Draft

NPS Form 10-900
(Oct.1990)

OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name First Baptist Church of Ventura

other names/site number none

2. Location

street & number 101 S. Laurel Street ☐ not for publication

city or town Ventura ☐ vicinity

state California code CA county Ventura code 111 zip code 93001

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☐ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☐ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

Signature of the Keeper | Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain):

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- X private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- X building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing:
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Religion: religious facility

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Religion: religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals/Mayan

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete
walls Concrete
roof
other

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- X C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- X A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)
Architecture

Period of Significance
1932

Significant Dates
Constructed 1926, 1931-32

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Architect/Builder
Stacy-Judd, Robert Benjamin

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #_____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- X University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:
Architecture & Design Collection, UC Santa Barbara

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.26

UTM References
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	11			3	11		
2	11			4	11		

☐ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Mitch Stone, Judy Triem, Jill Dolan

organization San Buenaventura Research Associates date 23 April 2008

street & number 1328 Woodland Drive telephone 805-525-1909

city or town Santa Paula state CA zip code 93060

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional Items
(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Becky Burnham, President, Ventura Center for Spiritual Living

street & number 101 S. Laurel Street telephone 805-643-1933

city or town Ventura state CA zip code 93001

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.0. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

Narrative Description [continued]

The First Baptist Church of Ventura, constructed in 1926 and expanded and remodeled in the Mayan Revival Style in 1931-32, is located at the southwestern corner of E. Santa Clara and S. Laurel streets within the Townsite of San Buenaventura, at the street address of 101 S. Laurel Street, in the City of San Buenaventura, Ventura County, California. The immediate vicinity of the nominated property is characterized by low-rise residential and neighborhood commercial construction dating primarily from the 1900s through the 1920s. The nominated property retains a substantial degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association from its period of significance.

Physical Description: Exterior

The building consists of essentially two, joined rectangular volumes and plans. The main volume, the auditorium constructed in 1931-32, features a dominant tower/belfry which is oriented to the northeast at a diagonal to the street corner. The tower, which rises roughly 56 feet above the sidewalk, consists of eleven, layered pylons which project outwards and upwards in steps from the edges to the center, and form an exaggerated six-stepped ziggurat-like termination. The center seven pylons are pierced by thin vertical grooves terminated by corbeled arches.

The main entry to the church is located at the base of the tower, within a tall Mayan corbeled arch formed by the rising pylons of the tower. The double wood entry doors which repeat the vertical groove detail seen in the tower, are inset and framed by a ribbed detail. The entry is set on a platform defined by seven steps which spill in three directions towards the street corner and are braced by stepped walls and posts featuring ziggurat-like terminations and fluting motifs repeating the configuration of the tower. The entry is flanked by two wall sconces.

The northern elevation consists essentially of two parallel planes. The main wall to the rear is formed by six slabs rising in steps to a height of roughly 35 feet to a stepped vertical pylon which projects on a perpendicular from the elevation. A secondary, lower building plane in front consists of a thirteen-stepped parapet with seven narrow openings terminated by corbeled arches, within which are a band of seven, narrow three-pane wood casement windows. The northwestern corner of the buildings is terminated by a two-story, flat-roofed volume defined by four, deep and narrow grooves, framing four wood casements at ground and second-story levels. Above is a decorated frieze and cornice/parapet exhibiting stylized Mayan ornament in deep relief, which wraps around the building to the western elevation. The western elevation features two sets of four narrow grooves concealing bands of narrow wood casement windows, and a stained glass window set within a large Mayan corbeled arched opening.

The eastern elevation features a large stained glass window within a corbeled Mayan arched opening, flanked by two stepped engaged buttresses. Adjacent and to the north of the window is a two-story projecting mass pierced by four narrow grooves concealing two band of narrow wood casement windows, and topped by a five-stepped parapet. A side-entry is located on a small, raised patio, which is enclosed by a baluster pierced by three corbeled arch openings. This patio joins the 1931-32 portion of the building to the original church “Sunday School” building, completed in 1926 and remodeled to match the addition in 1931-32. Above is a decorated frieze and cornice/parapet exhibiting stylized Mayan ornament in deep relief.

The two-story “Sunday School” portion of the building features a rectangular plan and a stepped parapet similar in configuration to the northern elevation, and a stained glass window deeply inset into a Mayan corbeled arch opening. The southern elevation is relatively nondescript, and consists of bands of aluminum sash windows on the ground and second floors, and a stepped parapet.

Narrative Description [continued]

Physical Description: Interior

The principal, architecturally significant interior space of the building is the sanctuary. The sanctuary consists of four distinct levels, including a sloping main floor of seating terminating in a raised podium and a mezzanine/balcony. The baptismal and organ loft are located along the southern wall of the sanctuary above the podium. The sanctuary ceiling is characterized by a seven-stepped, four-sided corbeled arch terminating in a flat ceiling decorated in a geometrical textile pattern painted on perforated ceiling tiles. The altar/lectern, located on the podium, features Mayan motifs in deep relief.

