Building the Kingdom of God: Mormon Architecture before 1847

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The first seventeen years of Mormonism — from its organization in 1830 until the entrance of the Mormon pioneers into the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 — have not received the attention they deserve in studies of Mormon architecture and planning. The period produced few “church” buildings, and the two major ecclesiastical buildings constructed during the period, the Kirtland and Nauvoo temples, were functionally very different from later Mormon buildings. Even the plan for the City of Zion in Missouri contained elements foreign to the Mormon village plan used in the colonization of the Great Basin.

In reality, this was a period of tremendous development in Mormon architecture as Church leaders struggled to find how to build the physical kingdom of God. The answers they found incorporated both their former building traditions and current Church doctrines. The period produced a number of buildings that mirrored evolving Church organization and doctrine, a model that became pervasive for nineteenth-century Mormon building, and a theory of architecture, which, while not entirely articulated, has influenced the design of Mormon buildings to the present. Mormon architectural theory and practice changed dramatically during these early years and by 1847 had produced the elements that served as the foundation for later Mormon architecture.

Mormon architecture of the early period reflected several Latter-day Saint beliefs. First, the concept of the gathering. Much Mormon architecture was based on the idea of a central gathering place or places. Buildings were therefore planned at first to accommodate the entire Church. When numbers increased in a locality to a point where division was necessary, buildings were planned for priesthood quorums, not wards or congregations. (Wards, after

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they were first organized in Nauvoo, were primarily temporal units focused on the care of the poor.)

Mormon building and planning during the period also illustrates the fusion of secular and spiritual. Community planning was directed toward spiritual goals. The "Mormon village" was designed to balance the social and spiritual advantages of a community of believers against the evils of large urban areas. Similarly, spiritual and secular functions took place in the same buildings, and Church meetings were held in a variety of locations, many of which were, from outward appearances, secular.

Mormon architecture in Kirtland and Nauvoo was a blend of secular and religious structures. Church meetings were held in private homes or at outdoor meeting sites (some of which, like the stand in Nauvoo, were highly developed, equipped with benches and an elevated stand or pulpit), as well as in public halls. There were, however, three types of buildings constructed during the period primarily for worship services. Together, these structures show the emergence of an interesting Church building pattern.

The first category of Church buildings was designed for general Church meetings and included the Kirtland and Nauvoo temples. The rapid growth of the Church made such structures too small even before they were completed. The Kirtland Temple, for example, could not hold the members who assembled for its dedication. The Nauvoo Temple was almost three times larger but was also too small before it was completed. Joseph Smith was later quoted as saying "that we may build as many houses as we would, and we should never get one big enough to hold the Saints." Church leaders did make one last attempt to build a large general building in 1845 when a canvas tabernacle 250 by 125 feet was approved. This structure had not been completed, however, when the decision was made to leave Nauvoo. The four thousand yards of canvas purchased for the tabernacle were not wasted, but joined the trek west as tents and wagon covers.

The second category of Church buildings, small chapels for outlying areas, came about by necessity and is not discussed as often in contemporary accounts. These chapels were patterned after small church buildings Mormons had known before they joined the LDS church and served as a pattern for chapels built in the West into the late nineteenth century. Such early chapels were built or planned for New Portage, Ohio; Pikesville and Norway, Illinois; Pueblo, Colorado (built by members of the sick detachment of the Mormon Battalion); and perhaps in several other towns as well. Some, such as the chapel in Pueblo, were built without general Church direction, while others, including those in New
Portage and Norway, seem to have been closely supervised by the general Church leadership.\(^7\)

Providing sheltered meeting places in populous communities such as Kirtland and Nauvoo was more difficult, and despite such ambitious projects as the canvas tabernacle, it was apparent that constructing larger and larger buildings could not provide the needed facilities as effectively as could a number of smaller structures. An examination of buildings constructed and planned during the period clearly illustrates that the Saints were beginning to be divided into smaller units for spiritual direction, including worship services. However, the system was based not upon geographical wards but upon priesthood quorums. Sunday worship in Nauvoo, for example, consisted of a general meeting at the open-air stand near the temple, weather permitting.\(^8\) Additional meetings were held in a number of indoor locations ranging from the Masonic Hall and Concert Hall to private homes.\(^9\)

