Vernacular Issue
Inspired by life: design for the people and heritage of the land
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Welcome!

Architectural theorist Leon Krier noted, “Vernacular architecture is the manual-artisan culture of building, based on tectonic logic…” Close your eyes and take a trip across Iowa, from the Loess Hills to the Quad Cities. You’ll travel by pastoral rolling farms, iconic barns and silos, then enter the urban centers of Des Moines and Iowa City, perhaps take a detour down to the American Gothic house, then land on the banks of the Mississippi. Each of these places exemplifies the careful craft of the artisan. Have you looked at the craft of a silo, the interlocking weave of a crib, the rhythm of boards and battens, the structure of a barn? They embody a local beauty that becomes inherent in the work of Iowa architects. How does this myriad of places influence the design of the built environment?

This issue begins to explore Iowa’s vernacular, starting with the addition to the iconic “White House” on the campus of Grinnell College by BNIM. We then contrast it with OPN Architect’s minimalist interpretation of vernacular materials with the BioVentures Center. Matt Niebuhr takes us on a photo essay through the Iowa farmscape, sharing the lessons he’s learned from Iowa. Finally, we’ll look at a trio of projects funded by the Iowa Main Street Initiative, dedicated to preserving and revitalizing the social fabric of Iowa’s smaller towns. Each of these projects exudes a sense of craft that I have only seen in this state and exhibited in our finest architectural works.

Sit back and enjoy what Iowa has to offer.

Leon Krier
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We understand discovery is a process, but it doesn't have to be a long one.
I EAT / DRINK

The Design of Everyday Things / Design is intentional problem-seeking and problem-solving. It's the effort to enhance our experience by thoughtful creation of the elements that make up our environment. Everyday things meet both objective and subjective needs that, at best, are also functional and work to enhance the activities for which they were intended.

Eat / Growing concern about food contamination presented an interesting challenge for kitchenware designer Joseph Joseph. The company aimed to create a tool that allows for safer separation of foods in a convenient and attractive way. Enter the Index Advance. The chopping board categorization system reduces contamination through innovative design, including non-slip features and color-coded tabs for each food type that fit perfectly into a stylish and portable storage case, josephjoseph.com.

Drink / Wine sellers in Southern California identified a problem. Traditional wine glasses didn't work well on tasting tours. They broke easily and had to be either discarded or cleaned. Plastic glasses were a poor marketing tool and lacked the elegance associated with fine wine. The solution came in the form of Govino wine glasses. Available in wine glasses, flutes and cocktail glasses, Govino products are shatterproof, reusable and recyclable. Plus, they're made of flexible polymer, which allows a wine's aromatics to ruminate and color to shine through govinowine.com.

8-Ounce Flute
Set of 4
$12.95

12-Ounce Cocktail Glass
Set of 4
$12.95
In late fall 2010, two companies put up offices a few blocks apart in Des Moines, unknowingly kicking off what has been dubbed “Silicon Sixth” Avenue, a name applied to a three-block corridor that boasts the greatest concentration of technology companies and startups in Central Iowa.

Anchored on the south by flat-fee money transfer startup Dwolla, the company who set up shop on the 11th floor of the Midland Building (206 6th Ave.) and on the north by mobile-application development shop BitMethod on the 12th floor of the Liberty Building (1408 6th Ave.), Silicon Sixth grew as each company filled their open spaces by inviting their friends in other startups to join them.

Fast forward almost 18 months and the corridor has been buoyed with the addition of Startup City Des Moines, an incubator hosting eight startups (and growing), located in the Bank of America building (317 6th Ave.), Foundry Coworking in the Liberty and Silicon Prairie News in the Midland, each hosting multiple companies working to get off the ground. Several others startups and ecosystem players have taken their own offices in the three buildings as well. Dwolla has since outgrown its space and moved into larger offices around the corner in the Financial Center (666 Walnut St.).

Silicon Sixth is fueled by Amici Espresso, a coffee shop on the first floor of the Midland, which often serves as a common break room for entrepreneurs along the corridor.

The concept of Silicon Sixth was neither planned nor formalized, but has developed organically out of a sense of collaboration among the startups—entrepreneurs like to co-mingle to work through common issues and share successes.

Dwolla (above, top), a Silicon Sixth resident and e-commerce startup, has found itself rising to the top of the entrepreneurial who’s who list in Des Moines. Having served as an anchor for the district, the online payment company has quickly grown from just two to about 15 employees.

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The Stories They Tell

To passerby in Iowa City's pedestrian mall, 118 East College Street is the archetypal 19th-century main street building. Once a funeral parlor, a cabinetry factory and popular bar, it's now vacant, and nothing if not ordinary. Still, the building has many stories to tell.

For Elias Schroeder, former architecture intern, it's a story of haunting. In 2011, Schroeder spent his summer taking measurements for renovations, often alone and with little more than a flashlight.

