

Building Zion

The Latter-day Saint Legacy of Urban Planning

Craig D. Galli

As with the founding of Plymouth Colony, distinctive historical circumstances and theological beliefs converged to motivate early Latter-day Saint community builders. While the historic roots of Salt Lake City are well known to virtually every grade school student in Utah and to Church members around the world, aspects of our remarkable legacy of urban and transportation planning remain obscure. The physical design and community values underlying early attempts to build Zion provide useful perspective and inspiration as today's community leaders now grapple with managing urban growth along Utah's Wasatch Front (from Brigham City to Nephi and Grantsville to Kamas) and elsewhere.

Physical Design

The basis for Salt Lake City's design was Joseph Smith's concept for the City of Zion. In 1831, the Prophet Joseph Smith proclaimed from Kirtland, Ohio, that Independence, Jackson County, Missouri, had been "appointed and consecrated for the gathering of the saints" (D&C 57:1-4; see also 52:42). Joseph sought nothing less than the creation of "sacred gathering places" where the pure in heart would dwell in Zion in preparation for the second coming of the Savior.¹ Joseph Smith did not leave the creation of Zion to chance.

City of Zion Plat. Building a "Zion society" required careful planning and selfless commitment on the part of the new community's leaders and citizens. To assist them, in June 1833, Joseph delivered to local church leaders in Missouri the "City of Zion Plat" (fig. 1), which was soon revised to correct minor oversights.²

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FIG. 1. The City of Zion Plat, prepared by Joseph Smith in 1833. In the margins, Joseph explained that the large center lot for the temple would be surrounded by ten-acre squares. The deep individual lots would contain a stone or brick house and a garden. All barns, stables, and farmlands would be located outside the city, while farming families would reside within the city. Once the city was fully occupied, other towns would be constructed in the same manner to “fill up the world in the last days” (see bottom line).

While initially the plat would be used for the settlement of Jackson County, Joseph Smith intended that it also be used to build future communities elsewhere.³ The City of Zion Plat included margin notes detailing the physical configuration and characteristics of the community. The city described on the revised plat would cover one and one-half square miles and be divided into a European-style square grid pattern with 2,600 half-acre lots.⁴ The city center would consist of blocks to accommodate a temple complex and other ecclesiastical buildings. Located adjacent to the temple would be a bishop's storehouse, a repository of contributed tithes and offerings such as funds, food, and clothing to be dispensed to the poor. Nearby blocks were reserved for schools, parks, and stores, surrounded by individual family lots situated so that no single dwelling fronted another, thereby preserving "a sense of openness and privacy."⁵ The four major streets had 132-foot widths, other streets had 82.5-foot widths, and all were oriented to the cardinal directions.⁶ Houses, normally to be built of brick

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moving back to Salt Lake City in 1993, Craig became interested in the history of urban planning in Utah when he began to notice the impacts of haphazard urban planning along the Wasatch Front. He is currently serving a four-year term on the Salt Lake City Planning Commission and sits on the Steering Committee of Envision Utah.

or stone, would be set back twenty-five feet from the streets with gardens and orchards for beauty and sustenance.⁷ The Prophet Joseph intended that residents locate their barns and stables at the community's edge, surrounded by agricultural lands and open space.⁸

The density of the community when fully populated would be relatively high for a frontier town—eight people per lot. After achieving a population of between fifteen and twenty thousand inhabitants, growth into the immediately adjacent surrounding area would not be allowed.⁹ Rather, a new satellite community would be settled beyond a buffer or greenbelt between the new and old communities. Margin notes reveal Joseph Smith's intentions to maintain a compact urban design: "When the square is thus laid off and supplied, lay off another in the same way, and so fill up the world in the last days."¹⁰

Joseph intended that all members of the community live within the city: "Let every man live in the city, for this is the city of Zion."¹¹ Farmers would live side by side with merchants and professionals, rather than on the outskirts of the community or on remote ranches and farms. The compact size of the community accommodated such living arrangements. Later, John Taylor, the Church's third president, instructed:

In all cases in making new settlements the Saints should be advised to gather together in villages, as has been our custom from the time of our earliest settlement in these mountain valleys. The advantage of this plan, instead of carelessly scattering out over a wide extent of country, are many and obvious to all those who have a desire to serve the Lord.

By this means the people can retain their ecclesiastical organizations. . . . They can also cooperate for the good of all in financial and secular matters, in making ditches, fencing fields, building bridges, and other necessary improvements.

