

BY MARK LEONE

WHY THE COALVILLE TABERNACLE HAD TO BE RAZED.

Mormonism has been subject to rapid renovation since its founding. The Prophet Joseph made it quite clear that God's revelations were continual and that if things were withheld for the moment, it was because His Saints were not yet ready to receive them. The Prophet built a greater degree of change into the system than most of his faithful understood. He established a system that was far more dynamic than many of his spiritual descendants recognize. Mormonism is so successful today, not because it remains the religion nineteenth century farmers knew, but because it has easily undergone very crucial changes. There is some understanding among Church leaders that such change is fundamentally good. They of course sense that it must be centrally controlled to avoid disruption. There appears to be, however, another sense in which the rate of change within Mormonism must be disguised, and one of the most useful ways to disguise change is to localize the writing of history—have everybody in the community do it and

center it on kinship. This produces genealogical history and at the same time eliminates the need for professional historians. Taken together these two factors facilitate rapid reinterpretation and rewriting of history.

Another pattern in the Church indicates this tendency toward reinterpreting history—that is the inclination to destroy visible remains of the past by tearing down nearly all of the Church's nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings in Utah. Those left standing are renovated (not restored) beyond recognition of their original craftsmanship and style.

Apparent Principles of Church Planning

The following generalizations are drawn from observing modern Church architectural practices. They are offered here as suggested and tentative explanations for some observed, patterned behavior among Mormons.

1. Artifacts from the past symbolize attitudes and behavior of the past. Symbols motivate behavior. Therefore, the artifacts (symbols) of the past may conflict with and even impede new and different behavior.
2. Space affects behavior. Behavioral changes require spatial changes.

Therefore, in anticipating change, Church architecture requires that buildings:

- a. have no unique qualities which would stand in the way of their easy replacement—they must be disposable;
- b. have symbols with limited existence.

Over the last several years, the Church has earned notoriety both in Utah and the rest of the country for its willingness to tear down old chapels and stake centers.¹ While some individuals, with the help of historical societies, have tried to preserve the more famous and visually appealing of these structures, with most, like the Coalville Tabernacle, they have been unsuccessful.

The attitude of the Church with regard to its own old buildings merits considerable attention because that attitude is but an index to what could be considered an unusually knowledgeable and even avant-garde approach to architecture and architectural planning. The Coalville Tabernacle is an especially important example here. This moving building was razed with the permission of the Church hierarchy.

The official reasons for the destruction had to do with the changed nature of the activities to be carried on by the modern wards using the building, with concerns of space, flexibility and convenience. The underlying reasons Coalville had to be torn down are very close to the reason some wanted it preserved: it was too completely the symbol of those who built it.

Nineteenth Century Buildings

Mormons turned nineteenth century necessity in architecture into an activity of deep religious significance. Many of the immigrant converts were skilled carpenters, masons, and builders. Most became farmers and belonged to communities that were not rich, but whose economies were underwritten against failure by the Church. These communities were responsible for constructing their own church buildings and were allowed to use tithing for part of the costs. But basically they built and paid for their churches, schools, tithing houses, factories and other community buildings by themselves. By and large they did a careful, appealing, and substantial job.

The bond between the people and the building was complete. They worshipped

in what they built. The same may be said of their fields, dams, homes; in fact it is quite clear when looking at the small and unadorned ward chapels in the Great Basin that the whole of redeemed Zion was where one worshipped.

The stake centers, often called tabernacles in the earlier days, were another matter entirely. They were large since they had to accommodate many hundreds of people for quarterly conferences. Often the tabernacles were designed by professional architects and could be imposing. It was still the labor of the farmer-craftsmen who executed the design and since they were attempting to give concrete expression to Mormonism in their particular area, the tabernacles were powerful statements—witnesses to what the people who built and used them stood for. Even more to the point is that the people who worshipped in them understood that the building stood for them.

