

# Building Hope

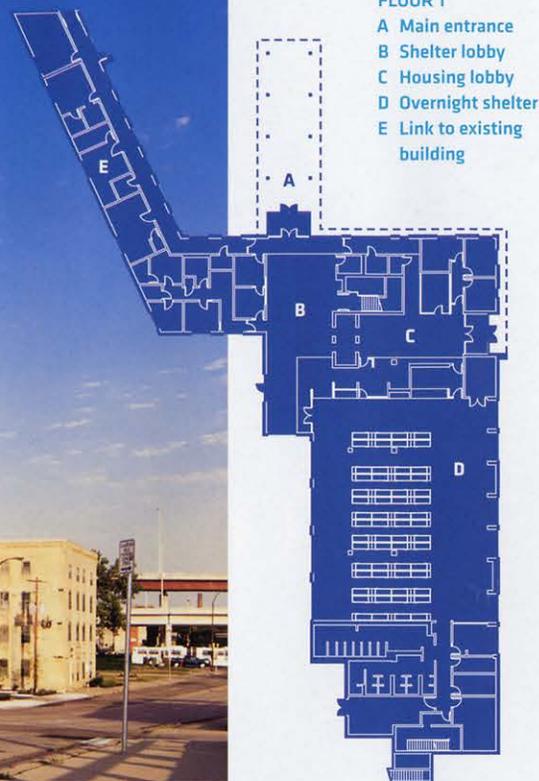
Higher Ground, an innovative new housing facility in Minneapolis, takes home the **first annual Affordable Housing Design Award**. Its message? That emergency and transitional housing can inspire.

BY AMY GOETZMAN

## HIGHER GROUND

<b>Location:</b> Minneapolis, Minnesota	<b>Architect:</b> Cermak Rhoades Architects <a href="http://www.cermakrhoades.com">www.cermakrhoades.com</a>	<b>Project lead designers:</b> Todd Rhoades, AIA; Chris Wegscheid	<b>Landscape architect:</b> Spencer Jones Landscape Architect	<b>Cost:</b> \$14.4 million
<b>Clients:</b> Community Housing Development Corporation; Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis	<b>Principal-in-charge:</b> Todd Rhoades, AIA	<b>Project manager:</b> Lisa Germann, Assoc. AIA	<b>General contractor:</b> Frerichs Construction	<b>Completion:</b> June 2012
	<b>Energy modeling:</b> Emanuelson-Podas Consulting Engineers	<b>Size:</b> 75,000 gross square feet		<b>Photographer:</b> Brandon Stengel, Assoc. AIA

*Higher Ground is strategically placed to take advantage of downtown transit and services. Yet it maintains a warm and homelike quality for its residents through its color scheme and lighting.*



*The building borrows from the material and color palettes of neighboring buildings to fit amiably into its urban environment.*

It's a joy to design a dream home that will bring years of comfort and pleasure. But it can be even more rewarding to design a home for those whose dream is simply to have a home, or even merely shelter for the night.

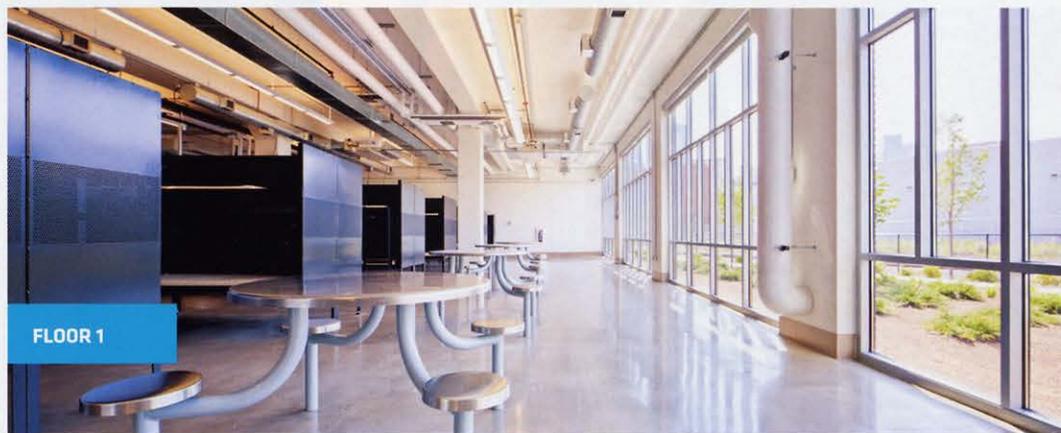
Just ask Cermak Rhoades Architects. The small St. Paul firm known for its work in affordable and supportive housing (page 11) reached new heights in 2012 with Higher Ground in Minneapolis, a building designed to lift its residents up from homelessness to transitional housing and on to permanent homes.

The project posed considerable challenges for the architects, including a tight budget and an even tighter site, but the results couldn't be more uplifting. Filled to the brim with grateful clients, Higher Ground was recently named the winner of the inaugural Affordable Housing Design Award, an honor bestowed by the American Institute of Architects Minnesota and the McKnight Foundation.

Higher Ground's owners—Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis and the Community Housing Development Corporation—developed the property with a novel idea: to combine emergency shelter and transitional and permanent housing in a single building just west of downtown, with easy access to services and transit. The first floor houses check-in, housing-assistance and healthcare services, and 171 overnight-shelter beds; the second level has 80 pay-for-stay beds

(\$7/night) with adjacent lockers. Higher up, floors three through six offer 74 private sleeping rooms with shared baths and kitchens for longer stays, and 11 affordable efficiency apartments line the top floor.

