

HORD ARCHITECTS

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Annual Religious Buildings Issue

SAVING GRACES

Designing and restoring churches nationwide, a Memphis firm opens congregations' eyes to architecture's ennobling possibilities.



Above: On a main thoroughfare in a Memphis suburb, Hord Architects has designed a Classical campus for Kingsway Christian Church. Domed cupolas grace a chapel (right) and the main building, and Hord is now completing a stylistically compatible school for the property. Photo: ©2006 Jeffrey Jacobs Photography

Right: Carter Hord (third from left) poses in the office's 1925 Art Deco lobby with staff. From left Brandon Allen, Lisa Hord, Carter Hord, Matthew Lee, Donna Dixon and Jeffrey Holt. Photo: Huo Andrews



By Eve M. Kahn

Perhaps no other architecture practice in America has a portfolio of church projects with the aesthetic and geographical breadth and scholarly and soulful depth of Hord Architects of Memphis, TN. The 49-year-old firm has graced 10 states with religious buildings spanning from haute Renaissance to Carpenter Gothic. The office is a worthy successor to history's church specialists, such as Christopher Wren, Nicholas Hawksmoor, A.W.N. Pugin and Ralph Adams Cram. But just discussing the firm's accomplishments can make principal Carter Hord a little uneasy.

After an eloquent, impassioned one-and-a-half-hour interview, he confesses that he's not accustomed to talking about himself. "Our motto is 'service through architecture,'" he says. "I work hard to subordinate the ego, to make the work not about me, but about how well we've used our gifts to glorify God, and how well we've listened to the client."

Congregations keep telling him compelling stories. Their existing buildings have endured storm or fire damage, or their communities are expanding or splintering. Or perhaps they have recently changed liturgy, refocused on urban outreach to the needy, or welcomed new immigrant groups. Their neighborhoods are likewise evolving, gentrifying or fending off sprawl. Hord, age 43, a second-generation architect, creates uplifting architectural solutions out of his patrons' many competing needs.

The six-person office proceeds patiently, working phase by phase as funds are raised to rebuild downtown Gothic steeples or weave Georgian or Colonial complexes into suburbs. Scores of clients from Florida to Minnesota have commissioned 15- or 20-year master plans, so that every new wing will be consistent with the last. Worshipers enjoy Hord Architects' inspiring domes, colonnades and trusswork without realizing how much forethought and experience went into the sightline configuration, altar height or underlying technology.

"Sometimes congregations tell me that architecture isn't that important – they'll say, 'Carter, we can worship in a metal building,'" Hord



Above: Renaissance colonnades provided inspiration for the church's main entry. Gables and towers relieve the mass of the 300-ft.-long façade. *Photo: ©2006 Jeffrey Jacobs Photography*

Left: Sunlight through clear arched windows reflects on highly polished pews in the church's austere sanctuary. *Photo: Carter Hord*

observes. "But I say to them, 'Yes, you can, but do you have to?' Of course you can muddle through in a metal building. But then the congregation loses all the meaning and teaching opportunities that can come from detail, space, light. Even infants get something out of a beautifully designed church – they have their own kind of spiritual experience. There are easier building types to work on, but none more gratifying."

A typical Hord project is born when a few representatives of a church planning committee arrive at the office, explaining that they want their new or rebuilt structure to look like a church. "Then we try to figure out exactly what those words mean to them," Hord says. "We analyze the site and we drive around to see the local vernacular. We study the history of the denomination and the congregation. We talk to members who have strong convictions about which architectural language they prefer, to find out why, and help decide if it's appropriate for their needs now. We hold town hall-style meetings, so everyone knows they're being listened to, that they can convey ideas. The dialogue, the research, the whole process always takes longer than the client anticipates. A solution doesn't fall out of our sleeves right away, but a solution always surfaces. And if there's been some controversy brewing in the congregation, the programming and building process can be therapeutic. It can bring everyone together, and refocus their energy."