Further than this they are a mutual protection and source of strength against horse and cattle thieves, land jumpers, etc., and against hostile Indians, should there be any; while their compact organization gives them many advantages of a social and civic character which might be lost, misapplied or frittered away by spreading out so thinly that intercommunication is difficult, dangerous, inconvenient and expensive.¹²

Early Application of the City of Zion Plat. Joseph prepared a revised City of Zion Plat in June 1833, but his plan to build a City of Zion in Missouri was frustrated by the expulsion of the Saints. Beginning in November of that year, vigorous opposition from mobs forced hundreds of settlers from their homes in and around Independence.¹³ The Saints eventually regrouped in Clay County and Far West, Missouri, and later in Nauvoo, Illinois; each time eventually to be again driven by mobs from their homes, farms, and businesses. Nevertheless, in each location, Church

leaders loosely adapted the City of Zion Plat for use in settling these communities to build a temporary or “cornerstone” of Zion until the eventual return to Jackson County (D&C 124:2, 60). Before his martyrdom, the Prophet Joseph spoke of relocating to the Rocky Mountains as an interim gathering place until Zion could finally be reestablished in Jackson County, Missouri.¹⁴

Shortly after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, Church President Brigham Young and his associates made a number of land use and city planning decisions, remarkable for the time, using an adaptation of the City of Zion Plat.

Four days after their arrival, Brigham and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles proposed a new settlement with a temple lot, streets 132 feet wide, twenty-foot-wide sidewalks, and houses set back twenty feet from the street. Brigham dictated that the streets would not “be filled with cattle, horses and hogs, nor children, for they will have yards and places appropriated for recreation, and we will have a city clean and in order.”¹⁵ In August of 1847, Brigham supervised the preparation of the first plat for the Salt Lake Valley. It largely followed the City of Zion Plat with modifications to accommodate topography and specific needs of the community. The temple would be located not in the valley’s center but near the northern foothills. Nevertheless, it represented the spiritual center of the community and the zero mile marker for city blocks in all directions. Five- and ten-acre tracts were aligned in a grid pattern for commercial, light industry, manufacturing, and residential use. Larger lots of up to twenty acres were available for those who wished to live on farms located on the edge of the community.¹⁶

By 1850, three years after the Saints’ arrival in the valley, Salt Lake City covered an area four miles long and three miles wide. Unlike the many western settlements that developed as agricultural villages or mining towns, Salt Lake developed from the start as an urban community supported largely by manufacturing and commerce. The 1850 census reported that only one-third of all heads of household considered themselves farmers, dropping to 16 percent twenty years later. Salt Lake’s population grew rapidly from 1,700 in the first winter, to 5,000 by the first anniversary, to over 6,000 in 1850. Utah saw an increase in population growth of over 50 percent during each subsequent decade between 1850 and 1890.¹⁷

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FIG. 2. Wide streets in Salt Lake City, ca. 1869. The city was laid out with streets wide enough for a wagon to turn around. This width made it easy for the city to adapt streets for automobile and mass transit use in later years.

Brigham admonished the pioneers to beautify and take pride in their temporary Zion in the Rocky Mountains: “Progress, and improve upon, and make beautiful everything around you. . . . Build cities, adorn your habitations, make gardens, orchards, and vineyards, and render the earth so pleasant that when you look upon your labors you may do so with pleasure, and that angels may delight to come and visit your beautiful locations.”¹⁸ Similarly, George A. Smith counseled, “The plan of Zion contemplates that the earth, the gardens, and fields of Zion, be beautiful and cultivated in the best possible manner. Our traditions have got to yield to that plan, circumstances will bring us to that point, and eventually we shall be under the necessity of learning and adopting the plan of beautifying and cultivating every foot of the soil of Zion in the best possible manner.”¹⁹

In many ways, the pioneers succeeded (fig. 2). A visitor from Pittsburgh wrote in 1849, “I shall never forget the first sight of this valley. It shall ever remain on my mind as the most beautiful spectacle I ever beheld. . . . The bridges are all good, the streets and roads wide, and the fences very regular.”²⁰ Remarkably, this was just two years after the first settlers arrived. One traveler visiting the Salt Lake Valley in 1850 described what he saw as “a large garden laid out in regular squares.”²¹ Historians Thomas Alexander and James Allen observed that the city fathers “paid

careful attention to planning and beautification, and their wide streets, with irrigation ditches running down either side, became a standard item for commentary from travelers.”²² Passing through the Salt Lake Valley in 1877, renowned naturalist John Muir noted:

Most of the houses are veiled with trees, as if set down in the midst of one grand orchard. . . . [Homes] are set well back from the street, leaving room for a flower garden, while almost every one has a thrifty orchard at the sides and around the back. The gardens are laid out with great simplicity, indicating love for flowers by people comparatively poor. . . . In almost every one you find daisies, and mint, and lilac bushes, and rows of plain English tulips. Lilacs and tulips are the most characteristic flowers, and nowhere have I seen them in greater perfection.²³

Brigham Young’s Adaptation of the City of Zion Plat. Brigham’s adaptation to the original City of Zion Plat to allow for extra-wide streets facilitated future urban design adaptations that enhanced the community in several ways as Salt Lake City’s population grew.²⁴ First, as the automobile arrived and became prevalent, many wide streets were modified to become high-speed, high-capacity arterial roads, some with as many as six lanes, while other streets located in quiet residential neighborhoods were converted to two-lane boulevard configurations with handsomely landscaped median strips. This flexibility has given Salt Lake City residents a degree of increased mobility and aesthetic appeal enjoyed by few metropolitan areas. Second, wide streets allowed for the preservation of historic homes and buildings. To accommodate the automobile, many other cities had to condemn developed strips along existing streets to widen streets in urban centers.