In Coalville, forty miles northeast of Salt Lake City, the tabernacle was built between 1879 and 1899 at great cost and personal sacrifice. For the immigrant converts, it was the symbol of what they had become and of what they, under the ministrations of their Church, had achieved. If the building can be judged on its unique qualities, the people of Coalville had achieved a great deal. This building of simplified Victorian Gothic design dominated the town which was in turn dominated by surrounding mountains. In anybody's terms it was an aesthetic marvel regarded as one of the finest nineteenth century Mormon buildings.² But more than that, it was probably one of the best American buildings built in the West in the nineteenth century. It was an extraordinary example of taste, proportion, and spatial harmony. It was great. And it got torn down without much trouble. Certainly the bulk of the Mormon population did not give its going a thought, even if they managed to know about it at all.

The Coalville Tabernacle had achieved such a high degree of symbolic success for its nineteenth century builders it could not appropriately represent its twentieth century users. Not only did it misrepresent them, it reminded them every day of all that they were not, and all they had stopped being. Aesthetically and functionally it stood for a form of Mormon religion and society which was gone and which should be forgotten if the present is to be adjusted to adequately. If the past sits around speaking eloquently of what it was, especially if it is the past of your immediate ancestors, the differences between you and it can be discomfiting.

We must ask if there is something in a coherent, cogent witness from the nineteenth century that may damagingly or unflatteringly contradict something Mormons are currently doing or believing. With these buildings, too much of the past is too close and well-represented to be lived with easily in a society that is busy perfecting the means for rapid rewriting of the past. What the buildings were and represented can be more readily dealt with in memories, journals and photographs.

Influence of Architecture on Attitudes Within

Mormon architecture comes out of the tradition of eighteenth century utopian planning. In America there were dozens of utopian groups, Mormons being one of the most successful. Utopian planning considered the physical environment as an element that could and even had to be manipulated to bring about some utopian aims. Utopianists as a whole believed not just in environmental determinism, but in its peculiar offshoot, architectural determinism. The buildings that people



The Coalville Tabernacle

The new Coalville Stake Center



lived in were to be built according to principles that would reinforce basic utopian principles.³

Illustrative of his interest in the manipulative power of architecture is the direction the Prophet Joseph gave to the construction of the temples at Kirtland, Ohio, and Nauvoo, Illinois. He seems to have employed a number of special features that were also used in later Utah structures, but he does not seem to have elaborated a philosophy of architecture with the same comprehensiveness as his Plat of the City of Zion did for town planning. The temple at Kirtland has a set of raised pulpits at both ends with seats between having backs that could be swung either way depending on which set of pulpits was in use. The main floor could be divided in half with a sliding partition creating two rooms which could be used for smaller, simultaneous meetings. This built-in flexibility was not to reappear in Mormon architecture until later in the twentieth century.

By studying the internal arrangement of a building we can infer some of the principles of social and religious organization that produced the building. We see that nineteenth century chapels and stake houses and tabernacles were not social centers. They consisted of a large room with a sea of pews arranged before a raised platform with tiers of seats.

The tabernacles were high, formal and designed for preaching by a few to the many. The arrangement did not include plans for a congregation that might be mobile during the service, or which might break up into smaller groups of various sizes after the large meeting—or at any other time. Congregations were arranged in a specific way to perform well-understood rites. Meetings other than worship services were held in other buildings in the town, which, by virtue of the pervasive religious life style, were an extension of the chapel.

As a result of their design, the nineteenth century tabernacles generate attitudes of hierarchy, distance, passivity and separateness. Early Mormonism needed a powerful hierarch, social classes, and an obedient population to survive the rigors of settling a wilderness. Modern Mormonism does not need, nor does it foster any of these attitudes. Therefore the buildings which express and reinforce them are less than useful—they can be a definite detriment.

It is difficult to modify old buildings, and regardless of how well they are modified, they still evoke some of the effects the original builders put into them. Tabernacles are not meant for the participatory religion Mormonism has become. Echoing acoustics, shouting voices to counter them, vaulted ceilings, ornate decoration, distances between speakers and those spoken to all counteract the informality, freedom and closeness of a contemporary sacrament service.