Pious Upbringing

Hord's commitment to client-tailored architecture is partly hereditary. His father, Lawrence T. Hord, Jr., was a Memphis-based Modernist-leaning architect. There were three boys and three girls in Carter's family, and they grew up in Modernist houses designed by their father. "We had mountains of glass around us, and stairs with open risers," Carter recalls, "so of course people

called us 'The Brady Bunch.'" The Hords belonged to a Roman Catholic congregation and attended Holy Rosary Catholic Church, a 1950s Romanesque essay in limestone. (Hord still worships there, and he has devised expansion plans for the building, with a new lantern, narthex and arcaded limestone porte cochere and entry.)

For undergraduate studies in architecture, Hord chose Auburn University, partly because it offered parallel tracks of rigorous design and pragmatic building science. "We were exposed to a lot of viewpoints – it was a 'cafeteria school' in some ways," he says. "There were professors who'd worked for Mies, Bruce Goff, Frank Lloyd Wright – but no Classicists." Not until his master's studies at Cornell did he meet erudite traditionalists; the charismatic scholar Colin Rowe was running Cornell's urban design studio. The architecture studio there was Modernist, Hord says, "which made for really fascinating, spirited debates about what exactly are an architect's responsibilities to the city and to the community."

During school vacations, he apprenticed at his father's office, and was tempted to partner there after finishing Cornell. Instead he was recruited by a Washington, DC, firm, Keyes Condon Florance Architects (now part of SmithGroup). "I wanted to be in a city full of world-class architecture, and help shape buildings on a monumental scale, a larger scale than what my father was handling," Hord says. He worked on the likes of a Metro station master plan, the U.S. Embassy in Algiers, and the Smithsonian Institution's half-million-sq-ft. Administrative Service Center. In Washington, Hord's wife Lisa, an Auburn classmate, helped design Collegiate Gothic school buildings for the office of Leon Chatelain. The couple made enduring friendships with



St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Jackson, TN, an 1840s landmark, reopened this fall, after Hord Architects undid devastating 2003 tornado damage. Photo: ©2006 Jeffrey Jacobs Photography

Chatelain, Allan Greenberg staffers and other prominent traditionalists including Michael Franck, James McCrery, and church specialist Duncan Stroik (Stroik, now a professor at the University of Notre Dame, publishes *Sacred Architecture*, the only tradition-friendly journal for religious architecture.)

Hord officially partnered with his father in 1991, setting up a branch office of Hord Architects in Alexandria, VA. Carter and Lisa moved back to Memphis in 1995, shortly before L.T. died of cancer. The senior architect lived to see the firm undertake its first large traditionalist religious commission: Frederick Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Maryland. "The congregation's 1970s church had just burned to the ground," says Hord. "They had an insurance settlement and a high-profile new site on an interstate, and they wanted

to build in the local Georgian tradition. We entered and won their design competition with a solution rooted in James Gibbs' 1720s design for St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the marriage of a Gothic spire engaged in a Greek temple front. My father approved. He was very open to letting me make my own way, on the business and aesthetic side of the firm."

Expanding Horizons

Carter and Lisa haven't quite replicated his Brady Bunch childhood. They are raising two children in a nondescript 1950s house, set in a spectacular landscape: cherry groves and manmade lakes laid out in the 1920s as the grounds for a supermarket tycoon's pink-marble mansion. Lisa is a principal at Hord Architects, which has offices on the ground floor of a 1923 high-rise downtown, the Shrine Building. The rest of the 14-story building has gone condo, just one example of Memphis's preservation-driven rebirth over the past decade.



