The Senses & Society
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The LDS Conference Center

William C. Miller, FAIA and Ryan E. Smith

The Gentile’s Perspective

When I was growing up in the West, Salt Lake City was considered a “peculiar place,” as the City of the Saints appears rooted in a unique world-view and resulting physical order. In the process of moving to Salt Lake City over a dozen years ago, my two sons asked our real estate agent what living in the city was like – her response set a stage for understanding the place that continues to inform me today. “You must remember,” she said, “that Salt Lake City is an orthodox community, which creates a unique condition that few in this country, or the western world, experience.”

Founded in 1847, Salt Lake City was platted as the “City of Zion” by Brigham Young. This act had great impact on the physical structure of the city. With ten acres, 640-foot square, city blocks, intended to be parcelled out to maximize an agrarian vision of land use and habitation – and 100-foot street right-of-ways, to allow a six-oxen team wagon to do a U-turn in the street – the spatial structure of Salt Lake City is profoundly different than her western American counterparts. These large blocks and wide streets provide a spacious sensation as one transverses the city, while simultaneously, gathering in dynamic, panoramic views of...
the Wasatch mountain range. Further, there is a much less dense urban fabric than found in her sister cities, due to the building patterns imposed by the large blocks. And the city contains the naval of the Mormon universe: Temple Square, the spiritual center and home of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).

This religious center impacts the city profoundly: First, the streets are numbered sequentially from Temple Square toward the four cardinal points; that is 100 North, 100 South, 100 East and 100 West and so forth. Given the coordinates of my address, for instance, it means I live nine blocks south and twelve blocks east of the Square. Moving through the city, one is palpably aware of the streets’ relationship to the Square, as the coordinate system constantly articulates one’s position within the city as well as the entire Salt Lake Valley. Second, the Square holds two of the most important architectural works of the LDS faith – the Salt Lake Temple and the famed Tabernacle.

Therefore, when, in the mid-1990s, the church decided to build the Conference Center, it was an act whose significance cannot be overstated. First, to address the current and future needs of the church, it would replace the 6,000-seat Tabernacle used for the church’s biannual General Conferences; second, it acknowledged the important position that the LDS church has assumed in the recent past within the world community of churches; third, from an outsider’s perspective, it appears the most significant architectural undertaking by the church since construction of the Salt Lake Temple and Tabernacle; and, last, at 1.4 million square feet, 9.43 million cubic feet – filling one ten-acre block – it would have a very significant presence in the fabric of downtown Salt Lake City.

The building steps up, and out of the block-square site as a large, terraced granite mesa, surmounted by an alpine roof garden. The roof garden provides a counterpoint to Temple Square, which it overlooks. As a center of spirituality, the Square is a landscaped oasis and haven walled from the profane city. The roof terrace provides a second center, with the sensation of being on a mountain that provides an awe-inspiring prospect to the Valley of the Saints. And, unlike the protected garden below, the mountaintop is windy and sunny, bearing the full impact of the high-desert environment. Against the sound of the wind blowing through trees and grasses in the background, the sound of water emanates from the fountain in the center of the mesa. The fountain metaphorically issues, as the streams form in the mountains surrounding the city to send life-giving water to the valley. The fountain cascades down the front of the complex and joins the recreated City Creek Canyon waterway at the edge of the entry plaza. Oasis and mountain, two essential places in the desert: one offering protection while the other provides the resources necessary for dwelling.

The terraced massing, combined with the giant staircase and waterfall cascading down the front of the complex, appears at one
level like a monumental village positioned on the large entry plaza. Yet the large planar granite surfaces simultaneously provide a modernist appearance. Waggishly referred to as the “Supernacle”, the exterior evokes a variety of images and associations— from Pre-Columbian to Babylonian, and even a bit of Albert Speer. The cool, smoothly hewn granite cladding of the complex was taken from the same quarry used to finish the Salt Lake Temple over a century ago, providing a tactile, visual and spiritual connection between the two works. The one element providing an obvious sense of religiosity, the tower over the waterfall, was added late in the design process and is less than convincing within the overall composition.

Among the largest theater-style buildings in the world, the center is the premier meeting hall for the LDS church, seating over 21,000 individuals in a column-free, fan-shaped auditorium. Prophetic speech-making, dramatic performances, elaborate reenactments of scripture and congregational educational activities are at the heart of Mormon culture, so within this tradition the Conference Center acts as the symbolic stage for this growing international religious culture. The interior space is stately, yet the cavernous size of the grand circulation hall and auditorium gives the impression that it can easily swallow up its 21,000 attendees. Illuminating the sheer magnitude of the space, the auditorium could, theoretically, hold a Boeing 747 within its walls. When it is empty, the sheer volume of this impressive space forms a palpable auditory silence.

The Saint’s Perspective

Temple Square in Salt Lake City is the preeminent pilgrimage site for the international membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as the Mormons. Saints travel from around the world to attend bi-annual church conferences at the center and view the neighboring iconic and historic Temple and Tabernacle. Announcing plans to build the Conference Center in 1996, LDS church President Gordon B. Hinckley stated that it was conceived out of recognition that the Tabernacle no longer held all those who desired to attend conference. In addition, the new Conference Center, with its mountain-like presence within the city and international broadcasting power was to stand as a symbol of worldwide faith.