"The lights weren't working, and aside from an occasional demo team, I was often in there alone," he says. One afternoon he felt the temperature drop. "It was 85 degrees that day, so I knew something was off." His skin prickled, and Schroeder heard what he describes as "radio static," a high-frequency voice echoing from nowhere. "It was all around me, and it was saying, 'Go-ooo,'" he says. "I discredited it at first, and convinced myself I was just freaking out." Two weeks later, he heard the voice again, louder and more urgent. Schroeder grabbed his things and left.

Later, the story became a whimsical art installation. "The Kraken," an 20-foot inflatable sea monster with pink tentacles lit by gigantic floodlights, stretched out from the building's second floor for a weekend in late autumn. Created by Muscatine artist Andrew Anderson, the piece has traveled throughout the Midwest, appearing in vacant buildings, government offices and even the occasional neighborhood home. "The ultimate hope is that it will act as a reminder of the creative people who have shaped the Midwest," says Anderson.

Like many old downtown buildings, the 118 East College Street shell has been adjusted over the years to meet ever-changing needs of urban society. But after architecture transforms them to meet modern needs, untouched are their stories; the true local vernacular. Of course, there are dozens of stories that may never get out. But like many buildings, 118 East College Street is rooted in history and the community, still rich and vibrant—and worthy of preservation.

Stories are tied to places. As long as you have someone who remembers the story, it will stay tied to that place. —Vernon Troilinger, Haunted Iowa City
Iowa Natives

Long before the quintessential Iowa homesteads, painted barns and small-town main streets were dotted along the landscape, there was the landscape itself. The oak savannahs and tall grass prairies we associate with Iowa's untouched and natural places consist of native vegetation that is especially adapted to our local environment.
What makes these plants so special? They grew up here. Native plants evolved naturally as a fundamental part of balanced local ecosystems. They provide food and habitat for indigenous animals, water filtration and soil enrichment. Native plants are easy to care for, require less water, less fertilizer, and have natural resistance to common diseases. These plants also play a valuable role in our cultural identity and sense of place by helping to define the look and feel of the region. As a landscape architect, Seth Gray has an interest in the native plant species of Iowa. Here he shares a few of his favorites. Each is unique and perfectly suited to the place we call home.

**SHRUBS**

**American Cranberry Bush** - *Viburnum trilobum*
Enjoy the many different cultivars of the American cranberry bush. This shrub offers seasonal interest from white blooms in summer to beautiful red fall foliage. This native shrub attains 3 to 5 feet in height and equal spread; plant in full sun to full shade.

**‘Gro-Low’ Fragrant Sumac** - *Rhus aromatica*
Enjoy a citrus smell all summer long with this fragrant shrub. This shorter cultivar can be pruned to form a groundcover-type appearance. See red fall foliage as this shrub starts to turn in late September. Plant in full sun to part shade; grows 1 to 2 feet tall and 3 feet wide.

**Queen-of-the-Prairie** - *Filipendula rubra*
As the name suggests, this elegant beauty can be seen towering over the other prairie plants, showing its soft pink plumes in late June. After that, enjoy the green foliage this plant has to offer. Consider using Queen-of-the-Prairie toward the back of a perennial border; it will grow 3 to 5 feet tall. This plant needs a sunny and continually moist area for optimum growth.

**Scouring Rush** - *Equisetum hyemale*
Scouring rush, sometimes called snakegrass, is a great choice for moist areas and rain gardens. It establishes quickly and can help prevent erosion. This plant should be used in a confined area because it will spread aggressively with adequate moisture. Grows 30 inches in height; plant in full sun to part shade.

**TREES**

**Bur Oak** - *Quercus macrocarpa*
Truly an Iowa native reaching more than 60 feet in height with an equal spread, this tree is the fire-proof soldier of the prairies. They can be seen graceing the savannas and forest throughout the state. The bur oaks’ deeply furrowed bark and open branch structure allow enough filtered sun to grow a healthy lawn and many types of native forbs and perennials. Consider this robust native for your front-yard shade tree.

**Kentucky Coffeetree** - *Gymnocladus dioico*
Kentucky coffeetrees are large, slow-growing native deciduous shade trees. Young trees appear spindly and mature into beautiful, full-rounded trees. They tolerate drought, city conditions and a wide variety of soils. Consider grouping these trees together to create a shady grove.

**Allegheny Serviceberry** - *Amelanchier laevis*
Don’t confuse this 25-foot-tall majestic beauty with its smaller cousin, the apple serviceberry, which is much more common in the nursery trade. The Allegheny serviceberry presents a dramatic spring display of white flowers that turn into red berries relished by wild birds. It finishes the growing season with a gorgeous, brilliant orange fall show. It’s a favorite in full- to partial-sun areas.

