

Confessions of a Mormon Preservationist

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My first experience with losing a significant pioneer landmark was the bulldozing, by a local developer in our little Idaho town, of the last remaining log cabin to clear a building site for a modest home. I wrote a letter to the editor—I was only 16—and said that although I could see reasons for the destruction that were fairly compelling, it would be too bad if no one even mentioned in print that some of our heritage was gone. Some folks in our town were concerned about preservation, with marginal success. The logs left from a cabin built in 1870 for Brigham Young had been preserved. They served as benches in front of the DUP plaque at the Brigham Young Motel, and acted as stops in its parking lot.

After my mission, I became an entrepreneur and contributed to the street scapes of Pendleton, Oregon, by tearing down a funny old Victorian home (long a local eyesore) and replacing it with four gas pumps and a trailer house. For years I joked about the odd neighbors who came and carted off the turned posts, mouldings, and etched glass with my blessing, (one less thing I'd have to haul to the dump).

In early 1971, I returned to BYU, and was curious about the public furor over the razing of a tabernacle in a strange sounding place called Coalville. Several other things I noticed intrigued me. In Provo and Utah County, there were fine old buildings like those my Dad had talked about when we'd gone home teaching to the older folks.

When Janine and I got married, we built a new home together in 1972. When the chance for a law degree came, we sold it to raise some funds. We sold the gas station in Pendleton, too, and decided to buy an existing home in Provo while we went to school. Why not an older one? Well, we'd spent our first time alone together driving around American Fork looking at the pioneer homes there. The old furniture bug had bit us and we liked the idea of owning an old-fashioned house. As I write this now, lying on the flowered carpet in front of the parlor fireplace, it's difficult to pin down exactly when after that time my sanity left me and I lost control of my keen financial mind: every cent I have is tied up in pioneer real estate. A lot of that law school time was spent pounding nails into rough sawn

timbers, and we'd renovated 3 1/2 buildings before I graduated. Now, when my classmates are hustling legal fees, I work as a consultant for the Historical Society. A law school paper on "Historic Preservation and the Mormon Church" fell into the hands of a *Sunstone* editor and here I am trying to justify all this. I am also supposed to tell the world (*Sunstone's* share of it anyway) what the Mormon Church's attitude toward historic preservation is.

It isn't easy. I have been so concerned at times about deciphering the Church's attitude toward the maintenance of our historic religious buildings that I have sought out my stake presidency. I have not received any pat answers.

Last summer I was asked by some concerned associates to approach the leaders of one particular stake about their fine old church building, then optioned to a major supermarket chain. The building was not in religious use anymore, but had a viable role in the community as a senior citizens center. Architecturally, it was really something. It was located on a fine old main street, almost intact from early days, with only a gasoline station on the corner to break a generally pleasing street scape. Another chapel, still in use, was near and I wondered why the Church would want to jeopardize or compromise the local neighborhood of the active chapel with an open-on-Sundays supermarket.

Two stake presidents were involved. The first explained to me that the building's future hung in doubt. I asked if there might be a chance the city or another organization could raise funds to buy the building if enough people knew that it would possibly be razed

for a parking lot. He said he didn't know, but was certainly not going to tell anyone and get people excited: "It would just give the apostates something to cry over. People are more important than buildings."

The other stake president was very concerned. "If you had asked me a week ago, I would have told you to pull out all the stops. Do anything to keep the building, its uses, our neighborhood intact." Since then he had received a notice from the Church's real estate department that the Committee on Expenditures had denied his second appeal to them to withhold the option. Two members of the First Presidency were in the session that made the decision. For one who sustains his leaders, there was no other choice. I agreed and did no more myself.

Janine and I also visited Nauvoo that year and marvelled at the exhilaration we got from climbing out of the camper on a foggy July morning to step into another century. Walking down the streets, we caught the spirit of our own progenitors who moved commerce along those same thoroughfares and made monumental sacrifices for their faith and leaders. The painstaking efforts of the Church in recreating the Nauvoo experience for us lifted our testimonies and gave us renewed faith. A visit to Williamsburg had taught culture, but the Nauvoo encounter gave us broadened eternal perspective.

When President McKay dedicated a 1957 addition to the Bountiful, Utah, Tabernacle, he talked about the ability of cultural landmarks to strengthen our dedication to overcome present-day hardships:

This house becomes more than just a house of worship. It is a monument, a link in the

golden chain uniting the present with the past. It is only a means to an end, and that end is the development of character in the lives of your youth, instilling testimonies of God's existence in them.¹

This has been proven to me as I have visited such places as the Santa Clara Utah home of Jacob Hamblin, the Old Council Hall on Salt Lake's Capitol Hill, and most of all, the splendid temples in Manti and Salt Lake City. Our Church's meticulous care of such places, or support of their preservation, is deeply appreciated by a lot of people, and I remember for years hearing in testimony meetings and Sunday School lessons about affirmations of spirit prompted by someone's contact with our remaining examples of pioneer craftsmanship and faith.