Corbeled arched doorways flanking the podium are topped with inverted corbeled arches and Mayan-inspired scroll details enclosing grills expressing a Mayan geometrical design in concrete filigree. The baptismal font located above the podium is enclosed by a solid balustrade and characterized by two, cylindrical columns with Mayan drum details. These columns are repeated on either side of the balcony. Rectangular leaded-glass light fixtures featuring geometrical Mayan motifs are suspended over the main sanctuary space, and drum-shaped fixtures hang over and under the balcony.

Integrity

The essential physical features which convey the significance of this property are expressed in it architectural design. Consequently, the aspects of integrity which are vital to interpreting its significance are location, design and setting. Secondary considerations are its integrity of workmanship, materials, feeling and association.

The integrity of location for the property is intact; the building remains on the site on which it was constructed. The property's integrity of design is almost entirely intact. The only evident alterations to the exterior of the building consist of the replacement of windows on the southern and western elevations with aluminum sash units, apparently within the original window openings. These architecturally minor elevations face interior property lines. Wrought-iron lighting fixtures originally located on the balusters on the main stairway are missing. The most visually significant exterior alteration is the addition of a wheelchair ramp along the western elevation accessing Santa Clara Street at the western property line. The design of this addition is architecturally compatible with the building and is visually unobtrusive. The design integrity of the architecturally significant interior spaces, including the sanctuary and lobby, remains intact. The integrity of setting for the property is substantially intact. The surrounding neighborhood continues to generally reflect the residential character it had achieved by the early 1930s, when the property was constructed.

With the exception of the minor alterations specified above, the integrity of materials for the property is intact. Rehabilitation and maintenance efforts do not appear to have resulted in the substantial replacement of original building fabric. In terms of integrity of workmanship, the property was constructed in accordance with the architect's plans and specifications. Any specialized methods, crafts or technologies which may have been utilized to achieve the architectural scheme are currently unknown. However, to the degree that the interior and exterior design elements of the property remain, integrity of workmanship should be regarded as being intact.

The integrity of feeling for the property remains fully intact; it continues to express the aesthetic ideas which it was intended to convey when it was constructed. The property's integrity of association remains, as it continues to be used for its historic function.

Significance [continued]

Summary of Significance

The First Baptist Church of Ventura is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C at the national level of significance as a fine and essentially unaltered example of a scarce property designed in the Mayan Revival style by its most prominent and widely-recognized proponent, architect Robert B. Stacy-Judd of Los Angeles. The property represents the work of the architect at the peak of his notoriety as an advocate for Mayan Revival architecture, as well as his public persona as a self-proclaimed expert on Mayan art and civilization, and is likely to be the only church building in the nation to have been designed in this style. The distinctive features of the Mayan Revival style are embodied in the property through the use of the stepped pyramid forms in the principle elevations, corbeled arches, and the rich use of Mayan-derived ornamental friezes and cornices, both on the interior and exterior of the building.

Period of Significance

The period of significance for the property is represented by the completion of its construction and dedication by the church in 1932.

Historical Background of the First Baptist Church of Ventura

The property located at 101 S. Laurel Street and currently known as the Ventura Center for Spiritual Living, a Church of Religious Science, was constructed in 1931-32 by the First Baptist Church of Ventura. The distinctive Mayan Revival style design was created by Los Angeles architect Robert B. Stacy-Judd in 1928-30.

The First Baptist Church of Ventura was established in 1922, at the beginning of the second major wave of growth in Ventura. The church was an affiliate of the Southern California Baptist Convention incorporated in Los Angeles in 1895. The limited available evidence suggests that a fledgling Ventura Baptist congregation existed as early as 1903; however, no substantive account of this group has been found. (*Oxnard Courier,* 1-4-1902)

In 1922 forty-one congregants convened under the leadership of Frank McClelland in the sample room of the De Leon Hotel at the corner of Main and Chestnut streets in downtown Ventura. Church history states that McClelland was not a Baptist; he also may not have been a local man, as he “came to Ventura each Sunday and conducted services for them.” The new congregation became affiliated with the Southern California Baptist Convention in the Fall of 1922.

In March 1923 the congregation welcomed its first pastor, W. B. Pearson. That same month they outgrew the sample room at the De Leon Hotel and moved into new quarters in the vacated City Hall building one block away at the corner of Main and California streets. This space again proved too small and the following year they moved to the long-vacant Lagomarsino Opera House on Santa Clara Street (between California and Oak streets). On March 25, 1924 they baptized their first congregant in the Ventura River. The old Opera House provided them with much needed space for church activities and Sunday school but the building was in a state of disrepair. Frequent maintenance and discomfort during services prompted them to accelerate their plans to build their own place of worship.