That pattern was changed with the construction of the Seventies Hall, the first example of the third category of Church buildings. The seventies, one of the major priesthood groups or quorums, began to hold Sunday worship services in addition to presidency meetings and meetings of individual quorums. The meetings were often attended by family members although it is not clear whether the meetings were designed to include women and children or were seen primarily as meetings for male quorum members. The meetings were addressed by Apostles as well as members of the seventies presidency.\(^10\) While the seventies and high priests (another priesthood quorum) were soon holding regular Sunday meetings, the wards, which were first organized in Nauvoo, do not appear to have held any sacrament meetings in Nauvoo. A meeting was held in Bishop Hale’s house, addressed by Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith’s mother, but it was apparently held in the bishop’s home because of the building’s size rather than because its owner was the head of the ward or the meeting was a ward event.\(^11\)

The Seventies Hall is an unusual Mormon building form, but one that fits easily into early Mormon views of proper ecclesiastical functions and buildings. The high priests in Nauvoo voted unanimously to construct their own hall and were delayed only by an impassioned request from Brigham Young that they finish the temple first.\(^12\) Understanding that priesthood quorums and not wards were viewed as responsible for some Sunday services helps to explain two of the most baffling questions in Mormon architecture: Why were the interiors of the Kirtland and Nauvoo temples designed with multiple pulpits at each end? and Why did Joseph Smith’s plan for the City of Zion include provisions for twenty-four “temples” in the center of the city?
The plan of the City of Zion contains what seems to be a plethora of Church structures: three temples for the presidency of the High Priesthood, three for the bishop, three for the high priests, three for the elders, three for the presidency of the Aaronic Priesthood, three for the priests, three for the teachers, and three for the deacons. The explanation accompanying the plan notes that the twenty-four buildings were required “to supply ... houses of worship, schools, etc.”13 (See fig. 1.) Houses of worship and schools are certainly traditional Mormon buildings, but in Utah they were normally constructed by wards, not priesthood quorums. The number of priesthood halls is also interesting. Why so many? The plan for the City of Zion called for a city population between fifteen and twenty thousand. If each of these halls had a seating capacity of five hundred, together they could seat twelve thousand, which, considering the number of children, potential nonattenders, and multiple use, may have been about right to provide Sunday services for the City of Zion. No indication is given as to who would use the buildings or how, but it is clear that Sunday worship services were to be held in priesthood temples.14

The design similarities between the interiors of the Kirtland and Nauvoo temples and the plan for the City of Zion are striking. Each end of the temples contained four pulpits. The designations on the pulpits correspond, in general, with the designations for the temples: M.P.C. (Melchizedek Presiding Council — the Presidency of the Church), P.M.H. (Presiding Melchizedek High Priesthood), M.H.P. (Melchizedek High Priesthood), P.E.M. (Presiding Elder Melchizedek), B.P.A. (Bishop Presiding Aaronic), P.A.P. (Presiding Aaronic Priest), P.T.A. (Presiding Teacher Aaronic), and P.D.A. (Presiding Deacon Aaronic).15 (See fig. 2.) The Kirtland and Nauvoo temples can therefore be viewed as sophisticated multiple-purpose structures that could provide in one building all the functions later planned for twenty-four temples. The intricate detailing on the pulpits; the ingenious seating system, in which the benches could be moved to face either the Melchizedek Priesthood or Aaronic Priesthood end of the building; and the system of curtains to divide the building and the stands are merely superfluous details unless there was a real need for the priesthood quorums to use the building in ways we do not fully understand today — including, perhaps, Sunday worship.16