The nineteenth century ward chapel, small, simple and informal, would be architecturally adequate for a modern worship service. However, it could not accommodate all the other meetings Mormons now hold in the complex of rooms within a modern meetinghouse. Adding on to an old chapel produces a disjointed arrangement that does not enable a Mormon to see so easily the unity of all the activities carried on within it—that religion is in everything and everything is religion.

Pioneer tabernacles are too big and cannot be easily subdivided. Pioneer chapels are too small and cannot conveniently be made larger. So the nineteenth century structures are functionally obsolete and, more than that, they are statements pointing out changes that work better unnoticed. Since Mormonism does not

maintain museums to its former stages, the old buildings are useless and even detrimental.

Contemporary Mormon Architecture

Today all Church building programs are centralized. The financing is directed by Salt Lake; the plans, construction, even the size of the lot to be purchased are specified by Church headquarters. Depending on the size and financial condition of a local ward, the Church will pay anywhere from 50% to 90% of the cost of the local building. Rarely does a ward pay more than 50% of the cost. This is one way Church members directly benefit from a portion of their tithing. And this is also one of the key ways Church headquarters redistributes wealth within the Church, thereby giving every congregation, no matter how small or poor, a respectable and comfortable place for Church activities.

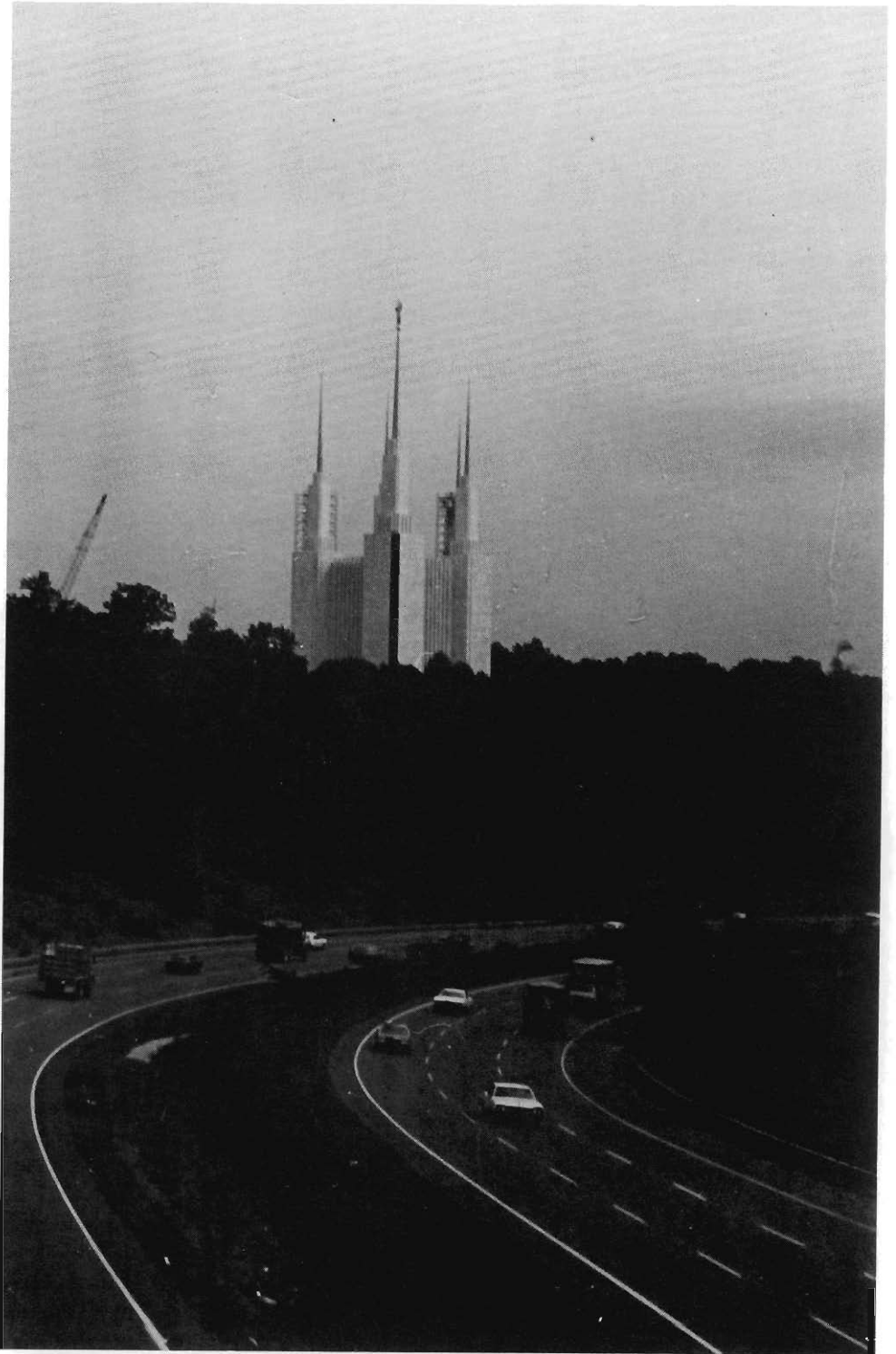
Two or three basic meetinghouse designs have been standardized for use throughout the Church. The designs are supplied by Salt Lake, sometimes with modifications requested by local wards, sometimes not. A local architect may be employed to create an exterior suitable to local conditions, but he provides little more than the veneer for the building.

