

FLORES HALL

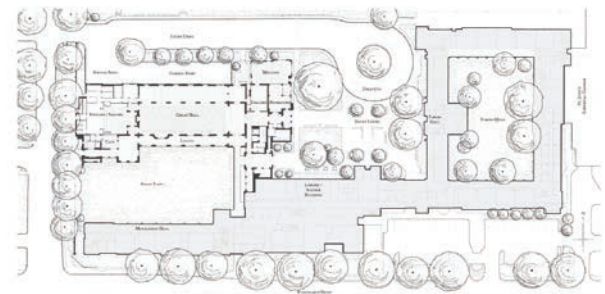
BY STEPHEN FOX

ST. JOHN'S SCHOOL



St. John's Great Hall

CURTIS & WINDHAM Architects



1st Floor Plan

Flores Hall and Campus Center is a two-story, 70,000-square-foot, steel-framed building built atop a 45-car underground parking garage. It is located on the North Campus of St. John's School, a private day school that opened in 1946 on a five-and-a-half-acre site at Westheimer Road and Claremont Lane. Led by headmaster Mark Desjardins and Ann Barnett Stern, chair of St. John's board of trustees, the school interviewed three architecture teams before hiring Curtis & Windham in 2011. Kendall/Heaton Associates were associated architects and Bellows was the general contractor for Flores Hall, completed in 2015.

Architect Russell Windham explains that while St. John's initially asked for a new building, what Curtis & Windham gave them was a campus, or, more precisely, an understanding of how architecture can shape space to construct a sense of community. For the duration of St. John's history, the school's first building, Farish Hall (1946, 1948, Hiram A. Salisbury, architect), has performed this role. The intimacy of Farish Hall's interior quadrangle is striking: it is what gives meaning to the complex's peaked gables, steeply pitched roofs, narrow windows, and walls of Austin limestone laid in random ashlar. Curtis & Windham aimed for a different effect however. Because of the extent of the program they needed to accommodate, they architecturally embraced bigness.

Curtis & Windham's analysis demonstrated that most buildings on the North Campus had been sited in relationship to driveways and parking lots. Cars tyrannized the compact site. Although Curtis & Windham retained the entry drive from Claremont Lane that loops

in front of Farish Hall, they moved as much parking as possible into Flores's new underground garage. Configuring Flores Hall in an L plan, they abutted one end of the school's Library-Science range (1959, MacKie & Kamrath) to form an open-air passage from the Entry Court between Flores and Farish into a new quadrangle, the Great Lawn, big enough to be used for informal games and special events. They integrated the tall, slender Mewbourne Hall (2005, Ziegler Cooper) into this new open space, using what had previously seemed like Mewbourne's ungainly height to securely bound the south side of the Great Lawn. Curtis & Windham's skill in constructing an open space that perceptually and proportionally recuperates an out-of-place building is key to evaluating their design methods at Flores Hall. They thoughtfully resolve practical problems architecturally. This is evident in examining the complex spatial organization of Flores Hall.

Mark Desjardins asked Curtis & Windham to produce a design that would impress students with the realization that they are part of a larger community and could function, like the quadrangle of Farish Hall, as a symbol of St. John's School. Flores Hall, the name of both the building and its major space, a 10,000-square-foot dining hall that rises to a height of 42 feet, is Curtis & Windham's response to that directive. Inspired in part by Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's Baker Commons at Baker College at Rice University, Flores Hall is based on the prototype of a medieval great hall like those found in English colleges. It is a straightforward space: six bays long with each bay defined by elliptical ground-floor arches, triple-arched windows in the clerestory level, and structural steel trusses cased in wood that support the roof. Running along the long north side of the room is a broad, one-story "side aisle." What Windham's partner

William Curtis describes as a “hanging balcony,” the Frankel Balcony, spans the east end of Flores Hall above the main entrance. A wide exterior arcade, the Fondren Outdoor Dining Area, frames the long south side of the hall, bounding the Great Lawn.

What stands out about the Flores dining hall is its combination of imposing scale and spare detail. Curtis cites Hiram Salisbury’s paneled fireplace wall in the entry foyer of Farish Hall as an example of how the “absence of detail” can be used to bestow dignity through economy. Curtis emphasizes how simple details—setting ground-floor openings in shallow recesses along the south wall, compartmentalizing the ceiling with trusses, rafters, and purlins, facing the Frankel Balcony with a divided wood paneled screen—reinforce the architects’ effort to work with scale gradation and create a sense of spatial amplitude that impresses without oppressing when there are only a few people in the hall. Windham is especially proud of the room’s dark red linoleum floor, scored with diagonal black runners keyed with white squares. The linoleum adds muted color in a space where white plaster walls, the wood surfaces of the trusses and ceiling, vertically grooved white oak paneling, limestone surrounds, and wood tables and chairs designed by Curtis & Windham produce the dominant lustrous/reflective tonal duality.

The principles of scale gradation and proportional measure also govern Flores Hall’s massing. The end-gabled dining hall is hedged with a lower, double-gabled, two-story wing on the west (containing the kitchen and servery at ground level and the Sarofim Family Fine Arts Studios above), built up to the property line along Claremont Lane; a stone parapet that screens the ramp to the garage on the north; the shed-roofed, wide-span Fondren Outdoor Dining arcade

facing the Great Lawn; and the gabled, asymmetrical east elevation, which faces—and reprises—the gabled entrance bay of Farish Hall. By surfacing Flores Hall with the random ashlar limestone work of Farish Hall and reiterating the latter’s wide-gabled entrance bay, narrow windows, and pitched roofs, Curtis & Windham proportionally scale up their building with respect to Salisbury’s and MacKie & Kamrath’s buildings. The vaulted sallyport of Flores Hall is detailed with a built-in bench set below a framed panel, with an arched, open-air stairway opposite it. The architectural subtlety of this space is reinforced by Curtis & Windham’s understated lanterns, recessed in the limestone walls. Curtis & Windham give the Fondren Outdoor dining loggia a room-like quality by detailing the ceiling with exposed timber beams and rafters. The loggia leads to a gateway, screened with iron gates, on axis with Locke Lane in River Oaks. This vista fixes Flores Hall with respect to the adjoining River Oaks neighborhood, bringing the architecture into an intentional relationship with its suburban setting.

Respect for place and a commitment to solving planning problems with architecture mark Flores Hall and Campus Center as a model for the next generation of buildings that St. John’s School anticipates constructing on its South Campus, south of Westheimer Road. The reciprocal spatial relationship between Flores Hall and the Great Lawn, the use of generous roofed passages to provide a protected, open-air circulation network, and the extrapolation of Salisbury’s and MacKie & Kamrath’s architectural methods and materials in the design of new buildings demonstrate that, even in Houston, it is possible to construct and maintain architectural continuity, coherence, and even community. ☉

