

A JEWEL IN THE GARDENS OF PARADISE:  
THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE HAWAIIAN TEMPLE

by Paul L. Anderson

For 70 years, the Hawaiian Temple has stood like a timeless vision of paradise, white and gleaming, between the emerald mountains and the sapphire sea. Some awestruck visitors have seen in its noble form and lush gardens a resemblance to the Taj Mahal or some other wonder of the ancient world. However, for those of us whose lifelong familiarity with the building came from handsome and exotic color photographs in Church magazines, the immediate reaction upon approaching the temple in person for the first time is surprise--we are amazed to realize how small it is.

This dismay at the diminutive size of the structure is completely appropriate. The temple is small. Before the additions of recent years it was even smaller--a tiny pearl in a vast tropical setting. The building's size makes its monumental architectural presence all the more remarkable. The architects, builders, gardeners and artists somehow managed to endow this structure with an aura of dignity and grandeur that transcended its modest dimensions to express its greater symbolic and spiritual importance. A comparison with the Provo Temple illustrates the success of this building in appearing to be larger than life. Although the two buildings seem similar in size when seen from afar, the Hawaiian Temple as originally constructed was actually only one-tenth as large. Even with its considerable modern additions, it is roughly the same size as the smallest of the new standard-plan temples which appear far smaller and less monumental. For those of us who are interested in how sacred places are created, places with a feeling of holiness and significance, the Hawaiian Temple would seem to have valuable lessons to teach.

The story of the creation of this wonderfully evocative building and the remarkable people who created it is fascinating and at times surprising. The characters in this story span virtually the whole sweep of Mormon history. When President Joseph F. Smith proposed its erection, he was approaching 80 years of age. Some of the designers and artists he called upon to realize his vision were young enough to be his great-grandchildren. The prophet, born in Missouri, raised in Nauvoo, orphaned at Carthage, and matured on the trail to Utah, employed people on this project who would live into the 1980s. At least one of the major contributors is still alive today.

Although the temple had its beginnings in 1914, many of the basic conceptions that shaped its form go back decades farther. When a temple in the Sandwich Islands was proposed to the membership of the Church in October conference of that year, there were just four active temples in the Church. All were in Utah, and all had been begun by Brigham Young. These structures were arguably the finest artistic achievements of Mormon pioneer times. Despite poverty, isolation, and persecution, the Latter-day Saints had built magnificent monuments to their faith and perseverance. The massive stone walls and graceful towers evoked both the strength of castles and the aspiration of cathedrals, two popular images in nineteenth century European and American architecture. Their interiors gave literal form to the phrase "House of the Lord," with rooms

decorated like the great halls of a royal palace. All of these buildings had been originally planned as "meetinghouse temples," composed principally of two large meeting rooms, one above the other. In the late 1870s, however, shortly after Brigham Young's death, there was a major change in temple planning. Church leaders accepted the idea of replacing the lower of the two assembly rooms with a series of impressive ordinance rooms for the presentation of the endowment. Worshippers would move through five rooms during the ceremony. Some of these rooms were ornamented with murals that provided appropriate settings for various parts of the sacred rituals. The exteriors of the buildings, which had already been designed when the new interior plan was adopted, did not express this more complicated arrangement. Their rows of windows and mouldings continued to imply that the temples were composed of two large rooms, much like the earliest temples at Kirtland and Nauvoo.

The Salt Lake Temple, the first of the Utah temples to be started in 1853, was the last to be finished forty years later in 1893. Its completion coincided with the end of an era in Church history: the passing of the founding generation of pioneers and leaders, the virtual closing of the frontier, the official discontinuation of plural marriage, and the emergence of Utah from isolation to statehood. In the two decades that followed, as Utah and the Church entered the American cultural mainstream, Mormon architecture reflected an attempt to define an acceptable and progressive image for the Church in this very different world. Meetinghouses appeared with elements taken from a wide variety of styles, ranging from Gothic towers and Byzantine arches to Greek columns and Renaissance domes. On the block next to Temple Square, work began on a complex of administrative buildings clothed in fashionable corporate classicism, respectable as a government, and solid as a bank.