Today's Mormon meetinghouse contains a small chapel with an adjacent gymnasium separated by movable walls to increase the congregational seating when necessary. There are eight to ten classrooms, one of which is appointed with more care for such additional special uses as small receptions and viewing before funerals. Nearby is a large kitchen equipped with professional capacity appliances. There is a library, a generous entrance hall, bishops' offices, and various supply rooms throughout.

The rooms are in almost continual use, not only on Sundays, but all during the week from early morning seminary classes until the end of evening meetings, rehearsals and classes. The varied activities are accommodated in the flexibly neutral rooms. Everything is movable; student desk chairs, the scaled down pews for the junior chapel, blackboards and, again, some walls, for that indispensable adaptability Joseph Smith so recommended.

As a result of the interchangeability of room functions, the religious nature of the chapel is more easily diffused to all the rooms and lends itself to all the functions conducted within the building. In the older meetinghouses where the activity complex had been added on, the chapel is still isolated and cannot be expanded by opening into a gymnasium. And the old chapel is usually too formal for anything other than worship. The advantage of the adaptable chapel is in the idea that all functions performed under the meetinghouse roof are sacred to some extent. It is hoped that the aura of sanctity will pervade all the rooms of the chapel complex and influence attitudes throughout.

The hope is only partially realized. The spirit of Mormonism certainly does pervade all the many things done in a meetinghouse. But the visitor will notice occasional signs in the foyer and other entrances to the chapel cautioning "Reverence in the Lord's House," and there might be a "Reverence" reminder in view of those on the stand facing the congregation. Such signs indicate that a certain amount of secularizing has gone on in the sacred space as a result of bringing so many activities close to the area where formal worship occurs. Mormon church designers have tried to use building techniques to make activities that are ordinarily secular more sacred. But clearly, while they have been Mormonizing many



The new Washington, D.C. Temple

activities, they have risked secularizing their own worship service and its locale. The signs express a feeling that worship may have become a little too informal, permitting behavior that is a little too ordinary. In spreading out the effect of sacred space it has diluted its effect in modern chapels.

Nor is there much help coming from the interior decoration of the chapel which has more than a movable wall in common with the gymnasium. Actually there has been more effect to dignify the gymnasium by changing its designation from "recreation hall" to "cultural hall." There is much complaining in Mormon circles about the low quality of building design. They are criticized as stripped down boxes with a thin layer of Georgian veneer. Inside there is a lot of blond wood; metal framed, ordinary windows, some with neo-Tiffany colored glass; surprising amounts of ceramic and plastic tiles of the kind commonly seen in locker and rest rooms; and minimal amounts of dull-toned commercial carpeting. Critics feel the buildings are neutral at best, relentlessly banal at worst. Not all meetinghouses to be sure, but most of them.

