LIFESERVE BLOOD CENTER HEADQUARTERS / CEDAR RAPIDS BANK & TRUST DOWNTOWN EAST /
LITTLE PRIEST TRIBAL COLLEGE SCIENCE BUILDING / RIVER VEIL /
FAIRMOUNT COMMUNITY CENTER / CITY OF DES MOINES GREENHOUSE & SOLAR FIELD
SUMMER 2026

ia architect

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF AIA IOWA

Behind the Veil


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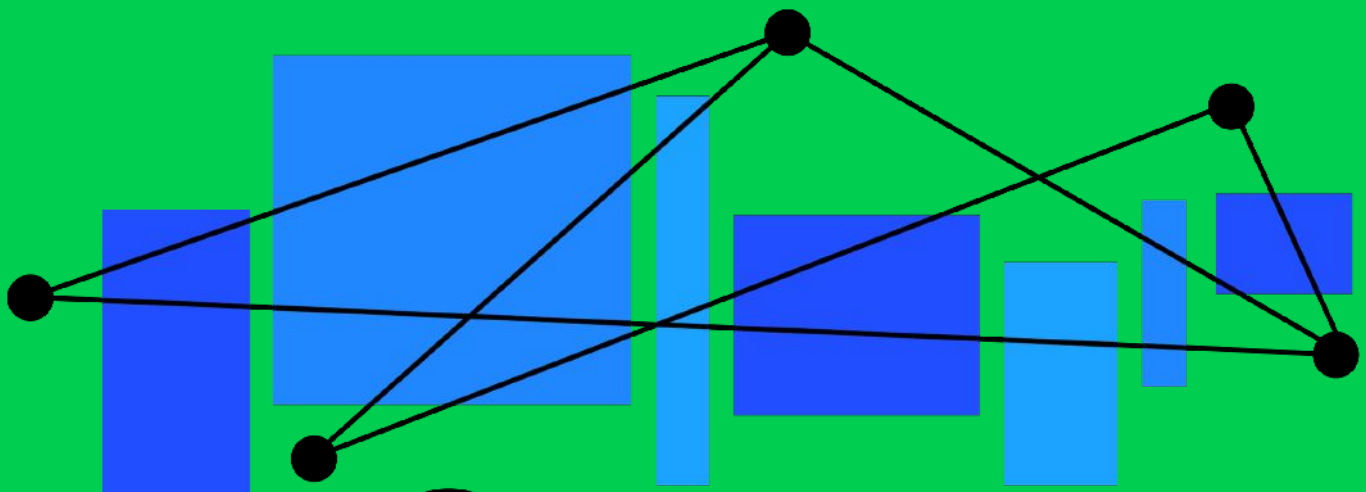

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editor's letter

Curtis Ehler, AIA
Editor, Iowa Architect

Our profession carries a long tradition of rejecting whatever movement came before. Whether it be the Arts and Crafts period, Modernism, Postmodernism, Brutalism, Deconstructivism, or Minimalism, many generations have sought to disrupt and oppose the work of their predecessors. Over the last century, architects have continuously debated the honesty of austere modernism against the delight of excess ornamentation. It's an endless conversation, yet one we seem to revel in. Both sides differ in fundamental approach but share a common intrigue with the materiality, craftmanship, and purpose of a building's envelope. Should it have order or expression? Should it be literal or symbolic? Should it practice restraint or celebrate meaning?

As Midwesterners, we often have a resourceful and artistic spirit. Likely derived from a mix of our geographic and cultural roots, Iowa architects have a unique, adaptable, hands-on approach to problem-solving that extends into design methodology. Designing a building's facade can be both a functional necessity and an inventive opportunity. It requires careful planning and precise detailing to survive Iowa's harsh winters and relentless summers. However, this doesn't have to come at the expense of good design, imaginative creativity, and occupant delight.

In this issue, we seek to uncover how architects clad their buildings through articulate details, unique fabrications, and innovative assemblies. Whether by opaque insertions, dimensional extrusions, or perforated scrims, how is the building's purpose and function expressed?

Is it by form, function, or both?

"Form follows function – that has been misunderstood.
Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union."
– Frank Lloyd Wright

Iowa Architect, the official publication of the American Institute of Architects, Iowa Chapter

Iowa Center for Architecture
400 Locust Street, Suite 100
Des Moines, IA 50309
515-244-7502
www.AIAIowa.org / www.IowaArchitecture.org

Subscription Rates
$7.25 per single issue
$24.95 per year
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The American Institute of Architects, Iowa Chapter

Publisher
Innovative Publishing
10629 Henning Way, Suite 8
Louisville, KY 40241
844-423-7272

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INNOVATIVE PUBLISHING

Published July 2026 | IP Volume 5 Issue 4 | 2026

Years of Membership

Longstanding AIA Iowa Members Recognized for Commitment to the Chapter

Every year at the Chapter's annual Spring Conference, the American Institute of Architects, Iowa Chapter (AIA Iowa), recognizes licensed members who have shown their longstanding commitment to the Chapter and the profession through years of continuous membership. Members receive recognition certificates starting at 25 years of membership, followed by 35, and every five years in subsequence. This annual observance is special to AIA Iowa members and inspires others to achieve a similar commitment; 2026 was no different. Chapter leaders were thrilled to recognize 38 long-term members with Years of Membership Certificates and acknowledgement at our virtual Spring Conference on April 4, 2026.

Congratulations and thank you to each recipient for their continued membership with the Chapter!

2026 Years of Membership Recipients:

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50 Years
Terry Lee Allers, FAIA
Robert P. Burns, AIA
William H. Dreyer, AIA

55 Years
William J. Ludwig, AIA

"The collective commitment of these members to AIA Iowa and the profession of architecture is remarkable. This recognition is one of the most meaningful things we do annually and is a testament to what we can accomplish together. Congratulations to these AIA Iowa members!"

— JESSICA REINERT, HON. AIA IOWA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

on the boards

Projects In Progress

Harbor Residence

Key Biscayne, Florida
Knop Killeen Architects

Located on an oceanfront property in Key Biscayne, Florida, this 8,000-square-foot custom residence draws heavily from south Florida's vernacular architecture. Deep overhangs, shaded loggias, and a low-profile roofline temper the subtropical climate while reinforcing an architectural language rooted in coastal tradition.

The home is organized around two exterior courtyards, a sheltered entry court that establishes a quiet threshold from the street, and an oceanfront courtyard that opens to expansive views of Biscayne Bay and the Miami skyline beyond. Living spaces flow seamlessly between indoors and out, fostering cross-ventilation and shaded outdoor living. A curated material palette emphasizes locally sourced, sustainable materials, including regional stone, and responsibly harvested wood, selected for durability in a marine environment and for their ability to weather gracefully over time.

Altoona Water Treatment Plant No. 4

Altoona, Iowa
Neumann Monson Architects

The Altoona Water Treatment Plant No. 4 is a 31,000-square-foot utility building designed to centralize Altoona's water treatment operations. The project, designed in collaboration with Neumann Monson Architects, McClure Engineering (civil, structural, and process), and IMEG (MEP), combines treatment infrastructure, vehicle and equipment storage, offices, and labs into a single efficient facility.

