

Sacred Space and City Planning: The Mormon Example

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Summary

The importance of Salt Lake City to the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly nicknamed the Mormon or LDS church) is widely recognized, leading to its comparison to other sacred places. City planning and layout are of fundamental importance in explaining the sanctity of space within the community. The city was originally platted after a design of the group's founder, Joseph Smith. Streets follow a rigid grid plan, with orientation to the cardinal directions. The center of the city is the Mormon Temple completed in 1893, and subsequent development and redevelopment of the downtown has evolved as part of the LDS church's determination to maintain the Temple square as the center of a safe, clean and attractive business area. Church ownership of land as well as the political dominance of the Mormons have ensured that the church leaders' vision has remained the source of planning decisions for the city center.

Résumé

On sait que Salt Lake City est une ville très importante pour les membres de l'Eglise de Jésus-Christ des Saints de la Dernière Heure (surnommés en général Mormons) et joue un rôle comparable à celui d'autres lieux sacrés. La planification et l'aménagement de cette ville contribuent beaucoup à expliquer le caractère sacré de l'espace pour la communauté. A l'origine elle avait été aménagée en suivant les plans du fondateur du groupe, Joseph Smith. Les rues sont tracées selon un plan strictement en grille, orienté au long des axes cardinaux. Au centre de la ville se trouve le temple Mormon, dont la construction fut achevée en 1893; tous les projets postérieurs de développement et de réaménagement du centre ont tenu compte du fait que l'Eglise voulait absolument maintenir le square du Temple en tant que zone centrale d'un quartier d'affaires propre, attrayant et sûr. Le fait que l'Eglise est propriétaire de nombreux terrains et que les Mormons jouent un rôle dominant sur le plan politique a permis à la vision de leurs leaders de continuer à servir d'inspiration aux décisions planificatrices concernant le centre de la ville.

1. Introduction

In few American cities is the role of religion so central in explaining the spatial relationships as in Salt Lake City, Utah. Established in 1847 under the direction of Brigham Young, Salt Lake City is a sacred city for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly nicknamed Mormons or LDS)(Jackson & Henrie, 1983). The sacred significance of the city is widely recognized, leading to its designation as "the Mormon Mecca", a destination that attracts more visitors yearly than does Mecca itself (Jackson et al, 1989).

2. Origins: Establishing a City of Zion

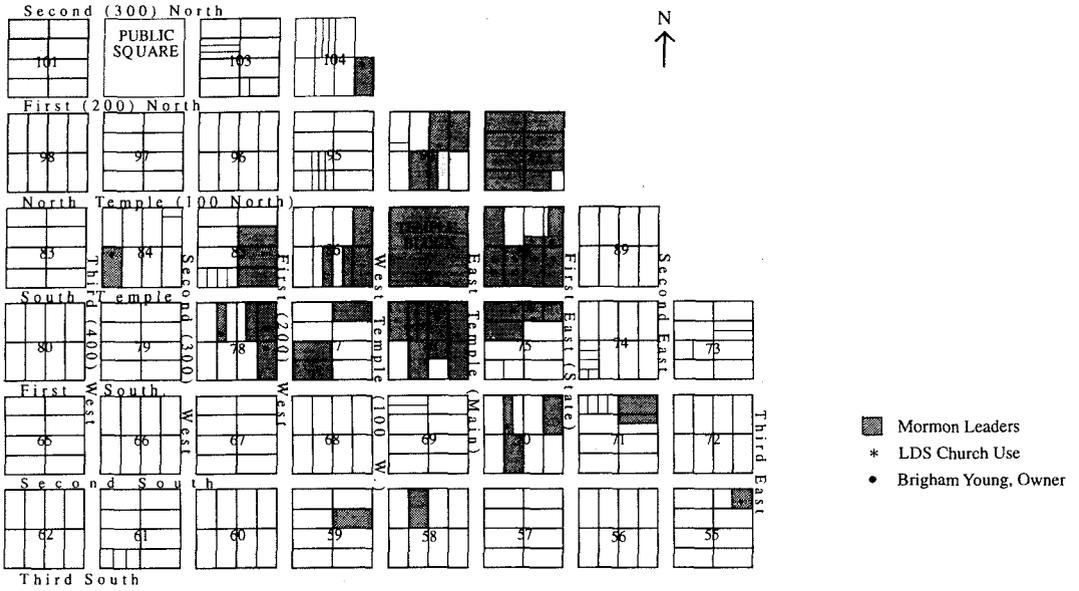
The origin of the unique planning principles upon which Salt Lake City is based can be found far to the East in the Ohio River frontier of the 1830s and 40s. The founder of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith, presented the basic ideas upon which Salt Lake City is planned in an 1833 document known as the City of Zion Plat. The important characteristics of this plan were a regular grid pattern oriented to the cardinal directions, with square blocks of 10 acres size, wide streets (132 feet), alternating half acre lots (21,680 square feet) so that houses face alternate streets on each block, uniform brick or stone construction, homes set back 25 feet from the street, frontyard landscaping, gardens in the backyard, farms located outside of town, and the designation of a tier of larger central blocks for temples, school and other public buildings (Jackson, 1977).