Prolific church architect William Halsey Wood designed St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Memphis, a circa-1900 English Gothic marvel carved from limestone. Hord Architects re-roofed the structure and cleaned and restored the masonry. Photo: Carter Hord



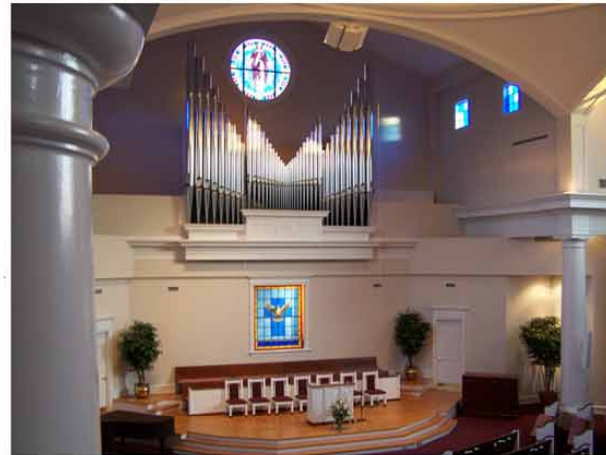
In the interior of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, Hord Architects brought in new mechanicals, supplemented pendant lights, adjusted pews, designed new modesty rails and restored plasterwork. Photo: courtesy of Hord Architects



One of Hord Architects' first traditionalist religious commissions (ca. 1995) was Frederick Seventh-Day Adventist Church and School in northwest Maryland. A replacement for a 1970s building that had burned, it reflects local Georgian traditions. The Gothic spire embedded in a Greek temple front is also rooted in James Gibbs' 1720s design for London's St. Martin-in-the-Fields. *Photo: Carter Hord*

"Because this was not a very progressive city," Carter explains, "we didn't suffer very much from urban renewal." The whole state's economy has likewise been booming. Multinationals headquartered there, like FedEx and Nissan, are helping build a diverse client pool for Hord Architects, half of whose projects are in Tennessee.

"We've had congregations that are predominantly Chinese, Korean and African-American," Hord says. "People from all walks of life are on the church building committees now. The global economy has come here, and the committees are more open than ever to hiring architects from out of town." The members of local design review boards and grassroots preservation groups are diversifying, too. Hord reports that the firm's proposals meet with warm community approval wherever they go: "We respect scale and context, and we don't plunk down seas of asphalt in front of our churches. We put ourselves in the neighbors' shoes. And we find more and more people are returning to an appreciation of traditional architecture." (Another sign of changing times, he adds: the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America just founded a Tennessee branch.)



In the interior of the Frederick Seventh-Day Adventist Church, clerestory stained glass and a rose window illuminate a dome resting on unadorned Doric columns (above) and dramatic entablature molding supports the dome's pendentives (left). *Photo: Carter Hord*

A Chinese-American congregation has taken over a chopped-up movie palace in suburban New York, renaming it Long Island Abundant Life Church. Hord Architects excavated and restored the gilded proscenium and scrollwork-encircled dome. *Photo: Carter Hord*



Lately, Hord Architects' project budgets range from \$500,000 to \$9 million. Churches account for 90 percent of billings; secular nonprofits make up the rest of the workload, usually when taking over former warehouses, train depots or fire stations. But charities don't expect Hord's staff to work pro bono.

"Because we're specialists, they realize that they're getting their money's worth, that we'll be good stewards of every hard-raised dollar, with every spec, all the way through," he says. "We're more efficient, a better buy for them, than a firm with a steep learning curve would be." On one of the few occasions he can recall a job going slightly over budget, there was an irresistible reason. A few years ago, the firm was converting a chopped-up movie palace in a New York suburb into a church for Chinese-Americans. Work had to stop briefly during partial interior demolition, because a scrollwork-ornamented dome unexpectedly turned up above some lay-in ceiling tiles. "The church knew their money would be well-spent on restoring this remarkable treasure," Hord notes.

As he travels widely to construction or reconstruction sites and navigates diplomatically through meetings with AV engineers or road planners, Hord stays invigorated by imagining the next round of dedication ceremonies. "To see something we've worked on for literally thousands of hours, over the course of years, finally full of people worshipping together – that's a beautiful thing to see, every time." ♦