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The Successful Synagogue Design Process

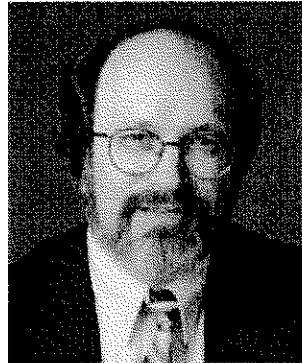
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The Successful Synagogue Design Process
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Everybody knows the definition of a camel; it's a horse built by committee. Some synagogues seem to have been built the same way, and the genesis is in the process.

Mark Levin, AIA



The Big Picture

By far and away, the single biggest mistake that congregations make is not looking at the big picture. Capital projects usually come about by linking together a series of small and large related and unrelated needs of a congregation. This happens whether it's a project to modify an existing structure or to consider building anew from the ground up. Without looking at the big picture or creating a "Master Plan" that takes all of the various needs, functions and details of synagogue life into account, congregations continually "add on" and "redo" in a haphazard manner, which they justify under the guise of fiscal restraint and responsibility.

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Unfortunately, and much to their chagrin, they discover months or years later that much of what they had recently completed needs to be modified or done over again. Each project is an opportunity to galvanize various interest centers within the congregational community. The failure to rethink the synagogue from top to bottom as to how it should function – rather than how it currently functions due to existing constraints and limitations – cripples creative and often significantly beneficial solutions (without necessarily incurring significant additional costs). Open-minded, creative thinking on the part of a synagogue design committee can literally breathe new life into a tired or dysfunctional facility

Find the Right Professional

Having made the decision to take a comprehensive approach to your capital project, the next most important step is to find the right design professional. The second biggest mistake, which sometimes rivals or even overtakes not looking at the big picture, is not hiring the right synagogue architect. Just as you would not subject yourself to a young surgeon using you as part of the "learning curve" in a sensitive procedure, congregations need to seek out design professionals with extensive synagogue design experience. Typically, architects and engineers will respond only to the program that you define for them. Architects and designers without adequate synagogue design experience will not know all of the questions to ask, nor will they know when they received answers or direction from the congregation that are inconsistent with the goals and needs of the project.

While sharing common ground with other religious institutions, synagogues have a particular Jewish perspective when it comes to many matters. These can include:

- Worship needs and style

- The bounds of using multi-purpose space for celebration
- The centrality of the educational and learning components as an integral part of the synagogue's mission
- The creation of effective and efficient working environments for the professional and support staff
- The integration of all of the mundane ancillary space and systems that make a project user friendly.



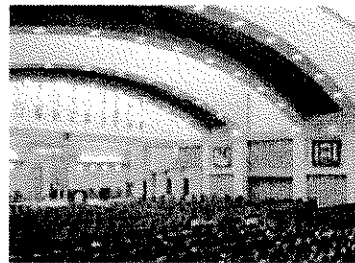
The redesign of Congregation Mickve Israel, Savannah, GA, had to conform with the requirements of the city's historic preservation district. It won the Historic Savannah Foundation 2003 Preservation Award.

If you are not interested in being that "learning curve patient", then you must look for significant synagogue design experience when hiring the right design professional.

It matters not whether your architect, who should be the design team leader, is a prominent, noted architect or the firm around the corner with a Jewish partner/ project manager. It is synagogue experience that counts.

Take for example, Temple Oheb Shalom in Baltimore, MD, which hired internationally famed architectural giant, Walter Gropius, to design its new edifice in 1960. Gropius designed an 1100 seat sanctuary, rising 50 to 60 feet and utilizing the stark clean lines of Bauhaus modernism. It was an exciting space but a flawed synagogue! There was nothing warm and inviting about the brick and concrete walls and ceilings, which created an acoustical reverberation that made it difficult to understand the spoken word – even with electronic amplification. The bima was 6 feet tall at the front of the sanctuary, creating a barrier between the clergy and the congregation and hindering ceremonial traditions such as hakafot.

