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Buildings at the Center: Reasons for Building Tabernacles

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CHAPTER 3

BUILDINGS AT THE CENTER

Reasons for Building Tabernacles

There were generally three different motivations for the construction of a tabernacle in a specific community. The first was that the leadership of the Church in Salt Lake directed communities to build one. Leaders did this in settlements that they believed were to become important central communities for gatherings and large meetings.1 The decision was also made in areas that the Church desired to strengthen their claim to, legally and emotionally. In 1863, Brigham Young decided that the struggling cotton mission in St. George needed a shot in the arm. To rally the community, he determined that a tabernacle would be constructed. It was to be a monumental structure that would categorically state, “we are here to stay.”2 This proposed centerpiece of the capitol of Utah’s Dixie would do more than encourage the Saints. The construction would provide work that would maintain the dignity of craftsmen by providing meaningful employment for many struggling to survive in the harsh environment. Though Young did not often subsidize communities, he chose to in this case because of the strategic importance of the colony. In his letter to the colony, he wrote, “I hereby place at your disposal, expressly to

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aid in the building of afore-said meeting house, the labor, molasses, vegetable and grain
tithing of Cedar City and all other places south of that city. I hope you begin the building
at the earliest practicable date: and be able with the aid thereby given, to speedily
prosecute the work to completion.”

The second condition was that an individual ward decided to construct a particularly
large and fine ward chapel which they then would refer to as a tabernacle. The third and
by far the most common was that a Stake decided independently to construct one, as in
the case of the Fremont Stake Tabernacle. Though the Church was and is a monolithic
religion, individual settlements were granted a large degree of autonomy, a policy
reinforced by the difficulty of communication. President George A. Smith, at the
dedication of the Fremont Stake Tabernacle in Rexburg, Idaho, indicated that he “was
surprised when he heard it was to be built, surprised when he heard it was built without
church aid, surprised when he heard it was paid for, and again when $500.00 of the
$3,000.00 appropriated by the church for seating had been returned.” The presence of a
tabernacle generally indicated a community of several thousand people to provide a
resource base to draw upon for construction. This was not always the case though. Loa,
Utah only had a population of 499 in 1920 when the Wayne Stake decided to construct
one.

3 Ibid.

4 The president of the Church also serves as the president of the Church building committee. He would then
logically been a person who should have had intimate knowledge of the plans to construct a tabernacle.

5 Paul W. Jensen, “Tabernacle Restoration & Rehabilitation for The City of Rexburg: Rexburg, Idaho,”
Proposal by The Architects Studio, Pocatello, Idaho. (Updated 1979), 2. One can only speculate on the
exact reason why President Smith was surprised when he heard the building was to be built, but it is the
author’s opinion that it was because of the relative youth of the community.
Leaders at the stake and ward level understood as well as general leadership in Salt Lake that building projects brought the people in their stewardship together. One bishop commented that he “would hate most of all to be bishop in a ward which has no building project,” because of the level of cohesiveness such projects brought.6 Rank and file members were not left out of the decision to initiate a tabernacle. Members and leaders alike in the Unitah Stake in eastern Utah were talking about the building of a tabernacle over a decade before construction was started in Vernal. Six years before the project was officially approved and ground was broken, lumber was cut and stacked in preparation of the anticipated building.7 In Paris, Idaho, there was an “active town consciousness, and a continual desire to ‘put Paris on the map.’”8 The debate over the design and construction of the building was a topic of constant debate, a dialogue that became so heated that Paris residents were admonished to “work unitedly and sacrifice our feelings if not in accord with those of our file leaders.”9

Boosterism

The literature about boosterism in the U.S. West is sizable, but it has not addressed developments in LDS communities where the construction of tabernacles was often the

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9 Ibid. One resident of Paris informed me that the reason that the north and south towers of the façade are different is that the factions could not agree on which design would be the best, though no reference could be located in contemporaneous sources validating the story.
Such boosterism was a powerful force for growth as it “dominated nineteenth-century thinking about frontier development” across the West. Towns would often form booster societies that took out articles in eastern newspapers or other publications to promote their particular project, town, or settlement, each promising that with the right mix of investment and promotion, they could be the next Chicago, St. Louis, etc. The ultimate symbol of permanence and importance in a Mormon community was the construction of a temple, but very few were able to marshal the resources and approval from Salt Lake to build one. The decision to build a tabernacle, however, did not have to come from Salt Lake.

The citizens of Rexburg involved themselves in a concentrated, concerted effort to bring in new settlement. Their breathless optimism mirrors that in many towns in the American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On January 29, 1906, twenty-five Rexburg merchants and businessmen met and organized the Commercial Club with “The sole objective…to promote commercial and social interests of the city and Upper Snake River Valley.” To further this end, they decided to

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10 The most current treatment of boosterism and booster literature is David Wrobel’s *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2002). He does not discuss Mormon boosterism. Two themes that reoccur in the booster literature that he discusses are the West as an Eden, and the irrigated West being compared to the Nile. The Saints were not seeking an Eden as much as they were fleeing from Babylon. They did not seek to establish an area comparable to the Nile River Valley with the “fleshpots of Egypt,” but named their river that flowed into their “Dead Sea,” the River Jordan, harking to a promised land of a different, spiritual character. Where Wrobel’s analysis is especially useful is his discussion of a regional identity being forged and nurtured by a reaction to the “other.” (Wrobel, 184).


