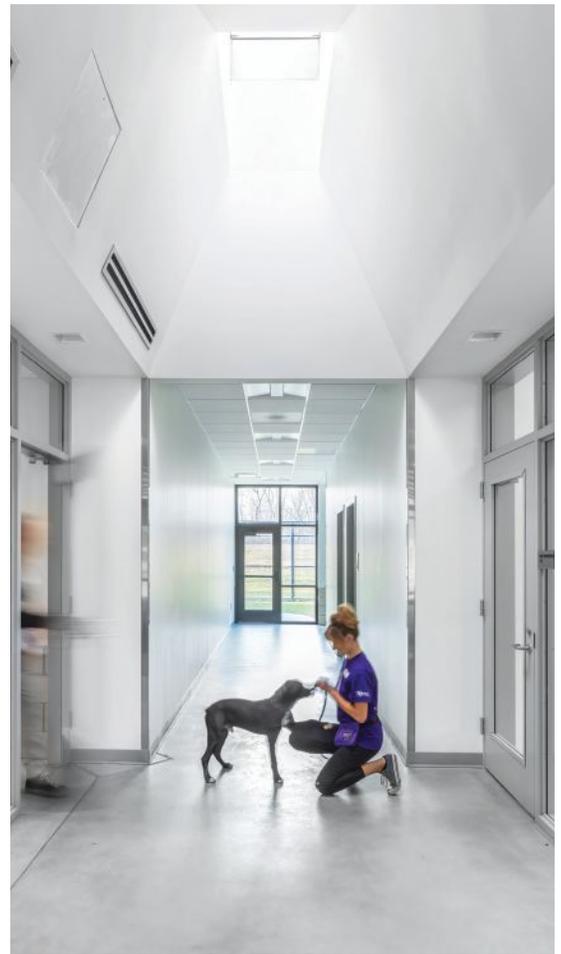
Wayfinding, clear and colorful, enhances navigation. Exterior vertical text denotes entrances to different functions, while interior colors guide visitors: Green indicates core areas, and blue leads to clinical spaces. This thoughtful integration saturates the interior while breaking down its scale.

Designers strove to minimize sound transfer to reduce stress and prevent anxiety. High indoor air quality—critical for limiting odors and disease spread—is ensured through 100 percent fresh air ventilation. The design team notes that good indoor air quality aids lung capacity and clearer thinking, especially for individuals with respiratory vulnerabilities.

According to the Animal Rescue League, walk-in traffic to the new facility noticeably increased from the old. They attribute this engagement to the facility's inviting design and opportune location. More alluring to passersby than its precursor, the building intelligently orients its public programming toward East 14th Street, with back-of-house functions located out of public view.

Addressing the loneliness epidemic, the design team shares that "architecture has a role in fostering connection within our society. ... Architects must be responsive to the communities they serve and design spaces [that] encourage interaction and accessibility." These principles were central to this facility's design process.

Office HST is proud to have worked on such a project. *Invitation* was the emphasis and essence of the design, welcoming both people and their four-legged friends. The design team concludes: "From the natural daylight and open spaces to the thoughtful layout that encourages interaction, every aspect of the facility is crafted to foster connections and reduce isolation."



**At top:** The new facility unites beauty and functionality, better accommodating both visitors and adoptable pets. **Middle and bottom left:** “Cat colony rooms” offer sociable cats communal living areas, while isolated kennels accommodate animals requiring special care. **At right:** Daylight accentuates key areas, offering “numerous benefits for both humans and animals,” including increased vitamin D production, emotional regulation, reduced irritability, and enhanced socialization.



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FOX CREEK PARK SHELTER

# Civilized Shelter

WORDS : SAMANTHA LEEPER IMAGES : CORY GAFFER ARCHITECT : SUBSTANCE ARCHITECTURE





**Opposite:** The Fox Creek Park Shelter transcends mere utility through its striking material strategy, use of natural elements, and pure geometric forms that recall works by Louis Kahn and Anne Tyng. **At top:** The design references New Deal-era park structures with natural materials and a prominent gabled roof, giving the shelter a lodge-like character. **Bottom left and right:** Clerestory windows at gable ends illuminate the gathering space. Striping the walls, windows welcome natural light from either side of the park. These voids provide guardians a sheltered space from which to supervise outdoor play.



