

## Bimah Them Up!

*Local architects find southern comfort in rebuilding a New Orleans synagogue*

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What was once a field of dregs is about to be resuscitated and relocated, as a Modern Orthodox shul becomes part of a post-Katrina kashrut connection in New Orleans.

And the men behind the T-square and the time line are Michael I. Hauptman, AIA, a Philly guy, and his partner David B. Brawer, AIA, who run Brawer & Hauptman Architects in Center City, which specializes in nonprofit institutions, with synagogues among their specialties.

And here was indeed a special case: Congregation Beth Israel had been swept away in the storm that savaged New Orleans five years ago, and which reconfigured the city's geographical and spiritual landscape. More than a century old -- and devastated by the hurricane of the century, which flooded its Lakeview locale, and destroyed its Torahs and prayerbooks -- Beth Israel has since rented religious space at the Reform Gates of Prayer, in nearby Metairie.

Its prayers in a way have been answered: The congregation's members last Sunday celebrated a ground-breaking performance that would parallel any parade of bonhomie on Bourbon Street: breaking ground for what will be the revived Beth Israel on land purchased from Gates of Prayer.

It is a modern-day mitzvah of a shul reborn in an old-time city laced with an ornate history of blues and second chances, all with the assistance of a long-established Philadelphia business some 1,100 miles to its north, but close to its heart.

Beignets and brachas? "They go perfectly together," avows Hauptman, himself a member of Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia.

In a way, this reconstructionist job on the Orthodox synagogue was heaven sent: a Google from God?

"An e-mail came out of the blue," says Hauptman, explaining how someone from Beth Israel "had typed in 'synagogue architects' on their computer, and we popped up at the top."

Good reason; B&H is top of the line at what they do, having served a series of synagogues, including Society Hill Synagogue in Center City; Old York Road Temple-Beth Am in Abington;



*An ultimately failed attempt to rescue Beth Israel's scrolls from Hurricane Katrina*

Tiferet Bet Israel in Blue Bell; and Beth Chaim Reform Congregation in Malvern.

So it is written -- and e-mailed -- that B&H would get the job? "It was between us and two others in Baltimore."

But could a Reform Jew draw the line at what a Modern Orthodox congregation needs?

"We also do a lot of health care businesses," says Hauptman tongue-in-cheek, "yet I don't know how to do surgery."

But the firm certainly knows how to operate. Their new clients "felt we were people they'd like to work with" -- and maybe nosh with? "We've done halachah kitchens before; like everything else, you learn."

And it was quite an education. But this was not merely just another job.

"We made it clear from the very beginning," says Hauptman, a graduate of Brandeis University who earned his master's in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania, "that this was more to us than [just] another synagogue restoration. The fact that it was in New Orleans" -- where humanity had taken such a hit five years ago -- "had serious meaning for us."

When the savvy came marching in ... B&H weren't new faces to New Orleans, however.

According to Hauptman, the American Institute of Architects "had sponsored some post-Katrina volunteer efforts, and my partner, David, had worked with them there. His efforts impressed them."

And New Orleans architecture left its own impression, he adds: "We took our cues from other buildings in the city; it was very clear" that Beth Israel "wanted a traditional look."

Working on a synagogue did cut down on a traditional work-week schedule. "We had to have

our questions answered by late Friday afternoons," says Hauptman with a laugh of the weakened weekend hours.

Certainly, the prospects of designing synagogues had its own catholic appeal. "Dave and I had done churches much earlier in our careers," says Hauptman of work with the Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

So, God is in the details. But can talk of support beams and supportive clergy co-exist? Well, the two concepts can mean mixed blessings: "You know, you get two Jews in a room and you get four opinions."



*Michael Hauptman is part of the temple's recovery*

Opinions of the firm's work have been much praised locally and nationally. But Hauptman knows that what is said of any business behind closed doors could mean a temple of doom that Indiana Jones would have trouble whipping into shape. "Being on the building committee of my own synagogue, well, you hear what they say when an architect leaves the room," says Hauptman, laughing.

Like a doctor who wouldn't operate on a family member, Hauptman doesn't bring his protractor past the front door. He wouldn't feel at home ... at home.

"I wouldn't work for Rodeph Shalom; I wouldn't be comfortable working for my own synagogue," he attests.

B&H has found southern comfort in New Orleans -- indeed, the whole entwined story of the Reform Gates of Prayer and Beth Israel is an inspiration that keeps building.

Hauptman says that "both rabbis find time to meet on Fridays and discuss issues; both share a special relationship," while sharing space with each other's house of worship.

Architects as icons? What happens when they don't have all the answers? Working the job in New Orleans, Hauptman hewed to some native culinary advice. "After a meeting, someone from the synagogue asked us: 'Where are you going to eat? Do you like shrimp?' Well, I said ... yeah -- sheepishly -- and then he offered a good place for shrimp."

It made Hauptman see food and religion in a different light.

"I said thanks, but then I just had to ask him, 'Shrimp? How do you know from shrimp,' " being Modern Orthodox? " 'Aren't you kosher?'

'Well,' he answered in that great New Orleans drawl, 'I'm Southern kosher.' "

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