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COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE**

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# Making a difference

Designer and developer **Phillip Katz**  
looks beyond brick and mortar



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## 'RENAISSANCE MAN'

Phillip Katz . . . "I draw my inspiration from adding life to my community."

PHOTOGRAPHER / SCOTT PAULUS



# Inspiring design

## Developer Phillip Katz is focused on community

BY PETE MILLARD | pmillard@bizjournals.com

**W**orldly greatness may never arrive at Phillip Katz's doorstep. Let's be honest. Katz will not rival the Dos Equis "Most Interesting Man in the World" for global recognition.

However, if national or international accolades for structural and interior design are bestowed on the Mequon-based construction project manager and designer, who is in the final stages of becoming a licensed architect in Wisconsin, he's prepared to accept the challenges and responsibilities.

At the moment, Katz is more focused on making a difference in his community and the city of Milwaukee.

Katz and his company, Phillip Katz Project Development LLC, already have a growing stack of local awards for design and construction. He was honored in 2008 for converting the former Chicago Crane Co. building at 225 W. Capitol Drive into a Lad Lake alternative school. Katz worked cooperatively with Williams Development on the Lad Lake school. He also won an award this year for the renovation of the former Manpower headquarters in Glendale now owned by A.B. Data Ltd.

"He represents the best of the next generation," said Bruce Arbit, president of A.B. Data.

In 2008, Katz's company received two Mayor's Urban Design awards for entertainment and education projects in Milwaukee in recognition of renovations of historic architecture.

"I believe good design is a function of first-hand experience and reflects what our eyeballs gather from travels," said the 37-year-old Katz, who has studied in Israel, France, the United Kingdom, New Mexico, Boston and Milwaukee.

Katz is the walking definition of "renaissance man." As a teenager, he attended Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel before transferring to St. John's College in Santa Fe, N.M., to participate in its Great Books program. He received a bachelor's degree in landscape planning at the College of Santa Fe before returning home to Milwaukee and enrolling at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Katz received his master of architecture degree in 1999 from UWM's School of Architecture and Urban Planning. Offers from some of the nation's largest architectural firms poured in after graduation, but Katz chose to stay in the community. While a student at UWM, he worked as a designer at Kahler Slater Architects in Milwaukee and continued at the firm after receiving his master's degree.

Along the way, he's participated in professional development and executive education courses at Harvard University, Ecole Speciale d'Architecture in Paris and Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, England.

Six years after working as a "pencil" at Kahler Slater, Katz decided to walk away and form his own business Sept. 4, 2001, one week before the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. He weathered the down economy stemming from the Sept. 11 attacks and is now poised to make a run at national projects after completing more than four dozen projects in the Milwaukee area.

The time Katz spent at Kahler Slater was a valuable experience for the young designer, said Bill Orenstein, president of Williams Development, Milwaukee. In addition to gaining experience at one of Milwaukee's largest architectural firms, Orenstein said Katz ultimately made the decision "to make his own statements in the architectural field."

One of the driving forces behind the creation of Phillip Katz Project Development was that Katz said he had an entrepreneurial bent and always acted like an owner.

"I wanted to be rewarded like an owner, winning commissions and choosing projects that suited my interests," Katz said.

### ECLECTIC PROJECT MIX

While Katz's corporate portfolio is an eclectic mix of commercial, residential and institutional projects, his personal specialty is sacred institutions. In fact, his master's thesis at UWM focused on sacred institutions, which led him to develop expertise in the design and construction of liturgical environments, especially synagogues.

"Phillip has this ability to envision and explain the engineering details that talked us into making changes at our building that was a real adventure," A.B. Data's Arbit said.

One of the development firm's current projects is the creation of a sanctuary and communal space for Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun in Whitefish Bay, which embodies research on the tradition, history, laws and culture of sacred architecture, Katz said.

"I'm hoping to find more work regionally and nationally on sacred institutions, including churches and even mosques," Katz said.

Phillip Katz Project Development has five full-time employees, including the owner. While Katz expects the company to grow, he doesn't envision the company ever rivaling Eppstein Uhen Architects or Kahler Slater for domination in the Milwaukee market.

"We'll remain lean and mean," he said. "I want to manage projects, not people."

However, Katz has a knack for teaching. Starting in 2001, he taught architectural design, construction, engineering and history at UWM and at the Milwaukee School of Engineering. Because of a growing workload at his firm, Katz had to take a leave of absence as an adjunct professor.

His involvement in the community is a direct result of the countless hours he spent with his own mentor, Marty Stein, the former Milwaukee businessman and philanthropist who died in March 2006.

Katz and Stein met for lunch twice a month and would then take walks around some of the more depressed central city neighborhoods in Milwaukee, discussing ideas on how to revive the areas.

"Marty convinced me the central city was the last real estate frontier, which inspired me to purchase property for future development," Katz said.

In the next 40 or 50 years, when Katz is a retired architect, he hopes to drive around southeast Wisconsin and see buildings and neighborhoods that he had a hand in creating or turning around.

"I draw my inspiration from adding life to my community," Katz said.



### VISIONARY PLAN

Katz's firm was part of the team that developed the Lad Lake school.