







**Above:** Common areas were kept as close to the original as possible. **Top:** The second floor utilizes mezzanine-level bedrooms to maximize living areas. **Opposite:** The building was adapted into 16 apartments, without the benefit of existing drawings to assess available space.

# THE ROOSEVELT SCHOOL APARTMENTS

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The Roosevelt School Apartments in Clinton, Iowa, represent the very best of what can happen when new life is breathed into an old structure. At more than 130 years old, the building has been revitalized to bring much-needed affordable housing to the surrounding neighborhood.

Roosevelt High School—which also housed the city’s public library—was built in 1888. After 120 years of continuous use, the Clinton Community School District deemed it too expensive to maintain, which led to the historic building being used administratively and then left vacant for years.

A \$3 million grant to the City of Clinton from the Iowa Economic Development Authority in 2015 greenlit the project to adapt the structure into apartments. Community Housing Initiatives, a nonprofit affordable housing developer, led the project. Patrick Denahey, AIA, of ASK Studio served as project architect. “Our primary goal was to save the building,” says Patrick. “If it had been left for too much longer, it was at risk of being torn down.”

The charge of the design team was the insertion of 16 apartments within a school containing about 14,000 square feet made up of seven classrooms and a large gathering space, while maintaining the integrity of the existing walls and spaces. Transforming a high school into modern living spaces is not without its challenges. Proper execution requires intensive planning.

“The first challenge was assessing the building and properly documenting so we knew what space we had available,” says Patrick. “There were no existing drawings so there was a lot of time spent measuring and photographing existing spaces and photographing to define how much space we had available to fit the apartments and provide for accessibility.”

All historic walls are maintained. The second floor utilizes mezzanine-level bedrooms to maximize living areas while capitalizing on the beautiful two-story windows. The main hall remains in its original state to pay homage to the building’s past. Patrick recalls that his favorite project





accomplishment was “preserving the spaces and giving people an opportunity to go in and experience these rooms.”

High ceilings are a great bonus of living in an apartment that used to be a school. “I think they’re in the 14-foot range, which is obviously very unique for an apartment,” says Patrick. “When we took over the building, it had a lot of drop ceilings, so as we got into demolition and started opening it up, it was really fun to see those spaces as they originally existed.”

Envisioning the space as it originally existed and keeping that integrity was a key point throughout the project’s progress. “We wanted to keep the common areas as original as we could,” says Patrick. “The Historic Preservation Office has very strict requirements, but we still had to add in things like sprinkler systems, so working carefully with the sprinkler installer to run those lines in a way that minimized the impact on those common spaces was a fun process. It was nice to go in after construction completion and still have those common spaces read as they would have back when it was a new building.”

The space officially reopened as a one- and two-bedroom apartment complex in October 2016.

ASK Studio notes, “The success of the building is measured in what is untouched, the architecture of the repurposing is to be unseen. The changes in fire exiting, improvements for accessibility and inclusion of fire protection are all accomplished in a demure manner. It is not a design product of ego, but rather restraint.”



This design philosophy was rewarded in 2017, when the Roosevelt School Apartments received the Preservation at Its Best award at the Preserve Iowa Summit in Fort Dodge. Patrick was on hand to accept the award along with Sam Erickson, chief executive officer of Community Housing Initiatives, and site manager Mike Brown of Ringland-Johnson Construction. The award symbolizes recognition as “Iowa’s top historic adaptive use restoration for 2017.”

**Top:** It was important to preserve the integrity of the original building while adding in accessibility features, sprinkler systems, and other “unseen” improvements. **Above:** The apartment complex has one- and two-bedroom units.