The church describes its mission as “the fountain from which truth rolls forth to fill the earth.” Water plays an important religious role through ordinances (which are like sacraments) such as baptism, and it stands as a symbol of Christ to which members look for spiritual cleansing and nourishment. Fountains can be found throughout the complex. First, at the level of the street facing Temple Square on the south side, water separates the plaza from the street and flows westward along the natural slope of the valley floor. The sound and image of water greets visitors again within the building where a waterfall formed from two joined roof-garden fountains cascades down, mediating between the viewer and the exterior plaza. Reminiscent of the flowing creeks and rivers in nearby canyons feeding the Great Salt Lake, the sensory experience of the flowing water is visual, auditory and tactile. Breezes from adjacent City Creek Canyon waft down through the valley and into the downtown. These moderate winds frequently cause water from the cascading fountain to lightly spray conference attendees as they are circulating up, around and outside the building.

The ascent and descent of people on the exterior and interior of the building along stairs, escalators and broad corridors, coupled with the culminating, spectacular view from the top of the roof gardens, suggest the notion of a far reaching, expanding, worldwide church. For those attending a church conference the sequence of spaces is experienced in four stages: the exterior plaza, the grand interior circulation halls, the auditorium and the exterior terraces and stairs (including the roof garden). First, the act of gathering at the entry street-level plaza space – despite the number of people present – organizes individuals into orderly lines through specific access portals. While initially sensing one’saloneness in this sea of international attendees, the sequence gradually becomes more intimate as the experience moves into the building. With anxious anticipation, visitors ascend on escalators within the mountain-like building to the various levels of the grand, multi-tiered circulation hall. In the impressive interior hall an original glass sculpture is sited under a skylight connected to the tower, spatially connecting the roof garden to a floor fountain in a continuous vertical space. The circulation halls also serve as a church art museum, containing some of the most identifiable paintings in the church’s short history.
in addition to housing many contemporary paintings and sculpture depicting religious themes. The top-floor circulation hall offers a space of particular impact where a stunning view of the Temple is framed by bronze cast busts of all past presidents of the church. These transitional spaces in the grand circulation hall, especially at the upper levels, contain niches for sitting, contemplating or engaging in conversation.

In another shift of scale and descending movement, the space flows from the hall into the auditorium. Nine large skylights bring light into the auditorium, enhancing the sense that the Conference Center is a place of worship. The stage area in the auditorium can be adapted in a variety of configurations that accommodate the space’s diverse purposes. The auditorium, while vast, is intimate, simultaneously being comfortable and impressive. The experience of attending a conference in the center auditorium is enhanced dramatically by feeling a part of a larger collective purpose, being one within a congregation of 21,000-plus members of the church. This connection to a larger collective is reinforced by the geometry of the seating and the ceiling – a concaved oval cradling shape. The carefully designed, yellow-hued lighting system coupled with the deep red tones of pattern-matched cherry wood paneling comprising the walls and trim reinforces the warmth of the space. The auditorium is the nucleus of the building, but only in so far as its purpose is to connect the message within to the world without. As a place of broadcast, an understanding emerges while attending conferences that this architectural experience is just as much about being connected to other present attendees as it is about feeling part of a worldwide membership. With an international audience, the LDS Conference Center broadcasts to over eleven million members in eighty languages throughout the world who are watching and listening simultaneously.

Along with its various meetings and performances, the Conference Center is the new home of the world renowned Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The auditorium is the place where its hymns and anthems are sung, recorded and broadcast. Music for the faithful is of paramount importance; the state of the art, acoustically-enhanced auditorium is accented with a beautifully crafted 125-stacked-pipe organ. The quality and power of the sound that emanates from the choir and its accompanying organ is remarkable, unique and breathtaking.

At the conclusion of a session of conference, one ascends from the auditorium back to the grand circulation hall and out to the roof garden. In addition to enjoying the unique garden-like setting with varied vegetation, viewers can look to Temple Square below and then raise their eyes to the valley and the world beyond. The crescendo of the spatial sequence is the final journey down the exterior stairs: one literally cascades from level to level, finally reaching the entry plaza. The significance and excitement of this experience is magnified by the sheer volume of people descending in unison. While the
entry sequence to the center from the street plaza is somewhat alienating. the experience of descent after a unifying spiritual session of prophetic speeches and music is inclusive, exciting, communal and purpose filled.

Joint Conclusion
In many ways the Conference Center is a building struggling with precedents. Regardless of its referential architectural language, the Center for the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a building of meaning, connecting its leaders, music and religious culture with its membership worldwide. It is a building that is deeply rooted to its locale and, simultaneously, global in perspective. In that respect it is a building that is without precedent.

Notes
1. The senior design architect for the church was Leland Gray. The Portland, Oregon-based Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership assisted as design architect and Auerbach & Associates of San Francisco was responsible for theater design and architectural lighting. The conference center was completed in 2000.