12 Cronon relies on the abundant research on western boosters. See 23-54, 396-7 N. 45.

13 Ibid., 123.
prepare, print, and distribute three booklets on Rexburg. The club also determined to secure a full-page advertisement and a two page write-up in *Sunset* magazine.  

The Commercial Club was not alone in its desires. The front page of the May 17, 1909 edition of *The Current Journal*, Rexburg’s newspaper, carried the headline “The Rexburg Boosters” that contained a call to “Meet and organize a club for the purpose of promoting the best interests of the pioneer city of the Snake River Valley.” One of the motivations for forming the club was “the fact that we had greater resources than any other settlement in this country, but if we neglected our opportunities, other places would surpass us and gain by their energy what we lose through indifference.” The January 5, 1912 souvenir edition of the *Journal*, which had the dedication of the Fremont Stake Tabernacle as the cover story, was equally fervent in its determination in “calling attention to some of the resources, attractions, and progress of our splendid valley and its rich alluvial soil, healthful climate, pure water, and enterprising citizens.” The tabernacle in their midst announced to the world that Rexburg had arrived and was ready to provide everything the new settler would need.

Regardless of the reason for undertaking the construction process, a tabernacle represents a huge sacrifice on the part of the Saints, and was often a bold move given the

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14 “To Advertise Rexburg,” *The Current Journal* (Rexburg, Idaho), 2 September 1909. *Sunset* is not well indexed, and the author was not able to determine if the Commercial Club was successful in their endeavor. He was able to determine, however, that Twin Falls, Burley, Boise, and St. Anthony, all Idaho communities with tabernacles, were able to secure a write up in the development section. Boise and Idaho Falls also had advertisements to promote settlement in the magazine in 1909-11. 


16 Ibid.

17 This was on the front page. Evidently the person setting the type failed to take into account that the year was no longer 1911 as the masthead indicated that it was the January 5, 1911 edition. To make matters even more confusing, when *The Current Journal* was put on microfilm, this edition shows up in both years.
financial situation of the church. Concerning the construction of the new tabernacle on Temple Square, Stewart L. Grow said:

The audacity of the planning which lay behind the announcement, and the scope of the project being undertaken, can be appreciated when it is realized that probably few, if any, auditoriums in America or the world were more commodious than the one announced by President Wells. Further, the project was to be constructed in a frontier area not yet served by a railroad and in which manufactured items such as steel building components were practically unobtainable.18

The problems faced in outlying settlements created a further burden in that the few shipping routes that had been established converged in Salt Lake, necessitating additional shipping from there or paying for a special trip directly from the source of materials or eastern suppliers. Apostle Franklin D. Richards helps explain why the Saints were willing to sacrifice so much. He said:

When I think of Logan and Cache County, I realize that you are blessed almost beyond your brethren and sisters in other Stakes of the Territory. You have a tabernacle here, second to none as a place of worship for the Saints of this Stake. You are supplied with other public buildings that place you in a good, comfortable position, such as a splendid court house, and a good, substantial college building, and you are in a position, as a people, by means of that college, to enjoy all the general benefits of a liberal and classical education and of knowledge that may be imparted unto you, not only in the laws and ordinances of the Church and the Kingdom of God particularly, especially and pre-eminently, but also in the arts as well as the sciences. You certainly occupy a very excellent position. But this is no reason why you should slacken your efforts. On the contrary, this prosperity should induce you to increase your diligence in all good things.19

Their tabernacle was an integral part in producing those benefits.

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The United Order

Bureaucratic movements within the Church also heavily influenced the building of tabernacles. Between 1874 and 1876 the United Order was established in every major settlement of the Saints. Starting in St. George, members of the United Order would consecrate everything they owned to the Order, whose board would then assign a stewardship to the member. Membership in the Order was not compulsory, but there was tremendous social pressure to join. In *Building the City of God*, Leonard Arrington outlines the movement and traces its history through all the settlements that were under an Order at one time. For the purposes of this study, though, we need to know that the United Order was based on five ideas. First, the earth, and everything on it, belonged to the Lord. Second, there should be economic equality among the Saints. This was not an absolute equality, but a relative one that at least would ensure that everyone was employed and their basic needs were met. Third, surplus income was to be used for community betterment. The system was to promote thrift and make possible the rapid accumulation of money to purchase communal machinery and other things that would benefit the community. If everyone complied with the agreements made in establishing the order, a sense of union and brotherhood would be established, and a stronger sense of community attained. Fourth, freedom of enterprise should prevail, as each steward was free to manage his affairs as he saw fit. Fifth, there should be group economic self-sufficiency.²⁰ It was a community movement with the emphasis on village self-

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sufficiency rather than on inter-village exchanges. This policy reinforced the insular nature of the center-facing villages.

Only a handful of tabernacles were constructed during the run of the United Order. The Order’s biggest contribution to tabernacle construction was the development of the community spirit that Church leaders began to look to develop by other means as Orders dissolved throughout Mormondom. Also, beginning in the early 1870’s, much greater differentiation in Church architecture was evident. While most meetinghouses continued to serve double duty as churches and schools, more and more began to be used solely for religious purposes, especially as school districts began to build their own schools and towns built town halls. In 1876, Brigham Young further set the stage for the central significance to communities of tabernacles by announcing that the Salt Lake Stake held no “center stake” authority over other stakes, but that all were equal in their dealings with each other.

