

IOWA'S
BEST

ECO-FRIENDLY Developments

12 award-winning new and restored places
to live, work, shop, and play in Iowa

by DAN WEEKS

The roof garden at the new Cedar Rapids
Downtown Library at dusk offers plantings,
a patio, and a panoramic view.

An urban roof garden at dusk is as good a place as any to contemplate what's happening to the built environment in Iowa these days.

The one atop the Downtown Library in Cedar Rapids with its varied low-lying flora and sweeping horizon has much in common with the prairie. This elevated half acre features walking paths, a patio, and picnic tables and benches and overlooks aptly named Greene Square, a city park. Across the park is the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.

Events, including weddings, are held on this rooftop oasis, and it is easy to see why: You get the feeling that you're at the center of an Iowa universe there, that everything — the city, the prairie, the entire continent — radiates outward. From there, it seems, you can see forever, and anything is possible.

But this isn't the Sears Tower (now called the Willis Tower): We're not so far off the ground that we can't wave and converse with folks on the sidewalk. And Cedar Rapids,

from three stories up, looks much like an Iowa small town, where people know one another and cooperate to get things done. There's something very courthouse-square about the feel — more civic pride than grand gesture.

1,000 Friends of Iowa, a Des Moines-based nonprofit focusing on responsible land use, selected this roof and the library beneath it along with a 11 other projects in 12 communities across the state as winners of its 2015 Best Development Awards (see page 43).

The group discovered community-based, environmentally conscious developments that could perhaps only happen in Iowa. Each celebrates its Iowan location — and offers a model for other Iowa communities to follow.

Join us as we visit the library — plus new condos in an old school in Ames, a revitalized Main Street in Manning, a whitewater park in Elkader, new lofts that connect Cedar Falls with its riverfront, and more. Better yet, visit them yourself: The websites listed contain calendars of events with dozens of reasons to go.

CLEARLY NEW

Downtown Library
450 Fifth Avenue SE, Cedar Rapids
crlibrary.org

Libraries have always been at the heart of Iowa towns — often behind imposing classical facades with “Carnegie” on the pediment. In their silent, mausoleumlike interiors, acolytes retrieved tomes from dusty stacks.

Cedar Rapids’ new Downtown Library couldn’t be more different. After the old library was irreparably damaged in the flood of 2008, community volunteers and the library’s board of trustees met to envision this city resource for the 21st century. Their goals were to establish the library as the center of the city’s urban core, embrace new technology, and minimize the building’s environmental impact.

“Transparency is a big part” of that vision, says Bradd Brown of OPM Architects, the firm that designed the building. Instead of thick masonry walls, “We want to have large storefront windows so that all the wonderful things the library has to offer are visible to the public.”

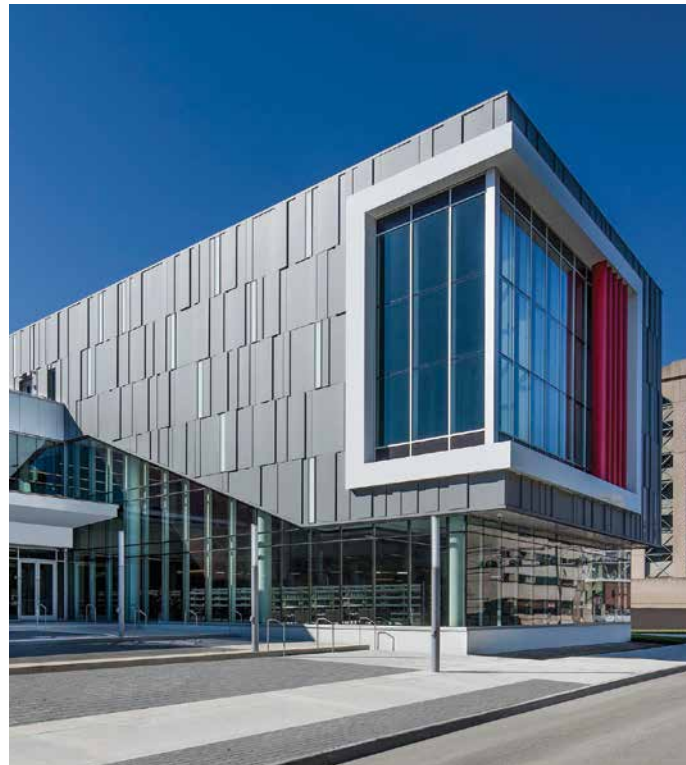
Views in and out are omnipresent. A 200-seat auditorium overlooks Greene Square through a glass wall, so the city is a backdrop to every event there. Sunlight permeates the building through floor-to-ceiling windows, 15 light-gathering solatubes, and a large clerestory on the roof.

