Studies in Utah Vernacular Architecture

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In a recording called A Sense of Place, novelist Wallace Stegner has spoken about the need for people to be placed, to be, that is, of a place. “You don’t know who you are,” Stegner warns, “until you know where you are.” And where you are is, quite simply, your environment, the land where you live. Part of this is natural and existed long before any humans came, and another part consists of fields, factories, houses, and roads, the things people construct in order to live. The way we have chosen to live is physically etched on the land and becomes a presence that affects both our everyday behavior and our collective consciousness. In Utah, for example, you can feel the mountains even when you can’t see them, standing there, providing a majestic backdrop to the neighborhoods we call home.

Historians, cultural geographers, and other scholars are well aware of this close connection between people and place; they have spent considerable time studying what they like to call the human landscape, the ways people have altered the natural world for their own social and economic purposes. Human landscapes are composed of many elements, but buildings have attracted the most attention. Amply endowed with social and cultural content, architecture—and particularly vernacular architecture, the common buildings found in rural and urban areas alike—has consistently served the historian as an index to human values and lifeways. Given Utah’s distinctive settlement history, it is not surprising that there has been a long tradition of vernacular architecture studies here.

The very idea of Utah’s historical architecture immediately calls to mind the Mormons, who have played such a pivotal role in the state’s history. But the Mormons were not the first people who built dwellings here. Long before Joseph Smith received his revelation in upstate New York, Native American shelters dotted the Utah landscape, each constructed according to the prescribed cultural needs of their builders.

The best inventory of Indian architecture in our region is found in the Great Basin volume (no. 11) of the Smithsonian’s Handbook of North American Indians, edited by Warren L. d’Azevedo. This volume surveys the various native
cultures within the state and includes a concise architectural description for each. The Western Shoshone, for example, a group that includes the Goshute of western Utah, lived primarily in lodges and caves, shelters well suited to their nomadic existence. The Northern Shoshone and Bannock, who roamed northeastern Utah and southern Idaho, lived in tipis and cone-shaped brush huts, as did the Eastern Shoshone, who occasionally ventured into the land that became northeastern Utah. All of these peoples were tied culturally to their Siouan neighbors to the east, tribes like the Lakota. The tipi eventually diffused southward into central Utah, where it was picked up during the nineteenth century by the Southern Paiutes and by the Utes, who had previously lived in brush huts.

While remarkably inclusive, the architectural information contained in the Handbook is necessarily cursory. More focused and therefore more comprehensive is Native American Architecture (1989) by Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton. This amply illustrated book is the best modern volume devoted to native building traditions throughout North America, including a great deal about the residents of the Great Basin. As a crossroads of native cultures, Utah is treated primarily within the context of larger chapters on the Great Plains and the Pueblo regions. Of note is the extensive discussion of the Navajo hogan, a building type which is also the subject of Stephen C. Jett’s and Virginia E. Spencer’s Navajo Architecture: Forms, History, Distributions (1981). With this exception, most studies of Native American building traditions in the state concentrate on historic and prehistoric structures; contemporary Indian architecture has been largely neglected.

The European architectural presence in Utah is, for better or worse, more apparent, especially during a winter temperature inversion. The brown cloud hovering over Salt Lake and Utah valleys is a material legacy of the Euro-American occupation of the West that began during the 1820s with the arrival of the mountain men, who left little behind but streams depleted of beaver. But soon there were trading posts, and when men such as Miles Goodyear decided to settle, cabins appeared. Goodyear’s log house—probably the first European structure built in what eventually became Utah—is depicted in Jan Harold Brunvand’s “A Survey of Mormon Housing Traditions in Utah.” The Utah State Division of Parks and Recreation has reconstructed a replica of Fort Buenaventura in Ogden, near where Goodyear’s cabin was located. Restored Fort Bridger, in southwestern Wyoming, also helps preserve the architectural imprint of the first years of western exploration by Euro-Americans.

