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שויתי יהוה לנגדי תמיד

In Love With Stormy Weather

Dream Rooms for the Ages

Dance Fever Strikes

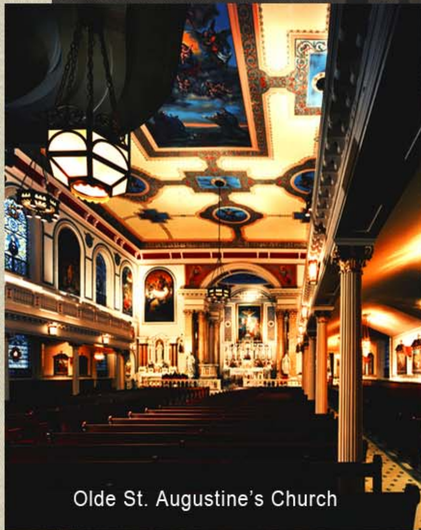
The Swing of Things

Form Follows Faith

A Spiritual Pursuit

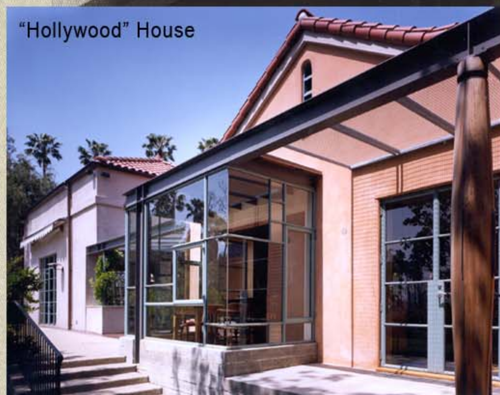
Brawer & Hauptman, architects, are two nice Jewish boys who've tried to give form to faith.

By Matt Ruben


Olde St. Augustine's Church

Orangetown Jewish Center

Tiferet Beth Israel


"Hollywood" House

BUILDING PHOTOS BY BARRY HALKIN COURTESY BRAWER & HAUPTMAN

DAVID DEBALKO

It was the last thing Dave Brawer expected to see. He and partner Mike Hauptman had been commissioned to reconstruct a fire-damaged church in South Philadelphia. With the church uninhabitable, planning meetings took place in a parishioner's nearby row home. As members of the African-American congregation debated the complexion of Jesus in new stained-glass panels, Brawer noticed something on the wall in the house's entryway. Its surface features had been obliterated, its crisp edges dulled by countless layers of paint. Yet up close there was no mistaking the outline and angle … of a mezuzah.

That improbable moment of discovery sums up the careers of architects Dave Brawer, 52, and Mike Hauptman, 53, whose 30-year friendship has thrived on serendipity and the persistent presence of faith.

The New York-area natives met at the University of Pennsylvania architecture school in 1974, where Hauptman felt a bit out of place. "I had gone to Brandeis as an undergraduate, so this was the first time I felt like a minority. One day very early on, I'm in a room with the other new students and this guy walks in and says, 'I guess this is the whole mishpachah.' I thought, 'Aha, so I'm not the only Jew in the room!' "

Thus, Hauptman met Brawer.

They quickly bonded over shared cultural and religious backgrounds. Upon graduation, the two secured positions at the same firm, only to be separated and then reunited years later at another firm, where they focused on "adaptive/reuse" — the rehabilitation and conversion of abandoned warehouses.

Excited by the booming adaptive/reuse market, the young architects hung out their own shingle in 1986. That same year, Congress enacted tax reform legislation that eliminated financial incentives for such projects, destroying the market and leaving the firm of Brawer & Hauptman without a business plan.

But this setback brought its own opportunities. "It was ultimately a good thing," Hauptman says. "It forced us to diversify and create a foundation for what we do now."

What they do these days is run a thriving architectural practice that devotes the lion's share of its considerable talents to the preservation and renewal of nonprofit institutional spaces, with a special emphasis on houses of worship. They have worked with more than two dozen religious organizations, performing a landmark restoration of Olde St. Augustine's Church for the Philadelphia Archdiocese, and coordinating a variety of renovation and expansion projects for Jewish and Christian congregations across the Delaware Valley and beyond.

A raft of awards and favorable notices attests to the quality of their designs. Yet the most distinctive aspect of the Brawer & Hauptman style is that there isn't one.

"If you look at our work," Brawer says, "it doesn't all look the same." Open the firm's portfolio and you will find a church preservation project with 150-year-old masonry and frescoed ceilings. Turn the page and you'll see a rectilinear community center made of glass and metal. Turn the page again and you'll find a home renovation with Spanish roof tiles and Arts and Crafts woodwork.

Rather than promote a signature style, Brawer and Hauptman emphasize the flexibility that has served them so well. They work with clients to help them visualize and build solutions to their wants and needs. "People come to you with a problem, and they want you to solve it," Brawer says. "That's why we don't start out showing clients a bunch of slides of our past projects. They need to know first of all that we can help them."

This organic approach has grown out of the firm's commitment to small and medium-sized organizations. While a developer or a university has in-house staff accustomed to managing construction projects, a church or synagogue has only a small, volunteer building committee. "You're dealing with clients who don't know a lot about how buildings actually get designed and built," Brawer says. "So you have to educate the client. There's a lot of stopping and restarting, going over the same thing numerous times. It can be a very difficult environment for an architect to work in."