The Priesthood Reorganization of 1877

 Probably one of the most important yet least studied aspects of Church history is the priesthood reorganization of 1877, which had a huge impact on the construction of tabernacles. The United Order not only proved that the Saints were not ready for living the higher law of consecration, but that there were many serious leadership and

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organizational weaknesses in the Church at the ward, stake, and general levels that sorely needed to be addressed. Up to this point, members of the Quorum of the Twelve presided over many geographical areas of settlement, many serving double duty as stake presidents. During the last few months of his life (April to August, 1877) Brigham Young created a new structure for the quorums of the priesthood and organized and re-organized the existing stake structure. Elder George Q. Cannon said of this important step in Church government: “He set the priesthood in order as it had never been since the first organization of the church upon the earth. He defined the duties of the apostles, he defined the duties of the seventies, he defined the duties of the high priests, the duties of the elders and those of the lesser priesthood, with plainness and distinctness and power -- the power of God -- in a way that it is left on record in such unmistakable language that no one need err who has the Spirit of God resting down upon him.”24  This general reorganization of the Church into a new order began at a general conference in St. George in April, 1877 and continued throughout the summer. This Church reorganization was to mark the close of President Young’s mortal ministry. He died in Salt Lake City on the 29th of August, 1877, only ten days after organizing Box Elder Stake. That stake was the nineteenth in the series of Stake organizations under this new plan and program of Church organization outlined in this document sent to the stakes on July 11, 1877.

The changes instituted during the priesthood reorganization were so sweeping that some scholars have referred to it as the “Mormon Reformation.” Seven new stakes were created out of the existing thirteen. One hundred forty wards were added to the one hundred and one that existed previously. Fifty three new members of stake presidencies

were ordained, and young men were ordained to the priesthood for the first time. Sociologists Valerie Bugni and Ronald Smith have noted that organizational development not only consists of changes in administration like setting new lines of authority, rules, and working procedures, but also requires a change in the working environment. The church was organized much more clearly along stake lines, and the stakes were given greater autonomy, especially in the light of Brigham Young’s declaration that there was no hierarchy of stakes with the Salt Lake Stake at the top. This freedom included even greater latitude than previously enjoyed to plan and execute the construction of ward meetinghouses and tabernacles. While tabernacles had been built as early as the 1850’s (See Figure 22), the greatest number and the most architecturally impressive buildings were not constructed until after the 1877 reorganization. Of the twenty three extant tabernacles in Utah, only four were completed before 1877 (see figure 22).

The reorganization influenced the construction of tabernacles in two very clear ways. One of the features to the Great Awakening for the rest of Christian America was the destruction of the notion of territoriality: the idea that a church or congregation was identified within a geographically defined location. From the Nauvoo period on, the

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Figure 22: Spires of the Bountiful, Utah Tabernacle, Built 1857-1863. It took so long because shortly after ground was broken, the Utah War commenced. For a while the foundation was used to store grain. Actual construction took approximately three years.

Church held to the notion of territoriality, making the bishops of wards responsible for the temporal welfare of the saints that resided within their ward boundaries. A letter from the presidency of the Church sent to wards and stakes on July 11, 1877 directed Church leaders to strengthen territoriality. It instructed “that every family, no matter how far removed from settlements, is recognized and numbered with the people of the nearest Ward. It is expected that every member of the church will have his name enrolled in the
church record of the Ward and Stake in which he lives, or else he will not be recognized as a member of the church.”30 Bishops were to account for each member of the their ward, ensure that all the priesthood quorums were staffed, guarantee that an effective ward teaching program was conducted, and turn in quarterly reports of membership, finances, and ward activities, among other things.31

The reorganization of the Salt Lake Stake included the building of the Assembly Hall on Temple Square for stake priesthood meetings. (Figure 21) The Assembly Hall was built by direct order from Brigham Young for that purpose. He even helped design the new building. To accommodate the new construction, the old tabernacle was razed.32

Figure 23: Assembly Hall on Temple Square, Salt Lake City

30 Clark, 2:284.

31 This program requires that Elders are assigned as “block teachers” that are to visit all the families on their block weekly to ensure that the spiritual and temporal needs of the families are met. They were to report back to the bishop if any family had requirements that the Church could help to meet. This program survives in the Church today as the monthly Home Teaching program. Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., “Bishop, History of the Office,” Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Vol. 1, (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

This building is a tabernacle, but because it sits right next to the new tabernacle, it was referred to as the Assembly Hall to avoid confusion. During the next seven years, each of the cities that held a reorganization conference in a bowery (Morgan, Coalville, Manti, Richfield, Paris, Cedar City, Provo, Moroni, Panguitch, Wellsville, Smithfield, and Brigham City, though the last was started shortly before the reorganization) built a tabernacle. These buildings were architecturally distinct from previous Georgian, Federal, and Greek Revival tabernacles in utilizing Gothic Revival or Victorian styles.

