



Project

The Minnetonka Center for the Arts introduces modern architecture to a western suburb in a friendly challenge to convention *By Thomas Fisher, Assoc. AIA*



Visual Art



Design team (from left to right): Scott Eloffson, Jim Dayton, AIA, Patrick Regan, Tatsu Tanaka, Marcy Conrad Nutt.

Art has become so removed from everyday life—locked in museums, guarded in galleries—that we rarely think of it as an integrated part of our daily round. The new Minnetonka Center for the Arts, Wayzata, however, makes us think again. The building, designed by James Dayton Design, Ltd., Minneapolis, not only makes the production and exhibition of art a part of its users' daily routines; it shows how architecture itself can visually express artistic ideas and visibly shake up expectations.

The center has provided art education to children and adults for 50 years, despite a histo-

ry of compromised settings. After renting space for several years, the center moved to a 1948 elementary school on its current site in the late 1970s. The old school, says Jim Dayton, AIA, principal, “conveyed an image of the arts center that suggested it was for hobbyists rather than for the serious art work that goes on there.”

After studies indicated the school building couldn't be rehabilitated to better serve the center's needs, the organization embarked on a fundraising campaign for a new building. Dayton, who had recently returned to Minneapolis to establish his practice after a five-year stint at



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the office of Los Angeles architect Frank Gehry, got the job.

Working in a mode similar to Gehry's, Dayton organized the center's program into functional units and studied them in different configurations. "In the old school," Dayton says, "the various art media had been isolated from each other. So in the initial scheme for the new building, we grouped all of the space around a central courtyard." The single-loaded corridor that resulted, though, proved too expensive to build.

The final design puts public spaces on the east side of an outdoor courtyard and art studios on



A collage of materials and simple volumes, the arts center (top) was also designed to admit daylight into the main entry (other side below), the hall leading to the gallery entrance and the corridor of studios (above left) and the gallery itself (above).



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The building's accessibility, via a seamless flow of interior and exterior spaces, is most pronounced in the outdoor work area used by the ceramics and sculpture studios (top). A double-loaded corridor provides access to the seven art studios (above), which are used by people of all ages from the community (other side below).

the west side of the building along a double-loaded corridor. The result is a 32,000-square-foot building with clarity and accessibility, well tuned to the center's purpose of bringing art to the public.

Even the landscape fulfills that purpose. In front of the new building, where the old school once stood, two crushed-aggregate parking lots flank a central driveway and an allée of trees that visually connects the road to the building's central outdoor courtyard and its 720-square-foot concrete "art wall" used for displaying large-scale outdoor works.

A gravel workyard adjacent to the allée provides outdoor space for the ceramics and sculpture studios, visible from the street. "We wanted to reveal the process by which art is made," says Roxanne Heaton, executive director, Minnetonka Center for the Arts, about the outdoor spaces, "as well as exhibit the outcome of that work."

That sense of accessibility continues with the building itself. Like a sculptor working in a variety of media, the design team clad the building exterior in Cor-ten steel, corrugated and galvanized metal, resin-coated wood, concrete, aluminum and glass, creating a dynamic collage of

color and material. Inside the building, the center's functions are organized as small-scale units to make the center approachable and the making of art less intimidating. While the sections flow from one to another with ease, each is defined through changes in material, space and light.

The steel-framed, tilted entry canopy leads to an aluminum-framed glass-enclosed two-story lobby, with public areas on the right: an information desk and adjacent retail shop; a glass-walled cafeteria; a lecture room whose walls are galvanized metal; and a high-ceilinged gallery. On a second level above the shop and cafeteria, accessible via a grand double-turned staircase or an elevator, are the offices, conference room and library—all clad in bright-yellow parklex wood.

Straight back from the lobby, a corridor passes by the grand staircase and the 3,000-square-foot exhibition space, both of which are illuminated by large skewed skylights and lined with rusted Cor-ten steel. The corridor then takes a perpendicular turn to provide access to seven art studios, mostly clad in corrugated metal.

Painting, watercolor, textiles and photography studios are located on the north of the corridor to take advantage of indirect light. In contrast, the sculpture and ceramics studios, with their outdoor



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work areas, occupy the south side. Large windows allow students to display their art and visitors to observe the art-making process. Similarly, the building's exposed steel reveals the structure was put together with artful directness and economy.

Architect and director have some misgivings about the finished building. Heaton worries the acrylic-clad wall in the cafeteria looks too "temporary." Dayton laments the elimination of a metal cooling tower, which would have given the structure vertical balance, but was not approved in the permitting process.

Still, the Minnetonka Center for the Arts is one of the finest facilities of its kind in the country, as well as a work of architecture that challenges local expectations in a friendly way. In addition, Heaton says, "Thoughtful planning produced a facility that not only meets our current needs, but has created vast opportunity. We are now positioned to engage an expanded community of artists, students, members, teachers and visitors far into the future."



Minnetonka Center for the Arts
Wayzata, Minnesota
James Dayton Design, Ltd.
Minneapolis, Minnesota