In 1912, in the midst of this period of renewed confidence and prosperity, Church leaders announced their plan to build a new temple, the first to be begun in 35 years, to stand in Southern Alberta, Canada. For the design for the first temple in the new century, they would seek the advice of all the leading architects of the Church--there would be an architectural competition. Of the fourteen architectural firms originally involved, seven actually submitted drawings in December 1912. These drawings, submitted anonymously to insure fairness in judging, were put on public display in the new Bishop's Building. The First Presidency and Presiding Bishopric announced the winner in the Deseret Evening News of 1 January 1913.<sup>1</sup> They passed over several pinnacled miniatures of the Salt Lake Temple to choose a daringly modern design instead, the work of young Salt Lake architects Hyrum Pope, a German immigrant 32 years old, and Harold Burton, a Salt Lake City-born son of English immigrants, just 25 years old. Their partnership was just three years old at the time, and this was their first major commission.

The winning design for the Canadian temple was a new architectural concept. Church leaders, seeking to avoid needless expense, had recommended against large towers and spires. They also decided that a large assembly room was no longer needed.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the four major ordinance rooms and the celestial room became the largest spaces in the building, and their arrangement could shape its ultimate form. As designer Harold Burton pondered this situation, he arrived at a brilliant architectural composition that was perfectly logical and simple. The four ordinance rooms would be arranged around the center like the spokes of a wheel, each one a few steps higher than the one before, with the Celestial Room in the center at the very top of the building. The Baptismal font would be in

the center of the lower level, directly below the Celestial Room. A person participating in a temple session would pass through all four of the ordinance rooms in an ascending spiral. Finally, he would pass into the central Celestial Room, a tall space with light coming down from high windows above the roofs of the other rooms. On the exterior, the four ordinance rooms would form four arms of a cross, each arm pointing in one of the cardinal directions, with the higher Celestial room providing a suggestion of a tower in the center. Minor wings projected diagonally between the major wings, accommodating stairs and rest rooms. The pyramid-shaped silhouette of the building would appear strong and dignified from all angles. Its complete symmetry would allow it to look out over the Alberta prairies equally in all directions.

For the architectural style of the building, the architects blended the influence of the modern American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, with elements of ancient American ruins.<sup>3</sup> Both of the temple's architects were familiar with Wright's pioneering buildings in and around Chicago. Pope had probably seen some of them while working in that city, and both he and Burton studied them in architectural publications. The overall form of the temple bore a strong resemblance to Wright's Unity Temple, a much-admired Unitarian church in a Chicago suburb designed a few years earlier. Moreover, the temple's tall narrow windows and some ornamental details seem directly borrowed from Wright's Larkin Building in Buffalo, New York, another of his best known early works. However, Pope and Burton combined these elements in a compact monumental form that recalled Pre-Columbian temples. Shaped somewhat like a stepped pyramid, and placed on a raised terrace surrounded by retaining walls, the Alberta Temple possessed some of the grandeur of an ancient shrine.

The striking appearance of the temple and the acceptance of its modern style by Church leaders made it a very influential building among Latter-day Saint architects. In addition to Pope and Burton, perhaps a dozen other architectural firms designed Mormon meetinghouses in a similar style over the next decade and a half. This important commission established Pope and Burton among the leading architects of the Church.

When President Joseph F. Smith returned from Hawaii in 1914 to announce his decision to build another temple there, he turned again to Pope and Burton to serve as architects. He asked them to design a smaller version of the Alberta Temple for the site on the Church plantation at Laie. Their design was ready for publication early in 1915.

Although the general arrangement of the Hawaiian Temple was similar to the successful layout for Alberta, the architects did much more than create a miniature of their earlier design. For one thing, good building stone was not easily available in the Islands, so they chose to build with exposed reinforced concrete. For aggregate in the concrete, they would use a local crushed volcanic rock. The exterior surface would be cleaned and tooled to a rather smooth texture with a creamy white color. The whole building would thus be monolithic in appearance like an object carved out of a single piece of stone. Ornamental cornices would be cast in place from molds in the structural formwork, making even these details integral with the building's walls. This was a very progressive building technique for the time, particularly in such a remote location. Frank Lloyd Wright had pioneered this system for his Unitarian church in Chicago less than ten years earlier.