**Pagoda Dogwood** - *Cornus alternifolia*
Pagoda dogwood is a wonderful ornamental tree reaching 20 feet in height. These trees take on different appearances depending on the amount of sunlight they receive. Plant pagoda dogwoods in sunnier locations for a fuller appearance; plant in shadier locations to show off the trees’ interesting pagoda-like branch structures.

Seth Gray is a landscape architect with Confluence, a professional consulting firm consisting of landscape architects and planners with offices in Iowa, Missouri and South Dakota.
Canvassing the Land

WORDS: ISAAC BRACHER, AIA

“The purpose of art is not to reproduce life, but to present an editorial, a comment on life.” This statement came from artist and Iowa native Marvin Cone, and echoes one of the tenants of the Regionalist movement in art.

At a time when other artists were focusing on the street scenes of Paris, Regionalists such as Grant Wood and Marvin Cone brought national attention to the front porches and backyards of Iowa—they paved the way for future generations of Iowa artists. The rolling prairie and small towns of Iowa have long served as an inspiration for art, and that tradition continues with Olson-Larsen Galleries in West Des Moines’ Historic Valley Junction. For more than 30 years, Olson-Larsen has been committed to promoting the work of more than 70 local and regional artists. Among these artists are John Preston, David Ottenstein, Brian Roberts and Stephen Dinsmore, each of whom brings a unique perspective to Iowa, creating works in a variety of media and dimensions that speak to the influences of this state.

JOHN PRESTON
Maryland native John Preston first arrived in Iowa during a summer afternoon thunderstorm 33 years ago. He was so captivated by the storm, he stopped and got out of his car just to watch the “horizontal lightning”—something that, at the time, he thought was a once-in-a-lifetime sight. Since then, inspired by the vast expanse of skies and open horizons in Iowa, his art predominantly features dramatic skies at different times of day, with changing weather conditions and seasons. These wider spaces that compelled him to paint the Iowa landscape have also presented challenges for representation. “The so-called ‘features’ are tough to organize within the confines of an average canvas—pull back too far and they disappear.” As a result, Preston says, “the sky, or the space, often becomes the ‘feature.’”

STEPHEN DINSMORE
Growing up in neighboring Nebraska, artist Stephen Dinsmore often traveled throughout Iowa as a child. His memories and frequent trips to the state influence his expressionistic painting today. For Dinsmore, painting is often an attempt to “hold the fleeting”—the late afternoon light in an Iowa town or a post-tornado sky with all of its “bruised magnificence.” The passion with which he seeks subject matter is obvious after listening to a few of his stories—he’s even hidden in a drive-through car wash to wait out a tornado. Small towns in Iowa have always been Dinsmore’s favorite compared to the neighboring states in which he has traveled. “It has always seemed to me that architecture has held a high place of meaning in Iowa,” Dinsmore says, “to be greeted by a Sullivan building after miles and miles of fields is such a treat.”

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Olson-Larsen Galleries
203 Fifth Street
West Des Moines, IA 50265
Phone (515) 277-6734
Tues–Fri., 11a–5p, Sat., 11a–4p
www.olsonlarsen.com
DAVID OTTENSTEIN

Drawing upon his 30+ years in architectural photography, David Ottenstein's work has recently focused on fine art photography documenting the Midwest, and in particular, Iowa. He sees this series of photographs as a commentary on the vanishing of traditional structures that symbolize a way of life and a celebration of the landscape, family farm and small town—the works require little explanation. Upon reflection, Ottenstein says, "My work is not much more than a deep, honest and pure response to my utter fascination with the vernacular architecture of Iowa, and the profound interconnectedness between it and the landscape. Well, I suppose it is also about the people of Iowa, even though I rarely photograph them directly." Look for Ottenstein's Connecticut license plates in a small town or neighborhood near you during his next Iowa visit.

BRIAN ROBERTS

"Vessels for containment"—barns, silos, machine sheds and grain elevators—influence Central College associate professor of art Brian Roberts's latest series of ceramic sculptures. His interest in the duality between the pure, archetypal forms of rural architecture, contrasted with the visual complexity of their weathered surfaces, is immediately apparent when viewing his works. These pieces draw upon his agricultural background in southwest Iowa, and until recently, Roberts spent many summers farming with his father. This fascination with agrarian architecture has even translated onto the small acreage near Pella, where Roberts lives with his family. Finding a house with a decent barn was a priority; here, he revived a series of old farm buildings on the property, reclaiming them for new purposes.

**Siblings** Stoneware, cone 6 oxidation, 10 x 15 x 3 inches

**Co-op** Stoneware, cone 6 oxidation, 13 x 5 x 12 inches

**Sheppler Barber Shop #5** Pigment ink print, 14 x 11 inches

**Wind Farm** Pigment ink print, 16 x 20 inches
CRATE EXPECTATIONS

Geoff Wood didn’t intend to build a company when he first approached the problem of organizing his Windsor Heights home.