No doubt this ability of prominent landmarks to convey our Mormon witness is partially responsible for the Church's pursuit of preservation in Palmyra, Carthage, Nauvoo, and Sharon, Vermont. My early impressions from visits to these places before I turned fourteen are deep and vivid.

Maintenance and care of even our most significant landmarks is not a foregone conclusion, however. In 1975, the Priesthood of the Bountiful, Utah, Stake voted to demolish the tabernacle President McKay was speaking of in the quote above. Built between 1857 and 1863, it is the oldest continuously used Church facility in the state. From what I can gather, plans to add on to the old Greek Revival adobe structure were deemed impractical by the Church Building Department. The Salt Lake Tribune stated that the stake officers' original desires to preserve the structure were overturned by "guidelines"

of the Department.²

Within a few days of the Priesthood action, the State Senate of Utah passed an unanimous resolution imploring reconsideration. The Utah Heritage Foundation and Historical Society were swamped with protests. These were directed to the First Presidency. Bountiful's Planning Commission urged the city to deny the demolition permit. Newspapers picked up the story and gave wide exposure.³ President Kimball was in South America, but when he returned, barely five days after the Bountiful Priesthood vote, an announcement was made that the tabernacle would stand:

We feel that because of its deep attachment to our sacred pioneer heritage, the Bountiful Tabernacle is the legacy and responsibility also of others beyond the Bountiful Utah Stake. It is a cherished treasure of the entire Church. . . .

We express both gratitude and commendation to many, many people both within and without the Church who have volunteered to contribute time, funds and energy in an effort to preserve this edifice. . . .⁴

You could hear the sigh of relief all the way down the Wasatch front. Some were relieved for the Logan Tabernacle and others for the Provo Third Ward Chapel and for the Ogden Relief Society Hall and the Perry Three-Mile-Creek Ward Meetinghouse. If the Bountiful Tabernacle remained after such a brush with extinction, there was hope for our own buildings in our own communities.

Decisions made by the Church subsidiaries are also encouraging. When the McCune Mansion (Salt Lake's finest) was sold by the Church in 1973, the buyers agreed to preserve the building twenty-

five years if the Church lowered the purchase price.⁵ The Church did. The same situation applies to the 1975 sale of BYU's lower campus to a group who plans to retain it as a shopping complex.⁶ Higher offers were received but the Church opted for a plan to preserve the buildings.

There remains some irony. Across from ZCMI's glittering cast iron facade, restored in the process of building a new commercial complex, and the grand new Hotel Utah, reconditioned with superb sensitivity, the Church's financial arm, Zions Securities, is razing the Constitution Building, a fine commercial structure of equal quality. While efforts to renovate the 1898 Timpogog Ward Chapel in Orem with an eye to restore its traditional gothic appearance unfortunately involved sandblasting the brick in a brutal manner, the addition of an amusement hall to the Spring City, Utah, Tabernacle is as fine as the original portion, with cut oolite limestone facing and the original motifs repeated in the new woodwork. I felt as proud to watch the careful retooling of the cornice and ceiling designs of the Celestial Room in the Salt Lake Temple a few years ago as I was disappointed to notice the acoustical texture spray covering vaulted ceilings in the Terrestrial Room of the newly renovated St. George Temple.

Now I suppose if a person did some "investigative reporting" on each of these situations he'd have a lot of data and reasons why some acts by the Church make historians happy and some are disappointing. For one who has merely watched all of this happen, however, and tried to grasp a thread of continuity through various encounters with old Church landmarks, it seems

the only realistic way to understand the Church attitude toward preservation is to conclude that the Church doesn't have an attitude toward preservation. Various departments have attitudes, at times seemingly at opposite ends of a wide continuum, but a general Church policy on preservation similar to the policy on missionary work or liquor-by-the-drink has not been articulated.