As early as spring 1923 the membership had started “the Lot Fund,” and by October of 1924 they had purchased the southwestern corner of Laurel and Santa Clara streets and were ready to begin a building campaign. The Southern California Baptist Convention offered them $5,000 towards constructing the building, if the congregation could match that amount. This

Significance [continued]

challenge was successfully achieved and, with the congregation providing much of the labor, the First Baptist Church opened its own doors on Laurel Street in February 1926.

While the opening of the new building was met with satisfaction from the members, it was only an interim solution to their worship needs. Known as the "Sunday school building," it was plain and rectangular, and occupied only a portion of their property. Services were held on the main floor, which also housed rooms for Sunday school classes; a large basement contained the social hall, kitchen, and additional Sunday school rooms.

In June 1928 the members welcomed Reverend J.W. Jenkins as their fourth pastor in five years. Despite the fluidity in leadership, the congregation had continued to grow and within a month of Jenkins assuming the pastorate, the Board of Deacons of the First Baptist Church announced that a new auditorium would soon be built. Before the end of that year architect Robert B. Stacy-Judd had been hired, and submitted his rendering for a Mayan Revival style church building. (*The Ojai,* 7-6-1928)

During the decade of the 1940s the First Baptist Church of Ventura turned its attention to outreach; working with the Sunday school at Limoneira Ranch in Santa Paula, establishing a mission at Oak View Gardens which later became the self sustaining Oak View Baptist Church, and helping to start a Spanish American Baptist Church in Oxnard. In 1949 they began broadcasting their evening service over local radio station KVEN. They retired the church mortgage in 1944.

As the church grew in the 1950s it purchased adjoining properties with the intent of eventually building a school. Insufficient off-street parking put an end to the plans and the church once again began a building fund drive. With the slogan "46 by 56" the church raised $46,000 by 1956 and in August purchased five acres on South Mills Road, then part of the Thille Ranch and planted with walnuts.

Two and a half years later, the new complex was ready for the congregation. On March 22, 1959 (Palm Sunday), the Baptist's new Fellowship Hall was complete and the membership celebrated with duplicate services in both the new and the old churches. This practice continued for the next two months; the Baptists held their last service in the Laurel Street church on May 24, 1959.

A month later, the *Ventura Star Free Press* contained the announcement that the church at Laurel and Santa Clara streets, which by that time was popularly known as the "Mayan Temple," had been purchased by the Ventura County Religious Science Church. This church was an affiliate of the Institute of Religious Science founded by Ernest Holmes. The Institute of Religious Science became the Church of Religious Science in 1953. Holmes was present at the inaugural meeting of the Ventura church in January 1952. Prior to purchasing the "Mayan Temple," the congregation met in the Alice Bartlett Clubhouse, a few blocks away. (*Ventura Star Free Press,* 6-20-1959)

Robert B. Stacy-Judd, Architect

The architect Robert Benjamin Stacy-Judd was born in London, England in 1884. Little is known about his parents, Benjamin Stacy-Judd and Elizabeth Thompson Stacy-Judd, beyond that they were relatively affluent West End Londoners and were able to provide quality schooling for their son. While attending Acton College in London as a teenager, Robert Stacy-Judd exhibited a talent for inventions and the fabrication of ship models and clocks, among other devices. On the strength of his construction of

Significance [continued]

a model submarine, Stacy-Judd's father directed his son towards a career in naval architecture, placing him briefly in the London firm of Mordand/Lawson & Co. (Gebhard, 1993: 3-4)

The young Stacy-Judd was unhappy with his father's choice of naval architecture as a career, and he remained at the firm only briefly. In 1900, after unsuccessfully attempting to persuade his father to allow him to pursue architecture, Stacy-Judd left home and found apprenticeship and employment with the Sussex architect James Thompson. He remained with Thompson for four years, where he learned the vocabulary of the period revival styles popular during the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras, and also began to demonstrate a flair for the flamboyant and unusual in architectural design which would characterize his later career. (Gebhard, 1993: 4-7)

Prior to completing his apprenticeship with Thompson, Stacy-Judd enrolled at the South Kensington Science and Art Institute, from which he graduated in 1905. Unable to find placement in an architectural firm, Stacy-Judd took numerous odd and unrelated jobs, including freelance advertising. In 1906 he obtained his first professional architectural position, with the Great Northern Railroad Company, for whom he designed numerous buildings, including a large but never-constructed hotel. While working for the railroad, Stacy-Judd continued his education at the Regents Street Polytechnic School, and sought more satisfying employment, which he found with the London architect's office of the Franco-British Exposition of 1908. This was only a short-term assignment, however, and Stacy-Judd once again found himself unemployed with its completion. (Gebhard, 1993: 8-10)

It was apparently at this point in his career when Stacy-Judd first began to seriously consider working abroad, as evidenced by an unsuccessful application for a position at an architectural firm in Buenos Aires. What followed was another series of apparently unrelated employments, including a brief stint as a government architect, additional freelance advertising, and editorship of a social journal. Through his work on advertising brochures, posters and store window displays, Stacy-Judd continued to develop and exhibit his taste for exotic and quirky design themes. He formed his own architectural practice in 1910, but advertising design remained an important part of his living for several years thereafter. (Gebhard, 1993: 10-12)

