

MAKING A CHAPEL

A Des Moines architecture firm undertook an unforgettable project in the hills of southeastern Iowa

Architecture by ASK Studio Text by Brent Schipper, AIA
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Scott Ullem and his father Ben had decided to invite multiple architects at different times to the Ullem Farm near Moravia in Monroe County to discuss the project; specifically, where to site the chapel they planned to build. It was the most unique interview I will likely ever experience.

I left Des Moines in morning darkness, witnessed a magnificent sunrise, earned a speeding ticket, and arrived early enough to park in an equipment drive and watch the morning sun awaken the Black Angus on green hills. I was struck by the vastness of the rolling hills and the palpable change of pace in this world away from the city I left a few hours earlier. The scene reminded me of words I had spoken when eulogizing my grandfather a decade ago: “he taught me to see the beauty of black cows on green hills.”

Our meeting began with handshakes and acknowledgment of the day’s beauty. We mounted the utility terrain vehicle (UTV) and began an interview that would become a friendship.

The morning continued to be as special as the sunrise that began the day. We traversed the ranch discussing Ben’s childhood on this farm, the importance of family history and legacy of this land to this father and son. While we talked, I became infected with their passion for this place. We took turns opening gates we encountered along our circuitous route. Our boots became wet in the dew of the tall grasses. (I was very glad I had donned work boots for this interview.)

The farm has row crops, a small grove of aronia berry bushes, but is predominately pasture land; an

expansive ranch. As we looked at possible sites for the chapel, it was easy for me to lose my bearings. Wayfinding was dependent on the sun, the creek, and a large century-old tree on a hillside that was clearly the oldest living being on the ranch. We discussed siting the chapel in the woods, but the location seemed like it could exist in any wooded area in the country. We came to a hilltop that seemed magical.

It had a view to the sunrise’s horizon on the east and would witness the sunset on the ranch hills to the west.

It overlooked the ranch’s singular stream.

The century tree stood as a beacon across the valley.

There were black cows on green hills.







The chapel is white, the same color as churches and corn cribs in the area.

Open to the elements, the structure is positioned on axis with the ranch's century tree. ►

It was this place that the Ullem family decided to erect their family chapel. For my insights, our studio was awarded the commission to design the chapel. The design process involved the entire Ullem family. Scott, who currently resides in California, wanted the chapel to be a special place that represented his family, his father, his spouse, and their children. It was not only to mark the history of the land, but be an artifact for the future of his family. Scott, Beth and their children were all contributors to long-distance design charrettes. The design process resulted in three major alternatives with the final design being the selected favorite because it appeared to be familiar ... vernacular.

The design is simple.

It was imagined as a place to consider a place.

A framed view of cows on green hills where there have been cows on green hills for generations of this family-owned farm. The focus of the frame is the century tree that is the ranch marker used for wayfinding throughout the hills.

The structure is to be spiritual. A chapel without denomination or creed; simply considering a place. The materials are to speak of agrarian frugality; sensible for a temporal insertion on a land that hides the ruins of houses belonging to past stewards in the nearby trees.

It is white because that is the color of churches and corn cribs in this plain-spoken part of the Midwest.

The march of the horizontal wall slats feels familiar, but in this context with Gothic arches, there is a tension. When the horizontal slats begin to form the roof plane, the tension approaches heresy. The structure appears vernacular on the horizon, but upon examination its amalgam of materials and systems can be understood as novel; an understanding which is only known to those that visit.

It is a crib.

It is a chapel.

It is not to be readily understood. Spirituality is complex.

It is a considered place to consider.

