



Gratz Insider, January 2017 - Story Continuation

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Meet the Board of Governors: Building Up the Board with Architect David Brawer

Like many of us, David Brawer ponders the question of what it means to be Jewish in America. However, he considers this question through the lens of an architect, that is, in terms of the synagogues and other Jewish buildings that reflect the evolving arc of the American Jewish experience.

“Given David’s work in building resources for the Jewish community, he brings a unique set of skills to the board,” says Gratz President Joy Goldstein, “which furthers our efforts to diversify the board’s expertise.”

An added benefit for Gratz is that Brawer has substantial board experience. In addition to serving on boards himself, he interacts regularly with building committees in a professional context as an architect specializing in institutional work.

When Brawer and his business partner, Michael Hauptman, founded their architectural firm in 1986, they handled primarily residential and commercial jobs. Their foray into the nonprofit world began with renovation projects at two Philadelphia churches: Old Saint Joseph’s, the oldest Catholic church in Philadelphia, and St. Augustine, which was featured in the film “The Sixth Sense.”

First by happenstance, and then by design, the firm continued to take on institutional jobs, with a client list including healthcare giants like Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Health System and Albert Einstein Health Network, as well as academic institutions like Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College. Religious entities - both churches and synagogues - also make up a substantial percentage of Brawer & Hauptman’s client base.

“There are people on our staff who are not Jewish who know more about the liturgical design of synagogues than most Jews do,” says Brawer, “They are even getting the Hebrew pronunciation down.”

Brawer & Hauptman’s synagogue jobs stretch from Massachusetts to Louisiana. One of the more memorable of these jobs was the [construction of Beth Israel, a synagogue just outside New Orleans](#), for a Modern Orthodox congregation whose original building had been ravaged by Katrina. It was a job complicated by required compliance with all sorts of new flood regulations. In particular, Brawer remembers the iconic images of the efforts [to rescue water-damaged Torah scrolls](#).

Another job that resonates personally for Brawer was the construction of the education wing at Congregation Or Ami in Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania - his own grandchildren attended school there, using the space that their grandfather had built.

With each synagogue that Brawer’s firm renovates, the challenge is to figure out how to alter the space to adapt to a very different Jewish community from the one that existed at the time the structure was

built. And, Brawer and his team must be sensitive to the changes taking place within the Jewish community in order to design a religious space that will continue to meet the needs of the congregation going forward.

When asked about applying these skills to his new position on the Gratz College Board of Governors, Brawer says:

I'd like to think that there's an overall awareness and consciousness of the Jewish community that comes from being the only architect in the room. I bring a skill set that's a little different from the other skills represented on the board, and I hope I can be useful because of that.