The project includes dedicated space for treatment process equipment, chemical storage, mechanical rooms, process labs, and system controls. Administrative areas include office and conference space, training rooms, and staff support amenities. A large vehicle bay supports fleet operations, and the layout prioritizes secure access and efficient workflows.

Delivered via a construction manager at risk (CMAR) model, the project benefits from early contractor input, phased procurement, and schedule control. Funding is supported by Iowa's State Revolving Fund (SRF), and the facility is undergoing full Iowa DNR (Department of Natural Resources) review and permitting.

Sustainable strategies include a high-performance envelope, daylighting, energy-efficient systems, low-maintenance materials, and future-ready infrastructure and building resilience.


LifeServe

LIFESERVE BLOOD CENTER HEADQUARTERS

PULL BACK THE CURTAIN

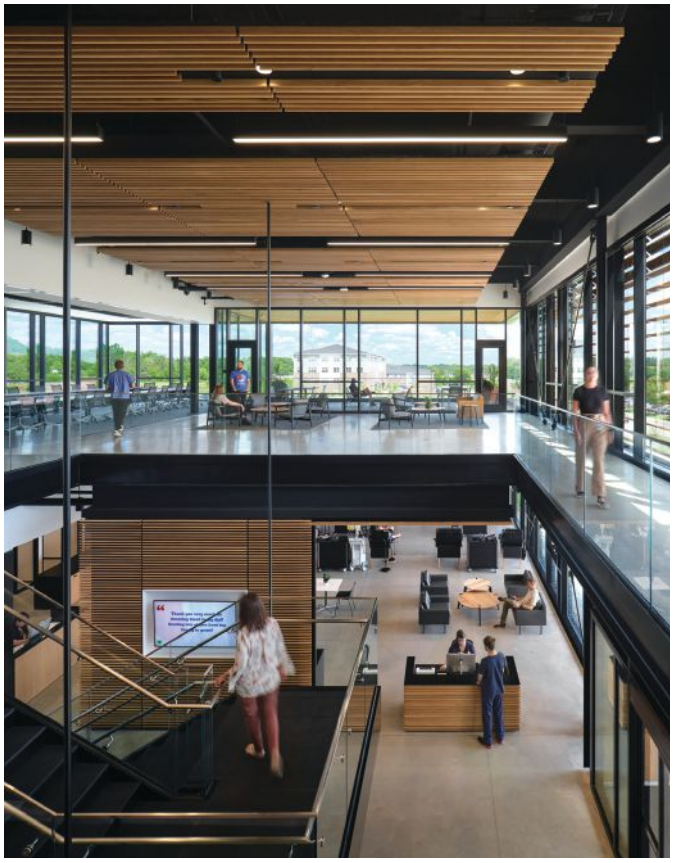
WORDS : LANE PRALLE, AIA **IMAGES :** KENDALL MCCOUGHTERTY **ARCHITECT :** BNIM

What does it mean for a building to reveal itself when architecture has historically been defined by what it chooses to conceal?

Architecture has always had a complicated relationship with its own skin. For every generation that reduces form to its elemental truth, another emerges eager to reintroduce meaning, texture, and narrative. Expression versus restraint; the debate is as old as the discipline itself, but the real intrigue lies somewhere between the thin, deliberate lines we draw at the building envelope.

The facade, for all its aesthetic weight, is designed for more than appearance. It's performance. It's craft. It's the point where environmental forces meet human intention. And in places like Iowa, where winters bite and summers swelter, there's no room for ill-considered solutions. The exterior must function. But it can also speak. Midwestern architecture has a habit of doing both. There's a quiet ingenuity here, a kind of hands-on pragmatism that resists overstatement. Materials are chosen for how they age, how they feel, how they respond to light at 7 a.m. in January or 9 p.m. in July.

The south bar, clad in zinc-coated metal panels, contains offices and donation spaces organized within an open, light-filled environment. Generous glazing invites daylight deep into the building, enhancing the interior experience and providing views of the landscape.



Early in the conceptual process, BNIM was tasked with challenging the client's assumptions about the internal processes that define their work. What emerged was a design approach rooted in understanding: the internal flow of personnel, the movement of blood and supplies, and the critical yet often overlooked interactions between staff and donors.

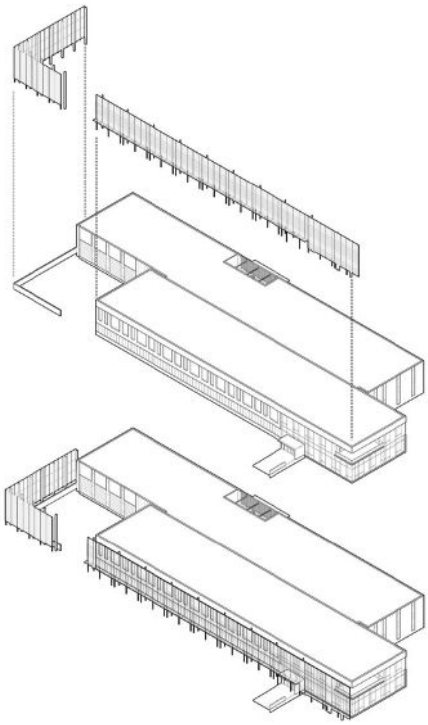
It's within this context that the LifeServe Blood Center headquarters begins to unfold—not as an object but as an idea shaped by inquiry and outcome. Early in the conceptual process, BNIM was tasked with challenging the client's assumptions about the internal processes that define their work. What emerged was a design approach rooted in understanding: the internal flow of personnel, the movement of blood and supplies, and the critical yet often overlooked interactions between staff and donors. These considerations became generative rather than logistical, forming the basis of an architecture that responds directly to its function.

A simple idea emerged: What if the building didn't just house its program but revealed it? Blood donation is generally a concealed act, conducted behind closed doors in environments that rarely reflect its significance. This project pushes back. The design operates on a simple yet powerful premise: Pull back the curtain. Visual and spatial connections are established between those who give and those who help sustain the mission. The internal organization is deliberately composed to foster these interactions and promote moments of overlap and visibility. Donors and staff aren't hidden away; they're part of the larger narrative. "These complexities were ultimately developed into opportunities to resolve site integration, create a public presence, and enhance user experience," said Jeff Shaffer, AIA, project architect at BNIM.

The plan responds accordingly. Exterior treatment is a direct expression of the internal program, revealing differences in use and occupation. Two distinct bars extend along the site, connected but clearly defined. The utilitarian north bar is wrapped with insulated precast concrete panels and houses storage, utilities, and maintenance functions. The south bar, clad in zinc-coated metal panels, contains offices and donation spaces organized within an open, light-filled environment. Generous glazing invites daylight deep into the building, enhancing the interior experience and providing views of the landscape.