In these new tabernacles, a stronger link was to be forged between the members and the leadership in Salt Lake. The reorganization letter instructed that “Once in every three months a conference of the officers and members of each Stake will be held, and it will be the duty of the Apostles to attend these as often as practicable. The Twelve have been relieved from presiding over districts, and they will devote themselves to traveling and preaching the gospel to the people, and see that the officers in the several Stakes do their duty.” These new quarterly conferences began in every stake, taking the place of the annual, semi-annual, or completely random conferences of the past. With few

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33 Ibid., 31.

34 Paul L. Anderson, “Mormon Tabernacle Architecture: From Meetinghouse to Cathedral,” unpublished lecture, Utah Heritage Foundation Lecture Series, Assembly Hall, 12 April 1979. The July 11, 1877 letter may have had an impact on this architectural differentiation. One section reads, “Every settlement should be provided with a library for general reading, and great care should be taken in the selection of books, so as to have those of the most useful and instructive character. Works upon architecture and gardening should receive special attention, and no library should be without several works of this description. By the aid of these works a better taste for buildings and other improvements will be developed, and the effect will soon be visible in the improved style of dwellings which will be erected all over the Territory. Clark, 2:289.

35 Clark, 2:286.
exceptions, each of the quarterly conferences would be visited by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve or the First Presidency.  

Community Maturity

The presence of a tabernacle in a community was seen by members as an indicator of the maturity of the community. Average members as well as leaders desired to have one in their town. Community members, who may or may not have been members of the Church, often lobbied for the construction of a tabernacle. The Commercial Club of Rexburg, Idaho in particular lobbied for the construction of a tabernacle. Their purpose in that and other community development was because of “the fact that we had greater resources than any other settlement in this country but if we neglected our opportunities other place would surpass us and gain by their energy what we lose through indifference.”  

The stake presidency of the Union Stake in La Grande was encouraged to build a tabernacle by authorities from Salt Lake. “Apostle M.F. Cowley spoke encouragingly of the enterprise of the people in undertaking to build a house for the stake. [He] promised that all would receive double for all they should contribute for this purpose.”

As the membership of the church increased, stakes split, and new stakes would plan and construct new tabernacles to hold their meetings as well. The decision to undertake what could be a very expensive and time consuming process was in many ways the easy

36 Hartley, 27.
part. Gathering the requisite funds in areas that were generally cash poor was often a challenge. Prior to 1918 when procedures for funding construction were put into place, Church headquarters funded construction projects on an ad hoc basis, from about 30% under Joseph F. Smith to 50% under Heber J. Grant, depending on the financial condition of the church at any given time, with the remainder of construction costs being borne by the members of the stake or ward that initiated the project.\(^{39}\)

**Financing Construction**

These members at the local level resorted to a wide variety of methods to pay the 50%-70% of the construction costs. One method was simply by freewill donations of labor or money. Even little children were encouraged to donate to the building fund. A great benefit of this method is that it gave all members a feeling of pride and ownership for their building.\(^ {40}\) In addition to these freewill offerings, each member was usually asked to tithe or donate every tenth day of their labor to building the edifice, a method used for a variety of public works projects.\(^ {41}\) Some units funded construction by selling shares in the new building.\(^ {42}\) The Teton Stake in Driggs, Idaho, after securing a construction loan from a bank in Salt Lake City, held a week long carnival to raise the remainder needed. One of the biggest money makers of the carnival was the creation of a

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\(^ {41}\) Roberts, 306.

rivalry between different districts in the selection of a carnival queen and king. Every ward or district was allowed to cast votes for their choice, their number of votes being determined by the amount of money donated to the building fund.\textsuperscript{43}

Another method involved stake leadership allotting wards a dollar amount to raise and let the ward decide what method suited their situation best. Leaders did not, however, excuse themselves from contributing to the fund. If anything, they were more demanding of themselves than of the general membership. President Mark Austin of the Fremont Stake wanted assurances that construction costs for their tabernacle would be paid. At a stake priesthood meeting, he “asked for more than an upraised hand supporting the project.”\textsuperscript{44} He asked for pledges of money and then set the example by pledging $1,000. Quickly, other community pillars also made large subscriptions. By the end of the meeting, others had pledged smaller amounts, with a total of almost $12,000 being promised. Ultimately, about thirty thousand dollars were pledged.

The following story is told about the Blackfoot, Idaho tabernacle:

The leaders of the Blackfoot Stake, when the decision to build was made, were President James Duckworth, Counselors Nofear Davis and Heber C.C. Rich. The three men met prior to the construction for the purpose of making allotments to the stake membership for contributions to build the tabernacle. The first to be considered was their own allotment. Counselor Nofear Davis was asked to leave the room. After careful deliberation on the part of the two remaining, they allotted him $250. He returned and Heber C.C. Rich left. His allotment was set at $250 also. Now came President Duckworth’s turn. When he returned to the room, he learned their decision – his allotment was $1000. “You believe honestly in your hearts, “ said the president, “that I should donate $1000?” “Yes,” they answered. “You believe,” retorted President Duckworth, “that I am able


\textsuperscript{44} David Crowder, \textit{Rexburg Idaho: The First One Hundred Years 1883-1983} (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1983), 163. Decisions were made by common consent. But this also implied obligation: by raising your hand, you were agreeing to bind yourself to the decision that had just been made.
to do that?” “Yes,” again they answered. “All right,” he replied, “I will pay $2000.” And he paid in cash. He always believed in going the second mile.45

Figure 24: Blackfoot, Idaho Tabernacle.