The Mormon Trail passed through Fort Bridger, leading the wagons of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints into the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847. The arrival of the Mormons signals the beginning of another chapter in the human history of the Great Basin landscape. While pioneers in other regions scattered out across the land, Mormons gathered together in small agricultural towns with farmers commuting daily to surrounding fields. Such a nucleated design consciously expressed their communitarian ideals, for Mormons believed—as did other utopian movements of the period—that cooperation
Aerial photograph of the town of Wellsville (Mendon in background) in Cache County shows the village gridiron plan characteristic of Mormon settlements. Instead of dispersing across the landscape, farm families lived in town and walked or rode to their fields.

and group unity would be strengthened through close personal contact. The first intensive investigation of the Mormon settlement pattern was conducted by sociologist Lowery Nelson during the 1920s, with an updated version of his work appearing in 1952 as *The Mormon Village*. Geographer John Reps also provides an extensive history of the Mormon town in *Town Planning in Frontier America* (1969) and *Cities of the American West* (1979). Other thoughtful portraits are offered by Joseph Spencer, Richard H. Jackson, and Charles S. Peterson.

Mormon towns stood like islands in an ocean of mountains and desert, but they were far from isolated. Rather, they existed as links in a chain of settlements radiating out in all directions from the parent colony at Salt Lake City. The complex colonizing system adopted by the Saints in the Great Basin is the subject of several histories, although Leonard J. Arrington’s *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958) stands out for its excellent discussion of Mormon settlement policies and programs. The Mormon cultural influence on the region has also been extensively researched by geographers, most notably Donald W. Meinig, whose works have become classic studies in western regional history that have inspired many younger scholars.

Among them is Richard Francaviglia, who sought to flesh out the settlement model provided by Meinig by identifying key physical features found in Mormon-settled communities such as the gridiron town plan, irrigation ditches, Lombardy poplars, brick and stone houses, and hay derricks. Francaviglia must also be credited with coining the phrase “The Mormon Landscape,” the title of
his 1970 Ph.D. dissertation. The term has now achieved a broader meaning as the overarching name for the entire tangible side of Mormon settlement in the West. Francaviglia, of course, was not the first to notice Mormonism’s distinctive material culture. In 1948, Austin Fife and James Fife had published a study of hay derricks in the Intermountain West in Western Folklore, but Francaviglia was the first to compile a comprehensive inventory of landscape features and to suggest the extent of their areal distribution.

The recognition of a bona fide Mormon culture region with its own settlement characteristics has stimulated research in Mormon material culture generally and in architectural studies in particular. As far back as 1874, the intrepid Elizabeth Wood Kane traveled through Utah and produced Twelve Mormon Homes Visited in Succession on a Journey through Utah to Arizona. In 1924, Georgius Y. Cannon published “Early Domestic Architecture in and near Salt Lake City” in the magazine American Architect and the Architectural Review, and geographer Joseph C. Spencer’s study of Mormon town planning in the Virgin River Valley produced a corollary article on house types of southern Utah. Several master’s theses at the University of Utah were also devoted to vernacular architecture during this period. A broader survey showing the influx of housing fashions from the East is Colleen Whitley’s Brigham Young’s Homes (2002).

Not until the 1970s did Utah architectural studies truly gain momentum. This work, largely centered on housing, tended to be either descriptive in its documentation of particular types of Utah housing or directed toward substantiating what was felt to be the “regional” character of Mormon building traditions. Since regionalism implies a degree of internal uniformity—regions are defined by the presence of shared features—the regionalists’ task naturally lay in demonstrating the consistency and relative homogeneity of design in Mormon housing. Into the descriptive camp fall overviews of nineteenth-century adobe architecture by Jonathan L. Fairbanks and of Mormon housing by Robert Winter, as well as city and village studies by Fred Markham, Richard Poulsen, and Cindy Rice. Also in the descriptive category is C. Mark Hamilton’s research on nineteenth-century architecture and city planning.

Elevation and floor plan of the Niels Anderson house, Ephraim, Sanpete County, c. 1866. This three-room home, with bedroom and living room in front and kitchen to the rear, was the typical Mormon house during the period 1860–1890.
Another significant development during the 1970s was the initiation of a statewide architectural survey by the staff of the Utah State Historical Society’s Preservation Office. This work generated the first comprehensive inventory of Utah’s architectural resources. The results of the survey led, among other things, to a revision of the earlier regional paradigm and its assumption of architectural uniformity. New documentation, based on solid field research, revealed the presence of distinctive ethnic building traditions. Linda Bonar pioneered the way with her article “The Influence of the Scots Stonemasons in Beaver” (1981) and in her master’s thesis on the Scots builder Thomas Frazer (1980). Thomas Carter’s early work centered primarily on the contribution made to Utah’s architecture by Scandinavian immigrants. The thesis of homogeneity and conservatism in Mormon architecture is analyzed in his dissertation, “Building Zion: Folk Architecture of Mormon Settlements in Utah’s Sanpete Valley” (1984), and in several articles.