During the years 1910-12, Stacy-Judd became involved with the construction of three movie theaters, both as a designer and an investment partner. This episode in the architect's career is notable on three counts. First, the Egyptian Revival designs which he was called upon to produce for these projects arguably provided Stacy-Judd with his first real opportunity to fully express his unconventional architectural ideas. Second, the bankruptcy of his business partner resulted in Stacy-Judd taking over ownership of one of the theaters. This event compelled him to meld the talents he had cultivated in both design and promotion, a combination which would reappear prominently in his later career. Finally, the proceeds from the sale of the theater he had inadvertently come to own allowed him to realize his dream of emigrating from England. (Gebhard, 1993: 12-16)

In 1911 Robert Stacy-Judd made a decision to leave England for Canada, with the ultimate goal of finding his way to Argentina, and setting up an architectural practice in Buenos Aires. Arriving in Montreal in July of 1913, over the next few months he ventured westward across Canada to the west coast, then south to the United States, first to Seattle in October, then eastwards across the country to New York City and Boston, exploring his opportunities along the way. Of the places which interested Stacy-Judd, Minneapolis won out. Shortly after settling in the city, in 1914 he was offered a partnership in the architectural firm of R.T. Frost in Minot, North Dakota. He accepted, and although his partnership with Frost lasted only a few months, Stacy-Judd continued practicing architecture in Minot for the next four years. (Gebhard, 1993: 17-18; United States Immigration Records)

Significance [continued]

Stacy-Judd's work during his years in Minot was relatively conventional in terms of stylistic approaches, probably reflecting the limited building opportunities of a small North Dakota city. Continuing with his eclectic proclivities, during his years in Minot, Stacy-Judd wrote poetry and articles for the local newspaper and authored a play, which was performed at the Minot Opera House. In 1917 he married Anna Veronica White, a school teacher from Waseca, Minnesota. The marriage ended in divorce a few years later. In 1918 Stacy-Judd was employed by the United States Emergency Fleet Corporation in Philadelphia, for whom he oversaw the construction of several housing projects. (Gebhard, 1993: 18-26; United States Census; United States Immigration Records)

After the war, probably in 1920, Stacy-Judd returned to Canada and entered into a partnership with Calgary architect William B. Major. At some point he was joined in Calgary by his widowed mother. The architectural partnership with Major was apparently productive, but in keeping with his restless nature, Stacy-Judd continually sought out new opportunities. He visited California in 1922, and after a week of examination, promptly decided to pull up stakes in Calgary and establish a new practice in Los Angeles. His mother followed him to California the following year. (Gebhard, 1993: 3-4; United States Census; United States Immigration Records)

The majority of the architect's early projects in California were relatively conventional period revival designs, as they had been in Minot and Calgary, although they often featured eccentric details which presaged his future direction. Stacy-Judd's first Southern California exploration of genuinely exotic architectural imagery, the Egyptian Revival design for the unbuilt Beni-Hasan Theatre in Arcadia (1923-24), harkened back to some of the last work he completed before leaving England. (Gebhard, 1993: 31-35)

Two events which occurred in 1923 fundamentally altered the direction of Stacy-Judd's practice, and his entire view of American architecture. During that year, the architect was hired by National Community Hotels, Inc. of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to design several tourist hostelries on the West Coast, including one in Monrovia, California. During the same year, Stacy-Judd was visited by a traveling architectural book salesman. Included in his inventory was the 1841 two-volume set *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, by John L. Stephens. The architectural images of Central America and Mexico he found in the books struck an immediate and deep chord with Stacy-Judd. The Mayan architectural forms illustrated in the books were quickly adopted as his preferred stylistic theme for the Monrovia project, which would be called the Aztec Hotel. According to Stacy-Judd, the Aztec name was applied to the hotel in favor of Mayan, "because the word Maya was practically unknown at the time." (Gebhard, 1993: 37-40; Stacy-Judd, c.1940)

Before it could be built, however, the unusual scheme had to be marketed successfully to his clients. The sales pitch Stacy-Judd contrived for his Aztec Hotel design would become a virtual template for methods he would use to persuade future clients of the soundness of his increasingly eccentric architectural theories. At first, the architect presented them with a relatively bland Spanish Revival treatment for the project. He then provided them with a peek at the more daring and original Mayan Revival design. The sleight of hand worked. (Gebhard, 1993: 41)

The design of the Aztec Hotel (1924-25) was, on the exterior elevations, essentially an exercise in applied ornament. The Mayan motifs in high concrete relief were attached to what was largely a traditional commercial storefront design. These motifs were carried through into the lobby areas. In later years, although Stacy-Judd would characterize his work on the Aztec Hotel as crucial to his career, he also called it "a crude blundering-in-the-dark attempt, but ... a first achievement ... which could be likened to the first steam-engine, the first telephone or the first automobile." (Stacy-Judd, c.1940)