The site presents its own set of challenges: tight constraints, a noticeable slope to the east, and a highly visible intersection that demands both performance and presence. These complexities become opportunities to enhance user experience and site integration. A Corten steel sunshade on the south elevation provides an unmistakable identity for the building and complements the darker finishes of the skin. Angled blades temper solar heat gain while preserving the transparency that defines the interior space. A metal screen wraps the corner with perforated panels and continues along the west elevation, veiling the garage with intention. The warm tones and weathered patina of the steel anchor the building to its history as a former tree nursery and reinforce a natural connection to the landscape. As the light shifts throughout the day, the perforated surface comes alive, casting shadows that stretch and dissolve in a quiet, continuous performance. On closer inspection, the pattern reveals another layer. The perforations, subtle at a distance, are an abstraction of red blood cells seen under a microscope.

There's a tendency in healthcare design to default to neutrality, to create spaces that are clean, controlled, and often forgettable.

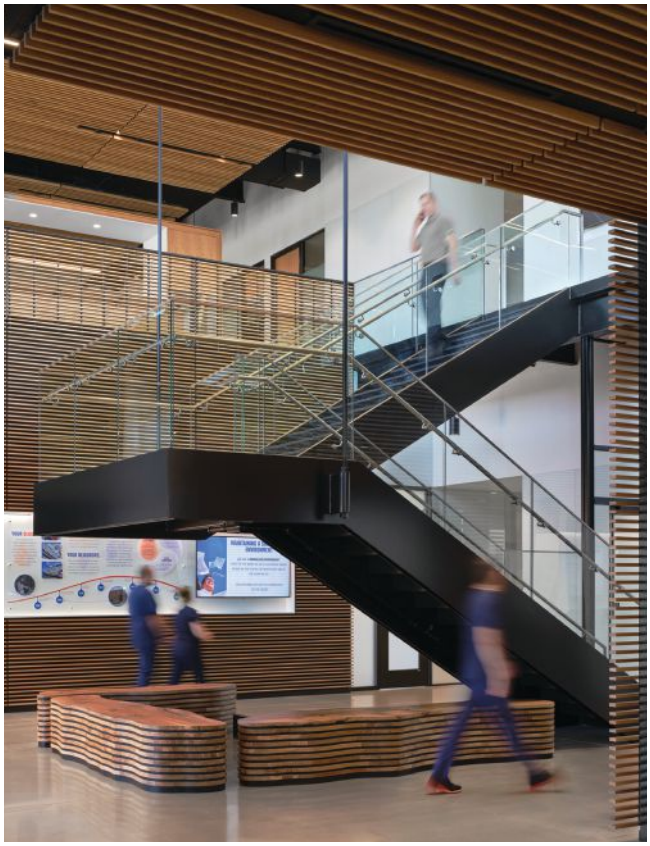


At left: Exterior treatment is a direct expression of the internal program, revealing differences in use and occupation. Two distinct bars extend along the site, connected but clearly defined. **Below:** The two-level open entry creates physical and visual connections between staff and donors. Custom wood benches under the stair utilize reclaimed trees from the site.

The LifeServe Blood Center leans in the opposite direction. It's bright without being sterile. Calm without being dull. The natural, tactile, and warm material palette reinforces that balance, while the connection to the surrounding landscape keeps the building grounded in its place. Full-height glazing along the east elevation frames views of trees and native vegetation, a quiet nod to the site's past life. A donor garden extends that connection outward, offering a space that feels restorative rather than transactional. The parking and circulation are carefully considered, supporting the building's flow without overwhelming it.

The success of the project doesn't lie within any single gesture or detail but in the way everything works together to shift the narrative. The building doesn't just provide a design solution; it reframes expectations. In the end, the question isn't whether architecture should choose between form and function, restraint and expression, honesty and delight. Exceptional work always finds a way to hold those tensions in balance. This project performs by responding to climate, site, and program with precision. Its expression of material, pattern, and light offers moments of surprise and meaning. And perhaps most importantly, it reveals.

BNIM pulls back the veil on a process that is too often hidden, and in doing so, it makes the building more human. There's a quiet confidence in that approach. No grand gestures. No unnecessary noise. Just a well-designed building that understands what it needs to do and isn't afraid to show how it does it. In a profession that's spent generations arguing about what architecture should be, that kind of clarity feels less like an answer and more like a step forward.



CEDAR RAPIDS BANK & TRUST DOWNTOWN EAST

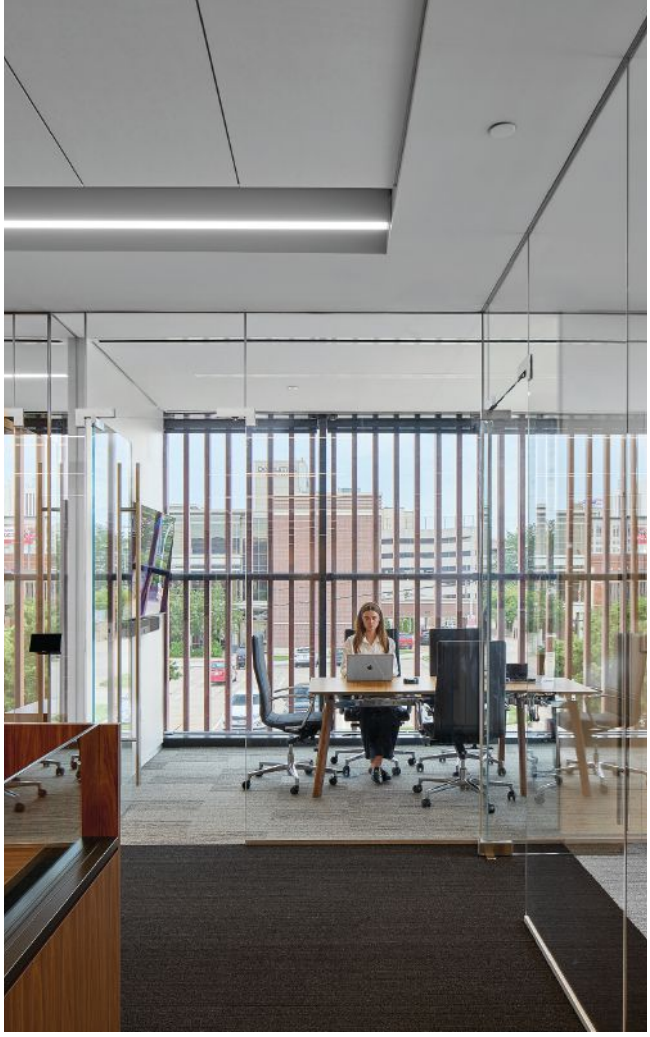
CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

WORDS : ANDREW BALLARD, AIA **IMAGES :** ALEX MICHL, ASSOC. AIA
ARCHITECT : OPN ARCHITECTS

OPN Architects' three-story Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust office and administration building stretches Cedar Rapids' downtown one block further along First Avenue, the city's busiest arterial. The building presents a clear image of two blocks—one of glass and one of terra-cotta—atop a limestone base. The design iterates on its older neighbor, addresses an urban topographic condition, and creates a range of exterior effects.

