

Preservation Utah – St. George Tabernacle

In the fall of 1862, Brigham Young asked the settlers of southern Utah to build a tabernacle, stating that it “will be not only useful but also an ornament to your city and a credit to your energy and enterprise.” While Brigham Young and Erastus Snow formulated the general design, architectural duties for the new monument were shared by William H. Folsom and Miles Romney. Construction of the St. George Tabernacle was primarily a public works project rather than being financed by individuals or private companies. Workers were paid with church tithing funds and settlers from all over southern Utah Territory either worked on the building or provided goods to aid in its construction.

The tabernacle has been one of the most loved and heavily-used buildings in St. George for more than a century. By 2016, that heavy use had taken its toll. Many repairs and modifications had been done quickly and with little funding. Some historic elements of the building had changed in the process. The tower was repainted dozens of times before being covered in sheet metal. Stone repair had, in some instances, caused more deterioration. Architectural detail on interior woodwork had been obscured by many layers of paint.

The three-year St. George Tabernacle project started as a roof replacement. While scoping the cost and design challenges of replacing the roof, they found many other deficiencies, including seismic event risk in the tall, unreinforced sandstone walls. Add seismic retrofit to the roof replacement. Building systems and finishes impacted by the seismic work were judged to need replacement due to their condition and the impact the other work would have on them. Now we’re talking about a major restoration project and not just a roof!

Understanding the tremendous value of the original design and original material in the tabernacle, the remaining 1870s building material was retained to the greatest extent possible. New structural members were added next to the historic material instead of opting for complete replacement. Finishes were restored or replicated to match the original design. While almost all of the structural support is hidden from public view, the original timbers sourced from Pine Valley and Mount Trumbull are completely in place.

The Ephraim Niles Byram tower clock, originally installed in the 1870s, was restored to more closely match its historic function, while adding new automatic winders. The entire building was repointed using a mortar closely matching the original color, texture, and hardness of the original. The colors – green tower, white steeple, two-tone grey soffit, and red window frames and front doors – closely match the colors that were on the building in 1876.

In the meeting hall, period appropriate fabric and carpet runners were installed, and a new floor that replicates the historic floor was installed to cover the structural upgrades. One of the most noticeable elements is the faux-grained wood. All of the finish carpentry in the meeting hall is pine, harvested from Pine Valley or Mount Trumbull. It was faux-grained in the 1870s to replicate oak, walnut, and marble. In this recent project, all of the wood was stripped, and remnants of the original faux graining were documented and used as a guide for new work. The patterns and colors seen today are close matches of the original work. The decorative painter, Lynn Swenson, passed away suddenly during construction with about 80 percent of the painting complete. His father, Robert, finished the job.

We're not sure how to interpret this, but during construction, lightning struck the tabernacle. A quick call was made to the fire department and because of their responsiveness there was only minimal damage to the timbers and only slight water damage. It was all repaired and fortunately, no one was hurt.

The St. George Tabernacle is one of the state's significant and iconic historic buildings, and this restoration and seismic project has ensured it meets modern safety and functional needs for the next many decades.