Refurbished and Restored: a new home for members of the Iowa State Bar Association

M. Monica Gillen, Iowa State University
Both rich in history, the Iowa State Bar Association and its restored building have a new public face.

Right: The third-floor conference room can hold 75 to 85 people. Two additional rooms allow attorneys to view presentations from other locales via video technology.

Above: Before the ISBA project began, the building stood ready for renovation.

Below: The upstairs lobby is awash in natural daylight due in part to vast windows and skylights.

For 134 years, the Iowa State Bar Association (ISBA) has had offices in various locations, including downtown Des Moines. The restored home of the ISBA is the public face for the organization. With a renovation plan in 2006, the ISBA purchased property at 625 E. Court Avenue in Des Moines.

The condition of the building prior to repair and restoration could have been cause for concern, but the client’s and architect’s vision saw through to the other side of what was an important and extensive endeavor.

“Let the existing building be the architecture.” This was the initial thought for the design team at ge Wattier Architecture, Inc. as they began preserving and renovating the building in Des Moines’ East Village. The mission for the architects became “to not let our imposed ideas compete with or supersede” the 112-foot-long by 44-foot-wide heavy timber warehouse architecture, which was originally built and completed as the Des Moines Western Railway Freight House in 1902–03.

Architects worked with historian Will Page to design and preserve architecturally significant building elements. Because the building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the project qualified for funding from state and federal agencies.

“The key with rehabilitating historic structures is to not damage or change historic fabric. We need to keep the overall character of a space, and when elements are added, they do not detract from the fabric,” said Greg Wattier, AIA, principal in charge. “It is a fine line.”

Repairs were necessary and extensive due to a floor that had settled slightly at the southeast corner. Adding usable space downstairs presented the need to waterproof by excavating and installing a drainage system that pumps water away from the building’s border. The electrical and heat systems were updated, and several cosmetic repairs were made.

“The Iowa State Bar Association went above and beyond. They wanted everyone to be able to see into the building and through the building,” Wattier said.

The transparency helps fulfill a goal for members and is experiential for passersby and visitors, who can see in on all sides and out from most points in the building. This allows for a flood of natural daylight.

ISBA assistant executive director Harry Shipley said they desired an open concept. Numerous design details contribute to this open idea, including glass walls in cherry wood surround and continuous transom windows. These assemblies help delineate space and extend the path of daylight.

Shipley said the new facility hosts 50 seminars each year. In addition to the third-floor conference room, two rooms allow attorneys to view presentations from other locales via video technology.

“I enjoy the history and the fact that they were able to restore the building and not abandon it,” said Mary Hill, membership director and foundation liaison at the ISBA. “Between all the meetings, there are people coming and going all the time.”

According to Hill, the building has come to life and attorneys are happy to have a place they can call their own.

—M. Monica Gillen lives and works in Ames.
Natural brick and ample windows replace, once boarded and covered, now allow west light.

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