A month after the Coalville Tabernacle was razed, President N. Eldon Tanner stood at the pulpit in general conference and said:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth . . . or where your treasure is, there will your heart be also . . . I wonder about our undue concern for material possessions, for shrines and monuments, which crumble and decay. . . .⁷

At the dedication of the Liberty Jail, President Joseph Fielding Smith remarked:

I think it is wonderful that this old jail is now in our hands and we must not get the wrong idea in regard to it. It is valuable to us as a historical site, but we do not worship it by any means.⁸

I agree with them. I also feel, as Elder Neal Maxwell does, that we must not succumb to the "narcotic of nostalgia" nor expect to recreate "the Victorian age, but with penicillin".⁹

I agree with Elder James E. Cullimore, too, when he participated in the dedication of the Johnson Farm near Hiram, Ohio, where Joseph Smith received significant revelations. He emphasized

the need for members of the Church today to come to such historic sites as this Johnson Home and to realize and be cognizant that the Gospel was

reborn in most humble circumstances. . . . This building will help impress upon others the truth of the great manifestation which came to the Prophet Joseph here . . . and will help them understand that this is indeed the work of the Lord.¹⁰

And President David O. McKay's words at the dedication of our most recent Eagle Gate:

May the new eagle . . . receive thy divine approval and future protection. May the virtues associated with its initial structure be incorporated with its new and final restoration and may (it) continue to radiate to future generations the virtues of the Pioneers exemplified as follows: loyalty, industry, freedom, faith, and worship.¹¹

All these comments leave wide middle ground in which we seem to have discretion to operate without running at odds with counsel from those we sustain as inspired leaders. Once brought to the point of stating my understanding of it all, I can sum up my view in the context of a few principles that seem to apply:

1. When buildings are dedicated to the Lord, they are his. He may decide to convey that stewardship to whomever he wills. At present, President Kimball is Trustee-in-Trust, and Bishop Victor L. Brown is head of the Corporation of the Presiding Bishop. Theirs is the right to decide finally, legally, and theologically. We sustain them, with our arms, once a year and should do so in our actions as well, once a final decision is made. Because of their positions, they are entitled to revelation and some decisions we will not understand because their insights into eternal principles are above ours.

2. The Church being composed of fallible humans with finite capacity,

decisions are delegated and sometimes improperly made. Some results are reached by default.

3. As President Kimball implied in his statement upon rescuing the Bountiful Tabernacle, it is proper to appeal to Church authority about preserving notable landmarks.

4. Historic preservation, when considered in a realistic, rational format, is good. It is not, however, akin to missionary work or genealogy—"central to the mission of the Church." There is missionary and genealogical value in pioneer landmarks, though, and it seems the question often boils down to financial priorities.

5. Decisions on church landmarks are not made by any one department. Much inconsistency results from different priorities among different decision-making agencies.

6. Those presently in charge of the staff positions in the Church's building programs do not always seem to be open minded about retaining older buildings.

7. Local authorities should not leave unquestioned every assertion by Church building officials that a building is irreparable or hopelessly unsafe. New technology and creative solutions to safety and structural problems are constantly improving the chances for older buildings.

8. Which buildings are worth saving and which are not is an elusive question. Local concern needs to be weighed against such factors as alternative sites for new buildings, sources of preservation financing, and historical significance.

9. We are losing too many fine structures.

10. Few buildings can be considered safe from demolition and, unfortunately, often no word is heard of impending doom until it is almost too late. One interested

in a building's future must monitor its status continually.

11. Much has been accomplished by local people at local levels. If the Church is not interested in a building's future, ward or stake members, city councils, or others nearby can often arrange for future care.

12. Anyone interested in saving a building needs to bear its financial burden. Unless a building can be seen to contribute to the Church's central objectives, that is, as an adequate meetinghouse or missionary tool, tithing funds will not be wisely used in maintaining it.

13. Some assurance of long-term maintenance needs to be made if a landmark is to be preserved.

14. Contention is of the Devil. Fighting Church leaders is wrong. It is easy to lose sight of eternal values—questions of principle—when quibbling over questions of preference.

15. People are more important than buildings. Buildings, however, can provide inspiration, tradition, beauty, and pride. These in turn make people better.

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1. *Church News*, February 10, 1973, p. 13.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. See *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 11 through March 14, 1975. Articles usually found on page B-1.
 4. *Deseret News*, March 14, 1975, p. B-1.
 5. *Church News*, March 24, 1973, p. 5.
 6. Discussion by Ab Christensen, of Architects and Planners Alliance, Partner in Academy Square Associates, Provo, Utah, Chamber of Commerce Luncheon Meeting, Summer 1975.
 7. *Ensign*, June, 1971, p. 14.
 8. *Church News*, September 21, 1963, p. 14.
 9. General Conference, April 1975. See *Ensign*, May 1975, p. 101.
 10. *Church News*, May 17, 1969, p. 3.
 11. *Church News*, November 9, 1963, p. 14.