Evolution of the First Manhattan Stake Center

by Ned Thomas

On January 5, 1971, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced the acquisition of a 25,000-square-foot site on Columbus Avenue between 65th and 66th Streets, directly across from the newly constructed Lincoln Square.[1] After an almost decade-long search throughout the city, the Church made plans to construct a 36-story mixed-use tower consisting of an area for religious worship as well as a residential apartment complex.

The religious portion of the building would be located in the first four stories and provide facilities for the spiritual, educational, and cultural activities of the Church's two Manhattan Wards and the Spanish-American Branch.

When President Harold B. Lee, then First Counselor in the First Presidency, first visited the site, he reportedly remarked, ". . . this is the place the Lord wants us to be.[2]" At that time, a parking lot and an assortment of older structures occupied the property. Shortly after this visit, President Lee appointed a committee to purchase the land and to guide planning and construction of the building.[3] President Lee explained that the estimated $15 million building would be a joint venture of the Church and Two Lincoln Square Associates, a private partnership that would hold a 100-year management lease on the residential and commercial areas of the buildings.

The apartments were completed in early 1974 and the chapel was completed in March 1975. Church president Spencer W. Kimball dedicated the Church on May 25, 1975. The buildings were designed and constructed from materials that complement the architecture of Lincoln Center.
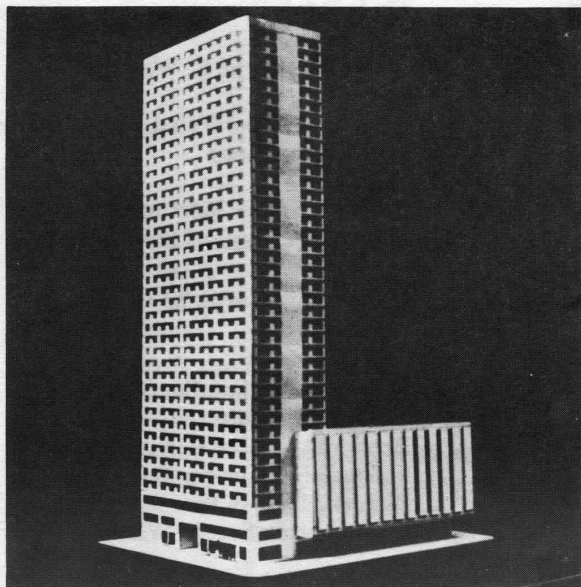
Since construction, the Church has undergone major renovations that have altered its original design. In the late 1970s and early 80s, homeless people moved into the open-air pedestrian plazas on the ground level, littering the area with cardboard shelters and old mattresses. Conditions grew so unsanitary and unsightly that the building's managing agent, Landau-Banker, was forced to ask permission from the city to remove the plazas. These areas were subsequently redesigned and completely enclosed to provide indoor exhibit space for the Museum of American Folk Art . In the early 1990s, the Church's Visitor's Center was closed, and plans were made for extensive renovation and expansion

Broadway and 68th Street, 1868

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

DEDICATION
VISITORS CENTER
New York, New York City Mission Offices
STAKE CENTER
New York, New York Stake

Manhattan First Ward
Manhattan Second Ward
Spanish-American Branch

May 25, 1975

Dedication Program, Lincoln Center Building, 1975

of the New York Stake Family History Center on the second floor of the Church's portion of the building.

The interior of the Church's portion of the building remained relatively unchanged until the mid-1990s when major renovations and refurbishment were completed. The first floor lobby, third floor Chapel, and fourth floor classrooms were redecorated and upgraded in 1995. In November 1998, a major remodeling and construction project was begun on the fourth, fifth and sixth floors of the Church's portion of the building to once again alleviate overcrowding. Space on the fifth floor, which had originally been occupied by racquetball courts used by residents of the adjacent apartment building, was redesigned to allow construction of a second full-size chapel, cultural hall, classrooms and office space. This configuration is unique in that two complete ward buildings are essentially stacked one on top of the other. In order to complete the reconstruction, two completely new elevator shafts were installed to access to the upper floors of the building.

These renovations come as the Church in Manhattan makes plans for several other new properties including a new chapel in Harlem, at Union Square and on the Upper East Side.

Notes

1 *The New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1971.

2 Building Dedication Program, May 25, 1975

3 Members of the committee included Fred A. Baker, Chairman of the Church Building Committee, Emil B. Fetzer, Church Architect, Albert V. Stirling, Director of the Church Division of Real Estate, and George H. Mortimer, Regional Representative of the Twelve and New York counsel to the Church.