Third and most important, the wide streets accommodated the construction of future streetcar lines, usually located in street medians with relatively little disruption to existing structures. Salt Lake’s first trolley cars, drawn by mules and horses, appeared in 1872. The Church financially supported the fledgling trolley car company at various times when the company struggled.²⁵ By 1889, the Salt Lake City Street Railway Company had twenty-one mule- and horse-drawn trolleys covering approximately 14 miles of track.²⁶ To accommodate the transportation needs of a growing population, electric streetcars replaced animal-drawn trolleys. In 1889, Salt Lake completed construction of its electric street car system, just one year after the nation’s first system commenced operation in Richmond, Virginia.²⁷ By 1950, trackless trolleys and new rear-engine gasoline buses traveled over twelve thousand miles daily on 154 miles of streets, making an average of sixteen million passenger trips annually.²⁸ As early as 1914, approximately half of all adults living in Salt Lake City rode the streetcars



Courtesy Church Archives

FIG. 3. Salt Lake City looking east, 1927. Laid out in a neat grid designed after the City of Zion Plat, the city benefits from a sense of order. The numbered streets make finding addresses simple.

on a daily basis, and 26 interurban trains carried over 800 passengers between Salt Lake and Provo each day.²⁹ In the late 1920s, as asphalt replaced most dirt roads to better accommodate automobile traffic, Salt Lake City was the first city in the world to outfit trolley cars with pneumatic rubber tires to be used without track. Delegations from twenty-six states and thirteen countries visited Salt Lake City to study the highly innovative design and operation of Salt Lake's trolley system.³⁰

Over time, the automobile gradually displaced rail and trolley service; in 1941 the last streetcar in Salt Lake City was decommissioned.³¹ Nevertheless, mass transit had played a significant role in economic growth and vitality in the Salt Lake Valley for a period of over fifty years at a critical time in the area's history (fig. 3).

Early Mormon Community Values

The Mormon pioneers could make the transition from establishing Zion in Jackson County to establishing an interim Zion in the Salt

Lake Valley in part because Zion was more than a place: it was and is an ideal—an ideal community or society whose purpose “was to create unity and cooperation for the good of the whole” based on correct principles reflected in the attitudes and conduct of the community’s inhabitants.³² The following values of a Zion community, derived from the sermons of early Mormon leaders and LDS scriptures, appear as relevant today as when they were first taught.

Equitable Land Use and Environmental Stewardship. Early Church leaders taught that the Saints would be judged by God according to their exercise of wise stewardship over the “land of their inheritance.” Joseph Smith taught that the Lord made “every man accountable, as a steward over earthly blessings,” decreeing that “the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare”; however, the Lord is not pleased “if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion . . . unto the poor and the needy” (D&C 104:13–18). Apostle Orson Pratt explained that “this land, about which I have been speaking, is called in some places in the revelations of God to the Prophet Joseph, the land of our inheritance. . . . If we shall be unwise in the disposition of this trust, then it will be very doubtful, whether we get an inheritance in this world or in the world to come.”³³

Brigham spoke of keeping the natural and manmade environment pure just as one maintains personal purity: “Keep your valley pure, keep your towns as pure as you possibly can, keep your hearts pure.”³⁴ As the Saints did so, “the earth under their feet will be holy; . . . the soil of the earth will bring forth in its strength, and the fruits thereof will be meat for man.”³⁵ The earth itself is holy and we will be blessed for treating it as such: “Speaking of the elements and the creation of God, in their nature they are as pure as the heavens.”³⁶ “The Lord blesses the land, the air and the water where the Saints are permitted to live.”³⁷ Brigham taught that the study of nature would edify: “Fields and mountains, trees and flowers, and all that fly, swim or move upon the ground are lessons for study in the great school of our heavenly Father, . . . [in what] is open before us in good books and in the great laboratory of nature.”³⁸

Brigham repeatedly warned against greedy and wasteful exploitation of natural resources.³⁹ “It is not our privilege to waste the Lord’s substance,” he preached.⁴⁰ “There is only so much property in the world. There are the elements that belong to this globe, and no more. . . . [A]ll our commercial transactions must be confined to this little earth and its wealth cannot be increased or diminished.”⁴¹ He cautioned that exploitation and greed would have eternal consequences: “It is all good, the air, the water, the gold and silver; the wheat, the fine flour, and the cattle upon a

thousand hills are all good. . . . But that moment that men seek to build up themselves . . . and seek to hoard up riches, . . . proves that their hearts are weaned from their God; and their riches will perish in their fingers, and they with them.”⁴²

To ensure good stewardship and equitable allocation of land upon arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham allowed residents to acquire land at no cost (except for a \$1.50 recording fee), but subdividing one’s lot was prohibited, and real estate “speculation” was expressly discouraged.⁴³ This system provided affordable housing for both newcomers and original settlers alike. Careful land use helped maintain the compact size of the city and a sense of shared community.⁴⁴

