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## Architectural creativity & employee creativity

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### **Abstract**

For the countless travelers who hum along Interstate 80 through Iowa each day, the newly constructed Brownells Inc. building, designed by Substance Architecture, marks a distinct glimmer in the expanse at the southern edge of Grinnell. The prominent building at mile marker 182 is easily seen from both directions along I-80 due to its generous size as the company's primary distribution center, headquarters, and new retail shop along one of the busiest national commercial corridors. The building rests on low-lying fields of prairie, extending along the interstate and anchored by a striking dark façade. At high speeds, the spacious deep-set windows shimmer and a white-striped plenum pulsates from behind the airy office windows, recalling the ever-repeating passing lanes.

### **Disciplines**

Architecture

### **Comments**

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# ARCHITECTURAL & CREATIVITY EMPLOYEE & CREATIVITY



**WORDS:** JAMES SPILLER, ASSOC. AIA  
**IMAGES:** PAUL CROSBY  
**ARCHITECT:** SUBSTANCE ARCHITECTURE

For the countless travelers who hum along Interstate 80 through Iowa each day, the newly constructed Brownells Inc. building, designed by Substance Architecture, marks a distinct glimmer in the expanse

at the southern edge of Grinnell. The prominent building at mile marker 182 is easily seen from both directions along I-80 due to its generous size as the company's primary distribution center, headquarters, and new retail shop along one of the busiest national commercial corridors. The building rests on low-lying fields of prairie, extending along the interstate and anchored by a striking dark façade. At high speeds, the spacious deep-set windows

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The interstate location was quite the change of scenery from the company's original offices in nearby Montezuma, Iowa. A third-generation family company, Brownells Inc. is "the world's largest supplier of firearm accessories, gun parts, and gunsmithing tools," a distant



evolution from its days as a hobbyist's catalog company. Even with the new location, the company faced the challenge of attracting a creative workforce to continue the company's growth and future success. The distribution industry is perceived as very traditional, but Brownells Inc. CEO Pete Brownell contends that "we're not about that. We're progressive, in that all ideas are welcome. We want to flatten the traditional company

hierarchy, which should be embedded in the architecture."

Such aspirations were clear to Substance Architecture, who sought to develop a building that would host a Google-like office culture, but retain the small-town principles the company has long known. Two terms kept surfacing in the early dialogue of the project: modern and rustic. "There were elements of abstraction relative to these

competing terms, and if ever the client felt uncomfortable, we would immediately reassess. In this way, it was a very adaptive process," says Matt Rodekamp, AIA, project architect. The project placed material identity at the heart of this tension. The materials at the core needed to be robust (limestone), at the workspaces soft and light (wood), and at the edges lasting, but open and contemporary (metal and concrete panel façade). The



“gunmetal” façade is no joke; it identifies a material palette of the industry the building serves, shines in a vast and changing visual landscape, and will last longer while requiring less maintenance.

As the project progressed, Substance Architecture persistently sought to “eliminate the inessential.” At the outset, Brownells Inc. requested a large peaked entry for the entire facility. The peaked roof increased the scale of the project, seemingly to unreasonable heights. Pete

Brownell recalls, “My dad and I looked at [the initial] renderings on a hunting trip with our iPad. It looked wrong. So we told [Substance] to do what they do and we went back to hunting.” In the end, all agreed to bring it down to the ground, to let it stretch along the prairie. Scrapping the peak, the design team proposed two sheds, the retail space gently leaning over the more elongated office block. At the overlap, a clerestory reveals a sliver south sky to the retail space. The overlapping

volumes also serve as the single entry for the entire facility, addressing security concerns for a building that distributes firearm parts.

There is a rigorous rhythm to the building. The strict structural layout defines a clear logic hosting the expansive windows, a spine of meeting rooms, and a grid of adjustable office furniture with regularly intervening open collaboration spaces. The control is paramount to a building whose primary responsibilities



are utilitarian. But the true touch of refinement is found at the overlap, where the intersections and edges of the office floor, executive suite, retail floor, and entry space subtly shift materials and culminate at the stair core, elegantly binding all of the components together as one.

The design process demanded leaps of faith, surprises, and constant communication, but since the facilities opened, Pete Brownell says the best outcome is that “employees get to discover

how they work best here. When they are creative, they are always looking out.” The balance of the traditional and contemporary seems to have been found. “The act of seeing a snippet of space beyond each function was inspired from the original facility in Montezuma,” clarifies Rodekamp. When employees need to collaborate, they head to the prairie or visit the open lounges, and along the way materials adjust, cuing faintly to the distant humming horizon.

**Opposite:** Second level of the office; primary office stair.

**Above:** Process renderings and plans for the Brownells building.