One Room for Living: a display for fixtures, finishes and fine art

M. Monica Gillen
If the commission is to design a living space, then trust is imperative. If an architect could imagine a dream project, then that exercise might come with a directive from the client to “have at it.” According to Marc Moen, developer and the owner of a newly remodeled loft in the vibrant downtown area of Iowa City, he said exactly that to Tim Schroeder AIA, of Neumann Monson Architects. Moen’s and partner, Bobby Jett’s relationship is historically tested and based on certain expectations that the architects have met consistently.

“We didn’t give a lot of direction,” Moen said. “We treat them like artists.”

The space needed to provide comfortable and adaptable living space. In addition, the kitchen and bathroom areas were to be showrooms for viewing by potential residents and clients of The Moen Group’s Plaza Towers, a 14-story, multi-use project, which will provide the same concept of open-plan living presented in the loft.

The building, erected in the early 1900s, had been home to a variety of businesses, including a Hudson dealership and a tanning salon, so one can imagine the layers that occurred over time.

The original space was bared to expose ceiling joists, concrete floors and brick walls. Moen completed much of the demolition work himself. The naked canvas presented a chance for the architect to cloak the space with the essence of architecture. This minimalist approach resulted in one open and flexible space.

The 1,700-square-foot enclosure is comprised of two sleeping areas, cordoned off with movable wardrobe cases, which can be rolled to expand or contract the spaces they define. The living, kitchen and dining areas are all open, one to the next. The only walls encase two bathroom areas. One of which is a box with an open top, dropped in between the kitchen/dining area and a sleeping area.

One 70-foot supply run with custom cut vents is suspended from the ceiling joists and delivers warm air in the winter and cool air in the summer. No attempt was made to repair the cracks in the floor; rather a polyurethane material was poured over the surface to preserve them.

After ancillary lighting proved inadequate, cable lighting was installed using several runs on different circuits. The architects took care to camouflage what few
light switches there are on the brick surface.
The sanded brick functions as a blushed backdrop for Moen's and Jett's collection of artwork, which includes an array of images by Mauricio Lasansky and Thomas Lasansky. The space is a gallery for the occupants' art collection and personal possessions. Moen worked for over a year to bring Starbucks to Iowa City. The java giant arrived on the first floor, directly below the loft space—giving new meaning to the phrase "wake up and smell the coffee."

The architects used an economy of design. Utilizing all of the character of the original intent and the flaws that have naturally happened over time, the loft has almost designed itself. The aged lines are accentuated with modern finishes and furnishings brought in to be functional, flexible and practical without impeding the occupants and their guests.

—M. Monica Gillen lives and works in Ames.