

HOMES

AIA HOME OF THE MONTH

# Love of art, Japanese design inspired this sculptural home

By LAURIE JUNKER  
For the Minnesota Star Tribune

Christopher Holien grew up in west-central Minnesota, a farm kid who spent most of his adult life working as a geologist in places like Australia, London, Malaysia and Alaska.

While Holien enjoyed soaking up different cultures, when it came time to retire in 2021, he gravitated to the familiar. He purchased a lot in White Oaks Savanna, a residential community near Stillwater with 320 acres of oak savanna – a mixed area of prairie and woodland – as well as organic farmland and 30 homesites.

“I immediately connected with the land,” Holien said. “It reminded me of home.”

Holien had lots of ideas for his new house that tapped into his Nordic heritage, a visit to Japan and an interest in art. That all resonated with architect Christopher Strom, a college art major. Holien wanted plenty of wall space for paintings, including several large Australian Aboriginal dot paintings he bought while living there.

Strom and Holien shared a vision of a sculptural home embedded in the open landscape with enough precise geometry to satisfy Holien’s scientific mind and enough views of the prairie to make him feel content. The result earned a 2024-25 Home of the Month honor, a partnership between the Minnesota Star Tribune and the Minnesota chapter of the American Institute of Architects that honors residential architecture.

Asymmetry played an important role in the design, from the shape of the house to the roof’s pitch and window placement. That created a little tension, which made for a more interesting composition. But Strom was careful not to overdo it.

“We kept a strong centerline to ground the interior, balance the asymmetry and make the space feel comfortable,” Strom said.

Strom thought about the house as a series of volumes, or components, that accommodate different activities. One for the entryway that’s connected to another for the living room and kitchen, with a dining bay off to one side. Another, one of Holien’s favorites, is tucked off the back of the kitchen with lower ceilings, corner windows and a single counter stool. It’s a cozy nook where he takes his morning coffee and admires prairie views.

“Modern design generally favors an open floor plan, which Christopher’s house has,” Strom said. “But we also included smaller volumes within the larger spaces, which fosters more of a human scale, variety and a sculptural expression of space.”

Southwest-facing windows in the central part of the house provide natural light and savanna views. They also capture the wind sweeping across the prairie, channeling the air into a row of ground-level windows on one side of the great room and out through the high-up windows on the other.

“The clerestory windows open via remote control, and the cooling air circulation is great,” Holien said.

Deep overhangs shade the outdoor patio and help keep the interior cool in the summer. But they also allow the sun’s lower angle in the winter to reach and

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

**Designing firm:** Christopher Strom Architects.

**Project team:** Chris Strom, AIA; Eric Johnson, AIA; Froukje Akkerman, AIA; Sydney Swift.

**Project partners:** Redstone Builders, White Oaks Savanna, InUnison Design, Bunkers and Associates, Travis Van Liere Studio, Northland Woodworks, Bespoke Finishes, Netter’s Welding & Fabrication.



Chris Strom



Eric Johnson



**O, SAVANNA:** A sculptural home of metal, glass and wood creates “Nordic zen” vibes while offering just the right backdrop for the homeowner to display his extensive art collection. Set against the prairie in a residential community near Stillwater, the house features walls of glass, plus design elements that frame oak savanna views. Passive ventilation and local sourcing are also emphasized in the design.



warm the interior, called passive cooling and heating. Other sustainability measures include constructing the home using high-efficiency structurally insulated panels and insulated concrete forms, which reduce energy needs. On the exterior, baked accoya wood siding and a durable metal standing seam roof that waterfalls down the sides of the house are naturally low-maintenance choices.

Not missing the opportunity to make an artistic statement, Strom had a metal panel fabricated for the front door that the color field paintings of Mark Rothko and Richard Diebenkorn inspired. Patinated shades of green and blue reference the Earth, horizon and sky while reflecting the prairie setting.

The lower level is a combination art gallery/family room with tall ceilings, deep light and win-

dow wells. There are also guest bedrooms for visiting friends and family, especially Holien’s two sisters.

While his house was under construction, Holien lived at the farmstead where he grew up. He and his sisters kept it after their parents died to use as a gathering spot, restoring the cropland to tallgrass prairie. During that time, Holien reconnected with neighbors and friends, reinforcing his decision to return.

“I lived away from home my entire adult life, and it’s rewarding to spend considerably more time with family,” he said. “The deciding factor was discovering White Oaks Savanna. I knew this was where I wanted to be.”

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Photos by Spacecrafting