Significance [continued]

The design and construction of the Aztec Hotel was accompanied by much ballyhoo, orchestrated with characteristic skill and bravado by Robert Stacy-Judd himself — along with a less than completely enthusiastic response from an unpersuaded architectural community. In support of his cause, the architect wrote numerous articles for newspaper and magazine publications nationwide, proclaiming the arrival of a new American architecture. Along with publicity intended to drum up interest in the hotel, Stacy-Judd promoted the notion that he had discovered this architectural form, and was the first to assimilate it for contemporary purposes.

This claim, as with many the architect made over the course of his career, does not stand up to close scrutiny. While Robert Stacy-Judd emerged during the 1920s as one of the principal, and certainly most enthusiastic, proponents of adapting Meso-American architecture, he was by no means the first to utilize it in modern construction. Other examples of Mayan Revival style buildings had appeared sporadically in the U.S., particularly during the 1910s and later. (Gebhard, 1993: 59-60; Ingle, 1984)

Setting aside any skepticism which results from Stacy-Judd's sometimes extravagant claims, his relationship with Mayan architecture certainly became unique. From the mid-1920s onwards, he constructed an elaborate mythology around both the culture and the architecture of the ancient Maya, and not incidentally, also about himself. Stacy-Judd argued that the Mayan style was the true indigenous architecture of the Americas. In order to support his theories, he actively cultivated at least the appearance, if not the reality, of a serious anthropologist's expertise in Mayan culture and architecture.

The architect was abetted and encouraged in his pursuit of all things Mayan by one of his more regular clients and fellow Maya devotee, Theodore A. Willard, wealthy owner of the Willard Battery Company, whom the architect met during the mid-1920s. Willard had published a number of fiction and nonfiction books and articles on Meso-American topics, and had journeyed to the Yucatan on exploratory expeditions. In 1929 Stacy-Judd persuaded Willard, as well as journalist and Maya aficionado Edna Robb Webster, to join him on an expedition to the ruins of Yucatan, which he had planned for 1930. The group would spend two months in the Merida area, exploring numerous important and minor Maya sites. During the expedition the architect met three famed archeologists, and extensively documented his travels in photographs and on film. These records, and collected Maya artifacts, would form the foundation of the lecture tours he embarked upon after his return to Los Angeles in April of that year. (*Los Angeles Times,* 4-23-1930; Gebhard, 1993: 95-98)

Almost immediately, Stacy-Judd began planning his return to the Yucatan, this time on a far more ambitious scale. In October 1931, the architect announced with characteristic fanfare an expedition featuring a large party of scientists, and the modern novelty of a dirigible from which they could search for previously undiscovered ruins, as well as live radio broadcasts direct from the jungle wilds. The plans were widely publicized, and the architect traveled to Mexico City to obtain the needed permits — but ultimately the immense magnitude of the expedition, planned just as the economy of the early 1930s was unraveling, lead to its cancellation. Over the next few years, the architect would visit Mexico and Central America again in search of inspiration for his architectural and anthropological ideas, and write about them extensively during the 1930s, but the 1930 expedition would prove to be the high watermark of his public profile as a self-proclaimed expert on the subject of Mayan civilization, art and architecture. (*Los Angeles Times,* 10-8-1931; Gebhard, 1993: 100-101)

During the 1930s, Stacy-Judd became aligned with a subgroup of Maya enthusiasts which since the mid-19th century had been publishing imaginative and fantastical theories about the origins of the Mayan people. By way of attempting to explain the evolution of Mayan high art and architecture without apparent precedents in the Americas, the architect expressed the belief that the Maya were in fact "the oldest civilization on earth," decedents of refugees from the lost continent of Atlantis, "which

Significance [continued]

now lies beneath the waters of the Atlantic Ocean," where they had lived for thousands of years before appearing in the Americas. The architect's identification with these theories was cemented in 1939, with the publication of his own contribution to the body of Atlantan theory literature, the book *Atlantis — Mother of Empires*, an expansion on the theories he had expressed in shorter form in articles, and in a chapter of his 1934 book *The Ancient Mayas*. (Ingle, 1984: 76-79; Stacy-Judd, 1933; Stacy-Judd, 1934)

Stacy-Judd's relentless marketing succeeded in attracting considerable attention to himself, which fed into his architectural practice, if not entirely to productive effect. Despite the widespread attention it received at the time of its unveiling, the Aztec Hotel did not result in an outpouring of demand for Mayan Revival style buildings, either for Robert Stacy-Judd or the handful of other architects who were prepared to design in the idiom. Stacy-Judd produced numerous proposals for Mayan Revival style buildings during the 1920s, but few were ultimately realized. Of his completed projects during the balance of the 1920s, the majority were designed to reflect the more familiar period revival styles popular during the 1920s. Notable exceptions were the Monroe House (1929) and Willard House (1929-32), as well as a few smaller dwellings in the Mayan Revival style. The architect's idiosyncratic architectural ideas would arguably gain their fullest expression in his design for the First Baptist Church of Ventura.