In 2016, the City of Waukee, Iowa, motioned for a new green space to accompany booming development north of Hickman Road. A park emerged three years later, offering public amenities including a pavilion named Fox Creek Park Shelter, designed by Substance Architecture. Built concurrently with other park amenities by Genus Landscape Architects, the shelter provides the developing city a space from which to enjoy the outdoors.

The design, led by Tim Hickman, AIA, and Kevin Wagner, AIA—respectively principal and associate principal at Substance Architecture—references New Deal park structures with natural materials and a prominent gabled roof, giving the shelter a lodge-like character. But this modern adaptation eschews rustic touches, instead tapping primal notions of shelter through Louis Kahn-like elemental geometry and pristine forms. The triangular roof overhang claims space. Building-block masonry forms are separated by windows stretching from ground level to roofline.

These frame views of the landscape, mimicking the porosity of traditional open-air shelters. Pristine forms and voids filled by landscape and light elevate rudimentary shelter to a refined spatial experience.

Waukee is the third-fastest-growing city in Iowa. Rentable year-round, Fox Creek Park Shelter offers residents a place to reconnect with public life. In 2024, the shelter was booked 283 times, housing graduation parties, wedding receptions, and reunions. Surrounding the shelter are tennis and pickleball courts, an extensive playground, three-fourths of a mile's worth of trails, and shaded seating. Waukee lacks a public pool facility, so the splash pad at Fox Creek Park is heavily visited in the hot summer months.

With a budget of just \$500,000, Fox Creek Park Shelter's organization is direct and functional. The space makes efficient use of its 2,200 square feet, accommodating 80 people. Two

bathrooms, including a shower and changing area, are accessible to the public during park hours. Two private bathrooms are also accessible to groups that reserve the pavilion. On the opposite end lies the assembly room and a concealed kitchen equipped for catering. The remaining area—dedicated to storage—is dimensioned for furniture carts, allowing the assembly room to be alternately fully furnished and easily cleared. The cantilevered roof consists of standard two-by-eight members, with a cost-effective and constructable scissor truss as its central structure, echoing residential framing methods employed in the area.

“We talk about design through iteration,” Wagner explains. “We like to come up with a lot of options to solve problems, and through feedback, we reiterate those options until you get to something that’s better and better, simpler and simpler, and that becomes the solution.”

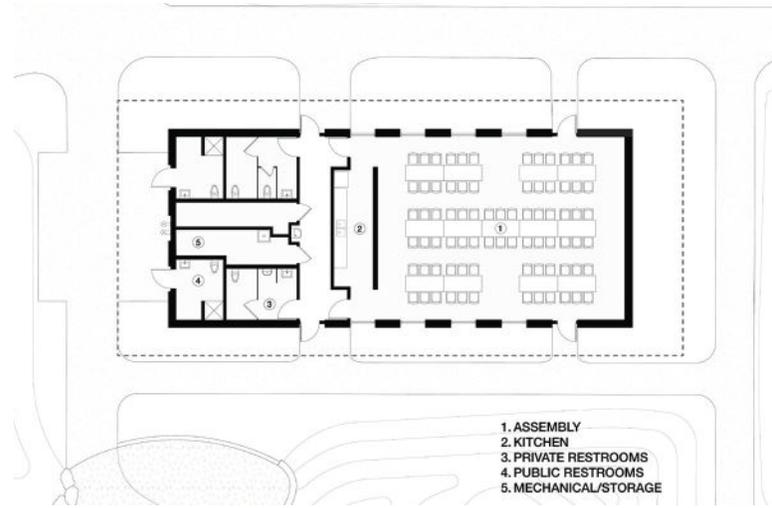
By applying environmentally friendly design strategies, the park conserves resources and minimizes its impact on the natural landscape. Unlike other splash pads in the area, Waukee opted for a recirculating water system that captures, filters, then recycles the water, minimizing waste. Intended to attract butterflies, the pollinator-friendly prairie is planted at each end of the shelter. The shelter itself is open part time in the winter, and its generous overhangs block summer sun, saving energy on both heating and cooling year-round.

