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Building Zion: The Material World of Mormon Settlement

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Thomas Carter. *Building Zion: The Material World of Mormon Settlement*.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Steven L. Olsen

I have waited my whole career to review for publication a book as good as *Building Zion: The Material World of Mormon Settlement*. At the same time, Tom Carter, an emeritus professor of architectural history at the University of Utah's College of Architecture and Planning, took his whole career to write a book this good. Would that *all* academic careers had such a worthy capstone! *Building Zion* examines the architecture and building efforts among early Utah settlers in Sanpete County and elsewhere, and it explores what these material structures say about the settlers' deepest religious impulses, including their concepts of Zion.

And yet the book is so much more than that. I consider *Building Zion* eminently worthy of recognition among Mormon scholars and interested readers for at least the following six reasons:

Interdisciplinary analytical framework. In order to explore "The Material World of Mormon Settlement"—a tall order, indeed—Carter crafts an ambitious, interpretive framework from such diverse academic disciplines as history, architecture, cultural anthropology, material culture studies, town and land use planning, cultural geography, folklore, and religious studies. His mastery of these disciplines and his deftness of their integration allow him to explicate in a sensitive and authentic manner the complex and multidimensional relationship of Mormon pioneers to their physical settings. Besides the numerous expected references to the leading relevant scholars of Mormonism, Carter relies heavily on such diverse and respected scholars of the material world as Pierre Bordieu, Peter Berger, Peter Burke, Mircea Eliade, John Gager, Henry Glassie, D. W. Meinig, R. Laurence Moore, John Repts, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Dell Upton, to name a few.

Comprehensive scope. Carter's work is concerned with all aspects of the physical environment of the Latter-day Saints of Sanpete County,

Utah: landforms, fields and farms, town placement and layout, residential and work patterns, public and domestic architecture, construction materials and methods, productive and decorative landscaping, and personal possessions. The book contains nearly two hundred photographs, line drawings, plats, maps, renderings, tables, and other figures that richly illustrate the diversity and complexity of the Mormon material world on display in Sanpete County.

Of all possible aspects of the Mormon material world, the idea of personal possession plays the least central role in Carter's study. The author neither denies nor marginalizes the practical benefits of Mormonism's material world; rather, he emphasizes the meaningful coherence of the material world with Mormon identity and solidarity. Many studies of Mormon settlement and Mormon material culture emphasize the practical benefits of such traditional practices—distributing settlers on the landscape, managing natural resources, providing a permanent basis for shelter and other physical needs, and so on. Carter is more concerned with how the same set of activities and practices expresses a sense of the special identity of the Latter-day Saints—as a covenant and blessed people of God, as exemplary stewards of God's footstool, as members of Christ's true Church, as agents of Christ's Second Coming, and so on. Illustrating the symbolic significance of such seemingly practical activities strengthens the theoretical foundations of Carter's study.

Furthermore, while Carter acknowledges that other geographical regions of Mormon settlement necessarily provide important variations on the general theme, the book's subtitle implies that Sanpete County serves as an effective, but not exclusive, microcosm of nineteenth-century Mormon culture. Indeed, *Building Zion* itself is a model and microcosm for how other studies should be conceived and conducted.

Following a general introduction that summarizes the study's theoretical perspective in a thorough and academically defensible yet intellectually accessible manner, Carter devotes a chapter to eight different dimensions of the general theme. The chapter titles use intriguing phrases such as "Faith and Works," "Settlement Matrix," "According to Need," "Frontier Fashion," "Polygamy and Patriarchy," "Business as Usual," "Meetinghouses," and "Mansion on the Hill." In subtle yet compelling ways, these complementary investigations demonstrate the relevance of the Mormon material world to such aspects of society as kinship, religion, economics, politics, social relations, daily life, and aesthetics.

Cultural sensitivity. To get at the heart of the Mormon material world, Carter must transcend the overly simplistic material/spiritual or

practical/symbolic dichotomies that characterize so many traditional academic studies of the empirical environment. While he does not categorically reject the relevance of such dichotomies for religious studies, he recognizes far more nuanced concepts within Mormon culture. For example, Carter acknowledges that the Mormon material world is so spiritual, and the Mormon spiritual world so material, that the two cannot be understood in isolation from each other, in either ideology or praxis. For example, the introductory quote to the opening chapter that lays out Carter's interpretive framework comes from a May 20, 1883, sermon given by Church President John Taylor at a stake conference in Sanpete: "When [we] talk about spiritual things and temporal things we talk about a distinction without a difference" (1).