Location

The location that the Saints chose for these buildings is instructive as to the building’s importance. The vast majority of these buildings sat on the main street of the town, usually on the equivalent of Main and Center in the central square that was set apart for community buildings when the town was laid out. If it was not possible to build on the central location, another highly visible spot was chosen. For example, the Star Valley Stake Tabernacle in Afton, Wyoming sits on a hill overlooking the town, and in a time when houses were smaller and trees not as well established, the building could be seen

45 Bingham County, Idaho, Centennial Book Committee, Bingham County, Idaho (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1985)
from quite a distance. Even in Mormon communities, money did often factor into the decision of where to build. The consensus of the Stake Presidency and other surveyors was that the Fremont Stake Tabernacle should be on Main Street, and on a corner lot, if possible. The Commercial Club in particular lobbied for it to be situated on Main Street. The problem was that it would be considerably more expensive to purchase a lot on Main Street than elsewhere. Upon considering all the options, the Stake Presidency decided to buy a site directly north of the tithing office, offered by Willard A. Ricks for a price of $750.46 Many Commercial Club members still wanted the tabernacle on Main Street but were told that they would have to raise the difference between the Ricks’ lot and a Main Street lot, which amounted to about $4,000. When the club was unable to raise the requisite funds, the stake announced that the Ricks’ property was being purchased.47

Regardless of the exact method used to pay for the buildings, it was hard work, cooperative effort, and sacrifices that allowed the tabernacles to be built. The Saints were no strangers to hard work and sacrifice. Many had sold everything they had to be able to come to the Promised Land, many forsaking their families and countries to go gather with the Saints. Most understood that the sacrifice was not over when they reached the Great Basin. One person remembers that upon their arrival in their new Great Basin home “his father unyoked the oxen and led the family into the brush where they knelt down and [his] father prayed ‘not for riches, but that they might be faithful come what may, life or death.’” 48 Most Latter-day Saints, with their reverence for Church authority and the

46 Crowder, 163. This site lies only one half block north of Main Street.

47 Ibid.

belief that their leaders were divinely inspired were willing to make whatever sacrifices
that were asked of them.\textsuperscript{49}

The stories about sacrifice to build the tabernacles that dot the Mormon Culture
Region are legion. In Wellsville, no contracts were let out for the construction. Young
girls thinned and hoed beets to make money for the tabernacle fund. Members donated
hay, grain, veal, cheese, butter, and eggs to be sold in Salt Lake City to raise more
money. The Relief Society held quilting bees. Young boys helped out on the building
site, running, fetching, and digging as directed by workers.\textsuperscript{50} Saints donated cattle and
horses as well as their agricultural output to pay for the Cardston Stake Tabernacle in
Cardston, Alberta.\textsuperscript{51} One brother who worked for a brick company in Vernal, Utah had
taken part of his pay in brick to be able to build a nice home for his family donated his
bricks to the construction of the Uintah Stake Tabernacle and lived the rest of his life in a
log cabin.\textsuperscript{52} When the Wayne Stake Tabernacle was receiving an addition, the women of
the town showed up in force to sand the new hardwood floor by hand.\textsuperscript{53}

The citizens of St. George were intent on having the finest materials available for
their tabernacle, so they ordered 2244 panes of glass from New York City. The glass had
to be shipped all the way around South America and freighted up from Los Angeles.

\textsuperscript{49} W. Paul Reeve, “A Little Oasis in the Desert”: Community Building in Hurricane, Utah, 1860-1920,”
\textit{Utah Historical Quarterly} 62 (Fall 1994): 231.

\textsuperscript{50} Wellsville Historical Committee, \textit{Windows of Wellsville} (Providence, UT: Keith W. Watkins and Sons,
Inc., 1985), 382.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Chief Mountain Country: A History of Cardston and District} (Cardston, Alberta, Canada: Cardston and
District Historical Society, 1978), 308.

\textsuperscript{52} Irving and Barton, 10.

\textsuperscript{53} Miriam B. Murphy, \textit{A History of Wayne County} (Utah State Historical Society, Wayne County
Commission, 1999), 323.
Before the shipping agent would release the glass, the shipping bill of $800 had to be paid. David Cannon, local leader and leading citizen of St. George, was chosen to raise the money to bring the glass from California. The day before his departure, despite the fact that he had only raised $200, he prepared to go to California to pick up the glass. Meanwhile, in the nearby town of Washington, Danish immigrant Peter Nielson had saved $600 in gold to enlarge his home. After a sleepless night, because he knew of the dilemma facing Brother Cannon, he walked several miles from Washington to St. George to give the money to Brother Cannon, catching him as he was leaving. Soon thereafter, people who owed Brother Neilson money for years began to repay him and he was still able to expand his home. Visitors to the St. George Tabernacle today will see that many of the original panes are still in place.54

Figure 25: Construction of the Fremont Stake Tabernacle, Rexburg, Idaho, 1911

Local historians often look back at the building of the tabernacle in their community as one of the times that defined who residents were as a community and group of Saints. Kathleen Irving and John Barton said, “The crowning communal achievement of Ashley Valley’s early history was the 1907 completion of the Uintah Stake Tabernacle. The faith of the turn of the century pioneers was fire hardened and shaped on the anvil of adversity and hard work. Sacrifice of time, effort, and scanty means finished their faith in the furnace of the Almighty’s workshop.”