The plan of the temple was a simplified version of the Alberta design. The ordinance rooms accommodating 50 people each, about half the size of those at Alberta, remained the principal wings of a Greek cross (a cross with four equal arms). However, where there had been diagonal minor wings in Alberta, the Hawaiian plan replaced them with smaller square elements. This change had the effect of giving the building a more traditional appearance, like a Greek or Roman temple with a flat facade. The Alberta Temple had been perfectly suited to a site in the midst of a flat prairie--the Hawaiian Temple was suited instead to a site with a definite back against the mountains and front looking out over the sea. Its flat facade could form the termination of a series of gardens and terraces arranged symmetrically along a formal axis.

In its architectural style, the Hawaiian Temple reflected many of the same influences as the Alberta design. It bore an even stronger resemblance to Wright's Unity Temple in its more rectilinear form and flat roofs. Its flat concrete walls and lines of cast ornament also had much the same feeling as Wright's "Hollyhock House" in Los Angeles, a building almost exactly contemporary with the Hawaiian Temple. More than the Alberta Temple, it also borrowed rather literally from elements of Pre-Columbian American architecture. Perhaps traditional Book of Mormon connections with Polynesia reinforced the appropriateness of this borrowing. Like some of the handsome engravings in the architects' reference book by Stevens and Catherwood, the temple stood on an elevated platform approached along a symmetrical axis. The decorative frieze at the top of the temple with three separate carved panels, as shown in the first published drawing, seems to have been directly taken from one of these engravings of a building from ancient Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

For its interior, the temple also borrowed ideas from antiquity to increase its feeling of monumentality. The concrete walls along the corridors connecting the ordinance rooms were scored to look as if they were made of huge blocks of stone. As a result, the rather small passageways and stairs suggest the feeling that they are part of a huge, solid structure, like tunnels through the great pyramids.

When the architectural designs were refined and plans were completed, construction began under the general direction of Hawaiian Church leader Samuel E. Wooley and the supervision of his son Ralph Wooley. Several talented Utah artists were brought into the process to enrich and ornament the well-conceived architectural scheme. Two artists who made important contributions in this regard were J. Leo Fairbanks, aged 28, already a well-established painter and sculptor, and his precocious younger brother, Avarad Fairbanks, just 18 years old. Both were sons of noted Utah painter J. B. Fairbanks. Leo had studied both painting and sculpture at Columbia, the University of Chicago, and in Paris. Best known for the "crisp, bright style" of his paintings, he eventually became the head of the Art Department at Oregon State University. Avarad, the tenth child in the family, had been recognized early as an artistic prodigy, studying with the New York Art Students League at 13 and becoming, a few years later, the youngest artist ever to exhibit work at the prestigious Paris Salon. He had a long and distinguished career as Utah's best-known realist sculptor and head of the University of Utah's art department. They were assisted by a talented young sculptor from Norway, Torlief Knaphus, aged 35, who worked under their direction and helped to carry out their designs. The Fairbanks brothers were commissioned to do sculpture work for the temple in the fall of 1916. By the following summer, they had worked out the designs for much of their work. Avarad had

already been in Hawaii several months working on the baptismal font when Leo joined him in July, 1917, bringing his new wife with him on a working honeymoon. Avard's fiance also came to Hawaii to be married and assist her husband in his work.

The sculpture work executed by young Avard is quite astonishing in its expressive quality for one so young. The oxen for the baptismal font appear dignified, strong, and lifelike in their movements, perhaps the best ever executed for a temple. Their harmonious integration with the architects' design for the font gives the whole composition a marvelously unified sense of religious solemnity. The bas-relief panel at the head of the reflecting pools titled "Maternity" is another sensitive and mature work. It depicts a Polynesian mother figure surrounded by children, holding a shell that is the source of water, and therefore life, for the temple gardens--a poetic and symbolically appropriate composition. The model for the mother was a faithful local Hawaiian member.