The First Baptist Church of Ventura

It is unrecorded how, or precisely when, Robert B. Stacy-Judd came in contact with the congregation of the First Baptist Church of Ventura, but this event probably occurred in 1928, several years after his famed work on the Aztec Hotel, but prior to his well-publicized expedition to the Yucatan. The architect was certainly not known as a church designer — of the many buildings he had designed to that date, only three had been churches, all of them in North Dakota. As a result, the architect was faced with the daunting twin assignments of persuading the congregation to not only hire him to design their new church, but to accept his highly unconventional Mayan Revival design proposal. It was to these tasks that the architect's temperament and talents as a promoter, honed over many years and demonstrated with the Aztec Hotel project, were particularly suited.

One possible clue to the contact between Stacy-Judd and the church was that the architect's hiring seems to have coincided with the arrival of Rev. John W. Jenkins as the congregation's minister in mid-1928, suggesting that this connection may have been made through the pastor. Whether or how this occurred may never be known. In any event, it was Jenkins who would publicly comment on the appropriateness of the design, in a way which provides some insight into the dialogue which must have passed between the congregation and the architect: "The church knows this is a radical departure from the established designs, but feels that the community will be pleased [with our] effort to bring into Christian use this ancient architecture ... it is probably not Christian in its background, but is religious and we consider it part of our business to Christianize the unchristian." (*Ventura Free Press,* 8-23-1930)

It is unclear precisely how much design work was completed by Stacy-Judd in the two years after his hiring, as his working plans for the building are undated. However, it is known that a perspective rendering was completed by the architect in November 1928, and that the final plans were approved by the congregation in October 1930, after the church completed a successful building fund drive, and doubtless after much debate within the congregation over the design. Some insight into this conversation can be found in quotes the architect provided to newspaper and magazine writers about the project and its challenges. In one, he pointedly remarked, "It took many battles and weeks of grief to tear down the walls of ignorance and prejudice that opposed this architectural venture." (Hansen, nd.)

Significance [continued]

In another article, authored by his friend Edna Robb Webster, the architect commented at more length on the difficulties he encountered with this project: "So, Maya art and architecture provided me with a theme; but with all these attributes, I met a fusillade of objections [sic] when I suggested Maya motif for a modern church. There was a prevalent lack of knowledge of the Maya subject and the consequent relegation of these marvelous people to the ash heap of barbarism and idolatry. But at last a far-seeing board of directors recognized its possibilities; and as the building progresses, their enthusiasm is unbounded." At the same time, the architect expressed frustration with the constraint of creating the design as a "new addition to an existing building of nondescript design," and working within a strict budget that was "appallingly low." (Stacy-Judd, c.1940; Webster, nd.)

As is always the case with interpreting Stacy-Judd, these comments should be put into perspective. It is entirely in character for the architect to claim personal and moral triumph for his ideas over daunting obstacles, and these remarks are consistent with the defiant tone he frequently struck in his writings. It is unknowable if it was literally the case with the First Baptist Church project that the architect was forced to "tear down the walls of ignorance and prejudice," but it is certainly true that few architects could have successfully sold such unconventional architectural ideas to a client which would have been naturally inclined to desire a more traditional approach.

It is interesting to consider, but difficult to determine, the degree to which the architect's 1930 expedition to the Yucatan influenced the design of the First Baptist Church. It is known only that this crucial and formative event in his career occurred in the midst of his work on the project, and that his final building plans were approved by the congregation six months after his return from Mexico, and during a period when he was actively engaged in speaking tours.

The available evidence, including the 1928 rendering and the 1930 building plans, are not particularly helpful in resolving this question. While the overall form and plan of the building were clearly established by 1928, the cornice and frieze details, which were important elements in communicating the building's Mayan Revival design, were not fully realized on either the rendering or the working plans. This suggests that the design for the church, even though it was conceptualized in 1928, was probably completed in detail after the architect's return from the Yucatan, and to some degree reflected his experiences among the Mayan ruins.

