

The iconic Fleming Building, which was constructed by Daniel Burnham in 1909, was the first high-rise in Des Moines. Nelson Construction & Development houses its offices on the second floor of the Fleming Building.





There's a lot of beauty in history, and Slingshot Architecture and Nelson Construction & Development have not only figured that out, but also made it their mission to preserve as much history—and beauty—as they can. In this case, they've linked up to rehab Des Moines' famous 6th and Walnut Fleming Building, which is, arguably, one of the most important buildings in the downtown area. After all, the 1909 "skyscraper" was Des Moines' first steel high-rise constructed by the one and only Daniel Burnham, a famous Chicago architect who designed the iconic Flatiron Building in New York City. It was only fitting that two firms with such a knack for giving old buildings new life while celebrating their former ones came together to pay Des Moines' first high-rise the attention it deserves—and that's exactly what they achieved with the Fleming Building.

"It's a prominent building in Des Moines," says Slingshot Architecture's John Bloom, AIA, who served as the project manager for the Fleming Building and worked alongside principals Dan Drendel, AIA, and David Voss, AIA, on the project. "And because it was designed by the Burnham Company, for us architects that's meaningful." Burnham, who's known for bringing structural steel high-rises to New York City and the Midwest after a particularly inspiring visit to the Eiffel Tower, is also known for acting as the director of works for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. "As an architect, you always feel this responsibility to the owner to design a good product, and in this case, there was an extra layer of importance associated with this building because of that."

Slingshot Architecture is known for doing an enormous amount of work in downtown Des Moines, and that includes a lot of conversion projects of historical buildings into new uses, says Bloom. But Slingshot and Nelson Construction & Development weren't the first people to get their hands on the building. A major renovation was done in the 1930s to the common spaces, and tenants had made their own touches here and there over the years. "When we first started the project, we really wanted to understand how much original fabric was still in there, so we did an inventory of the entire building and produced a set of as-built drawings that identified original doors, walls, and

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Preserving Des Moines' First High-Rise

WORDS: HANNAH GILMAN IMAGES: CAMERON CAMPBELL, AIA ARCHITECT: SLINGSHOT ARCHITECTURE



fabric. Anything outside the period of significance was mostly removed.”

Slingshot Architecture’s plans showed what was original and what wasn’t, and its goal was to keep performance at the forefront of the project while maintaining the integrity of the building. “We weren’t able to save every single wall or door in its original location, but we did what we could to design and work around the original fabric,” says Bloom. The Fleming Building had four levels with an enormous amount of original fabric in the corridors, which included marble veneers, wainscoting, and doors with transoms. “Those floors were sort of our basis of design,” says Bloom. “On all the floors, we kept the width of the original corridor, even if it wasn’t there anymore. Doors were sized to match the original size of the door openings, and they always had the door in a certain place

within the grid of the building, so we used that grid even if nothing was original.” But Slingshot didn’t try to rebuild history—they simply wanted to preserve what was already there. “We never tried to restore anything—where the trim stopped, we didn’t try to restart it and pretend like it was always there. We didn’t try to imitate anything in the building.”

The first two floors of the 11-story building are commercial—the first holds an urban market, while the second holds Nelson Construction & Development’s offices—and upper floors house market-rate apartments. “About 60 percent of the units are studios, and that was something that was market-driven by a market analysis that Slingshot did with Nelson. We accomplished contemporary studios in this historical setting, and also created large living areas for the studio units that

still have some division or idea of space,” says Bloom, who noted that the goal was to maximize the livable space while keeping areas such as the bedroom and kitchen tucked away.

“The Fleming Building was a little ahead of its time because it was one of Des Moines’ first buildings to roll out what I call efficiencies or micro-units for half of the units,” says the owner of Nelson Construction & Development Mike Nelson, who worked alongside The Baker Group’s B.J. Baker on the project. “These are all market-rate units. The person who works downtown has a certain amount of money they want to spend on rent, and the smarter you can get the smaller design, the more likely you are to fit within their budget,” he says. “That’s the key piece about Fleming—many of the units are smaller, but Slingshot did such a good job



with the design that they don't feel small, and they fit within the budget that the person who just got their first or second job can afford." With Des Moines' growing reputation as one of the best cities for young professionals, the Fleming Building couldn't have come at a better time.

"The design is very nice, and it creates this unique living space. It's such a great location and a great building, and I think that was equally as important as anything we did," says Bloom. "And Nelson Construction & Development took on the risk and challenge of renovating a 100-plus-year-old building."

And the risks will keep on coming. Nelson, who's currently working on the Des Moines Building just down the street, says he shares the excitement for buildings being constructed by other developers. "I'm excited to see the Equitable Building

come online; I'm excited to see the Des Moines Register Building come online. I think all these projects create a critical mass and we don't see it as competitive, we just see it as complementary. The more units we can get within the core, the more likely we are to see commercial support, and that's really what we want to see next. We want to see more restaurants, more entertainment. I think a city that has options is ultimately very sustainable," says Nelson. "The future for downtown Des Moines is pretty bright."

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Page 21, top to bottom: Partial walls give the illusion of separate rooms in the space-savvy studio apartments. Environmentally friendly finishes and recycled content were employed throughout the kitchen, which—like the rest of the apartment—also boasts energy-efficient lighting.

Above, left to right: Energy-efficient thermal-pane windows were swapped out for old clunky ones left over from the 1980s. An open living area not only makes the space feel larger, but allows for opportunity to either close off the bedroom with furniture or leave it as one fluid space. A galley kitchen creates a feeling of separation from the rest of the living space. **Bottom row:** Nelson Construction & Development, which lives on the second floor of the Fleming Building, is known for upcycling historical buildings in the area. Original marble walls and flooring were preserved in the hallways and offer a piece of the past.