The building transcends mere utility through its striking material strategy, use of natural elements, and pure geometric forms that recall works by Kahn and Anne Tyng. “Even a brick wants to be something,” Kahn once said. What does a brick want to be?

The designers consider the material properties and dimensions of brick while designing. Dimensions were composed such that not a single brick had to be cut. Coursing wraps around the building seamlessly, its apparent inevitability belying invisible design effort. The wood soffit warmly invites visitors in and persists into the interior ceiling, blurring the line between interior and exterior. Clerestory windows at gable ends illuminate the gathering space. Striping the walls, windows welcome natural light from either side of the park. These voids provide guardians a sheltered space from which to supervise outdoor play. The shelter’s uncomplicated geometry limits visual clutter, contributing a pristine backdrop to the lively site. From artificial lighting to vent covers, details are chosen with care, harmonizing materials, color, and alignment.

Over the past five years, the site has grown increasingly beautiful. Where budding seedlings once sat, bulks of wispy grass now blow. The building’s mood shifts as the seasonal light changes, speaking to the nature that surrounds it. Fox Creek Park Shelter—a warm and welcoming shelter encircled by outdoor fun—calls for communities to gather. Distinguished by crisp geometry and simplicity achieved through painstaking planning, this structure elevates elemental shelter into art.

**Opposite, top:** The shelter’s generous overhangs block summer sun, saving energy on both heating and cooling year-round. **At top:** Fox Creek Park Shelter’s organization is direct and functional. The space makes efficient use of its 2,200 square feet, accommodating 80 people. **At bottom:** By applying environmentally friendly design strategies, the park conserves resources and minimizes its impact on the natural landscape.







# VIBRANT MUSIC HALL

## VIBES MADE VISIBLE

**WORDS :** NICK LINDSLEY, AIA **IMAGES :** ALEX MICHL, ASSOC. AIA **ARCHITECT :** OPN ARCHITECTS

The Vibrant Music Hall at KeeTown Loop is redefining entertainment in Waukee, Iowa. Designed by OPN Architects and completed in 2023, this 61,000-square-foot venue anchors a 40-acre mixed-use district. With its distinctive architecture and thoughtful design, the music hall exemplifies a forward-thinking approach to community development.

From the outset, the Vibrant Music Hall was conceived as more than a performance space. It was envisioned as the nucleus of KeeTown Loop, integrating entertainment, retail, and residential elements. “The goal was to create a central hub that drives the entire development,” says Ken Hagen, AIA, project architect at OPN Architects. Beyond concerts, the hall facilitates connections between visitors, performers, and the broader community, anchoring the district and encouraging activity from day to night.

The design emphasizes regional identity without relying on overused clichés like barnwood or corn cribs. Instead, the architects drew abstracted inspiration from the lines of Iowa’s agricultural landscapes. “We incorporated patterns reminiscent of aerial views of farm fields,” notes OPN Principal Danielle Hermann, AIA. These elements are visible in the grid patterns on bar backs, wooden details, and the precast concrete facade. Live Nation, tenant and facility operator, reinforced this focus by integrating mural spaces for regional artists. “Adding spaces for local art further strengthens the venue’s connection to the community,” Hermann says. These murals celebrate Iowa’s cultural identity and create a dialogue between the venue and its audience.

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**At left:** At its core, the design prioritizes user experience. From arrival, visitors encounter a space that is both inviting and visually striking. This design ensures every attendee has a clear view and a strong connection to the performance.

At its core, the design prioritizes user experience. From arrival, visitors encounter a space that is both inviting and visually striking. The hall's layout—wider than it is long—cultivates an intimate setting, ensuring mezzanine guests feel close to the stage. "We aimed for an immersive and personal concert experience," Hermann shares. This design ensures every attendee has a clear view and a strong connection to the performance. Guests frequently remark on how the venue amplifies the energy of a performance, transforming it into an interactive experience. The careful consideration of layout and sightlines reflects a meticulous effort to prioritize audience engagement.