The bright, inviting, open interior includes a cafe and coffee shop; you can grab a beverage while you peruse the stacks. There’s also a young adult area with gaming, study, and group-work rooms.

Then there’s the roof. In addition to its function as an outdoor plaza and garden, it’s designed to retain 90 percent of the normal annual rainfall and 100 percent of all rainfall up to 1 inch, doing its part to mitigate the flooding that claimed this library’s predecessor. The parking lot also features permeable paving with underground storm water collection.

The entire building has achieved Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum status of the United States Green Building Council, its highest rating for resource efficiency in building construction, design, operation, and maintenance. It uses only 37 percent of the energy per square foot of the previous library — in spite of windows that comprise more than a third of the building envelope. Lots of daylight harvesting, well-insulated windows and walls, and a geothermal climate system all help. The library’s location within blocks of a city park, historic theater, convention center, outdoor amphitheater, restaurants, and hotels encourages walking.

No wonder the building has attracted 700,000 visitors, issued 120,000 library cards, hosted 125 special events, and won 10 awards for its design and engineering since it was completed in 2013.



COURTESY MIKE FAGER, FISHEYE



A plaza, modern design, and lots of glass characterize the new Cedar Rapids Downtown Library. It also has the first publicly accessible green roof in the city and has achieved LEED Platinum status for sustainability.



Early plans called for balconies on The Roosevelt’s facade, *above*; residents vetoed them to preserve the original look. New windows fill original openings. Inside, the original stairway and foyer, complete with vintage water fountains, greet visitors.

In the Hawses’ unit, *right*, a loftlike second floor overlooks an open living/dining/kitchen area with a 19-foot ceiling, making the condo seem even more spacious than its 1,892 square feet.



REVIVING A LANDMARK

The Roosevelt
9th and Roosevelt, Ames

rooseveltreamaged.weebly.com or summersundays.org (Roosevelt Park concert series)

Iowa has an abundance of retired school buildings in search of a new purpose. Many of them are in small towns with now-consolidated school districts. This neoclassical elementary school building in the center of Ames proves such conversions can be stunningly successful.

The Roosevelt School building has anchored its neighborhood since 1923. It was taken out of commission in 2005 and added to the National Historic Register of Historic Places in 2010. Still, it faced demolition until the Ames school district, nudged by the Ames Historic Preservation Commission and neighborhood residents, sought a new owner for the building.

They found one in developer Dean Jensen, who converted the building into 20 condo units ranging from 800 to 2,000 square feet and from \$170,000 to \$300,000+. The redesign reused much of the building’s original fabric, including chalkboards, moldings, and structural walls, many of which were left exposed.

New brick and limestone were carefully matched to the old, and Jensen scoured house demolition and salvage yards for fireplace mantels and other architectural elements from 1920s houses. He incorporated them in the new units, which are now fully occupied.

The former school’s entryway is preserved, as are the original interior doors. But visitors expecting classroomlike living spaces are in for a surprise. Some of the condos span two levels, with loftlike second floors overlooking living

spaces with two-story glass walls and outdoor balconies with views of adjoining Roosevelt Park. The feeling is definitely “luxury condo,” not “class, be quiet!”

Still, the historic character of the place comes through: A former playground, deemed unsafe, was replaced by a parking garage built in matching materials and style. Part of the old boiler room is now an exercise area. And Roosevelt Park has been preserved and improved by a group of volunteers who installed new playground equipment and sponsor public events there.

“It’s good to look out the window and see children playing here still,” says Dick Haws, a retired Iowa State University journalism professor who lives at The Roosevelt with his wife. The couple moved from just blocks away; their two children attended the school.

Jensen hopes the project shows that preserving old schools and other buildings facing abandonment or demolition can be a win-win-win-win-win. In this case, the school district avoided paying for demolition. A developer completed a profitable project. The neighborhood kept its landmark. Twenty families moved into luxe new digs. And \$5.5 million was added to the Ames property tax rolls.

There’s certainly plenty of interest in the concept: Haws says an open house attracted an estimated 4,000 people who had to park up to six blocks away. A summer concert series in the park (see website listed above) features the landmark as a backdrop.



This view down Manning's wide brick Main Street, *above*, features the 1904 Mueller Building, at one time a furniture, drapery, carpet, and undertaking establishment, now a restaurant and bar. The wired-glass clerestory windows were a 1920s addition.