The buildings are nonetheless important emotionally to ward members. That is managed in a rather interesting way. Formerly a community actually built its chapel. Today, of course, a building contractor is hired. The contractor is, however, given to understand that as much of the building will be built by the congregation as is technologically and legally possible. Even today that may include a great deal. Some money is saved that way, but more importantly, the idea of labor invested by a people in their own building is preserved. This facilitates a level of involvement and personal identity otherwise unlikely in so expressionless a building. They paint, put up ceiling tiles, plaster, hammer and clean up. They landscape, make curtains and so on. Things that require labor, not skill, care, not craftsmanship. Their accomplishment is not demonstrated in carved woodwork, intricately painted ceilings, feathered oak pews, finials, towers or a dozen other ways of hand-crafting structures designed to last forever.

Instead you can find the accomplishments of ward members represented in the lobby display case where trophies for everything from basketball championships to speech awards line the shelves. The positive emotions evoked by the trophies are, it is important to note, not tied to the church building, but to the movable objects that are universally recognized tokens of accomplishment.

Human energy and emotions are tied up in a Mormon building today. No mistaking that. But they are not tied up in ways that are visible, immovable parts of the building. Accomplishment is demonstrated in the transitory, even traveling, trophy—a symbol that ceases to mean anything specific to anyone a decade after it is won.

Deliberate Neutrality

The whole rationale for undistinguished buildings is not clear, but a few factors seem to be clearly related to the pattern. Not only is the Mormon population growing at a tremendous rate, but, like most Americans, Mormons are highly mobile. No longer tied religiously to a Great Basin Zion as the necessary and preferable place to live, they are spread across the world in varying degrees of density. With many conversions and high mobility, the membership of a ward is continually in flux.

Today the group who builds a chapel is never exactly the same group who uses it after it is built. In fact the group is always changing. Yet the building stands

for the people who use it as well as for the people who built it. So the means for personalizing a Mormon building lie in its familiarity of design for the newcomer. This allows for less confusion of identities and easier transference of emotions from one ward chapel to the next. The religion is the same, the activities are the same, the attitudes are the same; why not have the same buildings? Once inside, a Mormon can see in the new building the area where he performed some construction task in the one he left and he can see how the same job was done by some other Mormon.

The uniformity protects the mobile population from jarring discontinuity in symbols and activity. The plain and neutral decor is as undisturbing to live with as it is easy for the lay-builder to execute, and it is equally easy to leave. When a Mormon moves, he can be fairly certain his new ward will present no jolting adjustment. The people will be different, but the organizations and the chapel will be the same. As one Mormon put it, "Coming upon a Mormon meetinghouse in a strange town is like finding your favorite food franchise when you are traveling. Once you've located the church and Colonel Sanders it's as if you never left home."

Deliberate Disposability

The neutrality of design works not only for the emotional calm of a Mormon leaving his ward, but also for the calm of a ward replacing its building. Now, when a ward's needs change, the abandonment of the old meetinghouse cannot represent flagrant disregard for the symbols of the accomplishments for a whole generation of Mormons. Trophies won years ago in some forgotten contest can be moved and the personal labor performed on some inconspicuous part of the old building will be represented in whatever inconspicuous building replaces it. There will be no smashing of imported glass, breaking up of carved woodwork, pulling apart hand hewn beams, or pushing over walls of hand polished bricks. It is all much more neutral, much more replaceable.

To the extent that is practical and feasible, Mormons have produced the disposable building. It can be easily abandoned by the family who moves away or by the entire ward whose requirements have changed. This is a building philosophy only now being suggested by some experimental schools of architecture. Japanese Metabolists⁴ and the British Archigram groups⁵ believe that the best strategy should involve buildings put up to suit an immediate purpose and which can be disposed of with a minimum of effort and expense when that purpose no longer exists. The purpose may last a long time so the building need not be shoddy. But if society changes its preferences, then why should it be stuck with a useless monument to its past?