Lighting design further enhances the venue's atmosphere. Around the stage, custom-designed fixtures mimic guitar frets, nodding to the venue's musical focus. "These weren't off-the-shelf solutions," Hagen explains. "We collaborated with lighting designers to create bespoke fixtures aligned with the architectural vision." Externally, lighting effects evoke Hollywood spotlights, signaling events and adding to the district's vitality. The interplay of interior and exterior lighting contributes to the venue's distinct identity, making it instantly recognizable and exciting both day and night.

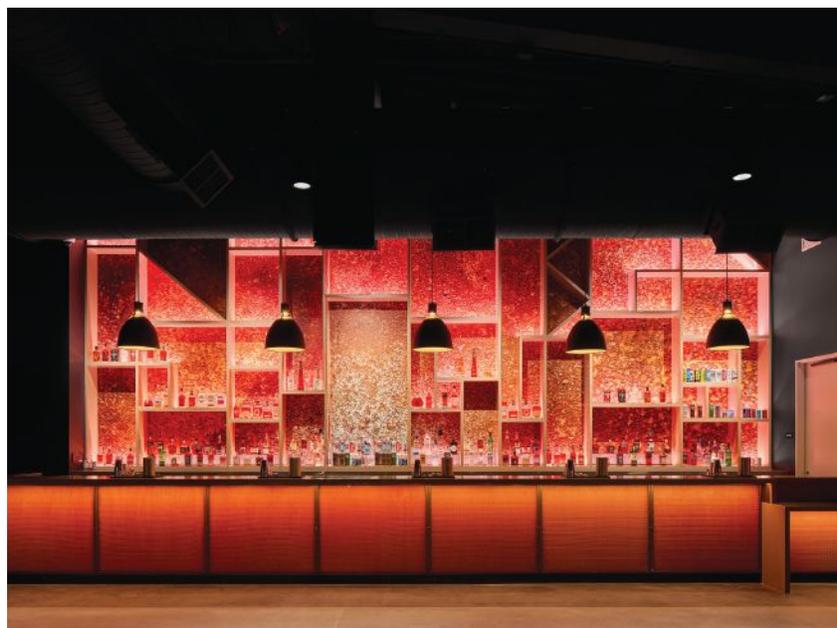
The deliberate contrast between public spaces and the performance area enhances the experience. Public areas are bright and open, designed for social interaction. A south-facing balcony offers sweeping views of KeeTown Loop, encouraging visitors to linger. In contrast, the performance area—a "black box" space—is darker and more focused, directing attention to the performer. This progression from light-filled communal spaces to the enclosed performance area heightens anticipation and emphasizes the centrality of the performance. It creates a narrative journey for visitors, where every space contributes to the overall experience.

Navigating construction challenges, including rising costs and pandemic-related supply chain issues, required a collaborative approach. Hermann describes the project as "an exercise in precision coordination and stakeholder engagement." Input from Live Nation, the developer, city officials, and consultants ensured the final design addressed diverse priorities while delivering a cohesive experience. Despite hurdles, the team remained focused on achieving a high-quality outcome that met evolving industry demands.

Since opening, the Vibrant Music Hall has hosted performances ranging from legendary acts like Chicago to local favorites such as the Pork Tornadoes. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. "Guests often tell us it's one of the best concert experiences they've had," Hermann notes. The venue's exceptional acoustics and intimate layout have drawn audiences who value proximity to the music and an engaging atmosphere. These features have made it a standout destination, setting a new benchmark for concert venues.

Hagen reflects on the character of the space, emphasizing how its design enhances performances. "When you're inside during a show, the energy of the audience seems to animate the space itself," he notes. Indeed, the vibrant interiors, with their dynamic lighting design and minimal material interventions, create a sense of excitement and anticipation, as if the performance has already begun before the first note is played. This interplay between lighting, atmosphere, and audience experience transforms the space into more than just a venue—it's a stage in itself, crafting a "vibe" that mirrors the energy of the performances it hosts.

