

Not Your Father's Synagogue



How your Capital Campaign can promote Jewish renewal *and* Repair the World at the same time.

"We shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us" – Winston Churchill. Churchill's observation on the power and enduring influence of architecture is one of Philadelphia architect David Brawer's favorite quotes. **Brawer and partner Michael Hauptman specialize in the design of religious spaces.** It is their awareness of this power and influence that has guided their practice for over twenty years.

Understanding how buildings shape us and how they fit into the communities around them and the larger environment are the touchstones of their practice and the keys to their efforts in helping synagogues revitalize their congregations and their buildings by embodying the principles of Green Architecture (also known as Sustainable Design). It is their belief that this is the very essence of Tikkun Olam – Repairing the World.

"Being Jewish in America has always been about finding ways to fit in," says Brawer. "If you build your synagogue with an awareness of current social and environmental priorities, you can help ensure that the synagogue will, in turn, help shape the congregation and the wider community for the better."

The New Architecture of Religious Spaces

In addition to participating in the renovations of their own synagogues, the partners' firm, Brawer & Hauptman, Architects, has helped dozens of building committees transform their houses of worship. Along the way, they have developed a keen awareness of how a changing Jewish population, changing patterns of worship and a growing awareness of environmental concerns can affect the architectural design process.

Survey after survey has shown that American Jews, from adolescents to Baby Boomers, are less likely than previous generations to be affiliated with a synagogue or to be actively involved with other Jewish institutions. Like other Americans, they live in a fast-moving society, overflowing with choices. They "have multiple identities shaped by many factors," as one study reports¹. For them, "being Jewish is part of a larger identity mosaic." Buildings, particularly houses of worship, are by nature places of permanence, constructed in the past and reflecting the needs and aspirations of their builders. As a result, existing synagogues are not always well-equipped to accommodate the diverse and changing needs of present-day communities. In addition to these functional limitations, they are also often expensive to

operate and maintain, are poorly insulated and have inefficient and outmoded heating and air conditioning systems.

For Brawer & Hauptman, the architecture of religious spaces lies at the intersection of these two themes. "Designing for a diverse congregation and designing for environmental sustainability is intimately related," says Hauptman. "Synagogue architecture has always been concerned with how the synagogue interacts with the outside world. It means welcoming new members by offering multiple ways for them to get involved in the Jewish community. It also means existing in a harmonious balance with the environment."

Lowered Bimahs, Raised Expectations

For the past 20 years, sanctuary renovations have strived to reduce both the actual and the symbolic distance between the leaders of the service and the congregation. The trend has been to lower the bimah and to arrange the seating around the bimah in a "U" shape in an attempt to make the sanctuary less imposing and more comfortable.

Yet in an age when younger Jews report having relatively little knowledge of Jewish ritual and liturgy, these features can have unexpected and unintended effects. Prospective



members may feel intimidated by the intimacy of contemporary sanctuary design, and by the implied expectation that they participate directly in religious services. "This expectation isn't stated explicitly," Brawer explains, "but the structure of the space sends that message. The building is trying to shape us, and this can backfire." Measures intended to make the sanctuary more welcoming may therefore have the opposite effect on those who wish to just "dip a toe" before making a long-term commitment. Moreover, the smaller scale of a modern sanctuary may emphasize warmth at the expense of solemnity and grandeur, while theater-style seating risks re-introducing the experience of passive observation that a lowered bimah was meant to dispel.

Brawer & Hauptman cite a variety of options — raising the

ceiling, adding a balcony, installing skylights, providing multiple types of seating — that can help balance liturgical requirements with congregants' and prospective members' diverse needs and comfort levels. As soon as these options are considered, however, the importance of green architecture comes to the forefront as well.

Green is Jewish; Green is the Embodiment of Tikkun Olam

In this age of heightened awareness and concern for the environment, it is difficult to contemplate a capital campaign without considering the need to employ the concepts of Sustainable Design into the project.

To produce a building that consumes less energy and resources, has less impact on the environment and is a healthier place for people to inhabit is the very embodiment of Tikkun Olam. To produce such a building can become a moral imperative for a congregation and a powerful selling point for their capital campaign.