One of its most notable features was a floor sloping upward toward the bima, philosophically recalling "ascending the mountain." Unfortunately, in order to stand up to daven, congregants needed to pull themselves up out of the seat. As you can imagine, this task became increasingly difficult as the years went on. The first eight rows of the sanctuary were nearly unusable, thereby eliminating a place of honor for families celebrating smachot, such as weddings and B'nai and B'not Mitzvah. Shopping Mall parking lots had more lighting than was provided in the sanctuary. At a simcha or worship service, 350 people, the average attendance at such events, were lost in the sea of 1100 seats.



The main sanctuary of Temple Oheb Shalom, Baltimore, MD was redesigned and reduced in size to create a warmer, more intimate environment.

Hard, cold and unfriendly materials, poor acoustics, inadequate lighting, separation of the clergy from the congregation, poor ergonomics and a lack of intimacy all combined to severely inhibit vibrant and meaningful worship experiences. A comprehensive redesign in 2001 by Levin/Brown corrected all of these problems, albeit, it required turning the sanctuary completely around physically and philosophically.

Having the Right Committee Structure

Another lynchpin in a successful design project is having an organized committee structure. At the end of the day, the design professionals should be taking direction from only one individual, the building committee chairperson. That individual, ideally, will work with a steering committee of approximately a dozen people who will, in turn, chair and receive input from a larger number of congregants and subcommittees. The steering committee should be the group that makes the hard decisions as to what is in and what is out of the project. Working in partnership with your synagogue architect, the

committee will also establish priorities for planning, phasing and cost control.

Steering committee members should have a variety of interests and talents. First and foremost, they should be dedicated and active members of the synagogue community. They need not come with construction or design expertise; their organizational skills as well as their ability to create and adhere to time lines and make decisions will make them a valuable asset. The process requires the establishment of consensus rather than a simple majority. Specific construction and/or design expertise can be either a help or hindrance depending on the nature of the individual. Committee members with such expertise must therefore be able to function as interpreters between lay people and the design professionals rather than to advocate a particular direction that they personally believe needs to be pursued. It's OK for them to ask tough questions. However, if you hire a synagogue architect with appropriate experience, the committee also needs to be able and willing to accept that expertise to the greatest extent possible. If this is not the case, then you have indeed hired the wrong professional or have the wrong committee members.

Ideally, and if applicable to your situation, each steering committee member should chair one of the following subcommittees:

- Educational/Learning
- Worship/Ritual
- Social/Simcha
- Youth
- Administrative
- House and Grounds

Your synagogue architect should lead you through the question and answer period for each and every aspect of the project. The subcommittees' task is to seek out specific answers related to the congregation's needs -- steering clear of specific design solutions. The Sisterhood, for example, might be queried about their particular needs in the kitchen. This information would then be forwarded to the social/simcha subcommittee, which would simultaneously investigate the needs of the social hall and related facilities.

The clergy and professional staff should have input into the administrative organization of the synagogue office operation. However, this information should also be forwarded through the administrative subcommittee and, in turn, to the steering committee. Each aspect of the synagogue's program will likewise be investigated for congregational input and feedback through the subcommittee to the steering committee. The steering committee will then sort through the avalanche of needs and organize and prioritize them in partnership with the synagogue architect. The steering committee will struggle with what the final building program will be and subsequently relay this information to the synagogue architect.

If you have hired the right design professional, the most critical role of the steering committee will be to respond to the synagogue architect effectively and efficiently and to keep the process moving. If you have not hired the right person, no amount of information or effort, no matter how valiant or voluminous, will avoid the creation of a "camel."

Get Realistic

Realistic expectations are another important ingredient. The typical Synagogue develops a list of needs for a capital project. Independent of those needs are the congregation's ability to raise monies and fund the project. Rarely are the two ever congruent, and the needs are nearly always larger than the budget. Again, working in partnership with an experienced synagogue architect, the building committee will work through its priorities and hopefully adopt the philosophy of "Do it once and do it right!" so as to avoid the proverbial: "There is never enough time (or money) to do it right, but there is always seems to be enough time (and money) to do it over." The reality is that

there really isn't sufficient time or money to do it over, and many projects consequently remain in a "temporary" state for many years and beyond.