"Residents are at various stages, yet they can find what they need all in one place, and advance as they are able to within the same building and with the same support system," says Brandy



**Overnight shelter: 171 beds. The space looks out onto a garden and a bike trail that passes behind the building.**



Supportive housing: 74 single rooms



Shelter: 80 pay-for-stay beds



Permanent housing: 11 efficiency apartments  
(community lounge shown here)

Brooks, director of community programs at the Food Project in Boston and one of the Affordable Housing Design Award's three jurors. "I really like that you can see evidence of that goal—to help people literally move up in life."

All three jurors—Brooks was joined by noted architects Peter Landon, AIA, of Chicago's Landon Bone Baker and Julie Eizenberg, AIA, of Koning Eizenberg Architecture in Santa Monica—admired the way Higher Ground fits neatly into its setting, fully utilizing a very tight lot without overwhelming it or the neighborhood. The building could easily have been a big boring box. But in Cermak Rhoades' hands the exterior became a lively geometric interplay of material textures and warm fall colors, with dark brick visually anchoring the base of the

building to the sloping street. Banks of recessed red picture windows add dimension and interest while bringing ample light inside.

"How a building relates to the street and the community as a whole is really important," says Landon. "So often this consideration seems to drop out of the design process when we talk about affordable housing. How does the building meet the ground, and is it on the right street, and how do you enliven it? Does it do what it needs to on the inside *and* on the outside?"

These are vital questions, the jury agreed, for communities tasked with providing emergency and affordable housing. "There's a big fear that

>> continued on page 52

The combination of generous glazing and high ceilings creates an open and airy feeling in many areas of the building. And those big windows frame spectacular views.



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## Mac Guy

<< continued from page 49

I'm not a trained musician. I've never claimed to have anything other than a tin ear. But even to me the quality of the acoustics is remarkable. Jazz artist Terence Blanchard and his quintet opened the hall for us. Last weekend we had the Chopin Society do solo piano music. We've had ensembles as large as about 20 pieces in there. In a city with a lot of great concert halls, I think this one takes its place as one of the best. To pull off something that's both aesthetically pleasing and acoustically flexible and effective—that's hard to beat. So I just walk into that space and feel very, very good.

And the other space is the atrium, which is a totally different experience. The concert hall is like a sanctuary: You feel a sense of peace and near spirituality in there. The atrium is where you feel the vibrancy and the life of campus. Seeing so many people there, enjoying themselves as they move through or sit in that space—that's the other part of the building that brings me a lot of joy. **AMN**

## Building Hope

<< continued from page 43

affordable housing will be poorly built," Landon continues. "And maybe in the past that was a reality. But today we realize that these must be durable, lasting buildings. They're paid for largely with public money and need to serve for many generations, so it's in everyone's best interest that they be solid, energy-efficient, and attractive."

The jury judged Higher Ground to be all three and more. The finishes and furnishings are simple, but the combination of generous glazing and high ceilings (the overhead mechanicals are mostly left exposed) creates an open and airy feeling in many areas of the building. And those big windows frame spectacular views of the farmers market, Target Field, and the downtown skyline. On the building's south-facing side, a glass-lined stairwell becomes a beacon at night, a shining symbol of the residents' upward climb.

"We as architects have an obligation to design buildings that not only provide basic shelter for those in need but also function as part of the community," Eizenberg concludes. "Kids will be raised in these communities, and when we give them a good home, we give them a better chance." **AMN**



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**Areas of specialty:**

Affordable and supportive housing. We work for mostly nonprofit clients who measure the success of their projects by the number of people well served—not by the number of dollars earned, spent, or saved.

**Describe your studio space or culture in three words or less:**

Collaborative, quiet, modest

**How does your location reflect or reinforce your values or interests as a firm?**

We're surrounded by neighbors involved in all types of creative endeavors, in a solid old building with character, right on the Central Corridor line. We have a view of the river, tree-covered bluffs, and the occasional soaring eagle.

**If you had \$5,000 for office improvements or staff development, what would you do with it?** Add a large-screen monitor and AV setup for the conference room.

**\$500,000?** First, take everyone in the office to the Netherlands for a bicycle tour of great Dutch housing and urban design. Second, get Walkstations and completely new hardware setups for everyone. Third, add a shower and a rooftop garden/patio.

**Employee with the most interesting or unusual extracurricular:**

Emily—spelunking!

**What's the greenest feature of your space?** We have big operable windows and lots of daylight. But really it's our staff: Todd is a Great River Greening board member, Chris is a Minnesota Green Roofs Council board member, and we all work diligently to find the best green features to incorporate into our tight-budget housing projects.

**Favorite Minnesota buildings not designed by your firm:**

Saarinen's Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis and the Finnish dovetailed log structures around Embarrass, Minnesota.

Workspaces say a lot about us. Join us on a tour of architecture offices around the state, and you'll see architects in a whole new light.

STUDIO

The firm that designed Higher Ground (page 40), winner of the inaugural Affordable Housing Design Award, thrives on bringing quality housing to those who need it most

**Cermak Rhoades Architects**

Founded: 1993 City and neighborhood: Lowertown St. Paul Number of employees: 9 [cermakrhoades.com](http://cermakrhoades.com)

*Firm founders Terri Cermak, AIA, and Todd Rhoades, AIA, love the view from high up in Lowertown St. Paul.*

BRANDON STENDEL, ASSOC. AIA/FARMKIDSTUDIOS.COM