

rising star: min | day

san francisco and omaha, neb.

e.b. min and jeffrey l. day make every site specific.

by cheryl weber, lead ap

Most architects who open second offices do so a few years into their practice, once they've built a base from which to branch out. Fewer follow the path taken by E.B. Min, AIA, and Jeffrey L. Day, AIA, who in 2003 launched Min | Day in two cities—San Francisco and Omaha, Neb. The circumstances leading to that decision were mundane—Day followed his fiancée to Omaha while Min stayed in the Bay Area, where they had been working together on and off for a few years—yet their practice has become anything but.

The business partners, who met as graduate students at the University of California at Berkeley, are developing a unique voice in the creative junction between these two places, which are as different in sensibility as they are in topography. San Francisco shouts good design in daily life and clients usually know what they want. But the quieter Midwest city is a surprisingly agile testing ground for new visual ideas, in part because it has a less well-defined regional style.

“Clients in the Bay Area have more focused opinions about what they like or don't like, but they may be less willing to open up to new ideas” than clients in the conventionally bland Midwest, Day says. “Here in Omaha it's more like, ‘I don't want what I see around me.’ It



Photos: John Lee/Aurora Select (above); Paul Crosby (opposite)



The Lake Okoboji house creates a set of blinders on a narrow lot in rural Iowa, screening close neighbors while gradually opening to lake views. Jeffrey L. Day and E.B. Min (opposite) pose on the Stones Table, which melds organic form with CNC precision. Together, the pieces form a rectangular table.



Renderings: Courtesy Min | Day



The Wide Open House is a stock plan developed for Hometta.com, a website Min | Day helped found to sell affordable modern homes.

experimental edge

Most of Min | Day's experiments with CNC digital fabrication are done in collaboration with FACT (Fabrication and Construction Team), an affiliated design lab Jeffrey L. Day, AIA, teaches at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. FACT takes on pro bono and very-low-fee work for nonprofit clients like the Bemis Center in Omaha, Neb., and Art Farm in Marquette, Neb., both artist residency programs. In these long-term projects, each successive class gets hands-on experience building small art installations. Day, firm partner E.B. Min, AIA, and their three employees design the projects while FACT develops them, conducts research, and oversees fabrication and construction.

Although FACT is never used for work on private commissions, its testing supports the firm's interest in creating unusual effects. "It's a way to make creative possibilities affordable," Day says. At the Bemis Center, for example, students developed a complex paneled wall system that cost \$5 per square foot because they wrote their own code and had it fabricated at a medium-security state prison. "The material itself was inexpensive, but it would have been a monumental task for craftspeople," Day says. "We're not that interested in precious materials, but in what you do with materials." —c.w.



Photos: Paul Crosby

Min | Day's interiors subtly refer to their site. In this penthouse overlooking downtown Omaha, Neb., a blue-saturated stairwell heightens the experience of moving up toward the sky, and the CNC-cut railings and light filters suggest prairie grasses.

gives us room to experiment a bit."

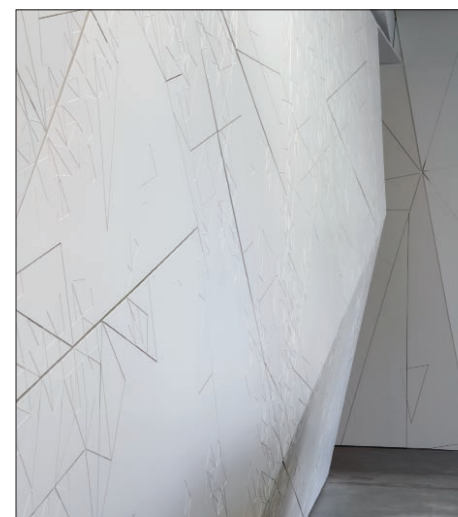
landscape inspirations

Those experiments often explore the fluid relationships between architecture, landscape, and technology. With art-related undergraduate degrees—Min studied art history and studio art at Brown University; Day focused on visual and environmental studies at Harvard College—the pair collaborates across disciplines, combining traditional building methods with digitally fabricated designs. Their enthusiasm for using sophisticated technology to tease out the specificity of the site shows up in projects like the Lake Okoboji house in Omaha. For the master bedroom facing the lake, they used animation software to create a rippling headboard, made from thin stacked sheets of birch plywood, that mimics the water's surface. They also cast the light-filtering screens of an Omaha condominium in a laser-cut pattern suggesting prairie grass.