The sculpture friezes on the upper portion of the temple's exterior were the most ambitious of the brothers' works. The original design for the temple had shown three separate panels in this location on each side of the building, with their subjects to be taken from Church history. However, Leo and Avard made a different proposal, larger in size and theme. They received approval to create four long horizontal panels, one for each side of the building, composed of 130 figures from the Old Testament, New Testament, Book of Mormon, and early LDS history. These figures were executed in high relief, in the style of Greek and Roman sculpture that had become popular for Victorian public buildings and monuments. This important change to the exterior design of the temple increased its classical feeling in contrast to the more geometrically modern Canadian temple. The deep shadows from the tropical sun made the sculpture panels easy to distinguish even at a distance. The two brothers worked together with Knaphus through July and August on the full sized models of these panels. Leo returned to Utah in September, leaving Avard to supervise their casting in concrete and their installation. The small design models for the friezes were placed in the temple chapel, and later cast and displayed opposite the visitors center on the temple grounds. During their time in Laie, both J. Leo Fairbanks and Knaphus painted scenes of the local landscape, a few of which are now part of the LDS Church museum collection.

The story of painting the temple murals is a rather complicated one with mixed elements of tragedy, frustration, and success. The commission for murals in the three ordinance rooms was first given in 1916 to Fritzof E. Weberg, a 44-year-old Norwegian-born artist. He was a convert to the church, baptized in Norway at age 26 in 1899. His artistic talents had come to the attention of Church leaders after his immigration to Utah. He had completed painting the creation room murals in the Salt Lake Temple not long before being invited to work in Hawaii. His realistic and dramatic landscape style reflected his European training. Utah painter Lewis A. Ramsey was also commissioned by the Church to go to Hawaii to assist Weberg. Ramsey, 41 years old, had studied in Paris along with J. Leo Fairbanks in 1902 and 1903 and had established himself in Utah as a skilled landscape and portrait painter. The contract he signed with the Church to assist Weberg reflected the likelihood that collaboration with the older artist might not be easy. It stated that "it is absolutely imperative that [Ramsey] work in harmony with F. E. Weberg and that [his work] . . . be done under the immediate direction of and to the entire satisfaction of said F. E. Weberg."<sup>5</sup> En route to Hawaii with Weberg, Ramsey quickly discovered that working

harmoniously would be difficult indeed. Weberg was irrational at times, subject to wide swings of mood and uncontrolled outbursts of temper. According to Ramsey's wife, while they and Weberg were visiting a volcano, Weberg became enraged over sharing some sketching materials and seemed on the verge of violence.<sup>6</sup>

The situation was serious enough for the Hawaiian mission leaders to cable the First Presidency on 2 January 1917 for instructions. They wrote that Weberg was "at times very disgruntled at Church" and "says [he] can't work with Utah people," and that he was willing to complete the paintings "but not as a member of the Church." The reply from Salt Lake was short and clear: "Send Weberg home."<sup>7</sup> A follow-up letter authorized Ramsey to complete the contract "as though nothing had happened." Some bitter feelings resulted from this unfortunate incident, with Weberg making accusations about Ramsey, and Ramsey being obliged to defend himself. Three years later, an Ogden judge declared Weberg insane and committed him to the Provo Mental Hospital.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, Ramsey felt that this experience may have resulted in his being passed over for future temple commissions, while Weberg, apparently recovered, received the commission for the Creation Room in the Mesa Temple five years later.

In January and February, Ramsey developed new sketches for the murals. He completed all three rooms before returning home early in the summer. Some photographs of these murals have survived through the years in Ramsey's scrapbook.<sup>9</sup> In the murals for the Creation and Garden of Eden Rooms, the ocean and tropical foliage suggest local Hawaiian scenery. For the lone and dreary world, however, the scene shifted to the Rocky Mountains, complete with deer and bears. Sadly, the murals were as ill-fated as the artists' relationship. According to a family history, Ramsey had recommended against mounting the canvas for the murals directly on the walls, fearing moisture problems, but was overruled. His fears proved to be justified. Barely completed, the murals began to deteriorate from moisture and mold.