Stacy-Judd articulated an elaborate rationale for the design of the First Baptist Church, and for why it did not conform "to one of the conventional ecclesiastic styles." This explanation provided the architect with the opportunity to describe the Mayan symbolism which he claimed was integrated into its design, as well as to expound upon his theories about Mayan being the true indigenous architectural style of the Americas. (Stacy-Judd, c.1940)

On the latter topic, Stacy-Judd urged American architects "to utilize motifs of the borrowed arts as a basis for evolving a style to symbolize the psychological and characteristic American way of life," instead of taking their architectural ideas from European and other non-American ancient precedents. In defense of this proposition, Stacy-Judd characterized the Mayan civilization in glowing terms, as an "ideal people who led an exemplary life ... bold thinkers and brilliant creators in the arts and sciences," and reiterated his firm belief that the Maya were descended from the peoples of the lost continent of Atlantis. It was key to the architect's theories to include the Maya "among the previously acknowledged classic races," in order to bolster his mission to establish Mayan as the appropriate classical architecture on which "to found an All-American style." As part and parcel of his dedication to this cause, he lashed out at his detractors and skeptics, decrying "the numerous misapprehension

Significance [continued]

and derogatory statements emanating from ignorant or misinformed writers who maintain among other inaccuracies that the Ancient Mayas were barbarians and savages." (Stacy-Judd, c.1940)

In an apparent effort to harmonize a modern Christian church with the forms and symbols of Mayan architecture, Stacy-Judd opined that the Maya "believed in One God, the immortality of the soul and placed flowers and fruit on their altars ... and in spite of the claims to contrary, there is no evidence that the Mayas practices human sacrifice." Through this statement alone, some insights can be gained into the lively discussions which must have taken place between the architect and the congregation of the First Baptist Church, as well as the architect's formidable powers of persuasion. This was evidently a winning argument for Stacy-Judd, as a Mayan sacrificial altar would become a notable feature of the church's sanctuary. (Stacy-Judd, c.1940)

In terms of the symbolism which Stacy-Judd expressed as being present in the design, the architect seemed to be striving to convey commonalities between Christianity and the beliefs of the Maya, or at least, the appearance of commonalties. The five steps of the tower are explained as symbolizing "the four elements plus the spirit ... the philosophers ascribed five to Christ, symbolizing the spirit of man rising above matter," and the "two flights of five [represent] the two opposite or dual system of thought," with the "topmost step ... indicative of attainment." The entrance arch, the architect said, was "intended to symbolize the gradual fusion of the various theological creeds." The six steps of the north bay are said to symbolize "the unity of spirit and matter" and man's "desire to reach the single seventh [step], the realization and understanding of his Creator." (Stacy-Judd, c.1940)

While the building's concrete-cast ornament relief carvings were said by Stacy-Judd to be representational and rife with Mayan decorative imagery, it seems the architect was according himself a substantially freer hand in designing these details. The relief carvings are "symbolic of the Mayas great love for, at times, highly complicated decorative forms ... frequently stylized, even to the total abstract ... [and are] therefore indicative of beauty in the decorative enhancing architectural form." This is decoration for the sake of decoration, the architect seems to be saying. (Stacy-Judd, c.1940)

The symbolic forms return on the building's interior. The seven steps of the nave ceiling are said to "symbolize the immortal number of the Mosaic Law, the Seven Days of the Creation, and the Seventh Day of Rest." The seven steps, found again in the organ grill, this time "symbolize the Seven Stages of Life unfolding." The decoration is based on the east wing of the Casa de la Monjas at Uxmal, according to Stacy-Judd. The baptistry ornament illustrates the "binding, or gathering together motif" representational of the "united effort to raise man intellectually and spiritually," and the reliefs on the lectern include "the universal Tau symbol of Life, surrounded by serpent motifs symbolizing protection. The Life Eternal." (Stacy-Judd, c.1940)

The official ground-breaking for the new church took place on February 1, 1931. Employing volunteer labor from its members, the church was completed a year later — in time to be the scene of the architect's second marriage, to Betty Schofield. The couple were married in the sanctuary of the First Baptist Church on February 12, 1932. The building's official dedication occurred several weeks later, on Easter Sunday.

In the flamboyant and immodest manner which characterized his career as an architect, writer and explorer, Stacy-Judd actively promoted his design as the "first ecclesiastic building to be erected in the world embodying in its design the architectural forms and art motifs of the Ancient Maya." This claim was repeated in numerous contemporary press accounts. (*Ventura Free Press*, 2-7-1932)

Significance [continued]

Once again, it is worth considering whether Stacy-Judd was as interested in the literal accuracy of his claims as he was in establishing his credentials as the first and foremost designer in the Mayan Revival style. Nevertheless, in this instance, the architect's claims may have been essentially accurate. Insofar as the building can be described as an example of the Mayan Revival style, it is certainly one of at most a small number of American churches to ever have been designed around Meso-American motifs, and quite possibly, the first.