We have seen so many projects that began on the wrong foot for the lack of having a comprehensive and well thought out Master Plan. The typical example is having a property where the initial phase sites the building in the middle of the property in a prominent area without regard to how the facility will grow or where the congregants will actually enter the building. More synagogues than you can name have prominent street facades that are rarely if ever used. Instead, the congregation enters by a back door next to the kitchen past the dumpster - not exactly creating that sense of spirituality that you might desire when coming to worship or celebrate a simcha

Just behind improperly siting a project, are construction "footage" versus "finish" and following some "artsy" aesthetic direction that really does enhance the quality of the experiences in the synagogue is another serious flaw. "Footage" refers to the quantity of space in square footage, while "finish" refers to the higher quality costs. If done modestly, "finish" pays off more in the long run. Going cheap will have a greater cost down the road. "Artsy" refers to the "hot" architectural style of the day, week, month or year, but styles change, and a building can become dated long before it's time to renovate or update. Just because it may be an "antique" doesn't make it worth something.

Installing expensive trendy technologies for things like energy saving, which are based upon normal business hour operation of 40 to 50 hours per week don't apply to sanctuaries and social halls that operate a couple hours a day at best. While it might be the optimum to mandate flexibility in nearly each and every space, that flexibility rarely gets utilized after the second or third reconfiguration - when the effort required is discovered. Consequently, the levels of multi-purpose and flexibility need to be carefully evaluated, particularly due to the expense of constructing such flexibility the right way. Nearly everyone has experienced classrooms with operable partitions where you can hear what's going on in the next room as if you were sitting there. This is most often the result of "value engineering" and/or cutting back on the quality of the materials installed and deleting their ancillary details that are also critical in making such systems work properly.

A well conceived Master Plan, even for an existing facility, will serve a congregation well into the future. Our relationships with many congregations go on for many years or decades, and having such a relationship with a design professional helps a synagogue meet its need for growth or changing demographics.

For Ohev Shalom of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, for example, we created a Master Plan in 1989 after reviewing their recently constructed existing sanctuary/social hall addition to an old converted church building. We created a new master plan for them that reexamined the facility and their needs from top to bottom. Fund raising began for reconstruction of the sanctuary, which required two phases. The next phase was the renovation of the social hall and an expanded kitchen. A new school building was then designed and constructed, and we are currently planning the addition of a gym/multi-purpose room, additional classrooms, and a new entrance. The new entrance actually addresses the congregation entrance point - the parking lot in the back where all of the people enter the synagogue. Each phase has been done in a seamless manner that followed the initial Master Plan, thereby eliminating unnecessary demolition of previous work and wasted expenditures of "hard-earned" donated dollars. The key to the success of this 15-year program has been the continuity and relationships established between the building committee, its excellent and dedicated chairperson, and the synagogue architect in the conceiving of an appropriate long-range master plan and in our ability to carry it out in segments that were feasible and affordable to the congregation

Follow the Process

The message in the success of Ohev Shalom's experience should be crystal clear: don't short circuit the process. Design that is inspiring, practical and economical takes time. Being in a hurry will sidetrack even the best projects. Do your due diligence - work deliberately and carefully. Thoroughly investigate the references of your design professionals, fund raisers and other project team members. Make sure that they are all "listeners." Each synagogue institution is a unique entity. While it is true that the basics may be similar from one synagogue to another, your synagogue's individual practices, traditions, and philosophical outlook makes your institution completely different from the next. Were this not the case, every synagogue would be the same and as we know,

nothing could be further from the truth. You want your synagogue architect to create "your synagogue" - not his or hers.

If you avoid the pitfalls noted above and follow procedural paths that have proved successful, then all of the other issues will work themselves out during an interactive design process. That all seems like common sense, but not adhering to these principles has doomed many a synagogue to repeat, at great expense and sometimes with significant embarrassment, many well intentioned capital projects.

6 Steps to a Successful Building Project

1. Find a design professional with extensive synagogue experience who can understand how to meet your synagogue's religious and cultural needs.
2. Select a steering committee consisting of active and dedicated congregants who can work with subcommittees and synagogue professionals to interpret the synagogue's needs to the design professionals.
3. Steering committee members should each chair committees that are developing the needs of various synagogue-life aspects, such as ritual, education, social, youth, etc.
4. Have realistic expectations and balance present and future needs with financial abilities. "Do it once; do it right "
5. Develop a master plan for the most cost-effective way to add or update facilities when the need and money are at hand
6. Investigate the backgrounds and references of all design professional candidates.

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