Deb's Corner Cafe, *right*, is a classic small-town eatery in an 1891 building — and the only place in Manning you can get breakfast. Historically a saloon, it once claimed “the longest bar west of the Mississippi.”

MAIN STREET MAKEOVER

Manning Downtown Revitalization
Manning
manningia.com

It's one thing to preserve a single building, another to restore almost an entire main street. But Manning, a town of 1,500 people about 90 miles west northwest of Des Moines on Highway 141, did it.

Ironically, this is the second time in recent memory that Manning has appealed to history with a Main Street redo. In a nod to its German heritage, a town ordinance in force between 1977 and 2008 actually required all storefronts downtown to remodel with Bavarian-themed facades. Faux chalet-style, half-timbered gables; awnings dripping with rough-hewn cedar shakes; and plywood-cutout balcony railings were everywhere.

But in recent years, the town decided to let its authentic, 1660 German Hausbarn (germanhausbarn.com), imported and reconstructed there in 1996, speak to the town's ethnic heritage. That freed Manning to expose the genuine architectural history of its Main Street, where the vast majority of the handsome brick, stone, and glass-fronted buildings date from 1885 to 1965.

The town is an excellent candidate for such a project. Set on a hilltop with views of the Nishnabotna River and the railroad, it's a picture-perfect site for a prairie town — and one that's changed little over the years. It's also far enough from urban centers to host a fully functioning, self-contained town with a strong sense of identity and pride.

For several blocks along Main Street, there are no vacant lots. While a few Bavarian fronts proved too troublesome to reverse, you can squint and imagine yourself back in time — perhaps as far back as 1915, when the street was paved with bricks that are still there.

You can stroll along the wide, vintage-streetlamp-accented sidewalks and take a self-guided architectural tour: Each building that's participating in the restoration has a descriptive article and historical photographs displayed in its window.

There's the “modernistic,” 1939, Art Deco, black-and-white glass facade of the former department store and pharmacy near the south end of the district.

Across the street is Deb's Corner Cafe, boasting food with “hometown feel, homecook appeal” and host to numerous coffee klatches. The 1891 building was about to topple before its original bricks were removed by hand, stacked in the street, then replaced after the structure behind it was rebuilt.

Each of the 30 contributing buildings has such a story — and often an interesting retail business inside. That makes Manning a worthy day trip destination and a model for other Iowa towns whose architectural history has gone undercover.

WHITEWATER MECCA

Elkader Whitewater Park
211 S. Main Street, Elkader
elkaderwhitewater.com

Elkader's widest thoroughfare is paved with running water: It's the Turkey River.

After the flood of 2008, a group of volunteers wondered how to turn the river into a community asset for recreation, education, and tourism. They approached the city council, obtained a grant for a hydrology study, and made plans for improved river access and a major recreational project.

The result, completed last year, includes the new riverside Founders Park, a handicap-accessible walking path to the river's edge, and slabstone and granite-boulder banks ideal for spectating and picnicking. Fishing is improved, too.

But by far the most conspicuous feature is a whitewater park that draws kayakers, canoeists, stand-up paddlers, and boogie board enthusiasts from all over.

The whitewater park's main drop is the 22-foot wide Gobbler Wave that's great for surfing, flat spins, loops, cartwheels, and other fancy kayak maneuvers — or just for shooting through on an innertube.

Nearby, a boulder island creates an ideal resting spot for stand-up paddlers and kayakers. The island submerges during high water, providing more big-river-style waves and holes for advanced kayakers.

A calmer passage around the drop allows migrating fish and flat-water canoeists to avoid the fast-and-frothy routes. Gentle eddies and still pools provide great vantages from which to observe the whitewater action — as does the improved riverbank. A nearby outfitter (turkeyriveroutfitters.com) rents canoes and innertubes, or you can bring yours.

“To say that I was impressed is an understatement,” blogs Stephen Wright, a hard-core, world-traveling kayaker from Beachburg, Ontario. His post was titled “Iowa: A New Whitewater Mecca!” But it wasn't just the waves that earned his raves.

“Elkader is a charming small town ... there's hiking, biking, disc golf, kayaking, fishing, and lots of other opportunities here,” he wrote. “Combine that with good coffee ... and some of the happiest people alive and this just may be my favorite small town.”

Elkader won first place in Leadership from 1000 Friends of Iowa for the project. Along with similarly successful whitewater projects in Charles City and Manchester, Elkader's example has encouraged discussions about similar features in Iowa City, Des Moines, and elsewhere in Iowa.