"When you change the dimensions and lighting of a sanctuary," says Hauptman, "you can do it in a way that increases the cost of maintaining the building or you can do it in a way that makes the building more efficient and more comfortable. We spend a lot of time working with buildings committees, educating them about efficiency and sustainability." With careful planning, Hauptman notes, spiritual and membership goals can be achieved through the architecture in ways that manage construction costs, lower operating expenses and, by promoting the stewardship of the Earth, embody the principles of Tikkun Olam.

Beyond the Sanctuary

Every synagogue is a place of worship, study, and social interaction. This is a potent combination that makes it a natural refuge for its members. Designs of the 1950s, '60s and '70s typically sought to accommodate these uses, often quite successfully with multipurpose spaces. Over time, however, many of these designs have become aesthetically outdated, expensive to maintain, and too cramped or impersonal for contemporary tastes.

As a result, some social and educational functions have moved to other locations outside the synagogue. At a time when many Jews, and their sometimes non-Jewish

spouses, do not intuitively see how synagogue membership fits into Jewish identity, this situation makes it difficult to attract new members and to grow a congregation. Renewing the synagogue as a diverse, vital community space takes both broad vision and attention to detail. Hauptman says, "You have got to think about putting real time and resources into secondary spaces like hallways and even the bathrooms. People want to feel at home everywhere in the synagogue, not just in the sanctuary. You can't downplay any of it."

Educational areas, for example, might need to be designed not only for Religious School, but also for child care and adult education. So too might social space be considered not only in the form of a ballroom, but also in the form of smaller, more intimate rooms. Hauptman attributes this need for creative thinking and flexibility to the popular "Synaplex^{sm2}" program. "Today we don't think of a coffee bar in a synagogue, but why not? In the past, synagogues were the coffee houses of their day. They were the dating services of their day. We need to open our minds and think in terms of core functions. That way the space can welcome all kinds of people in all different stages of life." Adds Brawer, "So many people join when their children are in third grade, and then after the Bar-mitzvah or Bat-mitzvah they're gone. How do you build in reasons for them to stay?" If the synagogue offers diverse ways of feeling Jewish, then



members — and their children — are more likely to feel emotional and spiritual ownership of the synagogue, even as their lives change.

These kinds of decisions create challenges and opportunities for sustainability. Applying a Sustainable Design philosophy to a synagogue allows the architecture to serve a spiritual purpose that goes beyond the design of the sanctuary. As Brawer explains, "With a synagogue or church, it becomes clear that energy efficient design is about more than cost and aesthetics. There's a moral imperative involved that goes beyond just fulfilling a function, and in this day and age, we're seeing that Sustainable Design is part of that moral imperative. A building is a powerful symbol, by building Green, we are saying to the Jewish Community and to our Gentile neighbors, that Green is Jewish."

Restore and Renew

Today's American synagogue is part of a dynamic changing culture. The speed and diversity of modern life can make undertaking a synagogue renovation a daunting task. Yet Brawer & Hauptman have seen congregations rise to the task over and over again, and emerge not only with newly efficient and versatile buildings, but also with a renewed confidence in their core values.

Brawer & Hauptman encourages congregations to think about renovation as part of a broad assessment of their values and needs. "Do an inventory," advises Hauptman: "What are the uses you need? How can you increase efficiency and comfort? What are the infrastructure needs for the High Holidays? How do you want to integrate social and spiritual values of sustainability and stewardship? Who do you want to attract in the future?" Adds Brawer, "Almost every synagogue could benefit from doing a survey of its members, especially those who don't come often, and even people in the community who aren't

yet members." Brawer and Hauptman also advocate forming a dedicated "Green Team," a committee that performs a detailed energy audit of the synagogue and act as the congregations "conscience" when hard decisions must be made.

Every synagogue is unique, says Hauptman. "The one rule is that there is no one rule. Architecture can't be a formula or a set of unchanging ideas when it comes to a religious space." The one constant, they say, is that architectural change should be integrated with every other aspect of synagogue life. "A synagogue is shaped by its people," Hauptman says, "and as an architect your job is to help the congregation bring out that unique human element."

Synagogues that are planned for the future — for diverse membership and environmental sustainability — can help congregations meet this challenge and flourish. In doing so they will not only renew themselves but will also help to repair the world.

**Today's American
synagogue is part
of the most
dynamic culture
the world
has ever known.**

Brawer & Hauptman Architects

777 Appletree Street

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

Telephone: 215. 829. 0084

www.brawerhauptman.com