Architects Pope and Burton arrived to inspect the progress on the temple in the summer of 1917. With Weberg and Ramsey gone and the murals deteriorating, they had a major problem to solve. Moreover, according to one account, the architects were not completely satisfied with the appearance of the murals and their relationship to the architecture of the rooms. They decided to remove them all and start again along different lines.

Providentially, another talented artist appeared on the scene at the right moment. A young elder 24 years old named LeConte Stewart had recently arrived in the Hawaiian Mission. Already an accomplished painter, he had received excellent training at the New York Art Student's League. During his ocean voyage and his spare moments in Hawaii, Stewart painted some charming views of the ocean and the islands. LeConte had met Harold Burton in Salt Lake City before his mission, and now had the chance to renew his acquaintance. According to Stewart, Burton watched him paint some children playing on the Laie beach and was impressed with his ability. The two talented young men spent hours talking about artistic philosophy and found that they thought much alike. Burton recommended that Stewart be placed in charge of the interior painting and other decorative work.<sup>10</sup>

In collaboration with the architects, LeConte prepared miniature sketches for new creation room murals, a series of long narrow panels framed in moldings

rather than filling the whole walls. This decorative approach integrated the paintings with the horizontal moldings around the room in a manner similar to interiors by Frank Lloyd Wright and some contemporary European modern architects. Stewart made a model of the creation room with these murals and sent it off to the First Presidency for approval. In several weeks he received word to proceed. Eventually he completed the Creation and Garden Rooms, and assisting in selecting carpets, furniture, and paint colors for the interior of the temple. With his missionary status changed, he received permission for his fiancee to come to Hawaii to join him. They two were married and the new bride began teaching second grade in the Church school. In later years, Stewart also painted murals in the Alberta and Mesa Temples and pursued a distinguished career as a landscape painter and art teacher. He served for many years as chairman of the Art Department at the University of Utah, and, well into his 90s today, is still considered the dean of Utah landscape painters.

The style of Stewart's murals was different from Weberg and Ramsey's earlier work. Stewart had learned the impressionist technique, pioneered in France by Monet, Renoir, and Seurat. Like the French and American impressionist masters, Stewart sometimes used small brushstrokes of unblended pure colors to build up his images, thus imparting to them a shimmering quality --a technique called pointilism. He used this technique particularly well in the creation murals, where the unfocused effect of broken brushstrokes in the early panels of the earth in the process of formation give way to more detailed and realistic depictions of the later events of creation. The larger and lush paintings in Garden Room depict a paradise that resembles the hardwood forests of the Eastern states where LeConte had studied landscape painting.

Meanwhile, back in Salt Lake City, Church leaders arranged for Alma B. Wright, professor of art at the LDS University, to go to Hawaii to assist on the mural work. Wright at 41 was the same age as Ramsey. He had been studying in Paris at the same time as Ramsey and Leo Fairbanks. During that time, Wright had been honored by having some of his work displayed in the Paris salon. In Utah he had become best known for his portraits.

In Hawaii, Wright painted in the World Room and the baptistry. His murals of the "lone and dreary world" were done in a hard-lined style quite different from Stewart's work. They depict broken, rocky mountains, storm-swept landscapes, gnarled trees, and wild beasts in combat. Some of the background areas have a softer, more impressionistic feeling, suggesting Stewart's assistance or retouching of those places. Wright's six paintings in the arches of the baptistry depict gospel principles and ordinances in a colorful illustration style.

The completed ordinance rooms were carpeted with heavy velvet pile rugs; the windows were draped with Japanese silk. Unpolished oak moldings ornamented most of the major rooms. One of the sealing rooms was panelled in precious Hawaiian koa wood.<sup>11</sup> The high windows in the Celestial room were leaded in a geometric pattern in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright. Elder Rudger Clawson penned a description of the Celestial room:

The furniture for the temple was made in Salt Lake City to the architects' designs by Fetzer Furniture, a company recently founded by Caspar Fetzer, an German convert to the Church. In keeping with the temple's architecture, the chairs and tables were straight and geometric like the furniture of Frank Lloyd

Wright and other modernists. The furniture was made of oak to match the architectural woodwork, with some contrasting wood inlays on more prominent pieces. This furniture must have complemented the architecture in a sophisticated harmony that has been lost in later years as the furniture has been replaced with more massive, elaborate, and colorful pieces, and the oak moldings have been painted.

