

TRANSFORMING SPACES

Architect Phillip Katz (SF94) joins the human and divine

BY ANNA PERLEBERG (SF02)

Jewish tradition teaches that every 28 years, the sun returns to the position in the sky at which it was created, an event commemorated with a blessing called *birkat hachama*. The last time this celestial anniversary was celebrated was April 8, 2009; for the Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun in Milwaukee, Wis., the recitation also marked the first service held in their breathtaking new sanctuary—designed and built by Phillip Katz Project Development, founded by Phillip Katz (SF94).

Katz's traditional Jewish upbringing made him a natural for St. John's: "Discussion was familiar to me from the dinner table, and I went to a Jewish seminary for freshman year of high school, where we used the same Socratic method as in seminar," he says. "St. John's was an outstanding experience, and a formative part of who I am"—a claim borne out by the fact that, although he eventually migrated to the College of Santa Fe to graduate from their landscape design program, his official bio and interviews still proudly mention his time with the great books.

Following college, Katz attended graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, receiving his master's in architecture in 1999. He still teaches at the school. He began work in corporate architecture in 1995, and was part of the design team for world-renowned Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava's 2001 addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum, the sculptural white concrete Quadracci Pavilion. Katz is definitely a Calatrava fan: "He's not only an architect, he's an engineer, a mathematician, a composer—his work is very anthropomorphic."

Katz was able to found his design company, Phillip Katz Project Development, thanks to what he describes as "some large commissions that gave me the security to leave the corporate firm." Unfortunately, the fledgling business opened its doors on September 4, 2001. A week later, as Katz says, "The world imploded, and the projects I had got shelved."



DESIGNING PROJECTS FOR NONPROFITS, INCLUDING A SYNAGOGUE FOR A MILWAUKEE CONGREGATION, IS ONE OF THE BEST REWARDS OF ARCHITECT PHILLIP KATZ'S WORK.

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PHILIP KATZ (SF94)

Throughout post-9/11 uncertainty and the current struggling economy—in which many clients are choosing to stay put and renovate existing properties rather than design and build anew—the firm has tenaciously held its own, he believes, by offering "the highest quality service. Training, constant innovation, and listening to our clients—that's most important."

The recession's deleterious effect on new architectural projects, however, has allowed Katz to pursue less tangible rewards by doing pro bono work. While these projects do sometimes result in paying work, "when approached by a

nonprofit, I don't have my hand out immediately—I feel a great responsibility to make the world a better place," he says. Katz goes on to reference the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, the "repair and completion of the world," a fitting dictum for an architect who often recreates new buildings within a formerly broken-down shell.

He's particularly pleased with the reclamation of a long-abandoned industrial building, designed in 1930 by prominent Milwaukee architect Herbert Tullgren. It has become a new school facility for Lad Lake, an agency that works with young men who have been expelled from Milwaukee Public Schools. The school has

an astonishing 83 percent graduation rate. The building, which had once been a silver-plating shop, was not only dilapidated in the extreme—holes in the roof, windows broken, asbestos in the more than 70-year-old heating system—it was an environmental disaster. Contaminants had to be cleaned up before the gutting of the structure could even begin. After a six-month renovation process, the center reopened with classrooms, offices, a library, computer lab, kitchen, cafeteria, art and music rooms, and a full-sized gym—the only outright addition to the building.

“This project was really like a grand slam home run in the World Series,” Katz says with obvious pride. “We saved a blighted building that was architecturally significant, contributed to the community, and cleaned up environmental devastation.”

Phillip Katz Project Development’s achievements have been publicly recognized. The Lad Lake project won an award from *The Business Journal* of Milwaukee in April 2008 for “Best New Development or Renovation: Education.” *The Business Journal* also honored Katz’s firm earlier this year for outstanding industrial renovation in a whimsical design for Traffic & Parking Control Company that incorporated its own products, including traffic lights and reflective yellow road tape. A 2009 award noted the environmentally

friendly design in the massive new headquarters of A.B. Data, a direct marketing firm, where a cubicle farm was re-envisioned as an “interior streetscape” with sustainable features such as cork and bamboo wall panels, stained concrete floors, and skylights. Two 2008 City of Milwaukee Urban Design Awards also went to the Lad Lake project and the Brochach Irish Pub, which opened in a restored restaurant space on the city’s lower east side, built over a century ago with “Cream City bricks” of local clay.

While industrial, corporate, and residential projects consume a great deal of his time, Katz reserves his greatest enthusiasm for liturgical architecture. This passion was born in graduate school, when his thesis analyzed the use of daylight in modern and ancient structures across Europe. Katz sees the creation of sacred space that bridges the gap between the human and the divine as “one of the most important ways architecture can affect people’s lives. It can unlock some chemistry, create a transformative experience.”

The questions that guide him in his designs are no different, Katz says, than those asked thousands of years ago: “How will the space connect us with each other? How will the space raise our consciousness of the divine? How will the space connect the congregation to our traditions?”



Several aspects of his recent Congregation Emanu-El B’ne Jeshurun project reflect these concerns: the Golden Mean proportions carried throughout the building itself and its design details and furnishings, and the sustainable nature of the temple that honors God’s creation. Even “the wood columns and beams that form the structure reference the trees in the Garden of Eden, the Bible’s first sacred space,” he says. Whether one is religious or not, it’s hard not to feel awestruck by the sanctuary’s simplicity and openness.

Despite the daily challenges of small-business reality, Katz remains optimistic and passionate about his work. “St. John’s taught me to bite off a little more than I can chew—to take risks,” he says. “Not every idealistic bone has been beaten out of me yet.” ❖



ABOVE, THE EXTERIOR, AND AT LEFT, THE SANCTUARY OF PHILLIP KATZ’S DESIGN FOR A SYNAGOGUE IN MILWAUKEE. HIS GOAL WAS TO CONNECT CONGREGANTS WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH THE DIVINE.