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GRAND PRIX APARTMENTS

A Thoughtful, Respectful Renovation

WORDS : MEG KENNEDY **IMAGES :** CAMERON CAMPBELL, AIA, INTEGRATED STUDIO **ARCHITECT :** ASK STUDIO

The Grand Prix apartment building in Des Moines was built in the 1960s as motel-style multifamily housing near Des Moines University. Its neighborhood, the area around Grand and Ingersoll avenues, is a vibrant mixed bag of architectural styles from mid-century and earlier and includes single-family homes, apartment buildings, and small businesses. When Des Moines University announced its intent to relocate to

West Des Moines in 2019, the Grand Prix's owner saw an opportunity to improve the apartment building in tune with the adapting neighborhood.

Cole Davis, Assoc. AIA, who led ASK Studio's renovation efforts, described the Grand Prix as unusual. "It is not often as architects we are asked to make an outdated '60s motel-style structure appealing," he explains. The challenge was to



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attractively and thoughtfully renovate the building for less than a million dollars in ways that emphasized the building's architectural strengths.

The design team took inspiration from the building's strong mid-century proportions. "Our solution was to downplay the stylized components that existed while reemphasizing the rigid organization of the building in a modern way," says Davis. Originally, the building was typical of the 1960s motel archetype, with a row of dwellings accessed from an exterior corridor," says Davis. While the existing brick and mansard roofs had not aged well stylistically, the building's characteristic mid-century organization left flexibility to make simple, impactful changes.

Difficult decisions had to be made regarding which components would be removed and replaced. Those that remained are at times cleverly deemphasized. Existing upper floor railings were updated in black to recede from new exterior wood elements. "The existing railing has twisted steel pickets with ornate detailing," says Davis. "We elected to focus on more impactful areas of the building rather than to replace the railings, so the color scheme became super important in how we downplayed these existing pieces to make them visually disappear."

The faux mansards, however, could not be so easily tamed. "By removing the sections of mansard roofs and implementing a modern architectural panel, we were able [to] remove the outdated motifs on the building and introduce a product that not only created drama on the exterior, but also reinforced the textural surface qualities seen in the existing brick that was retained," says Davis. In addition to recladding the building, the design team added wood panels to its exterior corridors, increasing each entrance's privacy with a welcoming, modern feel.

ASK Studio's smart design moves enhanced the Grand Prix's beauty and function, preserving what worked about the existing architecture rather than treating it as disposable.

"As designers, we must leverage the constraints we are given to produce solutions that solve multiple problems. Decisions based on aesthetics alone don't maximize opportunities. Finding ways to layer in functionality allows us freedom to implement more meaningful changes. I believe that this project was fully derivative of that line of thought, and I hope it will be a good model for the surrounding community," says Davis.

Top left: The Grand Prix apartment building in Des Moines was built in the 1960s as motel-style multifamily housing. **Bottom left:** The design team took inspiration from the building's original strong mid-century proportions. **Top right:** ASK Studio's smart design moves enhanced the Grand Prix's beauty and function, preserving what worked about the existing architecture rather than treating it as disposable. **Bottom right:** Grand Prix's outdoor common area.