Education and Cultural Pursuits. Joseph explained the connection between a compact urban design and the development of the educational and intellectual life of the Saints:

The farmer and his family, therefore, will enjoy all the advantages of schools, public lectures and other meetings. His home will no longer be isolated, and his family denied the benefits of society, which has been, and always will be, the great educator of the human race; but they will enjoy the same privileges of society, and can surround their homes with the same intellectual life, the same social refinement as will be found in the home of the merchant or banker or professional man.⁴⁵

Even as crops were planted and new homes built, Brigham considered cultivating minds as important as cultivating crops to ensure the success of the new settlement. Within months of his arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham exhorted the members of the Church in a “General Epistle to the Saints” to compile their collective body of knowledge:

The Saints should improve every opportunity of securing at least a copy of every valuable treatise on education—every book, map, chart, or diagram that may contain interesting, useful, and attractive matter, to gain the attention of children, and cause them to love to learn to read; and, also every historical, mathematical, philosophical, geographical, geological, astronomical, scientific, practical, and all other variety of useful and interesting writings, maps, etc. . . . from which important and interesting matter may be gleaned.⁴⁶

This early focus on education and cultural pursuits contributed to community cohesion and civic pride. Historian Linda Sillitoe characterized the early Mormon community of the Salt Lake Valley as “a thriving city, a county with expanding settlements, and multiplying social, intellectual, and cultural opportunities all boasted the value of planning and cooperation.”⁴⁷ The nineteenth-century Salt Lake community included a civic theater, orchestra, brass band, and Tabernacle Choir. Intellectual and

cultural societies—such as the Universal Scientific Society, Polysophical Society, Deseret Musical and Dramatic Association, Deseret Literary and Musical Association, and Deseret Philharmonic Society—developed to cultivate appreciation for literature, music, art, and science and to provide a forum for lectures, concerts, plays, and the reading of original poems and other literary works.⁴⁸

Civic Unity and Involvement. While the image of the “rugged individual” may symbolize the taming of the West, it does not typify building Zion. Joseph taught that “the building up of Zion is as much one man’s business as another’s. . . . Party feelings, separate interests, exclusive designs should be lost sight of in the one common cause, in the interest of the whole.”⁴⁹ Brigham emphasized the need to build community through collective effort: “We have come here to build up Zion. How shall we do it? . . . I have told you a great many times. There is one thing I will say in regard to it. We have got to be united in our efforts.”⁵⁰ He also said:

Let every individual in this city feel the same interest for the public good as he does for his own, and you will at once see this community still more prosperous and still more rapidly increasing in wealth, influence, and power. But where each one seeks to benefit himself or herself alone, and does not cherish a feeling for the prosperity and benefit of the whole, that people will be disorderly, unhappy, and poverty stricken, and distress, animosity, and strife will reign. . . . Let every man and woman be industrious, prudent, and economical in their acts and feelings, and while gathering to themselves, let each one strive to identify his or her interests with the interests of this community, with those of their neighbor and neighborhood, let them seek their happiness and welfare in that of all, and we will be blessed and prospered.⁵¹

Diversity and Tolerance. Brigham valued cultural diversity within the community of Saints. He fondly characterized them as a “mixed” people, “gathered from so many of the nations of the earth, with their different customs and traditions, associating with a kind, filial feeling nowhere else to be found,” dwelling “together on the most friendly terms and with brotherly feeling. . . . Into whatever neighborhood you go throughout these valleys in the mountains, amid the great variety of nationalities, with all their different habits and traditions, you find the warmest affection pervading the people.”⁵²

As Salt Lake City took shape in the 1850s, the neighborhoods reflected economic and ethnic diversity. Neighborhoods had a remarkably diverse and polyglot population. By 1870, with the influx of foreign-born Mormon converts, mostly British and Scandinavian, over 65 percent of Salt Lake residents were foreign born.⁵³ One could hear in the shops, streets, and churches the foreign languages and accents of immigrants from northern

Europe and elsewhere who had recently “gathered to Zion.”⁵⁴ Before long, economic opportunity attracted non-Mormons from inside and outside the United States.

Caring for the Needy. To establish a “Zion people,” Church leaders taught members of the community to “give of their substance, as becometh saints, to the poor and afflicted among them,” and be “united” because “Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom” (D&C 105:3–5). According to Brigham, this duty extended both to the poor within their community and in other lands. “The earthly means which we have been enabled to gather around us is not ours, it is the Lord’s, and he has placed it in our hands for the building up of his kingdom and to extend our ability and resources for reaching after the poor in other lands.”⁵⁵ He emphasized the need for social and economic unity and equity:

The earth is here, and the fullness thereof is here. It was made for man; and one man was not made to trample his fellow man under his feet, and enjoy all his heart desires, while the thousands suffer. We will take a moral view, a political view, and see the inequality that exists in the human family. . . . The Latter-day Saints will never accomplish their mission until this inequality shall cease on the earth.⁵⁶

Brigham also warned, “If the people called Latter-day Saints do not become one in temporal things as they are in spiritual things, they will not redeem and build up the Zion of God upon the earth.”⁵⁷

