

# Levy Associates Architects

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UNLIKE MOST ARCHITECTS today, Mort Levy does all of his drafting by hand. A skill that many architects have lost to computer-aided drafting, this is just one way that Levy brings an engaged and personal touch to his work. Passionate about design since high school (his first job was at an architecture firm), Levy has been in business for himself since 1963. In 1981, he started Levy Associates Architects, Inc., which, though now a solo practice, was, at its peak, an eleven-person operation. Over the years Levy Associates has worked for clients as diverse as the Houston Jewish Community Center and the United States Postal Service.

One of the most rewarding and interesting parts of a religious project for Levy, in terms of new design, is the challenge of reusing as much as possible from a former sanctuary space. Due to the sentimental and spiritual

value of many elements of a religious interior, working to save and reuse these elements is key to Levy's design approach. For his first religious project at his own Brith Shalom Synagogue in Bellaire, TX, Levy was faced with both a constricted site and an existing building that had originally been a Baptist church. A prior architect placed the Ark on the north wall, a consequence of the building's layout. "Traditionally, it's on the east wall," Levy pointed out, "so one major decision became whether or not to tear down the building in order to reorient the Ark." In the end, the decision was made to build anew, but not without first conserving as much as was possible from the original structure, including the Ark, the Ner Tamid (the everlasting light), and all of the stained glass windows. Though now located in a new building, the reuse of key elements made the synagogue feel like home.



Levy noted that one of the most important considerations when designing a religious space is acoustics, explaining, "It is very important to design for acoustics that relate to the nature of the service." As such, attendance at multiple services is key in order for an architect to gain an in-depth understanding of a congregation's acoustic needs. If the congregation has a variety of services, such as a smaller weekly service but also holiday services that draw larger crowds, Levy tries to attend some of each type to get a well-rounded sense of the congregation and its needs.

Levy Associates Architects helped Congregation Beth Jacob in Galveston, TX, after their synagogue suffered extensive damage from Hurricane Ike. Seen here is the fully restored chapel. Photo courtesy of Congregation Beth Jacob.



Photos of Congregation Beth Jacob in Galveston, TX, show the damage caused by Hurricane Ike. Silt and mud covered the floors and walls; surging water damaged furniture and textiles. Photos courtesy of Congregation Beth Jacob.

Through his considerable experience working with congregations on synagogue projects, Levy was the perfect candidate to help Congregation Beth Jacob, in Galveston, TX, after Hurricane Ike wreaked havoc on its building in September 2008. In the aftermath of this disaster, Partners for Sacred Places stepped in to help affected congregations with funding and training, which in turn led to Levy's involvement with Beth Jacob.

Levy recalled, "The building had four feet of water and no flood insurance." The congregation itself was on rocky ground before the hurricane. "This could have been the final blow," he said, "but, instead, it became an inspiration to put things back together – both from physical and spiritual standpoints." The congregation received overwhelming support from the community: a local church and synagogue provided replacement pews, and Beth Jacob's Rabbi, Todd Doctor, used his skills as a carpenter to restore the furnishings in the chapel.

Levy provided advice to the congregation in the form of design narratives and cost-estimates for the future development of the synagogue. He suggested reconfiguring the HVAC system to save energy and came up with various ways that accessibility could be improved for people with disabilities. Levy's adaptive use suggestions for under-utilized second-story classroom space inspired the congregation to

contemplate the creation of overnight retreat facilities for youth groups and adults, as well as the creation of a Texas Jewish History exhibit within the synagogue. Though the hurricane was devastating, it was also an eye-opening experience that has led to a greater vision for the synagogue's potential that is far beyond a simple restoration of the structure. Thanks to Levy's help, the congregation has come together even stronger with clear goals for a future greater than they knew was possible.

In addition to his architectural practice, Levy is also an avid writer about architecture. After his work with Beth Jacob, Levy participated in a series of meetings with the group of Galveston churches that Partners worked with after Hurricane Ike. This experience led Levy to write an article entitled "Survivors" for *Texas Architect* magazine about four of these congregations. Through his deep understanding of religious architecture, combined with the intense experience of working with various hurricane-affected congregations, Levy was able to capture their experiences in a unique way and share them with a large audience. Levy views each congregation he works with as a distinct group of people who come together for a common cause. This intense effort to understand what defines each congregation strongly influences the quality of Levy's work with sacred places.