The communities developed under the direction of Joseph Smith in the midwest varied from his ideal city of Zion Plat. Portions of Kirtland, Ohio were settled and surveyed by the Mormons in the early 1830s, and this plan followed the city of Zion Plat most closely, only excluding the central tier of super blocks. The Mormons established other settlements including Far West, Missouri (1836) and Nauvoo, Illinois (1840). Both differed radically from the City of Zion Plat in street width, block size, and lot size (Jackson, 1976).

Joseph Smith was murdered in 1845, and the Mormons under Young's leadership were driven west, arriving in Salt Lake City on July 24th of 1847. The establishment of Salt Lake City under the direction of Brigham Young followed Smith's plan more closely than any town established by Smith himself. This reliance upon Smith's plan reflects the importance of religion in defining the Salt Lake community as sacred space: space whose organization reified many of the ideas of the martyred prophet of the Mormons.

Salt Lake City was first surveyed into blocks that were 10 acres in size as Joseph Smith had suggested, but instead of twenty, 1/2 acre lots, there were eight, 1 and 1/4 acre lots on each block. The streets were all 132 feet wide as in the City of Zion plan, but instead of a central tier of super blocks, Brigham Young suggested one large super block of 40 acres to house their most sacred structures. Young added another 40 feet to the street width to provide a 20 foot sidewalk on each side and required that each lot be set back 20 feet from the property line in the centre of the lot. The houses on alternate blocks were to be built on only two sides of the block for privacy purposes. Each house was to have orchards and gardens and shrubs as well as domestic animals to provide milk, eggs, and other fresh food. All streets were oriented to the cardinal directions of the compass in a rigid geometric grid.

Original Land Ownership : 1847



LDS Church Property in 1992

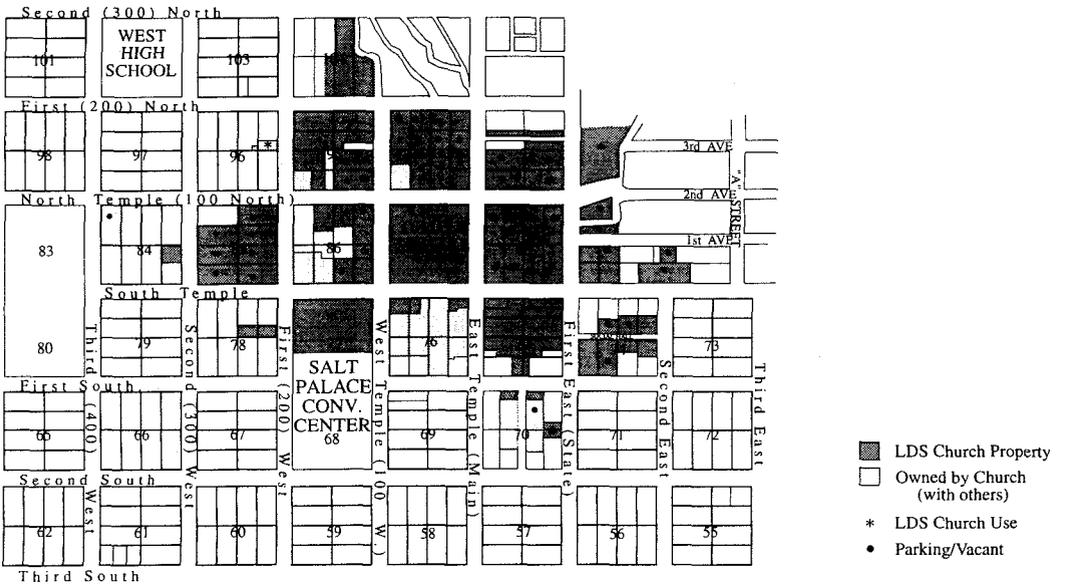


Fig. 1 Downtown Salt Lake City Land Ownership
 La répartition des propriétés au centre de Salt Lake City

Within days after Young presented this plan for Salt Lake, the temple block was reduced to the 10 acre size of the other blocks as other church leaders questioned whether the Mormons would be able to adequately landscape and care for such a large parcel in the arid environment (Jackson, 1977). Once agreement was reached on the size and format for the city, the initial city survey was commenced on August 3, 1847. One hundred and thirty-five, 10 acre blocks were surveyed in this initial plat. Twenty-two of these were on the foothills and could not be provided with irrigation water, but the other one hundred thirteen lots were distributed among the members of the pioneer party to the Salt Lake Valley. The leaders of the Mormon church selected many of the lots surrounding the Temple Square, with Brigham Young obtaining the block directly to the east for church administration and his own homes. Other church leaders obtained most of the other eight blocks immediately surrounding Temple Square (figure 1).

Initially the settlers agreed not to divide or sell their property, implicitly recognizing that this was a sacred community whose lands were not to be used for speculative purposes. While this provision was abandoned within a few years, it is one more illustration of the importance of religion in establishing the community of Salt Lake City.