The early settlers had ample opportunity to practice caring for the poor. A steady stream of immigrants, aided by the Perpetual Emigrating Fund, continued to gather to the Salt Lake Valley often with little more than the shirts on their backs. Upon arrival, impecunious immigrants were warmly greeted at Emigration Square, fed and entertained, then dispersed among the various wards so that no one bishop or ward congregation would be unduly burdened supplying them with food, shelter, and sustenance until they became self-sufficient.⁵⁸

Secularization of Growth and Development Patterns

The specific vision of creating a compact community, patterned after the City of Zion Plat, did not persist. Various factors influenced changes in urban growth patterns. First, it eventually became necessary for settlers to subdivide and transfer land as families grew or moved on to form other communities, often being called to do so by Church leaders. Beginning in 1850, in order to accommodate property transfers, the territorial legislature authorized the surveyor general to issue surveyor certificates

to demonstrate legal possession and transfer of land. While the system of documenting real property possession through surveyor certificates functioned adequately for about a decade, the territorial government petitioned Congress in 1859 to include Utah in the National Land System so that legal title to property could be legally transferred, documented, and protected. In 1865, the federal surveyor for Utah agreed that the territorial government's petition to establish a federal land office and title system should be granted in order to encourage the emigration to the Utah Territory of a "population less hostile to the United States than the present."⁵⁹ Congress agreed, and a federal land office opened in March 1869. Soon after the land office opened, its services were heavily used by long-time Mormon settlers, recently arrived squatters, and mayors of newly established townsites, all seeking to quiet title.⁶⁰

Over time, the plan for a compact community changed to reflect the wishes of a diverse and growing population.

Second, beginning in the 1870s, the Church's leadership relinquished much of its influence over land use policies and practices. Maintaining the preferred urban design took a back seat to the challenges Church leaders faced: the threatened seizure of Church assets (including temples), prosecution of Church leaders by means of the Edmunds-Tucker Act, and loss of political power in Utah's largest cities, Salt Lake City and Ogden.⁶¹ Control over land use decreased as the population of the Salt Lake Valley grew more ethnically, religiously, and economically diverse. In 1870, over 90 percent of Salt Lake's population were Mormons. The completion of the transcontinental railroad in May 1869, the establishment of the federal land title system, and the growth of mining and other industries resulted in a dramatic demographic shift over the next twenty years. Between 1870 and 1890, Salt Lake City's non-Mormon population grew twice as fast as the Mormon population. By 1890 about half of Salt Lake City's forty-five thousand residents were not Mormons.⁶²

Third, maintaining the original compact community design depended in part on a very high degree of social and economic cohesiveness. A diverse and growing population, combined with the decline of the United Order, resulted in the creation of a real estate market. In the early 1880s, there were virtually no real estate developers in Salt Lake City, but by 1888 seventy-five real estate developers, many from out of state, arrived in Utah, believing Salt Lake City to be the next Denver.⁶³ New subdivisions targeted upper-middle-class residents and offered the latest amenities, including hot and cold running water, electricity, and coal-burning furnaces.⁶⁴ Some of the

newcomers during this period began to amass great wealth, and a row of handsome mansions owned by mining barons sprouted up along South Temple Street.⁶⁵ Others purchased homes and farms from Mormon settlers or homesteaded the remaining undeveloped land along the Wasatch Front. As “Gentiles” (non-Mormons) moved in, the Mormon settlers and their descendants eagerly sold to newcomers and real estate developers as the value of their land rapidly rose. One out-of-state developer of a new residential subdivision in Salt Lake City observed in 1890 that Mormons eagerly sold their property at great profit but rarely purchased parcels in new housing developments.⁶⁶

The selling of the Saints’ “land of inheritance” became a concern to Church leaders, as did the ever-increasing numbers of Church members leaving the Salt Lake Valley to acquire large tracts of land before the land was purchased or homesteaded by non-Mormons. It was one thing to be called by a prophet to settle a Mormon outpost, but quite another to leave the Mormon community to homestead for one’s own gain. Church leader George Q. Cannon spoke passionately on this subject at general conference in April 1889:

We hear that a good many of our young men are leaving this valley . . . to secure for themselves tracts of land . . . in places remote from their own homes. . . . We have been called to gather, not to scatter; we have been called by the Lord to build up Zion—to beautify the waste places . . . , not to spread out all over creation and become so thin and so weak that there is no strength or power with us. . . . We should concentrate ourselves and combine our efforts, and not look to the ends of the earth and see how much is going to waste that we are missing. . . . [T]here are a great many people who seem to have that idea in earnest, and because there are large tracts of land of which they hear in remote valleys they are anxious to strike out and take possession for fear that somebody else will get them. This is not wise. Let us be governed by wisdom in our movements. This is the way to build up Zion. It is not by scattering abroad or attempting to grow faster than our strength. . . . We can grow fast enough right along here in these valleys which are already occupied, by making use of the facilities within our reach.⁶⁷