But Brawer and Hauptman clearly have the right disposition for the job. Animated and affable, they put non-experts at ease while surrendering none of the sharpness of intellect and vision a good architect brings to the table. They understand clients' motivation, and they derive genuine satisfaction from seeing their dreams come true.

"When you're talking about building committees in churches and synagogues," Brawer says, "you're talking about people investing their personal reputations. There's a lot on the line for them."

Hauptman adds, "What I find so fascinating and satisfying is that every congregation has a personality. And as their architect, you get to uncover that personality. Every congregation sees itself in a different way, and the building that results from our discussions with them should reflect that."

Today, much of Brawer and Hauptman's work takes place in suburban communities like those they grew up in. Buildings constructed in the 1950s and '60s are reaching the end of their useful lives and need updating. This sort of work differs greatly from the urban preservation projects that got the firm rolling two decades ago. Stone masonry and precious metals are rare; windows are everywhere. Spaces are open and airy, more serene than solemn. Holy places share key design elements with everyday secular spaces in the community.

For this reason, historic preservation is not the overriding concern it is in the city. Members of the Orangetown Jewish Center in suburban Orangeburg, N.Y., for example, wanted their sanctuary expanded and updated, which meant creating a new bimah and ark in addition to new lighting, seating and wall coverings. Only the existing stained-glass panels were preserved.

Some of the most intriguing changes involve the architecture of worship. New seating, for example, invariably takes the form of individual chairs or movie-theater-style seating. It's comfortable, but Brawer wonders about the implications of putting it in a sanctuary or a chapel. "It connotes performance: Something's happening up there that you're watching as an individual spectator. For that reason, I push the pew idea, but most congregations are pretty emphatic that they

Continued on page 76

don't want it."

Yet at the same time, new bimahs — and altars — get lowered and pushed forward, with seating in a semi-circle around them. In this respect, says Brawer, "the congregations, and especially the rabbis, want to diminish the performance aspect, where it's, 'We're up here and you're down there.' " This, the architects feel, reflects a desire to reduce the physical manifestations of hierarchy and inequality.

As might be expected, working to create and renew the worship spaces of others puts Brawer and Hauptman in mind of their own Judaism. Each feels that his religious observance — Brawer attends a Conservative synagogue in the suburbs, Hauptman a Reform one downtown — inspires his architectural work, and vice versa.

At the same time, the work raises doubts and questions. "People are going to these spaces, whether it's to see a yahrzeit plaque or to worship, and in a very real way, architects are manipulators," says Brawer. "We pull the strings and we're manipulating the experience. It's one thing if you're doing a mall and thinking about how to get someone to buy an extra pair of socks. But when you're talking about spirituality, that's a pretty heavy responsibility."

For his part, Hauptman confesses to feeling just a little intimidated by some of the Catholic and Orthodox Jewish environments he's worked in. And both men say they're more aware of their Jewishness when working on non-Jewish projects. "I have to learn to relate to people who have very, very different attitudes about religion than I do," says Brawer. "I have to ask myself, 'What's really important to these people? How can I give them an experience that's meaningful to them, but so contradictory to my own experience?' "

These questions are all the more poignant because they feel they are part of a tradition yet to be fully formed. Despite the prominence of Jewish architects like Frank Gehry, Louis Kahn and Daniel Liebeskind, says Hauptman, "architecture has never been seen as a Jewish profession. It was very much a gentleman's profession, where you got somewhere because you belonged to the right clubs."

Adds Brawer, "If you were a Jewish architect in the first half of the 20th century, you worked for Jewish businessmen who were becoming successful and building houses and factories. But you wouldn't work for the Strawbridges and the Biddles. It just didn't happen." It wasn't until the 1970s, says Hauptman, that Jewish architects as a group attained prominence. "Even today, we're still something of a rarity."

This historic lack of architects translates into an historic lack of Jewish architectural tradition. "There's no style that says, 'synagogue,' " observes Brawer. The firm confronted this difficulty head-on at Beth Chaim Reform Congregation in West Chester, Pa. "The congregation said they wanted the building to look Jewish. But what does that mean?" asks Hauptman rhetorically. Brawer continues: "We started thinking about the architectural traditions that did exist: What did my grandfather see in the old country? And what does it mean to transfer that here — because the fundamental thing about being Jewish in America is fitting in. So there's a contradiction."

At Beth Chaim, they drew on complementary aspects of Jewish and rural Chester Country traditions. The result, a mini-campus with multiple buildings linked by paths and green space, fits in with its surroundings while "appearing as if you're walking through town to go to the shul," as Hauptman says.

Speaking with Brawer and Hauptman in their sleek new offices on the edge of Chinatown, it becomes obvious that their synagogue work is among their most satisfying because it speaks most directly to how they see themselves as architects. "We're trained that architecture itself is a spiritual pursuit," Hauptman says, something holy in and of itself. "Any building has the potential to be a spiritual space. So to join the spirituality of the profession together with the spirituality of a religious space — that's bringing together two very important elements in your life."

Olde St. Augustine's Church

Brawer & Hauptman Architects

www.brawerhauptman.com

777 Appletree Street □ Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

Telephone : 215 829 0084
Facsimile : 215 829 9695

David B. Brawer, AIA
Michael I. Hauptman, AIA