A vestige of these early priesthood halls is found in two buildings built in Salt Lake City and a third building designed but never built. The seventies in Utah constructed a Seventies Hall that served as a museum and mission home rather than a place to hold Sunday services. Truman O. Angell, architect of many important
FIGURE 1. The plan for the City of Zion in which Joseph Smith specifies twenty-four priesthood temples for the center of the city. Joseph sent this plan to the brethren in Missouri on 25 June 1833. (Courtesy Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, hereafter cited as LDS Historical Department.)
FIGURE 2. A 1908 view of the Melchizedek Priesthood pulpits in the Kirtland Temple. The pulpits are labeled M.P.C. (Melchizedek Presiding Council), P.M.H. (Presiding Melchizedek High Priesthood), M.H.P. (Melchizedek High Priesthood), and P.E.M. (Presiding Elder Melchizedek). Note the curtain for dividing the room. (Courtesy LDS Historical Department.)
Mormon buildings, including the Salt Lake Temple, designed a large Seventies Hall, which apparently was never built, but which, judging from its size and design, appears to have been designed to allow Sunday worship services. The third and final building in this series of priesthood buildings is the Assembly Hall on Temple Square, constructed as a meeting hall for all priesthood quorums in Salt Lake City following the priesthood reorganization of 1877.

Perhaps the major reason for the lack of additional priesthood structures in Utah was a basic change that took place while the Church was enroute to Utah: a redefinition of basic responsibility for providing Sunday worship services. The inherent problems of overlapping quorum and ward responsibilities — especially during the time the two groups did not have corresponding boundaries — increased when the Mormon Battalion took away much of the priesthood leadership and most of the Battalion’s five hundred men left families behind. Faced with inadequate care for those who remained, Brigham Young reproved priesthood leaders in December 1846 for their lack of action and instituted reforms that included posting a map of Winter Quarters divided into wards with a list of the bishops and the wards over which they presided. The bishops were to “see that none suffer” and “to have meetings in their several Wards for the men women & children once a week also to . . . have schools in their Wards.” It is not clear where the wards met or how faithfully they followed the instructions, but the log tabernacle at Winter Quarters may well have been the first multiward Mormon chapel. The change from quorum to ward responsibility for worship services was thus begun, and with it a new basis for Mormon architecture based on wards.

Perhaps the greatest importance of pre-Utah Mormon architecture, and especially that of Nauvoo, was the pattern it provided for later Mormon cities in the West. Just as the Nauvoo Legion and William Pitt’s Brass Band were transferred to Salt Lake City with little change, so the building forms and the city plan of Nauvoo were transferred to the Great Basin. Plans to replicate the temple were quickly made. The ingenious, unbuilt canvas tabernacle planned for Nauvoo quickly became the old tabernacle and a series of boweries constructed on Temple Square. (See fig. 3.) The Mansion House was recast with a beehive on the top while the Masonic Hall, devoid of its fraternal associations, was reincarnated as the Salt Lake Social Hall. The Deseret News office was an extension of a continuous string of printing establishments in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Other buildings housed a new tithing office, Church-
FIGURE 3. The bowery and original tabernacle seen from South Temple Street. These structures are functional descendants of the canvas tabernacle designed in Nauvoo but never built. (Courtesy LDS Historical Department.)
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connected mercantile institutions, schools, and even the historian’s office. It took a little longer for the Nauvoo Concert Hall to be recreated as the Salt Lake Theatre, and it was not until a new century had been ushered in that plans for the Hotel Utah were approved — justified in part by the Nauvoo House precedent.  

The Nauvoo pattern influenced residences as well as public buildings. The central-hall house type, a common midwestern type that appeared farther east much earlier, was used extensively in Nauvoo and became the standard house in the new Great Basin colonies. The house, a marriage of vernacular and more formal styling, has been shown to be closely correlated with Mormon settlement in the West. Usually two stories high with one or two rooms on each side of a central hall, such “Mormon” houses often had a chimney at each gable end and simple Greek Revival detailing. (See front and back covers.) In some parts of the West this house type is known as the Nauvoo house. The building form, often constructed in brick, stone, or adobe, perhaps with a wing added, was pervasive enough in the Mormon colonies to have been used as a major indicator to define the “Mormon landscape.”

In addition, the plan of the City of Zion was modified in Nauvoo, and this modified version, rather than the theoretical plan developed for Missouri, became the basis for most Mormon communities in the West. While the original plan for the City of Zion and Nauvoo’s city plan have many elements in common, such as the grid street pattern, farms outside the town, and a central location for a temple or temples, the plans were developed to meet different circumstances. The Missouri plan was formulated while the Church was practicing the law of consecration, an economic system in which Church members consecrated their material possessions for the greater good of the whole. Elements of the Missouri plan were designed to facilitate that system.