The sacrifices asked of them, while causing a few to turn away from the Church, were for most a source of great pride.

Vernacular Elements

Though tabernacles represented a significant investment, the Saints were remarkably willing to experiment or make up the plans as they went along. The plans for the Salt Lake Tabernacle were either non-existent or so incomplete that decisions such as where to place the organ and the choir seats were not made until the shell of the building was well under way. When advised that adding a full basement to the Fremont Stake Tabernacle would only increase the cost of construction by $100, the stake presidency decided to add one even though the plans did not call for one. Numerous buildings were changed to coincide with the whims of the builders at the time, changes that never had to undergo the scrutiny of an engineer or pass an inspection for compliance with modern building codes.

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55 Irving and Barton, 7.

56 Grow, 40.
Especially before the coming of the railroad, materials to construct the tabernacles were mainly limited to whatever the Saints could find in the area or produce locally. This did not slow the Saints down much as they found ways to get around the lack of materials. One feature that is common in numerous tabernacles was faux hardwood finishing. The Great Basin is lacking in hardwoods, so craftsmen would painstakingly paint pine doors and paneling to look like they were made of fine grained hardwood. (Figure 26) When building the new tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City, the designers wanted marble pillars to support the balcony. Since marble was not available to the Saints at the time, boards were glued together and turned on a lathe to make the pillars, which were then painted to look like a fine marble. (Figure 27)

Figure 26: A pine door panel in St. George Tabernacle painted to look like hardwood
Perhaps the greatest example of the Saints making do with the materials at hand is in the construction of the roof of the new Salt Lake Tabernacle. The nine foot thick dome was constructed without nails, using wooden pegs and rawhide wrappings to secure the joints.
Figure 28: Detail close-up view of wooden peg fastenings in the roof of the Salt Lake Tabernacle; note lapped joint fastened with iron bolts using washers fashioned from oxen shoes

Non-Morman Involvement

Other than in the Salt Lake area, most Mormon settlements had few if any non-Mormon residents. In some areas, the Saints were so well established that they precluded any “gentile intrusions,” such as in the Sanpete Valley, where thirty years of L.D.S residence transpired before any significant non-LDS settlement occurred. Nevertheless, there were settlers of different faiths that recognized the benefits that a tabernacle would provide to their community. Shortly after the Rigby Idaho Stake Tabernacle was begun, Stake President John Hart received the following letter:
Spencer, Idaho
Hon. J.S. Hart,
President, Rigby Stake, Menan, Idaho

Dear Sir:

It has come to our attention that the Latter-day saints under your presidency are contemplating the construction of a tabernacle. Though not of your faith, our company for many years has been well acquainted with your people and have come to feel that the progress and development, which is so striking there, has been due them. Therefore, as a small token of our esteem and respect and our desire for their further progress, it is a pleasure to enclose our check of $500 to be used toward the construction of such a tabernacle as you may contemplate.

Again assuring you of our high esteem and personal regard, both of yourself and those whom you represent, we are

Yours truly,
Wood Livestock Co.
By J. L. Hagenbarth, President

In Vernal, Utah, Charles A. Neal, an Episcopalian, moved into the valley just as the Uintah Stake Tabernacle was nearing completion. He had training in electrical wiring so he offered to wire the building and install the first lights for free if the stake would purchase the materials, a proposition that the stake gladly took him up on.58

Understanding the benefits that the entire community could realize, the stake presidency of the White Pine Stake in Ely, Nevada took the opportunity presented by being interviewed by newspaper reporters to ask community members for donations.59

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58 Irving and Barton, 16, 18.

59 “Work Speeds at New Tabernacle,” *Ely Record* (Ely, Nevada), 30 September 1927, 1, and “L.D.S. Tabernacle Walls are Rising, Building is Shaping,” *Ely Daily Times* (Ely, Nevada), 28 September 1927, 1. The author has been unable to determine if any responded to the invitation. Part of the *Ely Record* article is very clear about the benefits that Ely would enjoy with a tabernacle. It reads, “The trustees announce that the building will be thrown open for all gatherings of a community nature, such as conventions held by fraternal, religious, civic, and political organizations or receptions given in honor of distinguished guests,
Once the construction cost was covered and the building was completed, most of the lots that the tabernacles were located on remained un-landscaped as was common for most public spaces in the nineteenth century. For the first seventy-five years or so of the Saints’ residence in the Great Basin, though public parks and gardens were often landscaped, lawns were not an important feature of a well kept house or church. As American society at large began to change its attitude about the value of landscaping, members of the Church began to change theirs as well. For the Fremont Stake tabernacle, during the years 1912 to 1925 the only landscaping was a few willows and poplar trees, and meadow grass irrigated from a ditch. In the summer, sheep were grazed around the building to keep the grass down.60 Sometime in the early 1920’s, H.F.C. (Chris) Pieper, the caretaker of the tabernacle, came across the prayer given by President Smith at the dedication. The words “that the grounds of this building may be beautified and most desirable unto the saints and most pleasing and acceptable unto thee” convinced him to change that situation.61 In 1925, he persuaded the stake presidency to approve a beautification project. Mr. Pieper spent three months on his knees with a 2X4 leveling a hundred wagonloads of topsoil so an irrigation system could be installed. Hedges and ornamental trees were planted, and flowerbeds were added around the building. The grounds became a virtual show-place, and inspired many other area residents to beautify whenever desired. Aside from the property value of the structure the other benefits that the tabernacle brings to the city and county can not [sic] be appraised. Ely has long needed a meeting place of larger proportions than is now available, suitable for serving banquets in connection, and this new structure will fill all the requirements most ideally.”