Most of these studies have been directed toward the original distribution of particular building styles and types. Attempts have been made, however, to get at the meaning of Utah’s built environment. For example, why does the Mormon landscape look the way it does? What do the buildings reveal about deeper cultural values and social relationships among Mormons? Several studies tackle, obliquely at least, these difficult questions. Most notable in this regard is Austin Fife’s “The Stone Houses of Northern Utah,” a folklorist’s attempt to discover the psychological underpinnings of Mormon housing. Mark Leone’s penetrating (and undervalued) articles on the razing of the Coalville Tabernacle and on the physical organization of the Mormon village are inquiries into the most fundamental relationships between a people and their buildings. Thomas Carter’s application of structuralist theory to Utah buildings, “Folk Design in Utah Architecture,” and an essay by Carter and Keith Bennett, “Houses with Two Fronts,” are attempts at defining a particularly Mormon vernacular expression in architectural design.

Worth mentioning too, are studies that explore other aspects of Utah’s vernacular landscape. Although Mormon studies have concentrated on domestic subjects, there are several good treatments of ecclesiastical buildings by Laurel Blank Andrew and Allen Roberts, along with Hamilton’s essay on the Salt Lake Temple and Robert C. Mitchell’s essay on the Mormon Tabernacle. Distinctive landscape features also receive attention. Austin Fife’s studies of hay derricks and fences and Mark Leone’s inquiry into Mormon town plans and fences are especially thoughtful.

Non-Mormon topics are less plentiful, and the Federal Government’s extensive involvement in Utah remains essentially undocumented except for a study of Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City edited by Jody R. Stock. The mining landscape, another key chapter in the state’s history, is likewise thin on documentation. Philip F. Notarianni’s Faith, Hope, and Prosperity: The Tintic Mining District (1982) treats architecture peripherally, and Deborah Lyn Randall’s M.A. thesis on Park City traces the stylistic evolution of workers’ housing during the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suggesting that, although utilitarian, these houses followed larger trends in American architectural fashion. The architecture of ranching has been similarly neglected, with only *The Grouse Creek Cultural Survey* (1988) by Carter and Carl Fleischauer examining the impact of ranching on the landscape.

Non-Mormon ethnic architectural research has also progressed but has yet to achieve wide publication. Notarianni’s exhaustive fieldwork in Carbon County among Italians, Greeks, and Latinos, for example, reveals a great deal about the adaptations made by immigrants to twentieth-century urban America, as does Carter’s “The Architecture of Immigration.” Likewise, William A. Wilson has discovered and explored several extant Finnish saunas in the mining community of Scofield. One wonders, too, if other examples of ethnic material culture could not be found among Utah’s sizeable Latino and Asian populations.

The study of Utah’s vernacular landscape remains, despite significant achievement, in its infancy. The process up to now has been largely that of discovery. We have identified most of the principal building types and technologies but know little of their meanings. Even the Mormon landscape needs further investigation, especially the architecture of polygamy. Paul Goeldner wrote his pioneering study, “The Architecture of Equal Comforts,” in 1972, hypothesizing that a doubling of external features symbolized the polygamist husband’s attempt to treat his wives equally. Thomas Carter’s “Living the Principle” offers an alternative view, showing that housing multiple wives was more problematic and that, rather than simple symmetry, there were great disparities in accommodations. Commercial and communal structures are also underrepresented, one exception being Jalynn Olsen’s booklet on the commercial and industrial architecture of Ogden.

Subregional traditions—particularly those in the Beaver-Parowan area of southwestern Utah and Bear Lake, Cache County in the north—beg for attention, as do the general topics of agriculture, industrialization, and recreation. Native Americans, ethnic groups, and suburbanites are populations that have largely eluded study, and it is interesting to note that there has never been a study of the contemporary Mormon home. Also to be accomplished is the analysis of the ways the Mormon culture region blends with—and differs from—the broader cultural patterns of the western landscape.