While seeking a space-planning solution for his bedroom—a finished loft space running the entire second floor of a 1939 Cape Cod—a friend suggested dividing the space with a dresser or bookshelf. "The problem is most furniture has a definite front and back side. After a few ideas, the solution turned out to be eggcrates—a stackable and interlocking series of wooden boxes," says Wood. The simplicity of his solution was genius. The crates are easily arranged to create a variety of patterned storage solutions, such as bookshelves, coffee tables or even desks. The transition from clever idea to a full-fledged company was inevitable; "when friends wanted eggcrates for their homes and offices, the company was born."

Eggcrates' ties to Iowa are significant. Most noticeably, Wood gathers his raw materials domestically. The crates are built from natural birch plywood obtained through Iowa suppliers, while Elemental Designs in Newton handles the manufacturing and shipment. The name eggcrates is a subtle tip of the hat to the prominence of agriculture in Iowa's history, and the company branding was developed in Des Moines by Saturday Manufacturing. Often destined for startups and technology offices in the area, eggcrates has found its way into the state's growing business community, bringing a modern taste of Iowa with them.

Order your own set from [eggrat.es](http://eggrat.es).
our mix is your advantage
rdgusa.com
West Campus Transportation Center
Neumann Monson Architects

The University of Iowa West Campus Transportation Center (WCTC) is located directly north of Kinnick Stadium, along Evashevski Drive. The facility consists of a new bus interchange, transit hub and canopy, skywalk connection to the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics and an office building.

The skywalk, transit hub and connecting elevator are fully enclosed in glass, fostering a secure, see-and-be-seen environment while also providing a pleasant, bright, welcoming patron experience. A grand stair and pair of escalators provide direct connection from the parking/interchange level to the skywalk level. The raised office bar is enveloped in fiber-cement-board panels and glazed floor to ceiling along the entirety of its north and south elevations.

The office structure is approximately 11,000 square feet on two levels. The operations and administrative functions have been lifted in the air above the transit hub. The offices then form the canopy for the transit hub, eliminating the necessity of another structure to serve that purpose and saving valuable land area for both parking and green space.

The project construction cost is approximately $14 million and is scheduled for completion in September 2012.

Lisbon City Hall
Knowles Blunck Architecture

The City of Lisbon has experienced recent growth and needed to expand a 5,100-square-foot facility that housed its council chambers, city offices and fire department. The community wanted the 30-year-old precast building to portray a new image of Lisbon and help support community activities.

To accomplish this, a proposed expansion consists of a 7,700-square-foot addition that would be divided by two floors. The new facility would also include a council chamber that could become a FEMA tornado shelter, plus a training room and conference space for community groups. These spaces would be wrapped around a two-story, daylight-filled lobby to help connect the city departments and become the community's "living room." The work is scheduled to be completed in spring 2012.

Cedar Valley Sportsplex
INVISION

Upon completion in 2013, the Cedar Valley Sportsplex will provide an all-inclusive recreational facility for children and adults in the Cedar Valley community. The project is sited on two highly visible city blocks and will feature a turf field house for soccer and baseball, a two-court gymnasium and a leisure pool. Other spaces include a four-lane track, weights and cardio workout area, golf practice area, child care, kids' gym and departmental offices. Sustainable elements are incorporated in the design, working to exceed code requirements by 30 percent.

The design of the facility focuses on the expression of movement and the building's role as mediator between the dichotomy of patron and vehicle action. The INVISION team played on scale to relate with a pedestrian city street and an urban highway, placing large-volume spaces near the busy interstate while smaller-scale spaces will engage pedestrians.
MidAmerican Energy is proud to work with our trade partners, including energy-efficient equipment dealers, architects and contractors, in educating home and business owners about the importance of energy efficiency. We hope our programs and incentives empower you to successfully market and sell energy-efficient products and services to your customers.
AN EDUCATION IN REVIVAL
A thoroughly modern (above) space in every sense, the new conference room side cabinets make a subtle reference to the dark oak woodwork that has defined the president's office for many decades.

The new wing (opposite) skillfully balances new and old, residential and institutional. The college bought the Greek Revival residence in 1937, using it over the years as a student recreation center, an officers' candidate school headquarters, faculty housing, art department facilities and a women's dorm. David Sutherland Morrison, a wealthy leather tanner and glove manufacturer, built the house for his family in 1903. It was designed by the prominent Cedar Rapids firm Josselyn and Taylor.

Everyone in Grinnell referred to the mansion as "The White House," until the college officially named it in honor of John Scholte Nollen, president from 1931 until 1940. The house sits along Park Street between the John Crystal Center—a contemporary glass, steel, wood and limestone project completed in 2002—and the Career Development Center, which occupies one of the many large, well-maintained 19th- and early 20th-century homes that line the streets of Grinnell. The Nollen House is no longer a house, as is the case with several of its immediate neighbors. The college takes care to preserve the scale, proportions, landscape settings and detailing of its repurposed residential facilities. The Nollen House addition is an exemplary case of how good designers can not only meet that sort of challenging objective, but also contribute something new to the existing cultural fabric.