As noted by historian John McCormick, “By the turn of the century . . . Salt Lake was no longer the uniform city its founders had intended.”⁶⁸ The rapid growth that occurred to the south of the city often did not follow the established grid system. Within the city center, new streets and alleys were carved through original city blocks to accommodate a hodgepodge of hurriedly constructed housing and commercial properties. Some sections of downtown “degenerated into crowded back alleys of squalor.”⁶⁹ Filth, from dead animals and open cesspools, and prostitution in the city’s

hidden corners became constant problems by the turn of the century.⁷⁰ Such conditions motivated many to move to outlying settlements or to homestead in remote locations far from the Salt Lake Valley. Looking back on Brigham Young's design to build a City of Zion, George H. Smeath, an early urban planner who worked in Salt Lake, Weber, and Utah Counties, lamented that the "comprehensive approach to community problems was lost as decision-making passed from the hands of a centralized authority into the hands, generally, of private interests."⁷¹

As the population diversified, civic organizations formed to represent a cross section of the community working together to advance community beautification and development projects. From the 1890s through the 1920s, the Chamber of Commerce, the Improvement League, and women's clubs embraced the national "City Beautiful" movement, pressing elected officials to clean up the city.⁷² Civic organizations and clubs, often with the backing of business leaders, lobbied for improvements in culinary water and sewage treatment, street lighting, mosquito abatement, and the creation of parks, playgrounds, boulevards, and other urban improvements.⁷³ These nonpartisan civic improvement societies were often headed by women and reflected growing religious diversity.⁷⁴ Thomas Alexander comments on the success of the men and women, LDS and non-LDS community leaders, who worked together, demonstrating early "environmental activism": "They achieved no civic Eden, but they realized some short-range and partial successes in solving several problems—controlling watershed erosion; providing parks, golf courses, water supplies, sewers, and street improvements; and cleaning the air of some pollution. . . . We could certainly learn from their experience."⁷⁵

Post-World War II Development Patterns

After World War II, restrictions on the sale of gasoline, tires, and automobiles were no longer needed to advance the war effort. New affluence found a willing automobile market, and many families began a tradition of owning two or more cars. Following the war, Salt Lake Valley experienced a significant housing shortage. Salt Lake City's mayor requested that developers place ten new homes on the market every day to meet the estimated shortfall of six thousand housing units. Developers accommodated the best they could, but often not within the Salt Lake City limits. They focused on constructing low cost homes in new subdivisions in the outlying suburbs where land was plentiful and less expensive.

With increasing congestion and virtually no mass transit, local officials concluded that new highways were needed to increase mobility in

the region. City and county commissioners proposed constructing an interstate highway bisecting Salt Lake City. Construction of Interstates 15 and 80 commenced in 1956 from the city center to the south. Initially, planners proposed a 2,000-foot-wide greenbelt adjacent to the highway, but this proposal never took hold, as real estate speculators acquired property along the highway to take advantage of the added mobility and convenience the new highway would bring.⁷⁶

Highway and road construction aided the dispersion of the growing population. In 1950, 70 percent of the population of Salt Lake County lived within Salt Lake City limits. By 1960, only 50 percent lived within Salt Lake City; only 30 percent remained by 1970. With a more dispersed population and the elimination of the trolley system, transit ridership plummeted from 33 million annual riders in 1946 to only 12 million in 1960—a 64 percent decrease. Utah’s population grew by at least 25 percent during that period of steep decline in transit ridership.⁷⁷

During the post–World War II period, the automobile, more than any other factor, changed and shaped the growth and character of the valleys along the Wasatch Front. Historian Dale L. Morgan observed in 1959: “The automobile came to Salt Lake City’s streets . . . soon altering the very character of those streets and ultimately banishing the streetcar, a development made final in 1941.” Morgan pondered: “Still we may hope that Salt Lake City will not lose itself in growth, that as it has preserved its unique identity through its eras as village, town, and city, it will not lose that identity in its transformation into a metropolis.”⁷⁸ Twenty years later, in 1979, historian Charles S. Peterson passed this judgment:

Whether in the satellite communities or the large centers of the Wasatch Front the problems of urban sprawl and industrialization are very much with Utahns today. Prime farm grounds are devoted to parking lots and subdivisions. Pollution and many of the social problems that attend urban growth are part of the scene. Visitors exclaim at how like other cities Utah’s population centers are, yet, urban Utah is the product of the interplay of natural and cultural forces found no place else and possesses qualities of its own.⁷⁹

Today over 80 percent of Utah’s population lives along the 100-mile, 10-county Wasatch Front, making Utah the sixth most urban state in the country.⁸⁰ The population of the Wasatch Front is expected to grow from 2.4 million in 2003 to 3.8 million in 2030.⁸¹ By the year 2050, there will be 5 million.⁸² The Wasatch Front looks much like other sprawling western cities such as Denver, Phoenix, and Las Vegas. The prevailing development pattern here, as in other rapidly growing cities in the West and throughout



FIG. 4. New automobile-dependent developments creating urban sprawl in Utah County, 2005. Such development is consuming agricultural lands and open space along the Wasatch Front.

the nation, emphasizes automobile-dependent, low-density, single-use development expanding on the fringes of existing communities (fig. 4).

