The Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids was severely damaged in a catastrophic thousand-year flood that struck the city in 2008. Located on May’s Island, in the middle of the Cedar River, the 110,000 square foot, civic building suffered damage to nearly 70% of its structure and interior. Alt Architecture was hired by the Cedar Rapids Veterans Commission to restore the building and reprogram the interior. The project converted what had been—by turns—the city hall, government offices, chamber of commerce, and an auditorium that had been abandoned for seven years prior to the flood into a thriving building focused on providing healing spaces (as well as economic generators) for Veterans, and public spaces available for community use.

The building’s entry features a stunning stained glass memorial window by Grant Wood, measuring 20’x24’. The only stained glass window by Wood, the window is dominated by a woman (described by some as the allegory for the Republic, Peace and Victory, or Mourning), in the center, and under her, fields of corn and soldiers from the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the American Civil War, and World War 1 (of which Wood was himself a Veteran).

The new building houses a military museum, a fully restored auditorium with seats for 2,000, a conference center with spaces specifically designed for Veteran peer mentoring and therapeutic workshops, offices for behavioral and physical therapy for Veterans, a food pantry for homeless Veterans, a ballroom, a restaurant, a serving kitchen that can cater to 500 guests, and offices. The building’s mechanical, electric, and plumbing systems were all replaced as well—some replacing original elements from the 1930s.
Memorial room / Grant Wood window during opening ceremony

Renovated auditorium during first public event

Rennovated armory during first public event

Auditorium: before
Auditorium: after

Armory: before
Armory: after

Site section through building / parkade

Veteran’s Memorial Building | Cedar Rapids, IA | Completed April 2014

1925
Veterans Memorial Commission established to serve veterans of the Spanish-American War and WWI

1927
Building constructed as a city hall, Veteran’s hall, coliseum, and chamber of commerce

1929
Grant Wood Memorial Window dedicated

Post WW II
City hall expands into all former community spaces, essentially becoming a bureaucratic office building where people remember paying their parking tickets

2008
Coliseum falls into disuse region, sending 1,000 city blocks under water and severely damaging building.

2010
Firm commissioned by Cedar Rapids Veterans Memorial Commission to begin collaborative effort to transform building back to its original purpose as a center for Cedar Rapids’ civic life. Design and construction consisted of 4 phases.

2014
Building reopens. Given the after-war and building begins to act as an agent of change and transformation in people’s lives. “A Healing Ecology”

Interdependence
The Cedar Rapids Veterans Memorial Building will demonstrate interdependence through the interactions between veterans and the community. The success of programming become a cooperative venture between veterans, the community, artists, healers, and teachers.

Sustainability
The behavioral health healing spaces remind veterans and the community that resources such as loved ones and friends can be lost. It reminds everyone that the void must be filled by the community and that resilience, empathy, and communal support are provided for those who have lost to overcome. Additionally, mechanisms are provided for economic sustainability for the veterans, in the form of rentable spaces including a serving kitchen that can serve over 500 guests.

Partnership
Partnerships between veterans, the community, and communal institutions foster democratic empowerment. Veterans and members of the community will participate and plan events within the environment.

Diversity
The diversity of spaces and programs will provide opportunity for multidisciplinary collaborations, leading to a richer understanding of how things work and are implemented. The building is a destination, drawing participants from other cities, states, and countries around the world, giving participants the opportunity to educate each other on their differences and commonalities.

Co-Evolution
As the community sector becomes more involved in the Veterans Memorial Building and understands the needs of those who have lost, who are disadvantaged, who have been displaced, the building begins to act as an agent of change and transformation in people’s lives.

As community members participate with the veterans, there will be an authentic integration in which all participants may thrive. In addition, a food pantry will feed homeless veterans.
Memorial room during opening ceremony

Auditorium stage with American flag

Memorial room/ Grant Wood window during opening ceremony

Restaurant/ cafe bar space

Grant Wood window during opening ceremony

Rennovated armory during first public event

Conference/ behavioral therapy space

Rennovated auditorium during first public event

Conference/ behavioral therapy space