BNIM's addition to the Nollen House includes new office space, a conference room that doubles as a classroom and accessibility modifications—a new ground-level entry and elevator. The project added about 4,000 square feet to an approximately 5,000-square-foot,
THIS WING DOESN’T PRETEND TO BE A HOUSE, BUT IT DOESN’T RUN FROM THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ITS CONTEXT, EITHER.
two-story building. While some of the house's original interior character vanished long ago during functional transformations, the exterior kept most of its integrity. The designers decided to preserve the building's Ionic two-story portico, adding on to the west side near the alley, where an earlier unsuccessful addition had already dismantled some original details. They maintained the historical—and inaccessible—entrance facing Park Street and the campus, placing an additional entry at the link between old and new, enabling access to those arriving from the parking in the alley as well as from the sidewalk connecting the street to the alley.

With its smooth-faced (above) limestone foundation and more minimal detailing, the new wing forms an understated but welcoming gesture at the entry link along the south side of the site.

Taking formal cues (opposite) from the balustrade in the original house, the new entry stair detailing offers a modernist alternative.
The bulk of the addition is in the alley and sits back from the street but its substantial, L-shaped massing creates a courtyard that defines a new on-grade welcome.

The new wing is tucked up against the back of the existing house—against the alley—but the offset offers a long-distance view east toward campus, creating a sense of openness for everyone using the ground-floor conference room. The views from the second-floor Dean’s office suite are even more impressive. Since the conference room is used at night for a variety of functions, its broad expanse of windows puts out a bright glow that can be seen from the far side of the central quadrangle. To the west, the view of neighborhood garages is screened with a clever louver system fabricated of the same wood siding used clad the original house and its modern addition.

The new wing takes many cues from the 1903 design, but the designers at BNIM weren’t interested in reproducing period details. Against a unifying backdrop of identical wood siding, the addition makes no apologies for its more minimalist sensibility. For example, the foundation is surfaced in smooth limestone in a regular module—a nod to the rougher, more random base of the original house, as well as the John Crystal Center’s limestone cladding. Similarly, the fenestration pattern of the addition makes no attempt to disguise its institutional functions. This wing doesn’t pretend to be a house, but it doesn’t run from the responsibility of its context, either. Overall, the balance between new and old (formally and functionally) is remarkable.

Paula Smith, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College, is impressed with her new headquarters on the second floor. The addition of accessibility means everyone is welcome and no meetings have to be scheduled elsewhere. Some people associated with her office were able to move out of their cramped third-floor attic quarters into the newly spacious second floor. Smith loves how the new waiting area sets the stage for chance encounters and informal conversation among people coming and going or waiting for appointments. This unexpected, perhaps unintended function means more business happens “in person, which is so rare these days.” She thinks overall, the updated and expanded Nollen House is “very professional, very modern, but it has not lost the character of an old house.”

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Main Street Makeover

A trio of renovation projects showcases elbow grease and dedication that pay off for small towns in Iowa.

Over three decades ago, preservation experts had an idea: What if they could get cities and towns to revitalize, reorganize and promote their business centers through a Main Street program? Would the results benefit the social fabric of communities, many of them smaller in population? Would projects, some of which focused on improving or rehabbing buildings, make a significant economic impact?

Those Main Street efforts, begun in the maelstrom of the 1970's economy, have continued today, through the ups and downs of the early 21st century. In three Iowa communities, projects—each with a very different nature and purpose—have shown the power of place to make a difference in the day-to-day lives of Iowa residents.
and bottom lines. That is very much the case with the Madison County Courthouse, an 1876 building that is the centerpiece of Winterset's downtown.

As hindsight and history typically reveal, not everything done to the courthouse over the years was particularly sensitive. And wear and tear had a way of working on the structure's well-being, too, says Isaac Bracher of OPN Architects. "Some joints, cornices and columns needed to be fixed, and there was leaking. There was also some degradation in the dome, particularly up close," he says.

OPN concentrated first on the inner workings of the building—the mechanical, the HVAC—and is now tackling the interior and exterior from the top down on five separate levels: cupola, dome, gutter level, window level and tower level. A historical paint analysis by an architectural conservator helped OPN determine original paint colors; those inspired a palette that mixed light and dark tones. Details that had been damaged or completed in a historically insensitive manner were also repaired. Plans are also to eventually return even more of the interior spaces, including a two-story-high courtroom space, back into their original setup.