That Min | Day's buildings reference their natural surroundings is no accident,

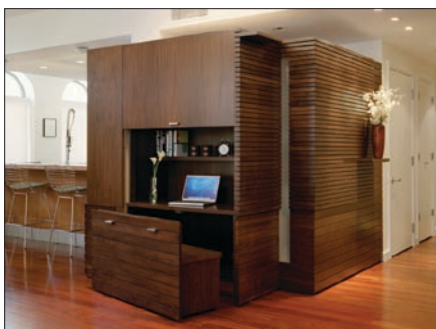
either. Day teaches landscape architecture classes at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Architecture, where he is an associate professor. Min's stint at San Francisco-based Andrea Cochran Landscape Architecture (then Delaney & Cochran) taught her that color and texture are as important as form. Both are fascinated by the interplay of painted finishes and the colors reflected in nature. "There's a portion of landscape design that is very graphic in nature," Min says.

Those qualities are evident in the Omaha condo, where vivid blue walls defining the vertical circulation are paired with high windows that admit snapshots of sky and shifting light. Another is the bright orange boys' bath in the lake house. "Some people say they can't handle that much color in a room, but when you're in these spaces it's very different from what you see in photos," Min says. "And if there aren't a lot of other views—just a bath with a little window—monolithic color makes it a more interesting environment. We work pretty hard on getting the right whites, too."



Photos: Larry Gawel

InfoShop, the new reception area for the Bemis Center in Omaha, Neb., provides a spontaneous place for dialogue and debate. The desk—laminated hardboard with exposed edges over a plywood and steel frame—doubles as a bar surface for gallery events. Behind it, CNC-milled MDF wall panels were cut from a pinwheel aperiodic tiling pattern.



Photos: Michael Moran



Walnut-stained casework brings texture and spatial definition to a New York City loft. The main cube (above) hides a desk and bench; its opposite side holds a toy closet and kitchen pantry—the source of light through the reveal. Other cabinetry contains a media center and closets.

the art of improv

Hesse McGraw, curator at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, an art residency program in Omaha, describes Min | Day's work as "an architecture that remembers it's meant to be lived in, and that reaches out to its occupants in a generous way."

Says McGraw, "When you look at the images you can tell there's a kind of joy or sense of celebration just by the colors and forms, but the way that happens when you occupy these spaces is palpable. There's a sense of discovery that unfolds over time."

Their ongoing work with the Bemis Center and other nonprofit artist organizations has inspired an improvisational paradigm that's quite different from their meticulously controlled projects, and one that would scare most architects. In this realm, too, Min | Day borrows from landscape architecture. "The way landscape architects think about the long-term has inspired us to think about how to do that architecturally," Day says. "When you can't depend on rigorous control from

start to finish, you seek ways of structuring the experiences to unify the work of others who succeed you."

It's an approach they've used on restricted-budget private commissions, too. With a portfolio ranging from a wheelchair-accessible suburban residence to urban adaptive reuse, straw bale houses, and repurposed art buildings on a working farm, their practice is hard to pin down. Recently they landed a new category: master planning for a 90-unit housing project in China.

The philosophy that informs all Min | Day's work, whether experimental or traditional, is that architecture isn't so much about the formal image as the way a building locks into its site. And that's something that has to be experienced.

"When the weather is cool here, the breeze comes from the north, and the building shields a beautiful patio," says client Paul Smith of his Lake Okoboji house. "In warm weather, the breeze comes out of the south. I often sit there with my coffee in the morning and watch the world wake up." *ra*