

Banking on a New Life

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Mid-century modern structures have only recently become eligible for historic renovation. Architects and historians alike face the challenge of defining what this process entails and what it reveals in a finished product. The Brenton Lofts in Davenport, Iowa, offer an endearing preview of how the past and present architectural landscapes can shape the future of restorative projects.

The Brenton was originally a bank built in 1967. The building was completed in the new formalism style, which emerged in the 1960s as a rejection of modernism's more restrictive strains. After the bank discontinued operations, the Davenport Community School District briefly took over the building until the summer of 2018. Over the course of about a year and a half, architects at ASK Studio worked to merge this gridded layout into a residential arrangement that complements the original architecture and maintains its historic character. The project was completed in February 2020 and cost just over \$4 million.

Retrofitting the space left by the former bank's lobby presented a rare challenge. The new dwelling units above required a ten-fold increase of plumbing fixtures, along with ventilation piping and mechanical systems. Kurtis Wolgast, AIA, project architect at ASK Studio, explains that, despite the challenges, ASK was able to "come up with a creative solution to maintain the open volume and route the residential services." The clean, open layout now graces the apartment building as a comfortable common space for residents, while maintaining the space's historic character.

The original office bays of The Brenton were easily adapted to one-bedroom units with minimal plan adjustments for modern services. There are now 38 residences within the building, some of which include dramatically high ceilings and private patios. Many of these unique dwelling units feature floor-to-ceiling windows or a repeating pattern of several narrow openings—an amenity made possible by the fenestration composition of these formerly commercial spaces. However, Brent Schipper, AIA, principal at ASK, thinks that these distinctive spaces and features work because of what the studio didn't do: "We put very



little inside. I think that's what's important and what makes it successful is the minimal insertion because stylistically we didn't do anything; we just tried to be quiet." Even the recently introduced wall elements were kept to a subdued color palette so that the original elements of the structure—terrazzo, aluminum framing and wood doors—could remain the prime focus within this minimalist composition. In this case, the walls can speak for themselves.

Realizing the potential of a building's key elements is only a small portion of the potential challenges that can occur when working with an existing structure such as The Brenton. Wolgast mentions that this project specifically brought up a lot of obstacles in terms of what one can and cannot touch from a historic preservation standpoint. "You try to do as much forensic investigation as you can on the building to understand all the potential issues you might run into," Wolgast says. "With older buildings, you have the potential for asbestos, lead paint, among other things, including how to bring an older, existing building in compliance with modern codes." Fortunately, ASK didn't encounter any large-scale issues on this project.

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PROJECT ARCHITECT AT ASK STUDIO

Wolgast is quick to mention that unknowns can encourage creative muscles to stretch because "it's a challenge that you want to take on and these are just variables that you have to deal with, fitting all the pieces together." A lot of those pieces are already in place, Wolgast says. "You've got an existing building to work with; you're halfway there and that makes things a little easier."



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Working off of an existing structure also brings environmental benefits. ASK Studio estimates the embodied energy saved from maintaining the existing building is equivalent to 600 tons. That amount of coal could power a single-family home for more than 400 years.

Breathing new life into an existing, underutilized building is a big positive. “It’s definitely seen as harder from the historic preservation standpoint,” Wolgast comments. “You want to do right by the architecture and give credence to that and make sure what you’re doing is complementary to the overall project, and I think we did all right there.”

Preserving the old bank vault was a special challenge. The ASK team spent a good amount of time pondering the best way to utilize it. The original occupants of Brenton Bank likely never would have imagined the outcome, but the vault eventually found its purpose as a residential game room. As to their thought process, Wolgast mentions that “some of it is dictated by code, what you can and can’t do with a large space that’s a single point of entry,” but they decided upon the game room because “it’s something that could create a unique environment that people would enjoy going in and it’s a talking point for those who live in that space.”

Wolgast, Schipper, and their project team have created a one-of-a-kind environment for The Brenton’s new residents while keeping integral elements of the architectural structure intact. It’s safe to say the Brenton has a new lease on life.



Top: The clean, open layout creates a comfortable common space for residents, while maintaining the space’s historic character. **At right:** The project was completed in February 2020 and cost just over \$4 million.