

Seeing the Provo City Center Temple through a blogger's eyes

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PROVO -- Provo residents and their cameras have been affixed on the corner of 100 North and University Avenue since the early hours of Dec. 17, 2010, when the Provo Tabernacle was engulfed in flames.

The curiosity of what has happened on that corner during the past four years, and the desire to be a part of it, has kept camera shutters clicking, bloggers blogging and hundreds of thousands of readers reading.

Google "Provo City Center Temple" and there are pages of media coverage and blog posts on the construction and transition going on at that downtown block -- which The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced in October 2011 would undergo a transformation from LDS tabernacle to LDS temple.



Julie Markham, a Provo blogger, has been taking weekly photos of the construction site since about the time the building was put on metal piers that looked like stilts.

"My first post went up April 5, 2012," Markham said. "At first I didn't go very often, but once they put the tabernacle on piers, I started going several times a week.

"Sometimes the pictures go up quickly, but usually I spend an hour or two at the site, and then four or five hours working on pictures and putting up the post."

Markham's blog, newtempleinprovo.blogspot.com, has since received thousands of visits.

A bit of history

When LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson announced the burned-out tabernacle shell would be restored and become a temple, the building and surrounding grounds attracted fans like a rock star. Thousands of people were taking hundreds of photos daily, they grasped for mementos when possible, and more often than not they just gathered and stared at the site. While it has slowed over the months, the attention has not stopped as the temple building progresses.

When the Angel Moroni was put in place this summer, more than a thousand people cut their lunches short to be downtown for the historic event. For members of the LDS Church, the act of placing the statue of Moroni atop the spire is a sure transition that the former tabernacle is now a temple of the Lord.

In fact, Markham and her zoom lens have a photo of the stone that has been cut and put in place that says "Holiness to the Lord, The House of the Lord." This is another sure sign the building is a temple.

In a story from the LDS Church Public Affairs newsroom in 2012 about how the church is interested in keeping its older buildings in restored good condition, the tabernacle was used as an example.

"For the past several months, Provo, Utah, residents have had a unique sight in their midst: the nearly seven-million-pound exterior of a 112-year-old building standing on 40-foot-high steel stilts," the statement said. "More than just an unusual construction site, this scene is the beginning of an extensive process to preserve the exterior of the Provo Tabernacle, a community landmark gutted by fire in December 2010."

Recording history

While local residents have been curious about the stilts, Moroni and just about everything else, the curiosity is not confined to Provo.

Rick Satterfield, a seasoned temple blogger from Pocatello, Idaho, has been blogging about LDS temples since 1997. His blog LDSchurctemples.com has picked up a lot of Markham's photos, but also offers a time lapse of the construction from a work-zone cam.

While Satterfield prefers to blog quietly, and without comment, he recognizes his site has been visited by hundreds of thousands of curious Saints over the years. His coverage of church temples is extensive.

Markham said it's thanks to her husband Ben Markham, who found a Canon SX50 on Amazon.com and bought it for her, that she has such great photos to share with the world.

"It's basically a point-and-shoot with a 50x optical zoom lens," she said. "It makes all the difference with this blog.

"I have actually been accused by the construction company of climbing the fence to take pictures. That has happened often enough that now, when I know a picture looks like I've been on the site, I mention that I wasn't."

What Markham has been able to do is not only get up close and personal with her lens, she has made friends with construction crew members as well. She has also been able to show how detailed these workers are and how much they want to get it right.

"I'm impressed at the skill of the workmen," Markham said. "They often have no idea that I'm there watching through my zoom lens. These are careful, diligent craftsmen, plugging away in all kinds of weather and temperatures. Seeing the tabernacle on piers was pretty amazing. Watching the brick repair has been a beautiful sight. My perception from walking around the site is that these men are very proud of what they are doing.

"Some of them recognize me and will come to the fence and chat. They ask if I'm 'the blog lady,' and I quickly realized it was a term of endearment. One man said, gently, that I miss a lot. He said (in jest) that they had discussed putting up big arrows so I'd know where to look. The crane operator used to alert people via the radio that I was at the site, and as a result some would look for me to teach me what was happening."

In an LDS Church statement about building and chapel renovations, Andy Kirby, Provo City Center Temple project manager, shared his thoughts about the temple construction site.

"People are amazed when they see [the construction site]," Kirby said. "They haven't seen anything like it before. They just say it doesn't look real, and are just amazed that we can do that, that we can lift a building up with the piles like that.

"This unique tabernacle-to-temple conversion process involves engineers, architects, contractors, input from many professionals who have great skills and abilities in this area, and it's an honor to work with them."

A unique perspective

Markham has recorded some things others may not spend time recording. To her, not recording them would make the story incomplete. What it does do is make the construction of the temple that more fascinating.

“The architects have paid a lot of attention to detail, such as the water collection system, which appears to be copper and bronze,” Markham said. “The woodwork that is going up now on the towers and steeple is especially beautiful, and since people are speculating about that, it is definitely wood, in keeping with the original design, not a synthetic product.

“A lot of progress on the brick has been completed, and I hope once the scaffolding comes down to show some before-and-after pictures (that was a suggestion from a blog reader). We are all watching and waiting for the art glass to go up. I know there is a great interest to get the building totally enclosed before winter sets in again, but I’m not sure the art glass will be part of that process this fall.”

When asked if she thought residents will be happy with the results, seeing what she has seen through the photo lens, Markham offered an emphatic yes.

“This will be a beautiful building, where there has been a lot of attention paid to detail,” she said. “I saw the plans at the city a year or so ago and was very impressed at the thoroughness of the design of the new temple and how well it’s going to fit with the time period when the tabernacle was originally built.

“I was previously unfamiliar with Eastlake architecture, and I’ve now spent quite a bit of time learning about that and looking for examples in the nearby Maeser neighborhood, and then in the temple as it’s being restored. The Victorian pavilion will be a show-stopper, I believe.”

Markham, an active LDS grandma, has had an interest in temples for many years.

“I’ve always loved temples, even though most of my married life I’ve lived quite a distance from a temple,” she said. “Several years ago some women kept a blog of the construction of the Kansas City Temple. They took beautiful, inspiring pictures, and I checked the site often.

“That was a big factor in the decision for me to do this blog. I thought it would be a unique experience and would allow others who live out of the Provo area to see the construction.”

Markham said she has been stunned at the interest in her blog. She prefers not to share the exact number of visitors.

“I think people are amused at the concept of a grandmother doing a construction blog, and readers are very helpful as a result,” Markham said. “They understand I don’t always know what I’m seeing, and there is a big “back end” where I field a lot of questions and read tutorials from readers about concrete, roof construction and brick terms, to give just a few examples. My perception is that people want me to succeed and they enjoy being part of the process, even anonymously.”

“I am excited to see this finished building,” she said. “The effort the Church is putting into this transformation is a testimony to me about how important they see this. I believe no one fully appreciates the impact this temple will have on downtown Provo, and I’m actually extremely excited about that.”