60 Pieper, Mr. and Mrs. Albert. “Landscaping the Tabernacle Grounds.” Snake River Echoes. 10 (1981): 34.

61 Ibid.
their yards as well. Sometimes the landscaping did not turn out quite as planned. When the Union Stake Tabernacle was completed in La Grande, Oregon, Box Elder trees were planted around the perimeter of the lawn, surrounding the tabernacle. These trees were later cut down and burned when “the Box Elder bugs became disturbing factors by their too frequent attendance at church meetings.”

Sometimes the changes to the completed tabernacles were a little more substantial than the addition of grass and trees, though this is unsurprising considering the amount of use they received. The entire front of the Logan Tabernacle was remodeled, removing the steps that brought people to the second floor from street level and providing access to the lower levels from the front of the building.

Figure 29: Logan Tabernacle, Logan, Utah, before remodeling.

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62 Ibid.

63 Bean, Bean, and Miller, 61.
Others went through several organs, boilers, public address systems, and a few, like the new Salt Lake Tabernacle, had their balconies added after the buildings had been in use. When the tabernacle in Rexburg, Idaho was outfitted with a font in the basement, one sister commented that it was “indeed an improvement over cutting a hole in the ice on the river.”

Tabernacles, even the finest ones were generally vernacular, bricolage buildings, planned and executed by people without formal training in engineering or architecture. This sometimes led to problems in the construction. The balcony of the St. George Tabernacle provides a good example of this. The story is told on the website of the St. George Temple Visitor’s Center. It reads:

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The Balcony Incident. One of the most unusual events in the building of the Tabernacle happened after the U-shaped balcony was crafted and firmly in place. Miles Romney, master builder, schooled in English architecture and supervisor of the Tabernacle construction designed two elegant circular staircases. He called them his crowning achievements. They were attached to either side of the foyer-type room at the entrance to the main hall. As the people ascended both staircases the top steps lead onto and were even with the balcony. It seemed a perfect architectural arrangement. There was just one problem. Upon close observation, Brigham Young discovered the balcony was so high, people sitting there could not see the pulpit. Miles Romney reminded the prophet the stairways were permanent and could not be moved. So, Brigham Young recommended the balcony be lowered. And while everyone thought this impossible, Brigham Young surprised them by devising an ingenious plan. This caught the interest of Miles Romney who agreed and complied. Strong men were stationed at each post of the U-shaped balcony. With the use of braces and jacks, each man in unison with the others, using his full physical strength lifted the whole balcony in one piece at one time. The posts were cut off to the desired height by other workers and the balcony was replaced, lower than before. Brigham’s plan had worked. Today, Tabernacle audiences who climb up the staircases to their original height will step down an easy 8 steps to the balcony, but that is alright, because now they can see the pulpit just fine.65

Figure 31: Stairs leading to balcony in St. George Tabernacle

Figure 32: Stairs from landing down to balcony in the St. George Tabernacle

Figure 31: Balcony of St. George Tabernacle at its current height.
The lives of faithful Latter-day Saints ultimately point to the sacred implication of the temples. In the communities that had tabernacles, however, the religious and social activities of the wards were focused on those buildings. Tom Carter of the Utah Historical Society says that “inside the temple, the Latter-day Saint experienced [the realm of the Lord]…The meetinghouse, on the other hand, belongs fully to the present, and here members of the group congregate for regular worship, receive the sacrament, and conduct the practical business of the ward. The temple is circumspect, closed, and ultimately sacred, the meeting house is enthusiastic, open, and social.”

The tabernacle belonged to the present; it is the venue for everyday community interactions.

Besides the use of the Salt Lake Tabernacle for General Conference and the unity that fosters, tabernacles fit into the notion of who Latter-day Saints are and how they view themselves as a people, helping cement the creation of a Mormon identity. For example, the St. George Tabernacle is closely associated with the practice of paying tithing. During the depression of the 1890’s, the church was deeply in debt. Lorenzo Snow, the fifth president of the Church, wrestled with the indebtedness problem for many days. After serious prayer and contemplation, he felt prompted to call a special conference in St. George, which was experiencing a drought as well. Standing at the pulpit in the St. George Tabernacle, he first praised the assembled Saints for their faith and courage, but then paused and the congregation became very quiet. He then said that “the time has come for every Latter Day Saint to do the will of the Lord and pay his tithing in full.

That is the word of the Lord to you and it will be the word of the Lord to every settlement.

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throughout the land…” On the way back to Salt Lake, he stopped at every settlement along the way to deliver the same message. As the Saints responded to the call of their leaders the church was able to pay its debt. Sufficient rain came in time to save the crops of the Saints in Utah’s Dixie as well. One Saint said the lesson the Church learned was “the value of sacrifice in the eyes of the Lord.” Since that time, the Church has remained debt free and tithing continues to be strongly encouraged by the Church. Incidentally, the video dramatization of the event, which was filmed in the St. George Tabernacle, is recommended for use in lessons about tithing in almost every lesson manual in the Church.

