

TEMPLE: Mormons Build in San Diego

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DAVE GATELY / Los Angeles Times

Its I-5 location adds prominence to the San Diego Mormon temple.

Continued from A3

prophetic trumpet? Try none.

"We talked about it becoming a San Diego landmark eventually, but in reality it's already become a landmark," Romney said. "In San Diego, when you consider distinctive structures, there's the Hotel del Coronado, the Coronado-Bay Bridge, [and] the Mission de Alcalá—it's a small list. Now we're on the list."

Former San Diego city architect Mike Stepner agrees. He says the temple has given image-conscious San Diego what it has long wanted and needed: A signature building on its northern border along the much-traveled corridor from Orange County and Los Angeles.

"I think it's a big asset to San Diego," Stepner said. "You're coming down the freeway from the north and all you see are condos and corporate architecture until you hit the Mormon temple and the Hyatt [hotel]. Those two things let you know this is San Diego and not San Clemente or Mission Viejo."

The San Diego temple is the 45th temple commissioned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its 162-year history. It is only the third in California, and the first since the Oakland temple was dedicated in 1964.

When it opens in April, the San Diego temple will serve an estimated 85,000 Mormons in San Diego and Imperial counties, as well as Baja California and the southern portions of Riverside and Orange counties.

Although Mormons may not be known as boastful, neither do they hide their light under a bushel when it comes to building a temple. Nor do they stint on furnishings. Inside the temple will be sweeping staircases, indirect lighting, airy hues and small meeting rooms.

"We feel very deeply that this is the house of the Lord, and the Lord never accepted castoffs," said Floyd L. Packard, a Carlsbad dentist who will serve a three-year term as president of the San Diego temple.

Packard has been dreaming of building a San Diego temple for local Mormons, who for three decades have traveled to the Los Angeles temple on Santa Monica Boulevard. "It is the dream of every Mormon to live in the shadow of a temple," he said. It is not as if he's got something against the Los Angeles temple. In fact, his brother H. Von Packard is the current president of the Los Angeles temple. A third brother is Rep. Ron Packard (R-Carlsbad).

Romney, a former chief of staff to Ron Packard, said building the facility on an eight-acre site on a knoll just east of La Jolla follows the Mormon practice of building temples in prominent locations for the visual edification of church members and the community.

Early temples in Utah were on hilltops. Now the most visible spot is near a freeway. "This is the modern urban equivalent of those early temples," Romney said.

True to their faith, San Diego Mormons will continue to attend weekly services in their neighborhood meeting houses, venturing to the temple only for special occasions or individual contemplation and always garbed in white robes. The largest room holds only 130 people.

"This is not the Crystal Cathedral," Romney said, referring to the Garden Grove church that has 3,000 seats.

Romney is chairman of the six-week open house—to be held from Feb. 20 to April 3—that will precede the formal dedication and will provide the public its only view of the temple's interior and the 100 rooms where the Mormon rites of marriage, baptism and religious instruction will take place.

Even before the open house, a visitors' information center was established to satisfy crowds that have been flocking to the site as the four years of construction come to a close.

The architecture and interior design work was done by Dennis and Shelly Hyndman, who are not Mormons and had never designed a church. They say it was a learning experience.

Dennis Hyndman's first idea was for an arcing, unbroken design taking the eye from the ground to the sky. Overseers from church headquarters in Salt Lake City said that would not do.

Mormons believe life is a series of challenges—of struggles and plateaus—from birth to afterlife. The temple was designed to reflect that belief, with a touch of emulation of the Salt Lake City and Washington temples.

Next came the design materials.

"We were asked to find a style indigenous to San Diego, but what is there except red-tile roofs?" said Dennis Hyndman. "We decided, what is San Diego except light, good weather and sun? The whiteness is part of that."

The 59,000-square-foot building is symmetrical, with an exterior of white stone aggregate and opaque glass adorning the towers and upper floors. The higher the room, the more light.

An alliance of San Diego architectural groups holds an annual banquet to bestow "orchids and onions" awards to the good and bad among new projects. For the Mormon temple, the group this year bestowed a "waffle," signifying neither approval nor censure. "Rockets to God," snorted one architect.

A columnist for the San Diego Union-Tribune said that the temple is so close to the freeway that it makes you wonder if the Mormons "believe in the separation of church and interstate." Dirk Sutro, architecture critic for The Times' San Diego County Edition, called the design "a cartoonish fantasy."

The Hyndmans hear all this and turn the other cheek, architecturally speaking.

"This is a building that makes you react emotionally," said Dennis Hyndman. "If I said 'I worked on the Mormon temple,' and you didn't know where it was, that would be the greater insult."