Space Container: Purity in the Face of Opposition

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Space Container: Purity in the Face of Opposition

Abstract
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This article was originally published in the Iowa Architect magazine, the official magazine of the American Institute of Architects, Iowa Chapter. For more information contact AIA Iowa at 515.244.7502.
RenSt Loft slips into its pre-existing warehouse structure. Its surfaces, materials and details resonate 'cube,' while its clarity contrasts with loft sentimentality to question the way we live.

Below left: View across kitchen island of minimal living space and double-height window wall to south.

Below right: Floor plan of lower level.

**Space Container**

**PURITY IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION**

**JURY COMMENTS:** incredibly thoughtful in detail, this small dwelling celebrates the kitchen of its chef owner. It’s easy to make mistakes on a small project, but here is a consistency of detail and form that is commendable.

At least since the early 1920s when Le Corbusier “discovered” the two-story volume in a Paris restaurant and offered it to architecture as his Maison Citrohan, the precise, geometric, and unadorned capsule—distinctly rectilinear and very much not object but space—has been an ideal of Modern Movement designers. Add to this cubic void Bauhaus theories of minimalism, the high-tech adornment of Chareau’s Maison de Verre, the single-space pavilion of Mies’ Farnsworth, the tendency of a Charles Moore to contain containers, and an Ando habitat a la Kahn’s British Art Center, and one has something like a family tree for Herbert Lewis Kruse Blunck Architecture’s (HLKB) RenSt Loft. Its big idea has been a mainstay of Modernism for nearly 90 years.

This long-running pedigree, however, in no way diminishes its present appearance in Des Moines. For this slice of orthogonal space is slid almost innocuously into a 1924 warehouse—an industrial-era container cleaned and converted to console us with nostalgia of days gone by. The RenSt Loft resists consolation. And if a warehouse, by nature, is brutally direct, utilitarian, unpretentiously detailed and somewhat crudely executed, HLKB’s “loft insert” is its antithesis. The contrast is the design’s greatest strength.

Higher than it is wide, the loft’s pure, geometric void contains a container. Centered between continuous white walls, this container is surfaced in corncrib-inspired striations: strips of plywood, stained burgundy on their outer side only. Light is emitted from behind, between the strips. The container is luminous and seems to glow from within. A kind of box within a box, the container effectively divides the space of the void into useable discreet units. It houses what seems more like equipment than rooms.

Thus, within the box is a bath. The bath is accessed not—like a room—by a door, but by a sliding glass screen. Atop the box is not a bedroom, but a mattress concealed on three sides by the box itself. The box’s walls open to reveal at its heart a stainless-steel refrigerator, support machine for 21st century life. On its dark side, nearest the entry, the box wall supports shelves and a desktop.

The box allows for spatial division without walls. It provides support for the loft’s most remote and intimate space, an elevated platform of open metal grating accessed by an open-grate metal stair. The openness of horizontal surfaces permits continuity of the primary cubic void and allows daylight, however minimal, to wrap itself around the box. In this way, the clarity of the large rectilinear void is not diminished but heightened.

Reinforcing this clarity and establishing an effervescent atmosphere is the loft’s “look, ma, no hands” attitude toward its constructiveness. Whereas a warehouse reveals its structural muscle, the loft...
conceals it. It has no columns. Its exposed concrete beams levitate, marking a module that adds intellectual order to the rectilinear void. The beam’s obvious weight gives presence to the lightness of cubed space, rendering it intentional and palpable.

In the RenSt loft, pure and geometric space is offered for our aesthetic consideration. Dismissing conventional convenience in favor of this aesthetic, it does not so much accommodate the way we live as question it.

—Daniel Naegele, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Architecture at Iowa State University.

Above: View across kitchen island cube to stove with shelving above.

Above: View into lower level bathroom housed in corncrib-inspired container.

Left: The loft in its entirety, looking from the south double-height window wall across its kitchen to the corncrib-inspired container.