

The Design Charrette and How We Get There

The design charrette is an exciting tool for designing a building. It is productive, collaborative, energizing and inclusive. It helps to ensure that all voices are heard, all options are discussed and that there is buy-in on many levels. The participants come away feeling that they have contributed to the process and that they have a stake in the results. Even those who are not totally happy with the outcome feel that at least they understand how the final plan came to be. The charrette helps to compress what can be a lengthy process into a few days. The result, while still very conceptual, forms a solid basis for the more detailed work to come.

There is a lot of preparation that we do before the charrette. Much information must be gathered to establish parameters and to provide background for the design of the building. Most importantly, we must do a Site Analysis, Code Review and Programming.



Site Analysis

This exercise involves researching the various regulations that affect the site – setbacks, flood plain restrictions, parking requirements, steep slope ordinances, impervious surface limits, landscaping requirements, just to name a few – to determine where the building can or cannot be built and how much parking will have to be provided. It is always a good idea to meet with the municipal officials early in this process to make sure that there are no surprises. We will be working with your Civil Engineer as well.

Code Review

Along with the Site Analysis, we will begin a preliminary code review that will tell us what codes are in effect in the municipality, if there are any specific rules that might affect the layout of the plan and whether there are any restrictions on the materials that we may want to use.

Programming

Programming involves determining what spaces you will need in the building and how you intend to use them. Our usual methodology involves setting up interviews with the representatives of the various user groups that make up your synagogue and ask lots of questions. We have developed special forms that act as guides and give us a way to record the information. We meet with as many groups as you feel are necessary to ensure that everyone who needs to participate, for whatever reason, is included. On other projects, we have spent one or two entire days, or several evenings in a row, interviewing groups as they filed in and out according to a schedule. Sometimes the building committee wants to restrict the process to one or two key groups for various reasons. Sometimes we are handed a program that the building committee has compiled itself and prefers that we don't interview anyone. This depends entirely on the culture of the institution. Of course, we prefer to talk to as many people as possible to gain the widest understanding of the congregation. We believe it achieves the best results.

Besides understanding what spaces are needed and how big they must be, it is also important to know how they are to be used. Can part-time people share offices? Do the school offices and the synagogue offices want to be together or separate? Do the classrooms need closets? Can the library also serve as a meeting room? Does the Rabbi like to be near the main lobby and keep his door open, or does he want his office more remote and protected by a secretarial suite?

All of these issues will be addressed during the interview process. Sometimes the interviews indicate consensus among the various groups. Other times there are real conflicts. The programming process helps to resolve these conflicts and find economies in the plan, often with surprising and creative results. In the end, we will have a written list of all of the required spaces, their sizes, their required proximities and a schedule of use for sharing and flexibility.

All of this work takes place in preparation for the charrette. We will need your help to determine how long the charrette will be, based on your sense of congregational interest and degree of participation. It is important that the same general group of people can commit to participating for the entire program to maximize continuity and consistency. The congregation's participation would include one full day for the workshop sessions and an evening or the following Sunday for follow-up presentation and wrap-up.

Each project presents different issues and, therefore every charrette is different. Sometimes the issues involve different siting options; sometimes it's about different interior plan issues. It may make some sense to arrive with a number of plan options already sketched up that we can present for discussion. We also bring pencils, markers, tracing paper and scales.

The charrette involves a lot of teaching. We explain zoning and site regulations. We discuss "green" design and how it affects the way we site the building. Depending on the number of participants, we will break up into smaller groups to explore separate options and then pin them up and compare them. We will bring enough people with us to lead as many groups as seems appropriate. At the end of each session, we will take the concepts and ideas that were discussed in the group sessions and advance them based on that day's work. We will return the session with those drawings and review them with the group during another design session collecting more comments and ideas. At the end of the charrette, we will have a concept for a building that was the result of a collaborative effort that everyone feels they were a part of. This buy-in will have fund-raising, engagement and membership retention benefits for a long time into the future.