Diverse sources. Carter marshals three major and diverse types of evidence to support his argument.

- Primary historical sources, including journals, diaries, letters, and day books of early residents; municipal records; local newspapers and documentary histories; photographs; plats and maps; and a plethora of LDS Church records, including meeting minutes, texts of sermons, and scriptures
- Secondary sources, representing the standard scholarship of both Mormon studies and the various academic disciplines that influenced his analytical framework
- On-site fieldwork, which enables Carter to (1) learn firsthand about the Mormon material world from the living descendants of Sanpete pioneers and (2) collect crucial evidence of this material world that exists in no other source. Many of the photographs and fine illustrations of his study result from his own extensive fieldwork in Sanpete County.

Carter demonstrates throughout his work considerable mastery of and facility with each source type, weaving them together into a compelling scholarly argument. In doing so, the study preserves a delicate balance between thoroughly documenting his various points and keeping his audience engaged with their analytical exposition. I was particularly pleased with the amount and kinds of supplemental information contained in the captions of the numerous figures and with the occasional editorial comments that accompany the endnotes.

Diachronic perspective. While Carter is aware of the forces for change that result from persistent tensions between Mormonism and the outside world (see fig. C.2, p. 276), he chooses in this study to focus instead

on the inherent dynamics within Mormonism itself. Thus, his study manifests an ever-present appreciation of the transformative forces among the communities of his principal study area and between local (Sanpete) and corporate (LDS) expressions of Mormon identity. Of particular value is Carter's recognition of the transformation over time of three dominant sacred narratives of the Latter-day Saints: the coming millennium, the nature of continuing revelation, and the "gospel of works" (summarized on 277–78). Carter further recognizes that sensitive diachronic studies such as his may reveal important nuanced differences in religious concepts over time within the same faith community and among different faith communities.¹

Affection for his subject. Carter's intellectual prowess and rhetorical proficiency are equally yoked with his genuine and abiding affection for his subject—the land and the people of Sanpete County. That the people of Sanpete County reciprocate so well their affection is a testament to the genuineness of Carter's academic objectives, scholarly insights, and human qualities. This is not to say that Carter is naïve to local tensions and oblivious to instances in which empirical realities do not reflect cultural ideals. Rather, such inconsistencies are considered to be part of the cultural reality that deserves explanation, not judgment, in terms of the same analytical framework that accounts for all of the other relevant data.²

In short, Carter makes a major contribution to the rich literature on the "Mormon Culture Region" in the American West and demonstrates in the process not only its material distinctiveness and cultural significance but also its persistent and dynamic features. *Building Zion* illustrates that the Mormon pioneers were not just finding a place to live in the American West; they were "Building Zion," the concept of which is not only powerful for the practitioners at every point in the historic past but also necessarily transformational over time. Thus, any empirical

1. As a result, it is incumbent upon students of lived religions not to assume that concepts behind such familiar words as *millennium*, *revelation*, *community*, *church*, *temple*, and so on have the same meaning when- and wherever they are used. In the end, practitioners decide by their usage the range of meaning for such words. In spite of their formal learning, scholars and other formal observers must show deference and respect to the "natives" if they are to come to true academic understanding about their subject.

2. Carter's discussion of Mormon ideologies of work and the resulting social organizations of production (64–92) is relevant to this issue.

study of Mormonism that does not build on this fundamental premise will likely fall short of its analytical potential.

Although the cultural landscape and material culture are not currently center stage among scholars of Mormonism, *Building Zion* deserves a prominent and abiding place on the bookshelves and in the classrooms of all who take seriously the academic study of the Latter-day Saints. Intellectually and rhetorically, the study is thorough and sophisticated. At the same time, *Building Zion* is also a distinct pleasure to read. *Chapeau, mon vieux!*

Steven L. Olsen received his PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago, and he has served as the senior curator and managing director of the Church History Department in Salt Lake City. He has long associations with the Religious Studies Center, Maxwell Institute, and BYU Studies, as well as serving in leadership positions of such professional organizations as Utah Humanities Council, American Society of Church History, Western Museums Association, Utah State Office of Museum Services, and Charles Redd Center for Western Studies.