The building stands one block northeast from its OPN-designed parent, Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust's retail banking flagship. The two aligning buildings, with similar proportions and material palettes, clearly share genetics. The new building's self-assured sophistication registers the architect and client's development in the 20 years since the first building's completion. Both buildings use limestone-clad bases to negotiate the ground's upward slope from First Avenue and build upward with glass and fired clay. The newcomer translates its predecessor's brick into terra-cotta, applying the system with variation that yields nuanced pattern, shading, and transparency.

The new design plays no second fiddle but does take care in supporting the earlier building's customer-facing role. OPN Principal David Sorg, AIA, describes the project's balance of clarity and understatement. "We wanted



Above: Private offices and support areas ring the perimeter. **Below:** Planted terraces are interspersed with steps and an accessible ramp.
Opposite: The design iterates on its older neighbor, addresses an urban topographic condition, and creates a range of exterior effects.

to enhance the urban experience at street level without providing confusing cues to bank customers, hence the more subtle signage and access." Parking and the primary entry are tucked to the rear. Street-visible doors, reserved for egress, are discreet and lack external hardware.

The ground level strikes a balance between the lower First Avenue sidewalk and the higher parking area located opposite. Too low a ground floor would inhibit accessible employee entry. Too high a ground floor would disrupt streetscape connection. The happy medium turned out to be 3 feet above the ground at the corner of First Avenue and Sixth Street Northeast. A portion of the building's base extends northwest to conceal mechanical and electrical utilities. This extension helps resolve the grade differential by backdropping the rear-located entry sequence with limestone. Upslope, planted terraces are interspersed with steps and an accessible ramp.

The building's interior optimizes flexible open space, with the entry vestibule opening to the primary stair and a spacious shared work area. Private offices and support areas ring the perimeter. The second level renders the building's dual box organization tangible as its floor plate cantilevers over 4 feet beyond the limestone-clad base on each side. A 10-foot east-west circulation dimension divides the two boxes, registered by wide flange steel columns and demarcated by walls and stair core. The third level proves even more unobstructed than levels

one and two. Part of the floor pulls back from the curtain wall to offer double height space below.

Much of the roof's surface is dedicated to photovoltaic (PV) panels. A 6-foot tall linear clerestory "lantern" slips between the boxes to usher daylight deep in the building. David notes that OPN had honed the lantern concept and other building features with Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust through other projects in their expansion plans. "Here, we didn't even put together daylighting studies or make a case; they said it was nonnegotiable."

Cladding finds variation in three primary materials: limestone, glass, and terra-cotta. At the plinth, stacked-bond limestone panels bear on a brick ledge foundation below grade and tie back to wall framing through rigid insulation. Atop this base, aluminum soffit panels cap the steel structure that cantilevers the building's upper portion.

The upper enclosure is predominately a fritted glass aluminum curtain wall clipped to steel framing. Screened portions consist of terra-cotta baguettes (hollow extrusions) mounted in front of the curtain wall's glass. Continuous aluminum support tubes secure the terra-cotta to support angles aligned with curtain wall connection clips.

The curtain wall and terra-cotta systems separate in a playful moment at the third floor's northwest extent. Here, the glass system steps back, creating a reentrant corner terrace. The terra-cotta screen continues in plane, completing the exterior envelope and returning horizontally above to create an airy enclosure.

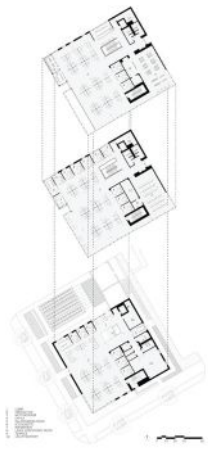
Continuous, opaque terra-cotta facade portions comprise panelized rainscreen over mineral wool fiberboard insulation. Subtle panel type variations yield an animated linear field that riffs on the adjacent baguette system's regular striations.

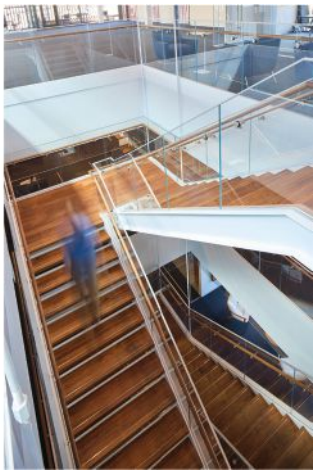
The curtain wall, with its terra-cotta veil, impacts interior experience as much as exterior perception. OPN Interior Designer Mindy Sorg started work with Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust's first interior fit-out 25 years ago and has remained a key collaborator in several projects since.

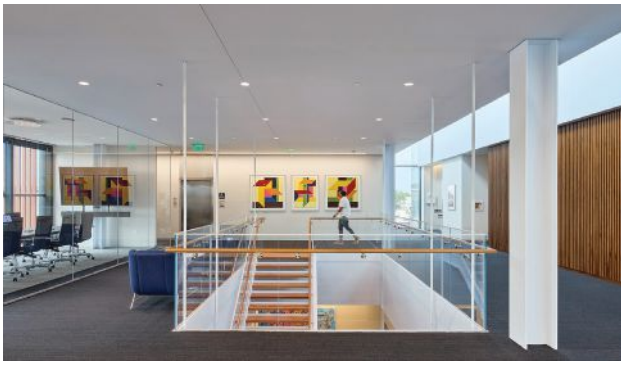
"They trust us to help them project their brand into space. When I first started working with CRBT, most banks' default was a simplistic version of customer-facing, with lots of heaviness and stability. We began to roll in workplace strategy: why employees would want to be there and how visibility can bring people together. Everyone up to the bank president wants to be available and accessible. It's about a larger community," says Mindy.

As day transitions to dusk, the building exterior shifts from reflective to transparent. Outside, rich walnut workstations and ribbed wall paneling join the facade's material palette.

At top: The curtain wall and terra-cotta systems separate in a playful moment at the third floor's northwest extent. Here, the glass system steps back, creating a reentrant corner terrace. **Bottom left:** Continuous, opaque terra-cotta facade portions comprise panelized rainscreen over mineral wool fiberboard insulation. **Bottom right:** The third level proves even more unobstructed than levels one and two.







Clockwise from top: As day transitions to dusk, the building exterior shifts from reflective to transparent. Part of the floor pulls back from the curtain wall to offer double height space below. Continuous aluminum support tubes secure the terra-cotta to support angles aligned with curtain wall connection clips. The building presents a clear image of two blocks—one of glass and one of terra-cotta—atop a limestone base.

The slat screen also incorporates a subtle expression of identity. The college's name is embedded within the pattern, visible only from specific vantage points.

LITTLE PRIEST TRIBAL COLLEGE SCIENCE BUILDING

A STRATEGIC FACADE: DESIGNING FOR ACCESS, EFFICIENCY, AND IMPACT

WORDS: PAOLO ORLANDO, AIA **IMAGES:** CHADD GOOSMANN, AURORA PHOTOGRAPHY **ARCHITECT:** PLAN ARCHITECTURE

In Winnebago, Nebraska, the new Science Building at Little Priest Tribal College extends beyond the addition of laboratory space. It represents a targeted investment in educational access, community empowerment, and the role architecture can play in expanding pathways into high-demand STEM careers. Designed by PLaN Architecture and completed in May 2025, the 13,652-square-foot facility supports science education within the Winnebago Tribal community, positioning the project as both an educational and economic catalyst.