Almost Every Use Imaginable

These buildings were at the center of the political life of the Saints as well. Every president between Theodore Roosevelt and Richard Nixon except Warren G. Harding spoke from the pulpit of the Salt Lake Tabernacle, and President Taft also spoke in the Provo Tabernacle. On a more local level, numerous political rallies were held in tabernacles throughout the Mormon Culture Region. For example, when the Cache Valley chapter of the Territorial Women’s Suffrage Association was formed in 1889, it was formed in the Logan Tabernacle. They were not just used for serious political and

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68 Ibid.

church meetings, though. When the midget General Tom Thumb came to Utah in 1869, he gave a performance in the Ogden Tabernacle.  

Tabernacle buildings were used for just about every purpose imaginable. Most performed the function of a civic center, hosting plays, pageants, operas, school graduation exercises, concerts, high school seminary programs, community meetings, basketball, lyceums, etc. In many communities, the privilege of using the building was extended on a non-partisan basis. The community was only too happy to take the Stakes up on their offers. In the 1920’s, the Rexburg Current Journal carried advertisements for plays, choir concerts, dances, or other entertainment with regularity, so much so, that one particular column on page 5 was the space for upcoming events in the tabernacle. In tabernacles equipped with a basement, they were especially popular places for social events, particularly in buildings without a gymnasium. (See figure 34) These basement activities were a part of the development of the feeling of community, a place to see and be seen. According to Rexburg resident Edna Taylor:

The stake event of the year was always the Gold and Green Ball, when all the wards crowded into the basement until the beautiful decorations could hardly be seen. One had to keep a sharp lookout to keep one’s partner from bumping into the posts as the whole crowd moved in the same direction around the room. Everybody came to these balls. It was fun to see parents and grandparents dancing with their young teenagers and many older folks lining the sides of the hall watching.


In Mormon towns where the distinction between church and state was often hard to see, tabernacles often served as the courthouse as well with town offices located in the basement.

Because the communities they were erected in were generally overwhelmingly LDS, there is little distinction between Church use and community use. There were times, however, that use of the buildings by those not of the LDS faith was significant. Contrary to the position taken by many writers of Utah history, Brigham Young’s intolerance of other group may have been greatly exaggerated.73 The tabernacle on

Figure 34: Banquet in the Cedar City Tabernacle

Temple Square was available to itinerant preachers to speak from the pulpit. In 1871, Brigham Young said to the people of Ogden that “Accord to every reputable person who may visit you, and who may wish to occupy the stands of your meetinghouses to preach to you, the privilege of doing so, no matter whether he be a Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist.”

The Salt Lake Tabernacle in particular was a focal point for non-Mormons. Travel accounts from visitors to the Salt Lake area almost invariably included their impression of their obligatory visit to the Salt Lake Tabernacle and the sermon they heard there. Sometimes if the visitor was a clergyman, they would be invited to address the congregation. Henry Kendall, a Presbyterian minister, asked Brigham Young if he had any objections to the establishment of Protestant churches in Utah. Not only did Young not express any objections, he invited Kendall to preach in the tabernacle on a Sunday morning to a group that Kimball described as “large, respectful, and attentive.”

On another occasion, Dr. J. H. Reiner, a prominent Roman Catholic minister was invited to address a congregation in the tabernacle.

Salt Lake was not the only place where non-Mormon preachers were invited to speak from the pulpit of a tabernacle. In Cardston, Alberta, Anglican priest Cannon S. H. Middleton was told by the stake president that whenever he needed the tabernacle, he was free to use it because of the good that he did for the community.

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74 Ibid.


77 *Chief Mountain Country*, 191.
similar experience in St. George. The following is an extract from a Catholic curate to his superior in 1879.

During Father Scanlan’s stay in Silver Reef he had, by his works etc, attracted the attention of the St. George Mormon church authorities, who, whilst opposed to his work, & the cause in behalf of which, he labored so zealously, could not help appreciating his zeal & sacrifice in the prosecution of his undertakings, and at the same time admiring him for his gentleness & firm but unassuming character joined with his great ability. As a mark of their appreciation, they invited him to hold services in their “Tabernacle”….In last May he celebrated High Mass (Mormon choir furnishing the music) in the tabernacle as St. George, before a congregation of not less than 3000 persons, all of whom with but few exceptions were of the Mormon faith.”

Of the occasion, one French Catholic said “It was the grandest event I ever witnessed in the history of the Catholic Church.”

Uses by non-Mormons were not restricted solely to preaching from the pulpit. The Union Stake Tabernacle in La Grande had the largest gymnasium in the area, so both La Grande High School and Eastern Oregon Normal School played their basketball games there in the 1930’s. Fire twice destroyed the La Grande High School building. On both occasions, the Union Stake presidency offered the use of the tabernacle and recreation hall for use as an interim school. The school board gladly accepted the offer on both occasions. Though primarily for use in religious services, tabernacles were truly versatile buildings in serving their communities.

In examining their construction, we can see that tabernacles reflect the social climate of the communities in which they were built and show some of the best goods and skills

79 Ibid.
80 Bean, Bean, and Miller, 62.
that the Saints had to offer. They were also true community centers, serving both the LDS community and the non-LDS community.