Utah's newspapers routinely feature articles relating to the undesirable effects of prevailing land use patterns along the Wasatch Front.⁸³ Tensions surrounding local growth patterns have captured national attention. On the eve of the 2002 winter Olympics, *National Geographic* published an article highlighting the impact of the rapid conversion of remaining agricultural lands on families who had farmed the Salt Lake Valley for generations.⁸⁴ Similarly, an article in the *New York Times* reported:

Salt Lake is on its way to becoming a Phoenix of the Wasatch Range, bordered by new suburbs whose only connection to one another are the highways. Few people here seem to want this. . . . But indirectly, Utah seems to be doing just that. . . . The Salt Lake metropolitan area is following a cycle that is well known to other cities. Atlanta, after building a ring of highways sliced by other highways, has one of the most traffic-clogged metropolitan areas in the country.⁸⁵

While Salt Lake City's Trax lines (fig. 5) offer some relief, traffic congestion remains a serious problem.



Courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

FIG. 5. Salt Lake City, 2002. Trax trains provide mass transit today, as did animal-drawn trolleys and electric streetcars in earlier times.

Building Zion Today

Today the Saints no longer “gather” to Zion in the Salt Lake Valley, but build Zion in the communities in which they live. Building Zion now emphasizes spiritually strengthening families, neighborhoods, wards, and stakes. Beyond that, does the Prophet Joseph’s City of Zion Plat merely represent a quaint utopian experiment long ago forgotten? Can the City of Zion Plat and the early Mormon community values of building compact, aesthetically pleasing communities provide inspiration for better managing growth and planning future development along the Wasatch Front and elsewhere?

The early Mormon values of equitable land use, environmental stewardship, providing

educational and cultural amenities, promoting civic unity and citizen participation, encouraging diversity and tolerance, caring for the needy, providing affordable housing, and integrating aesthetic qualities in urban design, all could serve as guiding principles to maintain quality of life for any community. In addition, the City of Zion Plat itself provides ideals for designing communities that are livable and sustainable.

City of Zion Plat as a Precursor to Smart Growth. Most planners agree that the size and configuration of the ideal “urban village” (a compact, high-density walkable community surrounded by open space) is more environmentally sustainable and socially beneficial compared to modern urban sprawl.⁸⁶ While they disagree somewhat as to the precise size of the ideal community or urban village (which usually forms part of a larger metropolitan area linked with mass transit), urban planners who follow the “New Urbanism” school of urban planning typically agree that “smart growth” communities exhibit the following common attributes, as listed by Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy:

- Mixed land use, with offices, shops, businesses, and community facilities integrated into residential development so that there is more local activity. . . .
- Considerable landscaping . . . and attractive gardens in public spaces.
- A mix of public, private, and cooperative housing with an emphasis wherever possible on families and thus large internal dwelling spaces, and spacious community [common] areas. . . .
- Community facilities, such as schools, libraries, child care centers, senior centers, recreation centers, and in some cases small urban farms. . . .
- Special areas for secure storage of equipment such as boats or other recreational gear to allow for those who may like the community focus of such high-density development but need a little extra space.
- Pedestrian and cycle links with parking facilities placed underground where possible and traffic calming on peripheral roads. The aim is a traffic-free, people-oriented environment, not one designed around the space demands of surface parking lots.
- Public spaces with strong design features. . . .
- A high degree of self-sufficiency in the community to meet local needs, but with good rail and bus links.⁸⁷

The City of Zion Plat included virtually all of the above smart growth components: relatively high density (15,000 to 20,000 residents within 1.5 square miles or 960 acres), mixed commercial and residential development, community facilities and common areas, extensive landscaping, small urban farms and gardens, and surrounding open space. Once the community reached its population threshold, the Saints would “lay off another in the same way, and so fill up the world in the last days.”⁸⁸ The City of Zion Plat did not specify the distance between communities. However, sufficient distance between each compact community would exist to preserve open space and maintain separate community identities. In short, the City of Zion Plat and the urban design advanced by Joseph Smith and his immediate successors incorporated modern ideas of urban growth boundaries, land use regulation to direct growth, a town center, and surrounding protected greenbelt.

In recognition of this fact, in 1996 the American Institute of Certified Planners awarded Joseph Smith’s City of Zion Plat the National Planning Landmark Award, acknowledging it as one of the earliest examples of smart growth. A plaque, located at Brigham Young Historic Park at the corner of State Street and North Temple Street in Salt Lake City commemorates the award. It reads:

The Plat of the City of Zion, incorporated in a remarkable treatise on urban design addressed to the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by Joseph Smith on June 25, 1833, guided the

development of over 500 settlements in the Intermountain West, establishing a continuing commitment to the building of well-planned and culturally nurturing cities.

Theological Implications. While today's society is vastly different and more complex than the pioneer economic system, the principles of living within our means, conserving natural resources for future generations, and avoiding wasteful exploitation of limited land and water resources resonate today. But what about building the City of Zion itself? Has the commandment to build the City of Zion been rescinded?