The need for the building stems from a clear disparity: More than 30 percent of the Winnebago Tribal community lives below the poverty line, while Native Americans remain significantly underrepresented in STEM professions. Tribal leadership identified access to science education as a critical step toward improving long-term economic opportunity. The new facility provides dedicated biology and chemistry labs, science classrooms, and student support spaces, creating a focused environment for STEM learning on campus.

The project was defined by three primary constraints: a limited site, a modest budget, and a strong cultural directive. The entire project was funded through grants, resulting in a construction budget of approximately $370 per square foot—far below typical laboratory construction costs. With a program of roughly 10,000 square feet on a site of only 5,000 square feet, a multistory solution became unavoidable. Additionally, the college emphasized that all student-occupied spaces should maintain a visual connection to the surrounding landscape.

A three-story configuration addressed the compact footprint but introduced additional challenges. Vertical circulation and utility shafts consumed a significant portion of the floor plate, placing further pressure on the already-constrained budget. In response, the design team developed a clear organizational strategy that consolidates service and circulation along a single wall, freeing the opposite facade for daylight-driven learning spaces.

The building is structured around a simple diagram. Service spaces and vertical infrastructure are concentrated along the southwest wall, forming a solid backbone, while student-centered spaces—including lounges, classrooms, and laboratories—are positioned along the northeast primary facade. This arrangement ensures that all learning spaces benefit from daylight and outward views.

To meet budget demands without compromising the student experience, the design focused its investment selectively. As Nathan Kalaher, AIA, principal of PLaN Architecture, explains, “The budget wasn’t something we addressed after the design. It was part of the design process from the beginning.” Three facades were intentionally restrained, utilizing repetitive metal panel systems, minimal openings, and straightforward detailing to reduce construction complexity and cost. These efficiencies allowed the project to concentrate resources on a single defining element.

The primary facade features a continuous band of floor-to-ceiling glazing, providing panoramic views of the Nebraska landscape. Every student-occupied space across all three levels connects visually to the site, reinforcing the college’s emphasis on cultural connection and well-being. Exterior vertical slats and interior motorized shades provide solar control while maintaining transparency.

The slat screen also incorporates a subtle expression of identity. The college’s name is embedded within the pattern, visible only from specific vantage points.

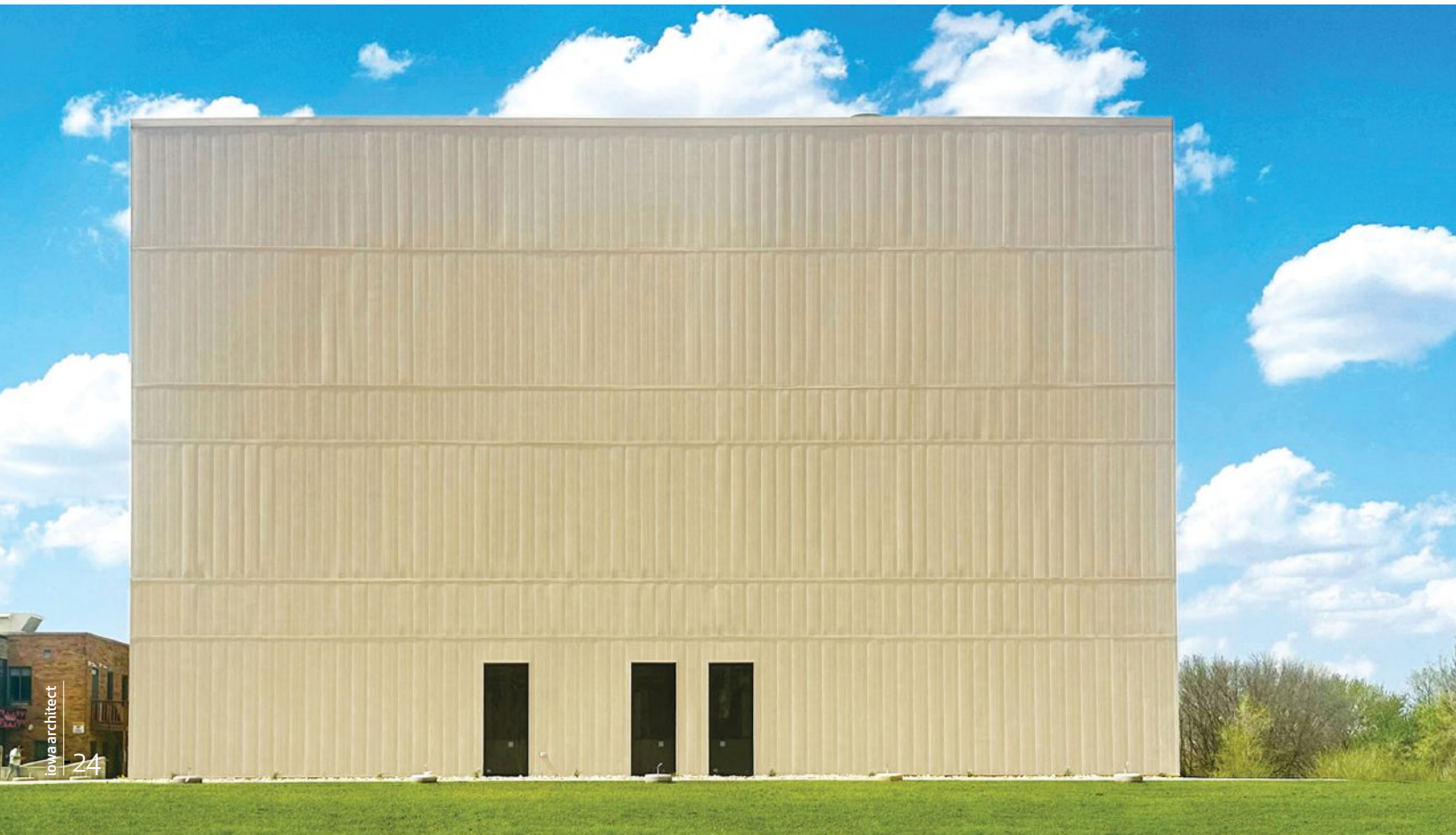
At most angles, the facade reads as an abstract composition of vertical elements, but when viewed directly, the lettering emerges.

Material and construction strategies are equally critical to the project's success. The design team worked closely with local fabricators and trades to develop solutions that balanced durability, simplicity, and cost-efficiency. Metal panels with a wood-grain finish reference the surrounding campus while providing a low-maintenance exterior system.

One notable refinement involved introducing shallow V-grooves into the aluminum panels, increasing rigidity and allowing for a thinner material gauge. This adjustment reduced costs without sacrificing performance and reflects the collaborative problem-solving approach that shaped the project. Similar efficiencies, including standardized material dimensions, reduced floor-to-floor heights, and the use of storefront glazing in place of curtain wall, contributed to keeping the project within budget.

