



AIA Minnesota

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Christiansen Hall of Music at St. Olaf College Receives AIA Minnesota 25-Year Award

Minneapolis, Minnesota – The Christiansen Hall of Music at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, has won AIA Minnesota's prestigious 25-Year Award for 2003. The building, completed in 1976, was designed by Ed Sovik, FAIA, Northfield, Minnesota, with SMSQ Architects, Northfield, Minnesota, as the architectural firm of record.

AIA Minnesota established the 25-Year Award in 1981 to recognize exemplary architectural projects, 25 years or older, that have withstood the test of time. The jurors critiqued the 13 submissions based on digital images and information assembled in a binder from the architect/architectural firm. They were not allowed to visit the project sites.

Jury members were Renee Cheng, associate professor, Director of Design, College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; James W. O'Brien, FAIA, principal, Williams/O'Brien Associates, Inc., Minneapolis; and Wynne Yelland, AIA, principal, Locus Architecture, Ltd., Minneapolis.

Since its construction in 1976, Christiansen Hall of Music has been in continuous use as the locus of St. Olaf College's nationally recognized music program. The building not only includes Urness Recital Hall, the primary performance space, but a variety of rehearsal spaces, departmental offices, faculty studios/offices, individual practice rooms, practice rooms for choral and instrumental ensembles and a music library. The structure is heavy due to the necessity for effective sound isolation and resulted in large areas of double floor consisting of four-foot concrete floor panels separated from the structural floor by two-foot fiberglass units. Studios, practice rooms, classrooms and the recital hall have acoustic isolation through doubled surfaces. Only a few of the large rehearsal spaces have been retuned acoustically in recent years.

Inside the building, the use of simple materials—brick floor pavers, exposed concrete columns, contoured wood-board ceilings—continue to communicate a timeless sense of place. Nowhere is this more evident than in Urness Recital Hall, which has a relaxed but gracious quality, as well as a sense of occasion that tends toward the festive.

“Not only is this main room striking,” the jurors said, “but its acoustics are seamlessly integrated with the wood panels and the geometry of the room. It has a reserved quality without being austere. It’s rich and simple; a space that’s elegant yet doesn’t dominate the building and plays well with the other elements of the program.”

The jurors also praised the building’s program for “having a high level of integrity from its role in the campus master plan, to its performance hall, down to the acoustics and the furniture. It resolves the challenging issues of integrating large free-span spaces with small settings that’s required by a campus building. And in balancing multiple rigorous demands, the architect generated a design that’s holistic. It’s a beautifully developed building.”

Not only is the Christansen Hall of Music “sympathetic to the context of its neo-Gothic surroundings” on the St. Olaf Campus, the jurors continued, “but with its modern detailing the building is not afraid to stand as a contemporary building in a historical setting, which is a difficult balance to achieve. It manages to be a building of its time without being limited to its time.”

The American Institute of Architects Minnesota, founded in 1892, is dedicated to strengthening our communities, improving our built environment and providing exceptional design. For more information on the organization and Minnesota architectural firms, reference our Web site at www.aia-mn.org and pick up a copy of Architecture Minnesota, the award-winning architectural magazine of the Midwest.

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