Brigham Young explained, "In the mind of God there is no such thing as dividing spiritual from temporal, or temporal from spiritual; for they are one in the Lord."⁸⁹ Some doctrinal teachings such as the Word of Wisdom have easily recognizable spiritual and temporal implications. Likewise, the City of Zion Plat and the emphasis on building compact, aesthetically pleasing communities reflect timeless community-building principles. These principles presage modern smart growth planning to build sustainable communities which, when followed, preserve a sense of place and enhance civic pride. But building communities patterned after the City of Zion principles teaches citizens to work together and sacrifice for the common good. One professional planner observed:

The Mormon village was an extraordinary example of a sustainable community. . . . Sustainability requires community, a critical ingredient that has almost disappeared in this country. The self-centered, me-first "individual in society" would need to be replaced by a group-oriented "person in community." Like the Mormon village, a sustainable community must have a clear strategy or master plan for survival, citizens who fully comprehend the strategy, and a dogged commitment to make it work. . . . The sustainable community must have a strong connection with nature and the sustaining land. Its members must have a strong connection with each other.⁹⁰

For Latter-day Saints, building communities based on enlightened principles can have other significant spiritual implications. The commandment to build Zion, in its multiple layers of meaning, is still in effect. Brigham Young taught that the Saints must prepare to build the City of Zion in anticipation of the Lord's second coming:

Are we prepared now to establish the Zion that the Lord designs to build up? I have many times asked the questions, "Where is the man that knows how to lay the first rock for the wall that is to surround the New Jerusalem or the Zion of God on the earth? Where is the man who knows how to construct the first gate of the city? Where is the man who understands how to build up the kingdom of God in its purity and to prepare for Zion to come down to meet it?" "Well," says one, "I thought the Lord

was going to do this.” So He is if we will let Him. That is what we want: we want the people to be willing for the Lord to do it. But He will do it by means. He will not send His angels to gather up the rock to build up the New Jerusalem. He will not send His angels from the heavens to go to the mountains to cut the timber and make it into lumber to adorn the city of Zion. He has called upon us to do this work; and if we will let Him work by, through, and with us, He can accomplish it; otherwise we shall fall short, and shall never have the honor of building up Zion on the earth.⁹¹

Similarly, Wilford Woodruff stated in 1863, “The Lord requires of us to build up Zion . . . and prepare a kingdom and a people for the coming and reign of the Messiah. When we do all we can to forward and accomplish this Work then are we justified. This is the work of our lives, and it makes life of some consequence to us.”⁹² In 1870, Lorenzo Snow further explained that progress towards building a Zion society would occur after the Saints learned how to build up cities acceptable to God:

By and by the Lord will have prepared the way for some to return to Jackson County, there to build up the Centre Stake of Zion. How easy this work can be accomplished, after we have learned to build up cities and Temples here to His divine acceptance! Our present experience is a very needful one. . . . As knowledge and efficiency are obtained gradually, we may expect that the experience that we are getting now in learning how to build up cities in our present condition, conforming as near as possible to the holy order of God, is, in order to prepare us by and by to return to Missouri, whence we were driven, and there build up cities and Temples to the name of the Most High, upon which his glory will descend.⁹³

President Gordon B. Hinckley has echoed the same aspiration regarding the need to build Zion:

Our forebears dreamed of Zion. “Come to Zion,” they said. “Even if you have to walk all the way. Come to Zion. Leave Babylon and gather to the mountains of Ephraim.” No one can read the words of Brigham Young, John Taylor, or Wilford Woodruff without knowing that they thought of these mountain valleys as a great gathering place for people of one heart and one mind and one faith, a place where the mountain of the Lord’s house should be established in the tops of the mountains and where all nations would flow unto it.⁹⁴

President Hinckley has also said, “If we are to build that Zion of which the prophets have spoken and of which the Lord has given mighty promise, we must set aside our consuming selfishness. We must rise above our love for comfort and ease, and in the very process of effort and struggle, even in our extremity, we shall become better acquainted with our God.”⁹⁵

As community leaders and citizens alike contemplate contemporary growth management needs and the myriad of land use decisions that must be made, great benefit could come from studying the rich legacy of urban planning left by earlier generations of Latter-day Saints. That legacy is grounded in the responsibility to build a community based on enlightened principles and timeless values.

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3. Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 5.
4. Hamilton, *Nineteenth-Century Mormon Architecture and City Planning*, 17–18.
5. Hamilton, *Nineteenth-Century Mormon Architecture and City Planning*, 17.
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31. Don Stract, “Railroads in Utah,” in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Kent Powell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994): 454–55; John S. McCormick, *The Gathering Place: An Illustrated History of Salt Lake City* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 92–93; McCullough, “Passing of the Streetcar,” 123. That year the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against a consortium of automobile, tire, and petroleum manufacturing companies prosecuted under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act for dismantling the mass transit systems of Salt Lake City and forty-three other cities located in sixteen states in order to gain a monopoly on transportation. *United States v. National City Lines, Inc.*, 334 U.S. 575, 556n. 3 (1947).
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