Downtown Winterset has, for the most part, fared far better than many of its counterparts in the state, but the courthouse is, as Bracher says, the jewel of the downtown community. "During meetings we heard great stories of how when people come home, they knew they are almost home when they could see the tower of the courthouse," says Bracher. "We wanted to make it even better than it was originally."

A COMMUNITY CORNERSTONE

The Madison County Courthouse, Winterset
FIRM: OPN ARCHITECTS

Most restoration projects are so big—in scope and in budget—that smaller communities must bite them off in chunks to make them palatable to both residents
An enormous revitalization of Belle Plaine’s historical 12th Street will include façade restoration and upgrades to the district’s infrastructure.

WHAT'S OLD CAN BE BETTER
Town Square, Belle Plaine
FIRM: RDG

It started, says architect Tim Olson, as a fairly small project. The City of Belle Plaine needed help with a grant request for some streetscape improvements. The main thoroughfare—12th Street—was already historical in nearly every sense of the word: Other construction was outside of the downtown district and on opposite corners of intersections. "The downtown buildings are all 50 to 100 years old," says Olson.

Soon, through some educated digging by RDG, the city was able to secure not one, but three state grants, totaling $3.8 million. "That in itself is a remarkable story that the city was able to secure that much funding," says Olson.

Belle Plaine worked with RDG to establish a list of priorities and divide the project into two parts. The first was pavement replacement, with new street paving, sidewalks and curbs, as well as bio-cells and an alternative stormwater management strategy. That work was completed in October 2011.

Next came the façade restoration portion of the project: Thirty different building owners worked to help update 36 of the 46 buildings on 12th Street. Three buildings needed to address structural issues; others had parapet copings removed and replaced to stop potential moisture infiltration. There were also masonry and tuck-pointing improvements on at least 30 buildings, and 27 received new operable awnings, which had been missing since the 1950s.

At every turn, it was give-and-take: While every building owner would get something, there was not enough money to do everything that needed to be done, so needs were evaluated and juggled based on priorities. In some cases it was objective, and in some subjective, but the goal was always to maintain the historical fabric of the buildings in the Main Street District, including a five-storefront property that was returned to its original condition. "The end result will be that Main Street in Belle Plaine will be restored back to a condition that is historically relevant," says Olson of the project, which will be complete in June 2012.
The theater room and stage area received extensive renovation, including the restoration and hand-detailing of the theater’s iconic domed ceiling (below).
helped, but nothing really coalesced until three years ago, when the group was advised to complete a Historic Structures Report and commit to full restoration of the building. INVISION came on board at that time, shepherding the E.E. Warren Opera House Association through a report and fundraising campaign, until finally the association had stitched together enough money to act on a vision for the complex for what had become the Warren Cultural Center. That included shoring up the building to make it structurally sound, says Steve King of INVISION, as well as righting some historical wrongs: moving an elevator from the center of the performance space, redeveloping accessibility, removing layers of paint and wallpaper, and jigsawing together the historical decorative paint scheme. Today, there is office space filled by the county extension service, retail space featuring Iowa artisan creations, a welcoming lobby/gallery and an auditorium space for the local theater troupe as well as for public and private use; there was even a prom held there in 2012. But mostly there is a renewed excitement for the positive impact at the end of this long road of restoration, and there are results, too, with a restored hotel next door. “They wanted to create an attraction, to use the resources they had, to restore the sense of place,” says King.
Language of the Land

WORDS & IMAGES: MATT NIEBUHR
Vernacular buildings are by definition derivative and empirical. I see these buildings are one of many possible sources of inspiration on a quest to think more clearly about contemporary issues designers face today. They characterize a set of pragmatic solutions to the problems at hand. In a past life, they were examples of form following function and utility: They served to protect and shelter grain or livestock, the products of the farm. Now they serve other purposes while still exercising their protective storage capacity as cultural icons. These buildings as practical solutions are mostly unfettered by concerns of aesthetics and beauty.
But I still find them full of beauty. Vernacular buildings are about their own time and an economy of means. Materials such as wood lumber were readily available and put to good use long before it was considered a renewable, sustainable, carbon-storing green strategy. Of a time when labor costs were low and material costs relatively high, the materials chosen remain easy to manipulate with simple tools and simple means. As a result, these structures are (or were) easy to repair and modify as purpose demands. This easy character of the material is partly what shaped this evolutionary development in form. Buildings of a unique circumstance and time also embody the culprit of their demise—the loss of purpose largely due to structural changes in the way grain and livestock farming is carried out today. Still, it seems there are organic pockets of hope. I find the lesson timeless.
Vernacular buildings are highly influenced by the character of the region in which they were built—environmental context matters. Corn cribs in the Midwest, for example, were built to store ear corn. In the day, the size of the structure was determined in part by the size of the field and expected yield of the crop. Many times, the building was located in or immediately adjacent to the field where the crop was harvested—a matter of necessary convenience. The width of the bin, determined by optimizing natural ventilation, was a measure of airflow to dry the corn and protect it from spoilage. Wood slats provided a structural skin for the walls and smaller but no less important details such as the bevel on the slats help to shed the rain. Such empirical design based on prevailing winds, humidity and general knowledge about rain and snowfall tell a subtle story about how to work with the constraints of the environment with limited means.

