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# Salt Lake City's Sacred Space



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Amid a devastating condo crash and high office vacancies across the U.S., one of the country's largest downtown [development projects](#) is taking shape in Salt Lake City. The city's center displays a landscape of cranes, cement-mixers and hard-hats--something all too rare in these tough times.

Over the next few years, with an investment estimated locally at \$2 billion, developers hope to transform a 20-acre swath of the city's now-uninspired central core. By 2012 they hope to create a model downtown district with a whole new array of retail shops and residential towers accommodating some 700 units.

On the surface, Salt Lake City, America's 38th largest central business district, would seem an unlikely place for such an ambitious development. The city's population growth--it is home to fewer than 200,000 of the region's 1.2 million people--has been meager, particularly compared with the surrounding suburbs. The central business district represents less than ten percent of the region's total employment.

The driving force here is not economics, but the desire of Salt Lake's most powerful institution, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, to salvage its immediate neighborhoods. "The church's primary notion is to protect the Temple Square and the headquarters of the Church," explains

Mark Gibbons, president of City Creek Reserve, the church's development arm. "That's first and foremost. This development would not have been done just on a financial basis, I can tell you that."

This motivation deviates from what we see now in most cities. For one thing, this does not reflect rent-seeking by real estate interests--there are no public subsidies, for example. Instead the City Creek project represents the ultimate in back-to-the-future city planning, a reversion to the ancient ideal of building a city around its essential "sacred space."

It's all the more remarkable at a time when churches being converted into [yuppie housing](#), discos or carpet stores is celebrated by the decidedly secular caste of urbanists. Of course, not everyone loves this approach. One former Salt Lake City planning official, a non-Mormon, has expressed fears about the "Vaticanization" of the area.

Yet to date the traditional urban approach--museums, light rail development, downtown malls--has been far from a shining success. Salt Lake's greatest remaining asset remains the Church, its great central Temple and the surrounding infrastructure of office, museums and genealogical agencies .

Mormonism, in a sense, has to be thought of as a growth industry for downtown. Since 1960, church membership has surged from 2 million worldwide to nearly 14 million. Although Utah remains the church's central base--over 70% of the state population is Mormon--the biggest increase has been outside the U.S., predominately in Latin America and parts of east Asia. This reality is reflected in Salt Lake itself; once overwhelmingly white, its population is now some 30% minority, much of it Latino.

As an anchor tenant, the Church provides the ultimate *raison d'etre* for the surrounding area. The Temple Square remains the state's largest tourist attraction. Church members from around the world come to the city for conferences and to consult with church records and officials.

Of course, the fundamentally ecclesiastical logic diverges wildly from urbanist conventional wisdom. In most cities, planners embrace the idea of building the city core around singles, or "empty nesters." The nurturing of a "bohemian" culture--hopefully of the free-spending bourgeois variety--is seen as providing a spur to art galleries, bars, clubs and high-end restaurants.

Salt Lake's developers wish to improve the amenity structure too, but in ways that would appeal to the middle-class families who dominate the region. Mormons, who make up half of the city population and the vast majority of those in the surrounding suburbs, average three to four children per family. Overall, the area has one of the youngest populations of any metropolitan region in the country.

"The idea of having a sacred center is to create a space--like a campus--that's decent, clean and upscale in a design sense, but accessible to families," observes Joe Cannon, editor of the church-owned local paper, *The Deseret News*. Without drawing in people from the predominately family-oriented suburbs, he says, the downtown would lack the base to rebound from a generation of neglect and decline.

The church focus also makes sense, Cannon notes, when you take into account the unique history of the place. Unlike most American cities, Salt Lake was born primarily through the religious vision of the Mormon Church and in particular its great visionary leader, Brigham Young.

The Mormons came to Salt Lake as part of their search for a sacred space. Such ideas led some to regard the Mormon as cult-like sect, dangerous to the nation. They came to Salt Lake only after attempting to settle down in Ohio, Illinois and Missouri--an action that often led. They often were booted out courtesy of bloodshed inflicted on them by more-traditional Christians.

Although successful in a capitalist sense, Salt Lake's urban culture reflected what Mormon historian Leonard Arrington describes as "Jacksonian

communalism." For many years, the Church controlled Zion's Bank, the largest in the region, and promoted commercial development. Critically, Mormon charities and organizations brought in new settlers, mostly from England and Scandinavia.

By the 1960s the downtown began to decay as Mormons, as well as non-Mormon "Gentiles," moved *en masse* to the suburbs. The area around the Temple became increasingly seedy and rundown. This has led to the current effort to revive the city through the efforts of the Church--the institution with the greatest stake in the central core.

Over the next decade, the Church's effort could represent something unique in an urban America increasingly obsessed with the ephemeral. "We are not trying to build a 'faux city,'" notes Mark Gibbons. "We are trying to build something that will last a hundred years or more."

In following that strategy, Salt Lake is trying to recover some of the very things that have sustained cities over time. It will be fascinating to see how their approach--based on the most ancient of city-building strategies--fares compared with those applied by their more decidedly secular rivals.

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