If this philosophy fits, it must be admitted there is a prominent exception to it. The Church is not thinking about demolishing the major buildings on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. Apparently it has never even been considered. The Square is the center of the city, the center of Mormondom. It is the Church's history in the West. The towers of the temple are iconographically significant to the Church and the pioneer history of the West. The major buildings in the Square—the temple, tabernacle and assembly hall—are classic nineteenth century structures. The temple, although unique in many ways, is clearly Victorian as is the assembly hall. The tabernacle defies classification, but does not come across as modern.

Here then are all these antique buildings laden with history and emotion, reminiscent of a heroic past. If the Church sponsors disposable architecture, what is it doing about these monuments to its own past? Shouldn't they be torn down? Or altered?

The latter is what has been done. During the 1960s the Church renovated Temple Square. The temple was sandblasted to remove all the stains and weathering of the last eighty years. A new promenade was constructed across the short axis of the Square running between the tabernacle, to which the visitor has easy access, and the high cement wall enclosing the temple. At one end of the wide walkway a large visitors' center was built. The promenade can be called a swath of mid-twentieth century laid across the traditional symbols of Mormonism. A piece of Southern California landscaping in downtown Salt Lake.

In the middle of all this is a flagpole—a single tall pole. At its base and set into the wall separating visitors from the temple are four plaques inscribed with quotes from the Bible and Book of Mormon. But there is this flagpole. You look up at it. There is the American flag flying high enough to share the sky with the pinnacles of the temple. With the quintessential symbol of America fluttering before the purest symbol of Mormonism, the identities of the two become fused. Here the Mormons have taken what stood for all that was particular, peculiar, unique—even loudly anti-American at one point in its history—and attempted to turn it into a piece of Americana.

While the Coalville tabernacle was completely eradicated, the Salt Lake temple had only the first eighty years eradicated. The sandblasting removed the masons' chisel marks, including the personal names that many of the stonecutters had lightly chiseled on the surface of the granite blocks. In the process of Americanization, the hand-hewn surface of the temple and the personality of the generation that defied America to build it have been smoothed beyond recognition.

Using history and architecture, Mormons take the data of the past and its monuments and disguise them both. The past is infinitely reinterpreted. The monuments are either demolished or renovated—not restored. For the most part, the concrete symbols of Mormon architecture are neutral and disposable. It is not just that nineteenth century buildings have been replaced by new ones in the twentieth century. It is that anything created now is created with the anticipation that it will soon be changed into something else.

NOTES

¹Wallace Turner, "Mormons Are Distressed By Razing of a 92-Year-Old Tabernacle," *New York Times*, March 14, 1971, 3:58.

Gary D. Forbush, Preservation Director of the Utah State Historical Society, and Hanno Weber of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Princeton University, have provided much assistance and advice in the research and writing of this essay.

²Anonymous, "The Coalville Tabernacle: A Point of View," *Dialogue*, 5 (Winter 1970), 50.

³See Robin Evans, "Bentham's Panopticon: An Incident in the Social History of Architecture," *Architectural Association Quarterly*, (April-June 1971), 21-37; and Robin Evans, "The Rights of Retreat and the Rights of Exclusion: Notes Toward the Definition of Wall," *Architectural Design*, 41 (1971), 335-39.

⁴See Gunter Nitschke, "Tokyo 1964," *Architectural Design*, 34 (1964), 481-508; and "The Metabolists of Japan," *Architectural Design*, 34 (1964), 509-524.

⁵See Peter Cook, *Architecture: Action and Plan* (London: Studio Vista Ltd., 1967); Peter Cook, "Control-and-Choice Living," in David Lewis, ed., *Urban Structure* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968); and David Greene and Michael Webb, "Drive-in Housing: A Proposition," in *Urban Structure*.