Internally, the building is organized by program to maximize efficiency. The first floor houses student services, lounge areas, and offices. The second floor contains science classrooms, while the third floor accommodates specialized biology and chemistry labs. This clear zoning supports straightforward building systems and reinforces the overall simplicity of the design.

Top: The college emphasized that all student-occupied spaces should maintain a visual connection to the surrounding landscape. **Bottom:** The design team worked closely with local fabricators and trades to develop solutions that balanced durability, simplicity, and cost-efficiency. Metal panels with a wood-grain finish reference the surrounding campus while providing a low-maintenance exterior system.



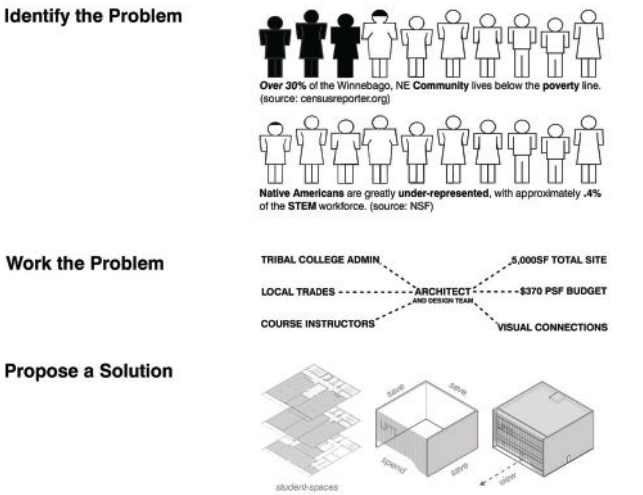
The completed building also introduces a new architectural identity to the campus. Surrounded by older structures, including log cabin-style buildings, the science facility presents a distinctly contemporary presence. Its simple form and luminous facade signal a forward-looking investment in education while remaining grounded in its landscape.

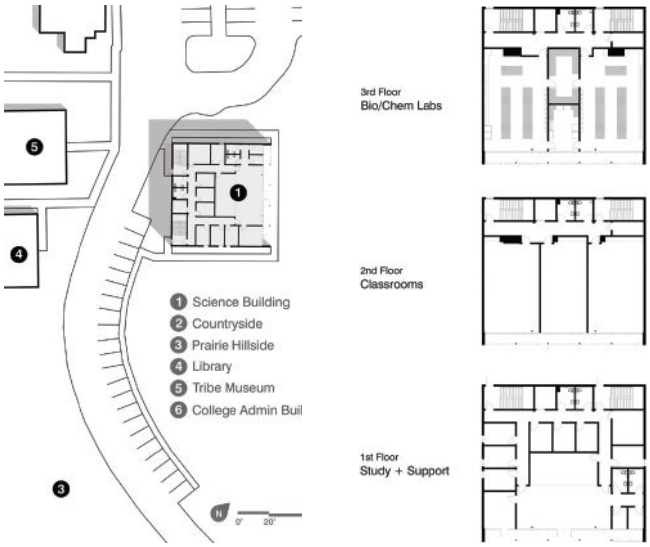
For the college, the building represents more than a physical addition. Manoj Patil, president of Little Priest Tribal College, emphasizes its broader significance: "The Little Priest Tribal College Science Building represents our resilience and our commitment to providing high-quality education while fulfilling Chief Little Priest's mission to 'Be Strong and Educate My Children.' The building gives our students access to state-of-the-art facilities and strengthens our ability to grow future academic programs."

Just one semester after opening, the building has already begun to demonstrate its impact. The college has reported record enrollment, with increased participation in science programs and growing interest from prospective students.

The Little Priest Tribal College Science Building demonstrates how a focused design strategy, particularly through its facade, can leverage constraint, budget discipline, and collaboration to produce meaningful architectural outcomes.

Top and bottom left: Exterior vertical slats and interior motorized shades provide solar control while maintaining transparency. **Top and bottom right:** The building is structured around a simple diagram. Service spaces and vertical infrastructure are concentrated along the southwest wall, forming a solid backbone, while student-centered spaces—including lounges, classrooms, and laboratories—are positioned along the northeast primary facade.

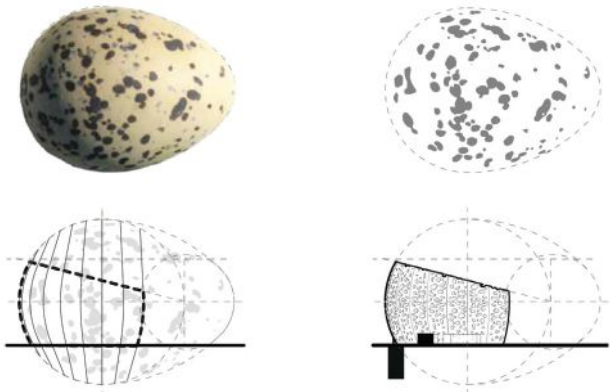




RIVER VEIL
AN INTEGRATED AND IMMERSIVE INSTALLATION

WORDS : NATHAN KALAHER, AIA **IMAGES :** NEUMANN MONSON ARCHITECTS **ARCHITECT :** NEUMANN MONSON ARCHITECTS

Located along the Iowa River in Iowa City, the River Veil offers a distinct vantage point for observing the riverfront and surrounding habitat. The installation is part of a larger ecological restoration project funded in part by Project GREEN, a local group dedicated to beautifying parks and green spaces. The structure was thoughtfully designed to be integrated with the site as opposed to being placed on the site.

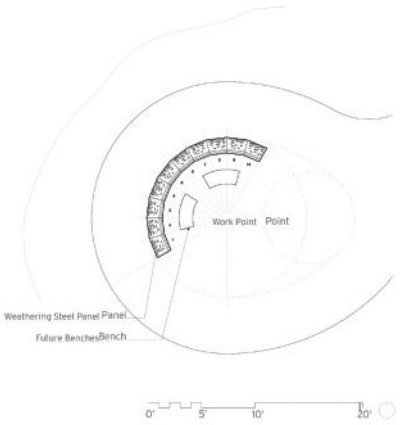


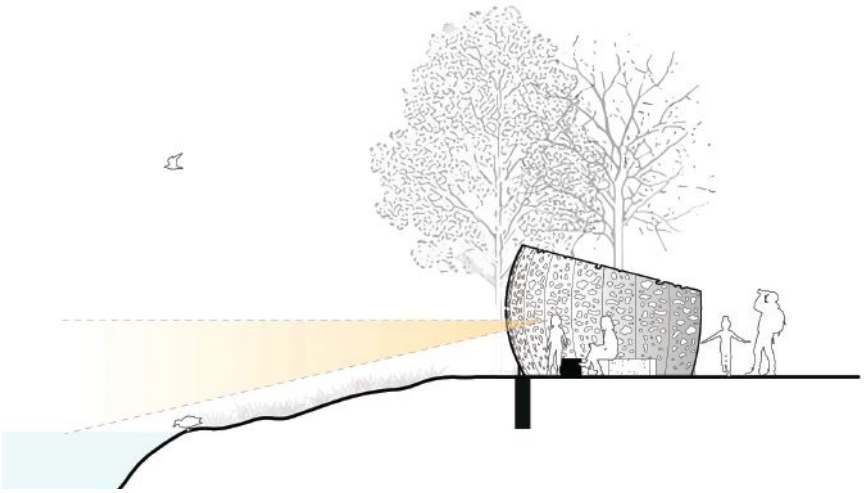
The use of weathering steel panels was used for both its resilience to potential flooding and also to weather, showing change through time on the site. The form curves and contorts creating volumes and spaces. Much like the structural form, the perforations were deliberately designed to mimic the speckled pattern of a plover egg, providing a variety of apertures and a sort of camouflage within the landscape.

