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Designing For The Way We Live

How cultural heritage shaped the visions of four unique architects

By Tina Isen Fox

Behind every building is an architect and behind every architect is a story. This is particularly true in Philadelphia where a unique group of architects have chosen to make their home. Hailing from points across the globe, including Cuba, South Africa and Iraq as well as the US, each of these visionaries has a personal perspective on how the world should look, feel and be lived in, yet they share a common thread—their Judaism. And the work created by these four architects shapes not only the city in which they live, but also cities and towns, both nationally and internationally.

Michael Hauptman
From Synagogues To Churches, Reaching Out To All Religions
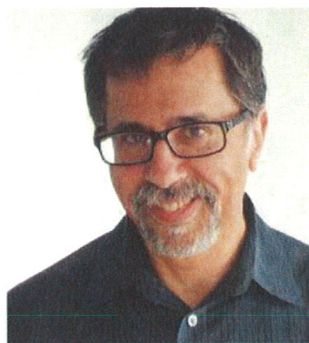
The bema at the Orangetown Jewish Center in Orangeburg, NY.

The Memorial Hall at Tiferet Beth Israel

Beth Chaim in Malvern, PA

"I always wanted to build a synagogue," says Michael Hauptman, founding partner of Brawer and Hauptman Architects, a firm that specializes in building non-profit institutions including the development and renovations of synagogues and churches. "I was always interested in synagogue design." Hauptman discovered this niche early on in his career and knew from the start that this was the kind of work he loved. He and his partner David Brawer joined forces 25 years ago after they both graduated with a Master of Architecture degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

Their venture into designing religious buildings began when Congregation Tiferet Bet Israel in Blue Bell, PA commissioned them for their first synagogue project—Hauptman describes the congregation as literally taking a "leap of faith" in hiring the new firm. From there, business quickly snowballed. Today they are the go-to firm for creating, renovating and restoring religious buildings, forty percent of Brawer and Hauptman's projects. Other clients include healthcare organizations, community and civic organizations, as well as colleges and universities.

Brawer and Hauptman truly is an "equal opportunity" firm: "We've done churches for every denomination you can think of." Ironically, one of the very first and most recognized projects the firm ever undertook was not a Jewish one, but came from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. The steeple and roof of historic Olde St. Augustine's Church in Old City Philadelphia had been destroyed in a storm. The restoration of the landmark also returned the interior to its original turn-of-the century appearance. Working with religious groups offers an added dimension to projects, which Hauptman values. "It's not just working with appreciative people, but working with people with a different motive. It's very satisfying." Their current projects include synagogues in New Orleans, Harrisburg, PA and Scotch Plains, NJ and a 50,000 square foot pediatric center for Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Of course, going green is at the forefront of architectural development, but for Jews, Hauptman says, "It's been a part of synagogue construction since biblical times. No matter what religious group you are working with part of their mission is stewardship of the earth, and for the Jewish community it's tikkun olam (repairing the world). The concept works well with sustainability."

Other notable Brawer and Hauptman designs include renovations for Philadelphia's Society Hill Synagogue, Young Israel of the Main Line in Bala Cynwyd, PA and the Chabad Jewish Enrichment Center in Wilmington, DE. Hauptman's bottom line is simple, "We enjoy working with all our clients in helping them solver their problems." Religion notwithstanding.