

The Oneida Community: Spirituality and Architecture in a Bible Communist Utopia

Janet White

University of Nevada Las Vegas

janet.white@unlv.edu

Summary Statement: The Oneida Community is an example of a utopia which succeeded in building an architecture which reflected and supported its spiritual and social principles.

Introduction

The large, brick, Oneida Mansion House sits on a low rise in what is now the village of Sherrill, in upstate New York, 28 miles east of Syracuse. In 1848, a group of Christian Perfectionists moved from Vermont to this site along the Oneida Creek and, under the leadership of John Humphrey Noyes, established the Bible Communist utopia called the Oneida Community. The settlement grew from their first building, a wood-framed residence they called the Mansion House, to a large complex of residential, industrial and agricultural structures. At its peak, the population of the Community reached over 600 residents. They supported themselves by means of various industries, including making of steel traps and silverware and canning of agricultural produce.

The Community held in common not only property and means of production, but also spouses and children, making it the most radical of the nineteenth-century Bible Communist utopias. All adult members lived together in the communal Mansion Houses, and all adult men and women considered themselves spouses in a polygamous relationship they called Complex Marriage. Children were cared for communally in a separate Children's House.

The Oneida Community functioned on this communal basis for 32 years. The reasons for the eventual break-up of the Community are complex, but can be brought back to one primary issue: the inability to pass on, to grown children and new members, the original members' faith in the perfection of John Humphrey Noyes, his leadership and his doctrines. On January 1, 1881, Bible Communism ended at Oneida; the Community's substantial assets were distributed to the members in the form of joint stock in the newly formed Oneida Company, Ltd. The New Mansion House, (the second large unitary home they constructed) and the dining hall are all that remains of the Community's architecture.

Spiritual Principles

The Community believed that "spirit" and the utopian principles which guided it would be the active generators of an appropriate physical environment. The Community's very architecture, they believed, would be an organic manifestation of its spiritual and social beliefs because "The soul must form itself a body of corresponding nature" (Com'ty. Architecture 166). Community members also recognized that life according to their principles would only be possible in an architectural "body" that "corresponded" to their principles.

So how did the body they produced reflect their spiritual and social principles? First, what were these principles? They followed Noyes in the Perfectionist heresy promulgated by the religious revivals that swept through New England in the mid-nineteenth century – the belief that the Perfection that God required of all true Christians could be achieved, not just in Heaven, but in this life on Earth. Noyes believed the Second Coming and a preliminary Judgement had

already occurred, in 70 CE at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, and that therefore this perfection could be achieved through what he termed “a right attitude” and an “inner sense of salvation from sin.” (Foster 256). A second distinguishing spiritual factor was their belief in Noyes as a prophet, who was divinely ordained to lead them and perfectly free from sin.

Their primary social principle was their self identification as one large family through Complex Marriage. This had a Biblical basis, as did their economic communism: Noyes argued that the New Testament passages referring to the end of marriage after the Second Coming, such as Matthew 22:30, must refer only to the end of monogamous marriage. The Evening Meeting, at which the entire “family” of Oneida met each day, was repeatedly described in Community literature as analogous to a family gathering in a parlor after dinner. Great stress was put on this familial group identity and its priority over individual identity. The Community actively discouraged drinking, smoking and card playing, for example, not on the grounds of immorality but because they encouraged an “individual spirit.”

Architectural Reflections

How did the architectural body reflect the spiritual and social principles? A very direct impact of spiritual beliefs on built environment came through their belief in Perfectionism, which manifested itself in a desire for inventions and improvements in the physical environment as well as the spiritual. For example, the Community’s use of reinforced concrete as early as 1863 shows their keen interest in constantly perfecting their lives through use of the latest technologies and inventions. The decision to use a mansard-style roof, newly introduced to America, on the new Children’s Wing of 1869-70 was made “in order to keep up with improvements” which was seen as more important than “stylistic unity” of the architecture (Mansard {sic} Roof 186).

The Community’s belief in the specialness of Noyes was reflected in his special accommodations. He occupied three bedrooms during the life of Oneida; the size and situation of and access to each acknowledged his special status and allowed him control over the balance of community and privacy in his life.

The acceptance of Complex Marriage after the move to Oneida is also reflected in the built form. In the Old Mansion House, begun in 1848, couples who were married when they joined the Community were still assigned a double bedroom space, though most of these were in the Tent Room, where curtains strung on wires were all that separated the spaces and the curtains could be pushed out of the way to create one large communal space (Tent Rm. 94). In the New Mansion House, begun in 1861, there were only small single bedrooms, assigned to one adult. In the initial phase, these opened onto a communal parlor, providing both individual access to community space and community surveillance of entry into individual bedrooms.

The parlor onto which the rooms opened occupied a special place in the social structure of the Community; parlor space was primary among the Community’s strategies for reinforcing the notion of the group as one large family, especially the Upper of the two Sitting Rooms in the New Mansion House. The Children’s Hour, an evening ritual in which the children performed for and interacted with the adults, took place there, and the community newspaper, *The Circular*, wrote that it “almost embodies our idea of home.” (Upper Sitting Room III 347). The proliferation of parlor space as the Mansion expanded, however, may have weakened the social structure in later years by encouraging the development of divisions in the “family.” Pierrepont Noyes remembered that the Upper Sitting Room was “usually enlivened by the presence of young people” while in the Lower it was “elderly people who usually visited together” (Noyes 40). Tension between older and younger members was instrumental in the ultimate break-up of the Community.

Why did Oneida succeed in creating a physical environment that reflected its principles when other utopias did not? Partly, their unusual economic success allowed them to build as they wished rather than as they had to. Partly, they were lucky in having a trained architect, Erastus Hamilton, as a member of the Community. I would argue, however, that it was largely due to the skillful leadership of Noyes. He conducted numerous lengthy communal discussions of a variety of proposals before the final plan for the New Mansion House was decided upon, assuring that all voices were heard and a consensus reached on what *The Circular* called "Community architecture – a style of building which shall be adapted to the character of our institution, and which shall represent in some degree the spirit by which we are actuated" ("Com'ty. Architecture 166).

Conclusion

Over the course of its 32-year communal existence, the Oneida Community constructed spiritual, social and physical structures that were uniquely its own. There is ample evidence that this was a highly self-conscious undertaking and that the members of the Community were convinced of the inseparability of utopian principles and architectural program. The examples cited above and others indicate that the Community succeeded in expressing its spiritual and social principles through its architecture.

References

- "Community Architecture." *The Circular* 9 Nov 1856: 166.
- Foster, Lawrence. "Free Love and Community. John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Perfectionists."
America's Communal Utopias. Ed. Donald E. Pitzer. (Chapel Hill: U of NC Press, 1997. 253-278.)
- "The Mansord {sic} Roof." *The Circular* 22 Feb 1869: 391.
- Noyes, Pierrepont. *My Father's House: An Oneida Boyhood* (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, 1937.)
- "The Tent Room." *The Circular* 25 April 1852: 94.
- "Upper Sitting Room III." *The Circular* 11 Jan 1869:347.