By the time Nauvoo’s plan was implemented, tithing had taken the place of the Law of Consecration. This change in the Church’s economic system resulted in greater flexibility in the Nauvoo plan. Nauvoo blocks were all the same size, thus eliminating the string of larger central blocks that not only provided space for the twenty-four temples, but also supplied land for special needs connected with the Law of Consecration, such as bishops’ storehouses and central barns and stables. In Nauvoo, blocks were smaller, having four, rather than twenty, half-acre lots per block. Individuals in Nauvoo had greater flexibility in what they could do with their lots. They could, for example, build barns, sell part of their land, or place their house as they wished. In the Missouri plan, houses had to be placed in alternate rows so that no house faced
another. Finally, Nauvoo’s plan also allowed greater flexibility for urban growth and design; the city was not limited to one square mile (as was its Missouri counterpart), and a Main Street business district was planned.²³

It would be hard to overemphasize the importance of Nauvoo as a model for later Mormon architecture and town planning. Its influence resulted from three conditions. First, Nauvoo was the only city developed under the direction of Joseph Smith, who planned several cities but “completed” only Nauvoo. Second, for those who had lived in Nauvoo, the pattern remained clearly in mind even when it deviated from Joseph Smith’s plan (deviations occurred in part because few people remembered the details of Joseph’s written city plans). Finally, an architectural achievement — the completion of the Nauvoo Temple — changed what might have been a negative experience for Church members into a positive accomplishment. By completing the Nauvoo Temple, Mormons felt that they had finished the city despite opposition from within and without the Church. The Church had shown that it could continue after the death of the Prophet, and, armed with the success of finishing the temple and receiving their endowments, Church members could begin the trek west (psychologically at least) as a result of their own decision — not as banished outcasts.²⁴ The *Times and Seasons* mirrored this view in one of its last issues. The article referred specifically to museums and libraries but could as easily have been talking about the entire physical kingdom of God: “What has been done can be done again. When they find a place of ‘rest’ — a Library, a Museum, and a place of Antiquities, will be among the first works of wisdom.”²⁵ The physical pattern for a Mormon community was set and would be repeated across the Intermountain West.

In addition to the above achievements, the early period of Church development also produced theories about domestic and ecclesiastical architecture that are basic to an understanding of later Mormon buildings. The Nauvoo house was a solid yet rather plain structure akin in some ways to the house of a prosperous Quaker. Such houses allowed their owners to have a large, substantial residence that could accommodate a growing family and provide visual witness to the favor of heaven while at the same time avoiding the frivolousness and conspicuous consumption that might suggest pride and avarice more than heavenly favor. These considerations explain in part why the Nauvoo house continued to be built for so many years. All colonists reproduce the architecture they know, but such forms become traditional or vernacular building types only if they fulfill real needs for the next generation. The
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Nauvoo house provided a solid large house, sanctioned by history, that avoided the self-indulgence of the more current Victorian architecture. An analysis of current Mormon housing would probably show the same preference for solid rather than showy houses.

The pre-Utah period also saw the beginning of an inherent conflict in Mormon building theory between architecture as art and symbol and architecture as simple shelter. That tension, which has its basis in latter-day scriptures, is one of the central themes of Mormon architecture. The first theme of architecture as art and symbol is based primarily on scriptural discussions of temples that contend nothing is too good for the house of the Lord. Indeed, Doctrine and Covenants 124:26–27 lists gold, silver, precious stones, and “all the precious trees of the earth” when discussing the construction of the Nauvoo Temple. The temples in Kirtland and Nauvoo were clearly planned and executed under that premise and provided architectural symbols as well as meeting places.26

