



GOTHIC GONE AWRY

Visiting the
Jordan River Temple

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WHEN Mormon friends asked me if I wanted to go out to dinner and then take a tour through the Jordan River temple while it was still opened to the public, I was leary. Maybe it's my own super sensitivity, living in a community where I represent an underwhelming minority, but like a football coach in a close game, I'm always on the lookout for a conversion attempt.

Finally, though, I figured what the hell. It would probably be the only time I'd ever get inside, and it promised to be a pleasant evening.

It was, but for reasons that I could not have predicted when we started. First of all, in spite of a 45-minute wait to get in, organizers of the tour and the people in attendance did their jobs superbly. Thousands of people moved through the building, never feeling rushed, but with a speed and efficiency that was amazing.

It was rewarding also in that it provided me with an opportunity to focus on some reasons why Mormon temples have annoyed and frustrated me ever since new ones started appearing along the Wasatch front a few years ago.

I'm not talking about the older temples, the one on Temple Square, or in St. George, Manti, Logan, Idaho Falls, or Hawaii, all of which have their charms and their architectural sins. My concern here is with the new ones, in Ogden, Provo, and specifically the new Jordan River temple.

From a distance at night, the white, lighted structure is an arresting sight. Sitting on a small rise of land in the flat reaches of the south valley, its drama can't be denied. It looks something like a large wedding cake with a spire topped by a golden angel instead of a bride and groom. It has a flat top and a lot of icing-like decorative ridges on the outside.

As architecture, however, it misses the mark. It fails, at least in part, because it does not grow from a single or coherent idea. Such a basis for design could stem from almost any premise. Frank Lloyd Wright's organic architecture reflected shapes and materials indigenous to their surroundings; Corbusier turned his back on nature and made his buildings stand out from their environment; Walter Gropius developed a style based on modern construction methods and materials, resulting in steel framed structures with glass walls which did not perform the traditional supportive functions of a wall.

Similarly, the gothic tradition in church architecture produced soaring interior spaces, made possible by the external support provided by flying buttresses. Inside a gothic structure, one's eye and spirit were lifted up to the infinite reaches where God dwelt in light. Windows contributed, like every other element of the design, to that upward sweep. On the outside, the spires suggested the same feeling of verticality that was so powerful on the inside.

A building might be designed on these premises, or on others as history and circumstance suggest, but the Jordan River temple apparently was not. I'm not advocating building gothic structures, but the new temple tries halfheartedly to do just that. It tries to "look like" a church. It has some of the trappings of a religious building, especially gothic trappings, but they are added in or stuck on; they do not grow from the building's concept or from its function. They are not an integral

part of the building.

The most obvious example is the use of stained glass windows. In the gothic they soared as part of the interior space. Their pictures and messages provided instruction for the worshipers. In the Jordan River temple they do not soar at all on the inside. In fact, they have nothing to do with the inside of the building, which is made up of relatively small rooms where various rites are performed. One catches a glimpse of them inside, but it is only an accidental glimpse near a stairway or in an exterior room where they appear, curtained, from floor to ceiling, apparently by pure chance.

Inside, the rooms are not unpleasant, the color schemes repeating the pastels of the windows. Each room is done in one color—pale blue, light green, or peach—used for carpets, drapes, and furnishings. It's all very well coordinated, but the total effect is something one might see in an expensive Olympus Hills home, with a sort of neo-French provincial style furniture (a long way from the provinces). And to punctuate the artificiality of the design, drapes cover windowless walls and plastic plants dot rooms and corridors.

In another abortive borrowing from the gothic, the building is adorned both inside and out with a design pattern described as a reverse gothic arch. It is not a true arch, only a pattern on various surfaces and at the tops of the windows, and it is not truly gothic since it has no point but rather a rounded peak. And the peak is at the bottom, suggesting the shape of a draped rope. So much for the gothic arch.

The apex of the tour, the Celestial Room "representing man's highest potential," looks something like the lobby of a new Hilton—plush furniture similar to that in the other rooms (which no one could possibly feel comfortable occupying), elaborate chandelier, seating arranged around tables, and floor to ceiling mirrors.

Well, you might ask, what *should* it look like? How would you go about designing a room with such an elevated symbolic purpose? I don't know, but at least it shouldn't be trendy. It shouldn't be something which will look as dated in 20 years as it looks fashionable now.

Further, the building should have some sort of design integrity. The opportunity for a truly sculptural shape in a church is almost infinite. Church architecture offers, even in this secular age, some of the most stunning examples of the designer's art, evidenced by churches of Corbusier and Phillip Johnson among others. Even in Salt Lake City, witness the Community Church in Bountiful with its artfully sculpted brick and shingles, or the Congregational Church on Foothill Boulevard which makes imaginative use of concrete beams where we might expect wood.

But the Jordan River temple is a hodgepodge. A snip of this, a piece of that, ideas taken incomplete and at random from multiple sources to make it "look like" a church. And it succeeds only in looking like the builder forgot to put the plastic bride and groom on top.

Maybe age will give it some respectability, but I suspect that it will only make it look dated as the Ogden temple already does. The high purpose to which the building is dedicated deserves better than that, and so do the people who use it.

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