

Projects of Note

PROJECT OF THE WEEK

Natatorium Blends the Excitement of Competition Swimming with Serene Sylvan Site

Ceiling simulates stars, allows natural ventilation

by Stephanie Stubbs, Assoc. AIA



Architect Tod Williams Billie Tsien & Associates met the challenge of designing the new Williams Natatorium at Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., on a campus where the spirit of Eliel Saarinen will live forever. "Integration of body and mind" reigns in academe and physical surround throughout the campus, and the natatorium follows

suit, blending the utilitarianism of a competition swimming pool with a serene décor echoing its sylvan setting.

The pool area's most striking feature is its dropped, night-sky blue ceiling, which harbors a scattering of lights whose seemingly random pattern emulates the stars above. The dropped ceiling also accommodates two huge conic apertures that reach up to the roof. Their coverings can be opened in nice weather to the real sky. The unusual ceiling design has its practical side as well: the deep interstitial space allows maintenance staff to change the light bulbs over the pool easily and keep a constant check on the steel structure for corrosion.

The natatorium's brick walls also play their part in bringing the outdoors in. Their 20-foot-tall windows are shaded by vertical wood slats, which open and close hydraulically. The operable windows allow natural ventilation, which is gained through the conic apertures, eliminating the need for air-conditioning. Aesthetically, the tall wood blinds call to mind the trunks of the tall pine trees that stand sentinel around the building.

"Our design sites the structure at the eastern end of the athletic complex, and a great bent wall clad in glazed brick terminates the long east-west axis of the Saarinen campus," the architects explain. "The project is both a building and a landscape element."

Tod Williams Billie Tsien Associates will receive an AIA Honor



Tod Williams Billie Tsien's design for Cranbrook Academy's new natatorium morphs natural elements of sky and woods into a utilitarian building.

Award for Architecture for the Williams Natatorium at Cranbrook during the AIA national convention in Denver, May 17-19. ■■