The architect's sources of inspiration for the form and plan of the building appear to have been somewhat more complicated, however. As architectural historian David Gebhard points out, the dramatic stepped vertical composition Stacy-Judd utilized for the principal elevation of the First Baptist Church is similar to the Grundvig Church in Copenhagen, designed by P.V. Jensen Klint, as well as a number of European Expressionist churches of the period, designs which Stacy-Judd was likely to have encountered in contemporary architectural literature. (Gebhard, 1993: 85)

In summarizing the significance of the architect's career, David Gebhard notes that while "he was by no means the first to suggest that pre-Colombian architecture could serve as a source for a new modern architecture of the twentieth century ... the timing of [the Aztec Hotel] commission and his highly successful salesmanship of it transported him into the forefront of American culture." While Robert Stacy-Judd would continue to promote his architectural and anthropological ideas throughout the 1930s, and for the rest of his career, as the public taste for architectural exoticism waned, so did his opportunities to design in the Maya Revival style he claimed as his own. (Gebhard, 1993: 131)

The importance of the First Baptist Church of Ventura within the career of Robert Stacy-Judd is best understood not simply as a scarce work of architecture in the Mayan Revival style, but as one of the most notable achievements of an unusual figure in the annals of the profession, one who was capable of making an uncommonly determined and successful pitch for an exotic architectural form, even in the most unlikely places. "Stacy-Judd was a huckster," observes David Gebhard, but "there is no question that he strongly believed whatever at the moment he happened to be enthusiastic about." In singling out the significance of this property within the context of the career of Robert Stacy-Judd, Gebhard concludes that the First Baptist Church of Ventura stands as his "one great masterpiece of the improbable." (Gebhard, 1993: 131; Gebhard, 1996: 104)

The Mayan Revival Style

The Mayan Revival style is a sub-classification within the broader theme of architectural exoticism, which can be seen as a response to Modernism and other changes taking place within the broader society during the early twentieth century. The development of advanced communication and transportation technologies, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, allowed remote parts of the world to appear closer at hand than they had previously. At the same time, archeologists were unearthing and displaying artifacts connected with ancient civilizations which were previously little known to the general public. Archeological explorations, particularly the King Tutankhamun discovery of 1922, and the wildly popular exhibition which followed, fired a national movement towards the adoption of exotic imagery in art, architecture and popular culture, as well as a growing sense that the traditional neoclassical styles derived from Greek and Roman prototypes were less than satisfactory expressions of the new American century. During this period, exoticism in architecture competed for attention and occasionally blended with Modernism, in both its academic and popular manifestations. (Ingle, 1984: 72-75)

Exotic architectural genres encountered during the first three decades of the twentieth century included Egyptian, Babylonian, Islamic, Oriental, American Indian, and Mayan, among others. They became the adventuresome alternatives to the more

Significance [continued]

traditional and restrained period revival styles, such as Spanish, Italian, and English. Although many examples of architectural exoticism can be found nationwide, the architectural climate within Southern California, which was in the process of searching for a regional architectural identity of its own and prepared to consider almost any proposition, was particularly receptive to experimentation. Still, exotic styles were implemented primarily in prominent commercial buildings, such as theaters, where an exuberant and unexpected architectural scheme could aid in a building's competition for attention within a crowded urban landscape.

Within the range of exotic architectural modes, the Mayan Revival style had the advantage of dovetailing with Modernism, as it was then evolving, and particularly Art Deco. A popular art movement related to Cubism, Art Deco ornament reduced natural and manmade forms to abstractions, in ways which were incidentally similar to Mayan art. The Mayan Revival style had the additional selling-point to a North American audience of having originated in the Americas. Despite these apparent, at least superficially favorable circumstances, adapting the Mayan style, as well other other exotic genres, to modern architecture proved problematical. Although a number of notable architects explored the possibilities of Pre-Columbian forms and motifs, including Frank Lloyd Wright, advancing the Mayan Revival style remained in the hands of a relative few architects, chief among them, Robert Stacy-Judd.

Despite the efforts and expectations of Stacy-Judd, the Mayan Revival did not evolve into the new architectural style of the Americas. In the final analysis, the Mayan Revival style joins the other exotic architectural images of the 1920s and 1930s as essentially a footnote in the history of architecture, a path which did not lead onwards. The style may not have thrived as its advocates had so fervently hoped, but the buildings which were built in the style can be seen as clearly communicating to the present aspects of the art and social history of the period during which they appeared.

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Geographical Data [continued]

Verbal Boundary Description

Assessor Parcel Number 073-143-240

Boundary Justification

The boundary of the nominated property is the parcel of real property upon which the building was constructed.

Photographic Log

Photographer: Mitch Stone, San Buenaventura Research Associates

Format: Digital

1. General view, northern and eastern elevations, facing southwest. (7 May 2007)
2. Northern elevation, facing south. (7 May 2007)
3. Eastern elevation, facing west. (21 March 2008)
4. Southern elevation, facing northwest. (7 May 2007)
5. Western elevation, portion, facing southeast. (21 March 2008)
6. Tower detail, northeastern elevation, facing southwest. (21 March 2008)
7. Frieze detail. (7 May 2007)
8. Sanctuary, podium. (21 March 2008)
9. Sanctuary, mezzanine/balcony (21 March 2008)
10. Sanctuary, ceiling detail (21 March 2008)
11. Sanctuary, altar detail (21 March 2008)
12. Lobby, portion (21 March 2008)