

IOWA

Architect

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2010 DESIGN
AWARDS STATE AND
REGION

A W A R D

AIA IOWA HONOR AWARD
FOR EXCELLENCE IN
ARCHITECTURE

Prairie Jewel Box

LONG LIFE, LOOSE FIT

JURY COMMENTS: *Almost residential in scale, this institutional rural retreat was a unanimous favorite of jurors: simple, elegant, consistent, absolute conceptual clarity. Represented one of the strongest relationships between site and building of projects submitted: simple form oriented toward view and exposure, lifted above a 70-acre restored prairie. Recalls the tradition of Midwestern barns but clearly contemporary and reductive in form and language. Ironically, it avoids any structural expression typical of barns. Simple arrangement of spaces dominate. Beautiful palette of recycled wood skin inside and out, placed on a concrete base. Looks effortless, but a lot of care and work to achieve that level of simplicity. Jurors very much appreciated its stylistic attitude. Project will endure for many years.*

Serving as a meeting place for family and business gatherings, a client and architect have composed a building with sustainable simplicity situated within a restored bucolic prairie landscape.

Right: A simple and minimal form is placed upon a restored Iowa prairie, expressing the ideal of living in harmony with nature. The abstract gable form evokes agrarian typology and connects the rural landscape with prairie grasses planted up to the perimeter.

Below left: All service and support areas are enclosed on the ground floor for maximum space utilization. The airy social gathering spaces on the upper floor are organized between two exterior decks, with a generous main living area anchored on the west by guest rooms, a bathroom, and antique bar, and a kitchen and dining area along the east end.

Below right: Steel moment frames at each end tie together the trusses, allowing for no load-bearing interior walls on the open second floor with expansive views in all directions. Extensive use of reclaimed wood reiterates the sustainable aspect of this remarkable but simple design.

An enlightened client has expressed his appreciation for native Iowa prairie with the acquisition of 700 acres of rolling hills and fallow farmland. The Department of Natural Resources assisted in the selection and planting of vegetation to complement the Midwest Retreat sited in an existing clearing. The retreat serves as a peaceful oasis for family members, friends and business associates to enjoy the solitude and open spaces isolated from the cacophony of our modern harried culture.

BNIM Architects is noted for its commitment to sustainable design and construction. Jonathan Ramsey, AIA, LEED AP, has created a pleasant rural abstract form with simplicity and sustainability as the primary considera-

tion. The architecture displays minimal modulation with few projections or recesses, and resembles buildings seen in the work of artist Ralston Crawford. Think of Worth Steel Plant, 1936, in the Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections.

Sustainability is the concept for the vast acreage surrounding this retreat and informs the design and construction methods. Ramsey noted the need for “a building that was highly durable, with low maintenance and a simple form with no pits or valleys for rain and snow to build up.” Since the retreat is utilized only intermittently, the required materials had to function with minimal attention or upkeep for extended periods.



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Project: Midwest Retreat
Location: Rural Iowa
Architect: BNIM Architects
General Contractor: W.R. Main Contractor
Electrical Contractor: MPT Electric
Structural Engineer: Charles Saul Engineering
Photographer: Farshid Assassi, Hon. AIA Iowa, Assassi Productions ©



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MARK E. BLUNCK

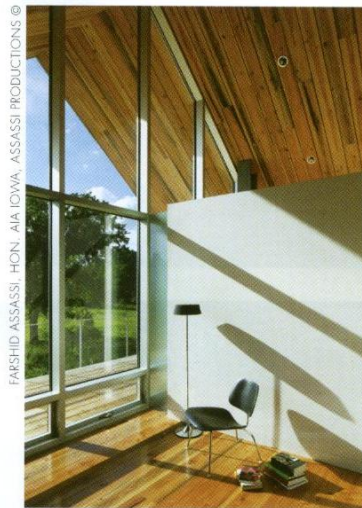


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The overall building composition is a steep gable roof constructed of reflective galvanized steel sitting atop two levels of concrete and wood clad walls. While the east and west ends are shaded by steel supported eight foot overhangs for morning and afternoon sun protection, this shading detail is minimal along the north and south elevations. This eliminated the need for soffits and the potential moisture issues associated with that element. It was absolutely essential that the building envelope design and materials had to be simple and uncomplicated to avoid the damaging effects of moisture infiltration. Mark Main of W.R. Main Contractor said, “Minor details for minimalist architecture look nebulous but take time and patience to look perfect.”

The program directive for the second-level social gathering space was open flexibility. This has been achieved with a minimal number of interior walls that do not reach ceiling height, enabling maximum views and natural ventilation. The client desired the incorporation of three elements—an open kitchen, a previously acquired antique bar and a fireplace—to be situated to enhance views in all directions. An important decision was made to shift the fireplace to an exterior wall, allowing an open sight line across the entire central space. The two multi-use guest rooms at the west serve as sleeping areas, office space and exercise room, and their open nature is expressed by semi- and fully private restroom functions.

Reclaimed Douglas fir was selected for exterior cladding and for interior floors, walls and ceilings. The beautiful 100-year-old wood was originally sourced from a train trestle near the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Since the salt environment preserved the wood for generations, no artificial stains or preservatives were needed for interior or



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exterior application. A two-fold problem was solved as no new wood was required and no toxic solvents were necessary for weather protection in Iowa’s harsh climate. To come full circle with the simplicity and sustainability concept, the building utilizes a geothermal energy system for nearly all heating and cooling needs.

This particular design consists of horizontal coils a mere 12 to 20 feet below the surface in 250 foot loops.

This is a proposal for the state government to reduce global warming. For every 700 acres of farmland that are taken out of production and restored to prairie, let’s celebrate with a retreat building.

—“Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just sit down and do the work.” After 23 years of freelance writing, Mark E. Blunck, Hon. AIA Iowa, now understands the creative process as expressed by artist Chuck Close.

Above: The contrast of concrete, limestone, reclaimed Douglas fir and galvanized steel forms a separation of building functions with support spaces on the concrete-enclosed ground floor and open social areas on the wood-clad second floor. A French drain filled with local limestone facilitates rain and snow removal and makes an unsightly gutter system unnecessary.

Left: The open interior plan extends throughout the space with the reclaimed wood floor and ceiling providing a subtle contrast with the white partition walls. This serves as a picture frame to admire the natural art of the renewed prairie landscape.