

AWARD

AIA IOWA HONOR AWARD
FOR EXCELLENCE IN
ARCHITECTURE

Single-Cell Space

HLKB ARCHITECTURE CONTRASTS THE WEIGHT OF THE OLD WITH THE EFFERVESCENCE OF THE NEW

JURY COMMENTS: Clear idea, well edited and executed on an apparently modest budget.

HLKB's renovation for the Des Moines restaurant, Lucca, is a paradigmatic single-cell interior—utterly modern in a decidedly antique envelope.

Right: The boarded and bricked-up one-story street elevation of Lucca before restoration.

Far right: Lucca street elevation after restoration including three-bay shop window and three double-hung windows in re-built second story.

Below: Interior from front of restaurant looking down bar, with floating ductwork and exhaust hood, vertical boxed shafts and a linear procession of lights.

Project: Lucca
Location: Des Moines, IA
Construction Manager: HLKB Architecture
Civil Engineer: Bishop Engineering Company
Electrical Engineer: Action Electrical Contracting
Mechanical Engineer: Punelli Heating and Air Conditioning
Structural Engineer: Charles Saul Engineering
Interior Designer: HLKB Architecture
Custom Millwork: Tony Lisac Construction Company
Photographer: Farshid Assassi, Hon. AIA Iowa, Assassi Productions ©

Lucca elegantly resolves two persistent issues in architecture: the modern interior in a late-nineteenth century envelope and the single-cell space of multiple functions. The restored brick street-front—a façade and a mask of solidarity with near identical buildings in a neighborhood—features a three-bay shop window below three tall, double-hung windows to the second floor. Within, a narrow and high volume of space is defined by continuous, redbrick walls and divided into three levels. Lucca, an Italian restaurant designed by HLKB Architecture, occupies only the middle level, the lower level is reserved for storage and kitchen support.

The restaurant's entrance is traditional, configured to protract the threshold between public street and private interior. The contemporary public street is but a corridor for cars through a mélange of seemingly tiny shop fronts dominated by the block-long, wide-bayed building to the south. By contrast, the private interior offers coherence, warmth, a relaxed control of all that one sees and senses, the assurance of sophisticated



twentieth century living. The entrance is unassuming and ambiguous. As with many of its nineteenth century neighbors, its door is “pushed” into the fabric of the shop-front wall to provide a small but protective porch, diagonally extending the shop-front window. This penetration allows the visitor to enter not at the edge of the shop or the edge of the street, but within the shop itself. The diagonal and deep extension of the window wall makes a kind of bay-window lozenge of habitable space, a distinct interior zone. In Lucca, a grand piano and small, high tables occupy this zone.

Inside, modernity is everywhere evident. The space of Lucca is continuous and single-cell: that of a rectilinear tube, closed at one end. Stripped of their plaster, the redbrick walls offer authenticity and temporal dimension. In their irrefutable directness and continuity, they are relentlessly modern yet exude an aura of the original, of an earlier era with other concerns and other ways of building. New space is set off by old object; fragility by brutal walls; smoothness by heavy texture; the phenomenal by weighted reality. Levitating exhaust hoods appear as halos. Clean, white counters and casework seem to glow. All is composed and in place in the deep space of the tube.

The rectilinear tube space offers a single cell to contain and facilitate all the functions and accoutrements of a restaurant: dining, of course, and food preparation, but also checking in and out, waiting, moving to one's table, coat checks, toilets, heating and air-conditioning, lighting, air supply and exhaust. How to retain single-cellism while accommodating a myriad of functions, movements and equipment? At Lucca, HLKB Architecture establishes sequence without the use of interior walls by conceiving various functions as realms of space defined by a glowing white



DANIEL NAEGELE



Left: Illuminated interior from back of restaurant looking toward shop front with tables in foreground and left and food preparation area beyond.

“furniture.” The bar and food preparation areas are designed as large-scale, built-in, and decidedly horizontal furniture. Table and chair placement define dining areas. Toilets are contained in a discreet box, its intimate size relieved by large apertures and mirrors. Ducts and pipes—white and luminous and always “ordered”—float horizontally in the space while vertical shafts are concealed in innocuous floor-to-ceiling boxes of a size and shape that helps define the spatial tube. Distinct boundaries are established in the disposition of this furniture, with circulation suggested as the space between these boundaries. All of this heightens the presence of the tube space, while its tendency toward abstraction is countered by rendering the floor in traditional maple hardwood and by presenting the

ceiling as a flat fragile plane that holds light in the form of exposed-bulb spots.

The appropriateness of HLKB Architecture’s conception for Lucca is reinforced by the seeming effortless execution. The former belies the thoughtfulness of the designer, the latter a mastery of the means necessary to make manifest that thoughtfulness in architecture.

—Daniel Naegele, Ph.D., is associate professor of architecture at Iowa State University. He is an architect, critic and historian. His writings on art and representation have been published worldwide.