The Vibrant Music Hall has become the cornerstone of KeeTown Loop, setting a high standard for integrated entertainment spaces. Its design, with a keen attention to user experience with broad resonance, ensures it will remain a cherished landmark.





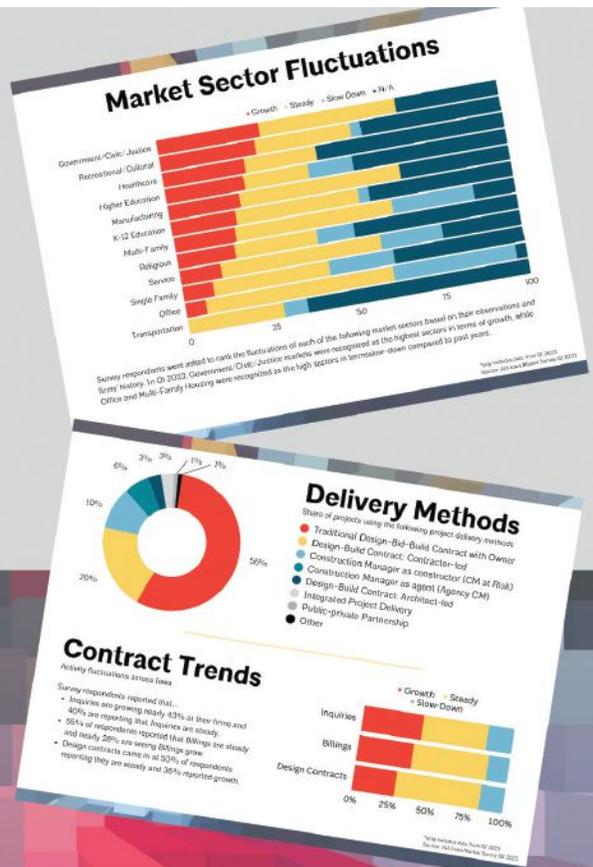
**Top left:** The interplay of interior and exterior lighting contributes to the venue's distinct identity, making it instantly recognizable and exciting both day and night. **Middle left:** The design emphasizes regional identity without relying on overused clichés like barnwood or corn cribs. Instead, the architects drew abstracted inspiration from the lines of Iowa's agricultural landscapes. **Bottom left and top right:** Every space contributes to the overall experience, including light-filled communal spaces. **Bottom right:** With its distinctive architecture and thoughtful design, the music hall exemplifies a forward-thinking approach to community development.

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**Structural Engineer:** Raker Rhodes Engineering

**Neumann Monson Iowa City Studio**

**Location:** Iowa City, Iowa  
**Architect:** Neumann Monson Architects  
**Contractor:** McComas Lacina Construction  
**MEP Engineer:** Design Engineers  
**Photographer:** Cameron Campbell, AIA, Integrated Studio

**Des Moines Animal Services Facility**

**Location:** Des Moines, Iowa  
**Architect:** Office of Hartman Spiller and Trapp  
**Contractor:** The Weitz Company  
**Civil Engineer:** Snyder and Associates  
**Client:** City of Des Moines  
**Engineer (MEPTS):** IMEG Corp.  
**Landscape Architect:** Genus Landscape Architecture  
**Photographer:** Ben Easter Photography

**Fox Creek Park Shelter**

**Location:** Waukee, Iowa  
**Architect:** Substance Architecture  
**Contractor:** Caliber Concrete LLC  
**Civil Engineer:** Bishop Engineering  
**Cost Consultant:** Stecker-Harmsen  
**Geotechnical:** Terracon Consultant Inc.  
**Landscape Architect:** Genus Landscape Architects  
**MEP Engineer:** KCL Engineering  
**Photographer:** Cory Gaffer  
**Structural Engineer:** KPFF

**Vibrant Music Hall**

**Location:** Waukee, Iowa  
**Architect:** OPN Architects  
**Contractor:** Conlon Construction Co.  
**Landscape Architect:** Confluence  
**MEPT Engineer:** Bluestone Engineering  
**Photographer:** Alex Michl, Assoc. AIA  
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