The opposite strain is also scriptural: that human beings are more important than an object such as a building, and that if choices between the two have to be made, they must be made in favor of individuals. This strain tends to see worship as a private matter that can be aided by surroundings but is not, and should not be, dependent upon the setting. This concept is clearly exemplified in Mormon 8:37, where Moroni speaks to a later people, people who are lifted up in the pride of their hearts: “For behold, ye do love money and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted” (emphasis added). This concept is shown in numerous buildings constructed during the period, from the school house the Saints used for worship in Kirtland to the canvas tabernacle in Nauvoo.27 The Kirtland school and similar structures built during the early period seem to have been the model for the utilitarian school/chapel plan Brigham Young circulated shortly after arriving in Utah. The emphasis on utility and simplicity has guided the construction of many, if not most, later Mormon chapels. Joseph Smith sanctioned the concept when he told the Saints in New Portage, Ohio, that they should “erect only a temporary or cheap place for meeting in Portage, as that was not to be established as a Stake of Zion at present; and that course would enable them to do more for the House in Kirtland.”28

The interaction of these two opposing strains explains much about Mormon architecture to the present. There have been some exceptions to this dichotomy, and some buildings, especially tabernacles, have been heir to both strains. Tabernacles did not serve as art and symbol in the same way the temples did, and yet
they were certainly more than simple shelter. The ambivalence about which category these buildings fitted may, in fact, be a major reason why tabernacles became an extinct Mormon building form.

There is still much to be done in the study of pre-Utah Mormon architecture, but enough is known to revise many earlier misconceptions. The period from 1830 to 1847 was one of the most dynamic in Mormon history because during those early years the Saints were struggling to know how building the kingdom of God differed physically from building other communities. The answers they found, often with few guidelines, have had a profound influence on later Mormon architecture.

NOTES

1See Laurel Brana Blank Andrew, The Early Temples of the Mormons: The Architecture of the Millennial Kingdom in the American West (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978). The general attitude toward these two temples is summarized in a thesis on the Kirtland Temple: “The Latter-day Saints feel that it served well its purpose, and was but a stepping stone to greater and more complete temples wherein the sacred ordinances of the priesthood could be administered” (Clarence L. Fields, “History of the Kirtland Temple” [Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1963], abstract, 2).


3History of the Church 7:410–11.

4History of the Church 7:427, 456.


8See Hartley, “Mormon Sundays,” 21, or History of the Church for almost any Sunday in volumes 5, 6, or 7.


10History of the Church 7:379; Brooks, Hosea Stout 1:8, 9, 11, 12 (entries for 3, 10, 24 November and 15, 22 December 1844).

11History of the Church 7:375; Brooks, Hosea Stout 1:22–23 (entry for 23 February 1845). Some meetings were held by wards. Thursday fast-day meetings were held in wards on 15 May 1845 for “donations . . . to the bishops . . . to supply the wants of the poor until harvest” (History of the Church 7:411). The bishops also met with members of the Aaronic Priesthood but not on Sundays (History of the Church 7:317, 325, 327–28, 351). In at least one instance, the quorum and ward designations were combined in a meeting of the high priests of the Fifth Ward on a Thursday (History of the Church 7:325).

12History of the Church 7:364.


16The relationship of the Kirtland Temple and the plan of Zion is shown in the chronology of the two designs. On 3 June 1833, a conference of high priests discussed the size of the Kirtland Temple and
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appointed a committee to obtain a draft for the interior (History of the Church 1:352). Twenty-two days later, Joseph Smith sent a plan for the City of Zion to Missouri with an explanation of the twenty-four temples and a detailed description of the first temple to be built (History of the Church, 357–62). The interior of that temple is very similar to the interior of the Kirtland Temple.


24Brigham Young voiced this feeling in a general epistle to the Church dated 23 December 1847. After discussing the exodus from Nauvoo, he added, "The Temple of the Lord is left solitary in the midst of our enemies, an enduring monument of the diligence and integrity of the Saints" (James R. Clark, comp., Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1833–1964, 6 vols. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965], 1:325).

25Times and Seasons 6 (1 January 1846): 1078.

26Joseph Smith wrote in a letter to the Twelve in October 1840 that the Nauvoo Temple would "be considerably larger than the . . . Kirtland and on a more magnificent scale . . . which will undoubtedly attract the attention of the great men of the earth" (History of the Church 4:229).

27History of the Church 2:142; 3:XLIII.

28History of the Church 2:25.