

Westwood Hills Nature Center by HGA – Text Alternative

HGA logo

Exterior and interior shots of the newly built Westwood Hills Nature Center in St. Louis Park, MN.

Glenn Waguespack, Sr. Project Designer: Buildings are made out of pieces of things. And so we had to choose like, how are we going to organize these pieces and we're inspired by this place. And so, you know, you see that kind of subdivision of the windows, the subdivision of the fiber cement siding, relating back to how things branch in nature. You know, whether it's a structure of a leaf or a, you know, trees branching. Just to kind of try to knit the building into this place, even though the building's an object that's placed at the north end of the parking lot. There's still that opportunity to, to connect it to its place.

Aerial shots of the Nature center, with solar panels on the roof, the surrounding woods and the Westwood lake.

Andrew Holmgren, Project Architect: The old nature center was up the hill tucked into the woods. And so for us to build this size facility up there, it would've meant destruction of a lot more landscape. And so bringing the nature center down the hill reduced the amount of imprint.

Glenn: Where I think the design of this kind of opened up and maybe got richer was when we started to explore not just a building that stretched out east to west in order to capture sun, but then started to kink and move to respond to the site a little more directly, to really knit the building into what was going on around it. You can see here where the structure has to literally reconcile that kink in the building. It makes for these really interesting moments.

Andrew: This landscape is going to change. That was one of our design intents. The natural prairie landscapes that are around this building will continue to evolve and grow and recapture the building.

Glenn Waguespack: The building acts as a gateway. Once you're past the building, you're kind of immersed in that landscape.

A naturalist leads a workshop with adults and children in a large room.

Mark Oestreich, Westwood Hills Nature Center Manager: We're an education facility, so we obviously teach programs in the building, but we wanted to use the whole experience as people come here to be learning through informal ways. We have interpretive signage so people can experience on a self-guided tour and learn the sustainability features of the building. Or we have used it actually with natural staff guiding students through it. So one of the features we have on the north side of the building is we relocated a bog from Northern Minnesota. And so what's been neat in that area is a duck discovered it like day two, I think when it was put in. And this is the third year that they've nested in there. And we've had frogs show up and turtles and all kinds of animals that have taken advantage of this habitat. And yet it's literally right outside the window. Our previous building was a single use building, kind of a one room schoolhouse as the analogy we used. And with this we can have multiple events going on and it's opened up a lot of opportunities for people to gather and people have found this space and learned the way they want to use the space and feel like it's their building, which is what we wanted.

Shots of different spaces in the Nature Center, a colorful interactive exhibit, a lounge area with a fireplace, deck chairs in the shade by the bog.

Andrew: This whole nature center is tucked between an interstate and, you know, densely populated neighborhood and city. It's really a cool little oasis.

Mark: I've heard a lot of excitement like this is so much bigger than the other building and it's beautiful and it feels warm and inviting. And one of the goals was we wanted the building to have that feeling where people come in and they feel like, this isn't an institutional building, this is some place where I want to spend time.