

MEETINGHOUSES IN THE MORMON MIND: IDEOLOGY, ARCHITECTURE, AND TURBULENT STREAMS OF AN EXPANDING CHURCH*

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ABSTRACT. Early work by D. W. Meinig delimiting “The Mormon Culture Region” focused on the spread of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in a core, domain, and sphere scheme that recognized diffusion of a fast-growing group bent on shifting its station from cultural edge to religious mainstream. Such a changeover from fringe belief to international force lacks any widely circulated rule book. The LDS and its followers today extend influence through diverse, distinct pathways: making missionaries a recognizable global force, offering education on church-controlled university campuses, emanating wholesomeness, entering high-security federal service, and attaining national political power. But nothing so locks in an LDS message as the standard-plan meetinghouses, in uniform styles, that mark church presence in North America and other continents. This work analyzes that architecture and examines its fit within LDS expansion and presentation of self, not just in the Salt Lake City church but even as imitated by outcast outliers. *Keywords:* cultural geography, D. W. Meinig, imperialism, LDS, material culture, Mormons, standard-plan architecture.

We shall trace the development of a distinct Mormon culture region in the Far West in due course; for the moment we may simply identify them as one of the many groups contributing to the diversity, dynamics, and, especially in their case, the turbulence of these early streams of migration.

—D. W. Meinig, 1993

The Mormon story, as Donald W. Meinig first reminded us in 1965, is of particular significance to Americans (and others elsewhere), for it is about origins, an instinct to move far and escape from that which we do not like or to find space and make of that a home ground. Pushed away, if not persecuted, in New York, then Ohio, then Illinois and Missouri, and finally in Council Bluffs, Iowa—whence believers following Brigham Young launched their handcart migration to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake—Mormonism was a faith on the move. Freedom to escape represents a chunk of the American way, offering a means of eluding oppression and discrimination (Meinig 1965; Lopez and Gwartney 2006). But the “freedom” to do so is not without costs, and the price of exceptionalism can be high. As Meinig later wrote, “Many Americans, near or far, didn’t much care how the Mormons formed or ran their families, but influential people in Utah and elsewhere did care how they ran their sociopolitical system” (1998, 111).

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