In short, these structures provide a visible lesson on building that responds to problems given a set of constraints. I am still learning, but I see opportunities from the vernacular that, in this sense, still very much serves its purpose.
Humans are a complicated species, simultaneously collaborative and combative. The dilemma has always been competing approaches to problem-solving. This is especially important for us to adapt and compromise to improve our lives and communities. Consensus-building is vital in organizing plans in a manner that benefits everyone.

In Pottawattamie County, several groups have come together to propose, design and implement a series of projects to enhance the livability of small towns. The Iowa Architectural Foundation includes the Community Design Program, serving mainly rural communities and partnering with other organizations as needed. Executive Director Kristin McHugh-Johnston, a Muscatine native, spent years with the Stanley Foundation, working in San Francisco on documentary films. "My architecture and planning background comes from my experiences of serving on boards and observing the process of architecture and design from that vantage point, and how ideas are created and how the process works. It's so much easier to consult with community leaders during a charrette," she says.
On a road trip to an event in Neola, the group came across Avoca. A team member informed the others that much of the work from an earlier charrette had been implemented in Avoca, and that the end-product was nearly identical to the original plans. Upon return to the Des Moines office, this was verified by McHugh-Johnston, and she was pleasantly surprised at the degree of completion with the plan. Avoca was considered a definite “feather in the cap.”

The Avoca project included other important entities in the scope of work. The Western Iowa Development Association (WIDA) assisted in organizing meetings to spread the application information to all communities, ensuring equal access for everyone. The following towns have participated in the program thus far: Avoca, Canson, Carter Lake, Crescent, Macedonia, Minden, Neola, Oakland and Walnut. The association is instrumental in assisting communities to coordinate meetings on the same days that the Foundation is present. “The Community Design Program was a great opportunity for the towns in Pottawattamie County to get a fresh look at their communities and the possibilities of enhancing what’s already there. Each community has the opportunity to make this as big or small as it needs to be,” says Lori Holste, WIDA executive director.

The Iowa West Foundation was another vital component in the process. The organization was established in 1994 as a private charitable foundation and has evolved into one of the largest nonprofits in the Midwest. Its mission is to “improve lives and strengthen communities for today and future generations ... by providing leadership, creating partnerships, leveraging resources and serving as a catalyst in identifying and supporting community needs.”

The most important player in this endeavor is the town of Avoca. A meeting was organized with individuals and city leaders with a team of architects. This discussion created a sense that the most immediate need was to do basic cleanup and improve the appearance of the town. In order to accomplish this goal, enforcement of existing ordinances, completion of a signage program and enhancement of the downtown district became priorities. Community leaders quickly realized that they needed a broader coalition of positive-thinking people to initiate changes within the town.

With the intention of goodwill and good works permeating, council members acknowledged that a highly competent city manager was needed to provide the organizational capacity and logistics to implement the priorities. Clint Fichter was brought on board to tackle that task, and during his first three years, those goals informed every undertaking executed by the town. “The charrette was a vital part of getting the community ready for change, and it was a great experience for the community to look at itself in a different way,” Fichter says.

Basic neighborhood improvements involved junkyards and rundown properties. Perhaps the most visually significant success has been the downtown streetscape and façade. The repair and refinishing of commercial and retail street fronts is a cost-effective method in enhancing community pride and vitality. A formal trail and signage plan has been adopted, and long-term sustainability and implementation of the Hometown Competitiveness Program are priorities.

The ability of a municipality to actively engage private and nonprofit entities to enhance the community bodes well for maintaining the viability of Iowa’s rural and small towns. Through skill, competence and determination, the future can be a bright one indeed.

**The charrette was a vital part of getting the community ready for change, and it was a great experience for the community to look at itself in a different way.**

—Clint Fichter, Avoca City Manager

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**Development plans for Avoca generated during the charrette focus on a range of projects with tiered implementation, including a park that integrates the town with regional trails and a cohesive signage system.**

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**Charrettes** are collaborative problem-solving sessions that engage design professionals with city leaders and citizens to develop design solutions. Learn more at [www.iowarchfoundation.org](http://www.iowarchfoundation.org).
WHAT'S AN ARCHITECT TO DO WHEN THE CLIENT STEERS A PROJECT IN ONE DIRECTION, THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ANOTHER AND NEITHER FEELS RIGHT?
We didn’t think that simply reusing shapes and forms from barns and silos for a lab building made much sense. —David Sorg

That’s exactly the spot OPN Architects of Cedar Rapids fell into when selected to design the new BioVentures Center at the University of Iowa’s Oakdale Research Park, a building that progressively reinterprets the Midwestern vernacular through materials, rhythm and scale.