"Responding to a prompt timeline and economical budget, the structure was designed to utilize modular panels that are rotated to offer an undulating pattern and sinuous form," says Bob Gassman, Assoc. AIA. The perforated structure serves to not only frame views but also to shield the viewers from being viewed, operating similarly to a duck blind.

The structure is accessed and perceived differently depending on the viewer's movement and proximity. It can envelop a pedestrian birdwatcher, creating an immersive spatial experience, or read as a sculptural object when encountered in motion by bicycle or kayak. In each condition, its presence shifts between inhabitable form and visual artifact, reinforcing its dual role within the landscape.

The River Veil is understood on the site as both object and space; and as a veil it allows the surrounding site to be viewed and experienced in a multitude of ways.





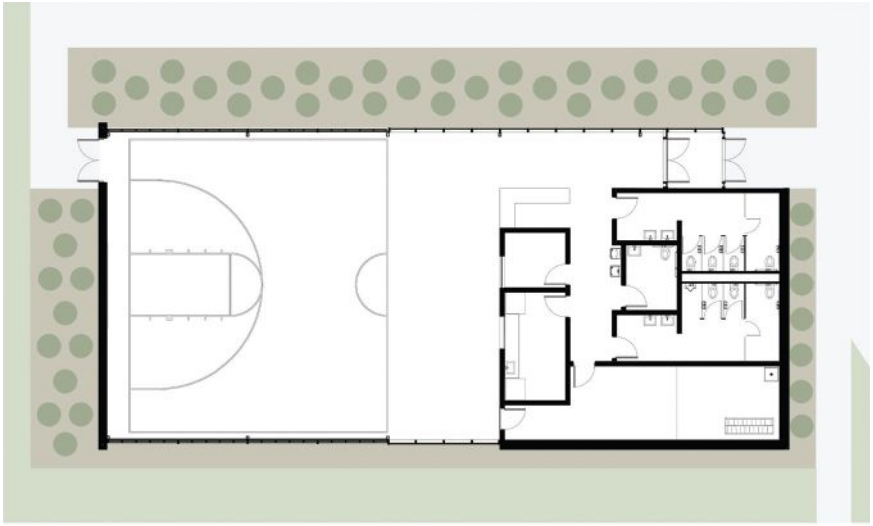
The structure is accessed and perceived differently depending on the viewer's movement and proximity. It can envelop a pedestrian birdwatcher, creating an immersive spatial experience, or read as a sculptural object when encountered in motion by bicycle or kayak. In each condition, its presence shifts between inhabitable form and visual artifact, reinforcing its dual role within the landscape.

FAIRMOUNT COMMUNITY CENTER

MORE THAN JUST A GYM

WORDS: ANDREW VAN LEEUWEN, AIA **IMAGES:** ALEX MICHL, ASSOC. AIA **ARCHITECT:** OPN ARCHITECTS

In Davenport's underserved neighborhood—an area without nearby schools, limited access to safe recreation spaces, and few opportunities for after-school engagement—the new Fairmount Community Center has quickly become an anchor of community life. The 4,500-square-foot building was originally envisioned as "just a gym," "but it has become a multigenerational hub supporting public health, community resilience, and neighborhood pride," says David Sorg, AIA, a principal at OPN Architects and lead designer of the building.



The design team developed a strict, efficient building module and a simple plan. As the high-volume gym became the anchor, it required support spaces including restrooms, office, kitchen, and storage. **Opposite, at top:** The translucent walls glow like a lantern serving as a beacon for belonging. **Opposite, at bottom:** Aspirations pointed toward a full-court gym, but once budget constraints were applied, the reality became a half-court. Instead of reducing potential, the constraint sharpened the design.

The project began with a simple request from residents for a safe space to perform physical activities. Aspirations pointed toward a full-court gym, but once budget constraints were applied, the reality became a half-court. Instead of reducing potential, the constraint sharpened the design. The design team developed a strict, efficient building module and a simple plan. As the high-volume gym became the anchor, it required support spaces including restrooms, office, kitchen, and storage. These were wrapped into a durable "wood box," expressed inside and out through simulated wood plank siding able to withstand both weathering and the impact of basketballs. As Sorg explains, "the multipurpose space became an 'accordion' in plan that flexed in size as cost, scope, and budget aligned."

The gym volume, multipurpose space, and the wood-box core established the architectural massing diagram. In plan and elevation, the team embraced simplicity in form and layout with a pure rectangular building rotated intentionally to align with the adjacent public library's main access path. While the community center stands independent of its neighbor, the two are visually linked and aligned for the purpose of civic engagement.

The facade articulation focuses on expressing the building's purpose, revealing the activity within, and balancing the programmatic function. The design team established a sequence of functional and intentional "absolutes" to articulate the cladding. The end wall of the gym as solid block for durability; the flanking sides of the gym as translucent glazing, delivering diffused, glare-free daylight; and the multipurpose space and entry employ full-height clear glass for transparency and visual connection. The envelope moves from opaque to translucent to transparent, revealing the building's functions through intentional expression. As Sorg notes regarding the design, "It's not more than what it needs to be."

The architectural simplicity and clarity are only part of the story. The building's impact has been immediate and measurable. With rentals fully booked months in advance, multigenerational activities including toddler time, senior dance programs, youth team practices, and community outreach sessions keep the facility activated and fulfill the need within the neighborhood. The city has seen a decrease in juvenile crime in the neighborhood, according to Davenport Director of Parks and Recreation Chad Dyson, who also shared one of the project's most telling observations: "The way it lights up adds to the desire for people to rent the facility because everyone sees what's going on and wants to be part of it."

At night, the translucent walls glow like a lantern serving as a beacon for belonging. In a neighborhood in need of civic investment, the Fairmount Community Center symbolizes commitment, identity, and possibility. Through clear form, strategic transparency, and an honest expression of purpose, the Fairmount Community Center steps out from behind the veil to reveal its deeper role as more than just a gym.

