

Poetic Architecture: Three Works by Johnsen Schmalig Architects

Milwaukee-based Johnsen Schmalig Architects has aptly captured the heart of what it means to live simply in the American Midwest and conveys a sense of that freedom in their design philosophy. Comparing three of their most recent projects (a cabin, a studio and a single family residence), one can easily discern a clear and soulful rhythm in their work—a harmonic cadence in synchronicity with both man and nature.

Stacked Cabin

Located in Muscoda, Wisconsin, the Stacked Cabin is an 82 square meter (880 square-foot) single family residence hidden away from the twenty-first century world in a remote Wisconsin forest. At first blush, the modest house fits snugly into its wooden hillside with a low- slung, twin-level block punctuated by a subtle third-level bookend. Syncopated fenestration frames exterior views while giving the occasional happy wanderer glimpses of the warm interior.

The material palette is comprised of exposed concrete, cedar, anodized metal and cementitious plaster—subdued hues that blend in with the earth, rock and woods of the picturesque surroundings. A humble yet powerful statement is created by the demur architecture in juxtaposition to the slope of golden leaves blanketing a thinning autumn forest, all capped with a blustery sky. This iconographic presence acts as a sort of modernist mile-marker on one of the paths meandering through the landscape.

Studio for a Composer

This piece (located in Spring Prairie, Wisconsin) was commissioned by an accomplished Country Western musician/composer who requested a tranquil refuge away from the fray, where he could work and literally hear himself think. The architects answered the owner's charge with a finely tuned design that is the physical embodiment of peace and serenity—a state of being to which most everyone aspires.

The studio seemingly floats upon a 36 centimeter (14 inch) clerestory of illuminated translucent polycarbonate that emphasizes the otherworldly aspect of the quiet and dignified work. The entire opera rests upon a type of “podium,” which is carved into the steep hill and extends horizontally, providing for a green/vegetated roof that minimizes storm water runoff. This “rostrum” also accommodates storage space below (lit by the clerestory)—all of which is accessed on the lower downhill side of the edifice via a cedar-clad overhead door.

OS House

The OS House is a 177 square meter (1900 square foot) infill project located on the edge of Lake Michigan in Racine, Wisconsin. It occupies a narrow lot which completes a row of housing built during the last century. The single family, detached residence, uses

an amusing *mélange* of simple colors, and even simpler rectilinear form to establish an exterior rhythm which deciphers an interior organization and flow of space.

Individual moments consisting of separate functions push and pull the playful interconnectedness within the project to create a patio, an outdoor terrace, a covered exterior edge, and a look-out study. The project was one of the first LEED Platinum certified homes built in the Upper Midwest.

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