Located at the entryway of the research park, just off Interstate 80 in the northwest quadrant of Coralville, the BioVentures Center was created out of a public/private partnership between the University and Minneapolis-based developer/contractor, Ryan Companies. The two-wing, 80,000-square-foot facility houses wet lab and dry lab modules, is available for lease by biotechnology startups and has a large speculative space for more established organizations. The building is intended to provide a collaborative environment for budding biotech firms, with the hope that they will grow and “graduate” into new facilities in the Oakdale Research Park.

Very little of the BioVentures Center’s aesthetic appears directly translated from the farms and agricultural structures that dot Iowa’s landscape. But the end result could’ve been much different, had it not been for OPN Architects’ unique approach to tackling the building program, and the willing flexibility of both the University of Iowa and the City of Coralville.

“The client originally wanted an almost literal interpretation of agrarian architecture,” explains David Sorg, principal at OPN,
describing a master plan that was developed prior to OPN's role in the project. "But we didn't think that simply reusing shapes and forms from barns and silos for a lab building made much sense." Sorg, who served as project manager, and his team began their work with a road trip through rural east-central Iowa, snapping photos of the expected and unexpected. They walked to farmsteads and knocked on doors, asking to look around and explore the property.

Farming structures are purely utilitarian, through economy and function, and what Sorg's team repeatedly heard from locals was "don't make it more than it needs to be." The designers were inspired by the less obvious elements of farmscapes: weathered wood, light penetrating through a corn crib, stone foundations and the dramatic vignette created when a set of barn doors is fully opened.

At the same time, OPN was grappling with the City of Coralville's code of ordinance design standards, which required that 100 percent of the lab building's street-facing wall be constructed of full natural brick, exterior finish insulation system (EFIS), wood siding, stucco or open-face block. No exterior metal is allowed. Furthermore, the standards recommend a minimum 5/12 roof slope (in an earth-tone color, if possible). Not only were the city's ordinances in direct opposition to the literal use of agricultural forms and materials requested by the client, "they were precluding a lot of viable architectural solutions we came up with during our research," says Sorg. He's quick to point out that the city's intentions are good, and that this provided an opportunity to engage with the local authorities more closely.

The completed laboratory building doesn't have a blatant farm-like look to it, nor does it subscribe word-for-word to Coralville's design standards. "It's not what our client was expecting," explains Sorg about the early design phase. "But when we showed them what inspired us, and what we recommended should drive the project, they bought into it."

Working closely together, OPN and the city collaboratively re-interpreted the design standards, each making some compromises along the way. To accommodate the city's desire for more masonry, the amount of limestone on the façade was increased. OPN illustrated how they were planning to use metal in a progressive, artistic way that fit the building program.

The Bio Ventures Center's use of form and materials remains true to the high-tech function of the facility, with only subtle connections to the rural Midwestern vernacular. The main roof plane is a single form that seems to fold over the building, gently wrapping it in a continuous steel blanket, like that of a barn's multi-planed roofline.
From north to south, directly facing the roadway and pedestrian access, a large portal pierces through the facility, creating the lobby. Each end of the portal incorporates wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling clear low-E glass, allowing the space to be transparent day or night, "slightly reminiscent of a barn with its doors wide open on both ends," says Sorg. Corten steel shingles clad the portal, providing a natural weathering that gives hints to the textures and colors the OPN team observed on wooden siding and oxidized farm equipment. The use of local Anamosa limestone to surround the base of the center is probably the most closely literal design interpretation, being that it is used as foundation material at farmsteads throughout Iowa.

The center’s interior includes twenty 700-square-foot wet labs and sixteen 300-square-foot dry labs stretched along the two-story east wing, serving as the biotech startup incubator space. Although the arrangement of these 36 modules is a response for maximizing efficiency and daylighting, Sorg suggests they’re somewhat evocative of the no-frills individual pods used in chicken coops, which are extruded out as necessary.

The building's success is, in great part, attributed to the willingness of OPN's University of Iowa clients to depart from their original plan and consider a non-literal approach to mimicking agrarian architecture. Hats also go off to the City of Coralville for its readiness to work with OPN in a re-interpretation of local design standards and a balancing of subjective aesthetic preferences. OPN took opposing direction and, rather than blindly following orders, stretched its thinking and that of everyone involved in the project, creating an elegant research facility that appropriately interprets and utilizes Midwestern vernacular.

Sorg reflects positively on the process of cooperating and sharing ideas with the city and with the university. “Everyone had the same goal,” Sorg says, “to create a great project.”

The corten-clad lobby “portal” (opposite) extends through the steel roof plane and the local Anamosa limestone. Saturated in vertical lines, the roof is a single form, folded over the building like a barn's multi-planked roofline.
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