Not long after the dedication of the temple, Caspar Fetzer met President Grant on the street in Salt Lake City and asked how he liked the temple furniture. President Grant solemnly intoned, "Caspar, you made a terrible mistake." Horrified, Fetzer offered to correct any problems, when President Grant explained, "When the Polynesian sisters sit in the arm chairs and get up, the chairs come with them." He laughed heartily and walked on down the street leaving Brother Fetzer shaken but relieved.<sup>12</sup>

Visiting Laie today, it is easy to forget that this area has not always been covered with lush tropical foliage. Photographs of the Church plantation show much of the land in cultivation, mostly in sugar cane, with the foothills rather barren. As the temple took shape in this vast open landscape, it must have looked small and lonely. While the architects were visiting the construction site in the summer of 1917, they worked out their designs for the temple grounds. Their grand conception of the temple as the climax of an arrangement of terraces, reflecting pools, waterfalls, and tropical plantings arranged along a formal axis was one of their most powerful ideas--a conception that would take many years of patient care to realize completely. From the driveway and gatehouses at the lower end of the site to the delicate fern houses and pergola behind the temple, everything was composed in a unified symmetrical scheme. In selecting the plants, they had the assistance of Mr. Joseph F. Rock, botanist of the College of Hawaii, who volunteered his services. Mr. Rock had travelled extensively, visiting the exotic gardens of India among other places, and contributed his expertise in tropical plant selection. The lawns were planted from small starts by the missionaries and their wives on their hands and knees.

The enduring value of the temple builders' work is evident in the temple's continuing ability to inspire awe and admiration through the decades. Its classical style achieved a kind of timelessness that has not gone out of fashion. As the gardens have matured and the outbuildings have expanded, the temple has continued to dominate its surroundings. Architect Harold Burton returned to Hawaii in the 1960s [?] to design the expanded visitor center facilities, preserving the strict symmetry of the gardens through the extravagant device of balancing the portico of the large visitors center building with an equally large portico to an open courtyard on the opposite side. The great axis of the garden from the temple to the sea received its logical completion with the construction of the boulevard down to Temple Beach. The basic idea of placing the temple at the climax of an axial composition proved to be strong enough to allow for change and growth as the plantation buildings and fields disappeared and a town grew up in their place.

The temple and its grounds demonstrate the spiritual power of an artistic vision. This small building might have been an insignificant structure lost in the development of later years. However, the quality of its design, the artistic success of its decorations, and the beauty and arrangement of its gardens have all combined to make it a memorable landmark for both Church and state. It is



a kind of artistic miracle that in this remote place at a time when few Latter-day Saints lived outside of the Great Basin, the temple builders were able to make this smallest of temples into a fitting symbol of their grandest spiritual hopes and ideals--a vision of harmony and completeness in the gardens of paradise.

#### NOTES ON THE TEXT

- 1 "Approved Design for Temple in Alberta Province," Deseret Evening News, 1 January 1913.
- 2 "Diary," Presiding Bishop's Office, No. 4, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MSS, Presiding Bishopric Journals, 1912, pp. 26-27.
- 3 Letter, Harold W. Burton to Randolph W. Linehan, 20 May 1969, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MSS.
- 4 John Lloyd Stephens, Incidents of travel in Yucatan (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858).
- 5 "Agreement" between L. A. Ramsey and Joseph F. Smith, 8 November 1916, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MSS.
- 6 Letter, Elizabeth Ramsey to David O. McKay, 11 June 1941, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MSS.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 "Artist Adjudged Insane" Salt Lake Tribune, 26 March 1920.
- 9 Lewis A. Ramsey Scrapbook, c. 1940, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MSS.
- 10 Zipporah Layton Stewart, "A Labor of Love," 1978, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MSS.
- 11 The koa wood panelling, mentioned in early descriptions of the temple, was apparently removed when this sealing room was combined with an adjacent room to make a single larger space.
- 12 Conversation of author with Percy Fetzer in Salt Lake City, about 1986.