Top left and right: The design team established a sequence of functional and intentional "absolutes" to articulate the cladding. The end wall of the gym as solid block for durability; the flanking sides of the gym as translucent glazing, delivering diffused, glare-free daylight; and the multipurpose space and entry employ full-height clear glass for transparency and visual connection. **Bottom left and right:** With rentals fully booked months in advance, multigenerational activities including toddler time, senior dance programs, youth team practices, and community outreach sessions keep the facility activated and fulfill the need within the neighborhood.

CITY OF DES MOINES GREENHOUSE & SOLAR FIELD
PERFORMANCE IN PLAIN SIGHT

WORDS : ANNA AVERSING, ASSOC. AIA **IMAGES :** COREY GAFFER **ARCHITECT :** MA ARCHITECTURE

The City of Des Moines Greenhouse & Solar Field by MA Architecture presents a compelling reconsideration of what civic infrastructure can be: technologically sophisticated yet publicly legible, environmentally rigorous yet visually restrained. At first glance, the project appears deceptively simple. A luminous greenhouse volume stretches across the site as a translucent object, paired with a dark, sharply detailed headhouse clad in vertically articulated metal panels. Yet behind the project's restrained expression lies an intricate network of environmental systems and layered operational strategies.

Located on a former landfill site in Des Moines, the 14,200-square-foot facility was designed as a fully electric, operationally net-zero greenhouse serving the city's Parks and Recreation Department. The building produces more than 240,000 flowering annuals each year for public planting initiatives throughout the city, while also supporting dozens of neighborhood groups and hundreds of volunteers. Beyond its horticultural role, the project demonstrates how architecture can integrate energy performance, resiliency, and civic identity into a cohesive architectural language.

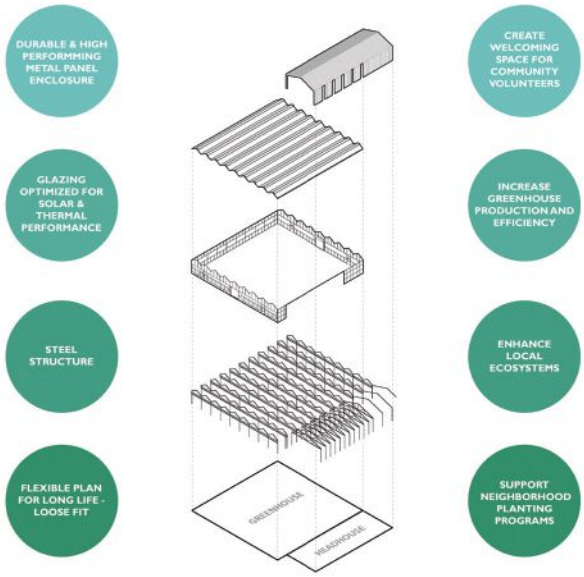
For Associate Principal and project lead Anna Squier, the greenhouse's apparent simplicity conceals a highly calibrated environmental apparatus. "What appears as a simple glass and polycarbonate shell is quite complex through the layering of systems that react to specific plant growth requirements," Squier explains. Operable rooftop monitors, guillotine side vents, shade curtains, grow lights, misters, and automated environmental controls operate together as a responsive system tuned to both seasonal climate shifts and plant-specific needs.

The project's defining tri-peak roof profile emerged not from formal expression alone but from extensive environmental analysis. Derived from Dutch greenhouse precedents, the repeated peaked form maximizes passive ventilation while influencing structural spans, condensation management, daylight performance, and screening systems. In section, the greenhouse reads less as a singular enclosure and more as a layered environmental instrument. Overhead mechanical systems, shade curtains, irrigation infrastructure, and ventilation assemblies remain fully visible within the greenhouse volume, transforming the interior into an exposed framework for cultivation and environmental control.

Squier describes this condition as intentionally paradoxical. "From the outside, it appears as a glowing glass enclosure," she

At top: The greenhouse glows across the restored prairie landscape while the internal systems recede into abstraction behind the translucent shell.

At top: The building produces more than 240,000 flowering annuals each year for public planting initiatives throughout the city while also supporting dozens of neighborhood groups and hundreds of volunteers. **Top left and right:** Overhead mechanical systems, shade curtains, irrigation infrastructure, and ventilation assemblies remain fully visible within the greenhouse volume, transforming the interior into an exposed framework for cultivation and environmental control. **Bottom left and right:** Rather than concealing systems behind anonymous industrial architecture, the project frames environmental performance itself as a public-facing architectural value.



The project's environmental ambitions extend well beyond the building envelope. A dedicated solar array produces approximately 142 percent of the facility's annual energy demand, supporting one of the few fully electric municipal greenhouses in operation globally.

notes. "On the interior, it's a systematic lab of pieces that work together to open and close, adapt and grow." That duality becomes especially pronounced at dusk when the greenhouse glows across the restored prairie landscape while the internal systems recede into abstraction behind the translucent shell.

The project's environmental ambitions extend well beyond the building envelope. A dedicated solar array produces approximately 142 percent of the facility's annual energy demand, supporting one of the few fully electric municipal greenhouses in operation globally. Native prairie restoration and pollinator habitat occupy roughly 40 percent of the site, while bioswales infiltrate the vast majority of stormwater on site. The landscape operates not as aesthetic foregrounding but as active ecological infrastructure integrated into the project's broader environmental performance.

Equally significant is the project's attention to volunteer and staff experience. While highly technical in operation, the facility prioritizes comfort and workplace quality through daylight-filled transplanting spaces, controlled thermal environments, and direct visual connections between the headhouse and greenhouse. Interior workspaces avoid the utilitarian character often associated with municipal service buildings, instead reinforcing the project's civic dimension.

That civic ambition situated the greenhouse within a broader shift in contemporary infrastructure design. Rather than concealing systems behind anonymous industrial architecture, the project frames environmental performance itself as a public-facing architectural value. The result is a facility that operates simultaneously as production space, ecological infrastructure, workplace, and civic landmark—one that demonstrates how environmental stewardship can become both visible and culturally meaningful through design.

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Photographer: Kendall McCoughterty
Structural Engineer: Raker Rhodes Engineering

Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust Downtown East
Location: Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Architect: OPN Architects
Contractor: Rinderknecht Associates
Civil: Anderson Bogert
MEP: Design Engineers
Photographer: Alex Michl, Assoc. AIA
Structural: Raker Rhodes Engineering

Little Priest Tribal College Science Building
Location: Winnebago, Nebraska
Architect: PLaN Architecture
Civil Engineer: True Engineering
Contractor: HCI Construction
Mechanical-Electrical Engineer: Advanced Engineering Systems
Photographer: Chadd Goosmann, Aurora Photography
Structural Engineer: Performance Engineering

River Veil
Location: Iowa City, Iowa
Architect: Neumann Monson Architects
Fabricator: Newport Industries
Landscape Architect: Hawks Design LLC
Photographer: Neumann Monson Architects
Structural Engineer: M2B

Fairmount Community Center
Location: Davenport, Iowa
Architect: OPN Architects
Contractor: Precision Builders Inc.
Civil: IMEG
MEP: IMEG
Photographer: Alex Michl, Assoc. AIA
Structural: IMEG

City of Des Moines Greenhouse & Solar Field
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