And it is teaching us that those who come to Iowa for such attractions are equally impressed with Iowan attributes the rest of us enjoy daily.



Many whitewater adventures require wilderness trips. Not Elkader's: You're right in the middle of a charming downtown, *above top*, where you can shop, enjoy lunch, or take in a show at the opera house when you're not on the water.

A stand-up paddle boarder surfs the Gobbler Wave, Elkader Whitewater Park's signature feature, *above bottom*. You can surf the waves in kayaks and tubes also.

POSTSUBURBAN LIVING

River Place

200 and 300 State Street, Cedar Falls

riverplace-cedarfalls.com

“We really had our backs to the river — literally and architecturally,” says Mike Kittrell about his hometown of Cedar Falls. He’s changing that with a project linking historic Main Street to the riverfront and its 100 miles of recreational trails with a vibrant combination of residential, commercial, and office spaces. Riverplace residents can live, shop, work, and play without having to drive.

He calls it “presuburban and postsuburban living,” and it’s proving very popular. Two of the development’s three buildings are now complete and 100 percent occupied.

Kittrell says young people are driving the trend. “My generation had to go places like Texas — where we didn’t want to live — just to get a job,” says the former tech entrepreneur, who’s in his fifties. On the other hand, “sixty percent of millennials decide where they want to live before they choose an employer.” They like small, livable, affordable cities, but they want instant access to recreational and cultural amenities, too. Many want to walk, bike, or take public transit to work. Some of them telecommute or work for start-ups.


So Kittrell obliged, creating a mix of funky studios and slightly larger one-bedroom apartments in the development’s three buildings. They’re home to a diverse range of folks, from college students to young professionals from all over the world to retirees who’ve lived in Cedar Falls all their lives.

Also in the mix: retail, a restaurant/market bay, and offices, including coworking spaces. Each building has its own character and melds with the surroundings — respecting, but not trying to reproduce, Cedar Falls’ nearby historic Main Street.

Kittrell says the development process was the reverse of traditional urban development, which has often been about creating a standout architectural monument.

“It’s more about how it fits into the whole, the mix of amenities, than it is about the architecture of the individual buildings,” he says.

The final plan was the result of more than 300 meetings among developers, architects, residents, retailers, civic organizations, and local government over the course of a year. The plan, says Kittrell, got better with each meeting.

“That year was extremely well invested,” says Kittrell. “Iowans by nature are a conservative bunch. Change we don’t do fast. But once you get everybody involved, we do it very well.” 

Dan Weeks is editor of The Iowan.



An old-and-new mix of bricks, balconies, and corrugated steel accents, *above top*, River Place links Cedar Falls’ historic Main Street with the riverfront. Wide sidewalks, pedestrian lighting, and links to existing recreational trails promote connectedness and walking.

Inside, studio and one-bedroom apartments above commercial and retail space offer space-efficient living with industrial-chic design, *above bottom*. Sustainable elements include pressed recycled paper countertops, wallboard made in Iowa from recycled milk cartons, and energy-efficient appliances.

COURTESY TIM DODD PHOTOGRAPHY



WAIT, THERE’S MORE!

1000 Friends of Iowa also chose these projects as exemplary:

THE ALBERT AND ANNA HERDA HOUSE

Cedar Rapids (airbnb.com/rooms/6227297)

for turning an historic 1875 house into a bed-and-breakfast at the heart of the Czech Village while preserving its character.

CITIES OF DAVENPORT AND MONONA

(cityofdavenportiowa.com) (mononaiowa.com)

for the use of permeable pavers that dramatically reduce and cleanse runoff during rainstorms.

CITY OF GLIDDEN WELLNESS CENTER

Glidden (cityofglidden.org)

for taking the vacant and dilapidated former local newspaper building, salvaging and recycling much of the building’s material in the process, and promoting community wellness.

JOHN WAYNE BIRTHPLACE MUSEUM (*above*)

Winterset (johnwaynebirthplace.museum)

for converting a former brownfield site into a destination that takes design cues from the city’s century-old courthouse.

SAWYER BUILDING

Council Bluffs (thesawyerbuilding.com)

for turning a brownfield site in an historic block into a mix of affordable housing, market-rate housing, and commercial space.

TEC CORPORATION

Sioux City (tec-corp.com)

for transforming a long-vacant warehouse into corporate offices, production, and storage, preserving a 1937 Art Deco landmark.