As more immigrants arrived in 1848 and succeeding years, the initial survey of Salt Lake was expanded and the large 10 acre blocks and extremely wide streets were varied on the foothills to the northeast. The core of the city, however, remained basically reflective of the original City of Zion Plat of the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith. Ownership of the lots around Temple Square by church leaders ensured that the Mormon beliefs would be incorporated into their development, preserving the sanctity of the temple property.

The absence of a designated business district in the original survey reflected the Mormon goal of creating a utopian settlement based on self sufficient yeoman farmers. However the area south of Temple Square for several blocks down Main Street quickly developed into a centre for merchants. Over time the emergence of this business district would be important in shaping the modern spatial relationships of the city.

3. Growth of The City of Zion

The most important spatial elements of Salt Lake City were and are its cardinal orientation and wide streets and large blocks focusing on Temple Square. The symbolic importance of the original temple block is difficult to overstate. The church leaders anticipated developing this site for their most sacred buildings. While title to this land was originally held by Young as trustee for the Church, after his death in 1877, the church took title to Temple Square and other nearby Young property.

The spatial arrangement of downtown Salt Lake City reflects the continued importance of the Temple Square and its structures. Only five days after the arrival of the Mormons in the Salt Lake Valley a bowery was constructed on the temple block to hold Sunday meetings. It consisted of posts placed in the ground with cross timbers upon which tree branches and other foliage were placed to provide shelter from the sun. Plans for more substantial buildings followed quickly, and the first permanent structure was completed in 1852. Called a Tabernacle because of Mormon comparisons of themselves to Old Testament peoples, it was a semi-dug out. Constructed of adobe bricks on a rock foundation, it measured 126 feet in length and 64 feet in width with a pitched roof covered with wood shingles. The Old Tabernacle seated 2,500 people, but

was supplemented by a newer bowery which seated 8,000 located behind it. (Roberts, 1975, 304)

4. The Symbolic Landscape of the City of Zion

Work on the Salt Lake Temple began in 1853 once the first (later called the Old Tabernacle) was completed in 1852. The jewel of Brigham Young's vision for Temple Square, the Salt Lake Temple was to represent both the finest workmanship the Mormons could provide, and the permanence and stability of their new settlements in the western United States. Constructed of granite quarried in the mountains east of Salt Lake City, its construction took 40 years. (Celebration of the centennial of its completion begins on April 6, 1993).

Rising majestically from the Temple Square, the temple soon became the dominant feature in the landscape of Salt Lake City. The sanctity of the temple and its surrounding grounds was further emphasized by construction of a 15 foot high solid adobe wall around the entire 10 acre block. Built on a sandstone foundation, this adobe wall was plastered and came to mark the division between the mundane space of the commercial and administrative Salt Lake City surrounding it, and the refuge of the sacred space within.

The significance of Temple Square to the Mormons, and its use for semi-annual general conferences of the church soon made the 2,500 seating capacity of the Old Tabernacle inadequate. While the bowery at its rear could be used during good weather, the general conferences held in October and April were often accompanied by rain and cold. In 1863, Brigham Young announced plans to build a New Tabernacle on the temple block. The New Tabernacle was to be 150 feet wide and 250 feet long with seating for 10,000 people.

The New Tabernacle was completed and first used during the October 6, 1867 General Conference of the church and has been continuous since. The tabernacle's unique construction makes it the second only to the Temple as an important visual symbol of the Mormon church. The tabernacle consists of 44 sandstone columns supporting a dome shaped roof. The space between the columns supporting the roof have double doors which allow the entire tabernacle to be filled or emptied in a matter of moments. The building is a true vernacular wonder, with the roof constructed in truss manner with timbers cut from nearby canyons combined in a lattice 9 feet thick to provide a continuous arch which negated the need for any central supports. The interior of the building spans nearly an acre of floor space (37,500 ft²) with no internal supports. Since its first use over 125 years ago, the tabernacle has been the focus of church conferences, and the weekly performance of the world famed Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Completion of the new Salt Lake Tabernacle left a need for a smaller building for assemblies that did not involve the entire church. The Old Tabernacle was torn down in 1877 and a building known as the Assembly Hall was completed on its site in 1882. (Roberts, 1975, 316)

5. Beyond the Sanctuary

While the Mormon church was focusing efforts on constructing their sacred buildings on Temple Square, the community continued to grow. The 1847 overland

travel resulting from California's Gold Rush was followed by increased migration to and immigration through the city. By the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the city had a population of approximately 15,000, and the growing commercial and business district between First and Fourth South was increasingly dominated by the estimated 750 non-Mormons in the city (McCormick, 1982, 4).

The success of non-Mormon merchants and consequent flow of capital out of the self sufficient Mormon settlements prompted Young to organize Mormon businesses in 1868. Known as ZCMI (Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institutions), these were stock companies supported by the Mormons with the avowed intent of freeing them from reliance on non-Mormon businesses. The Salt Lake City ZCMI was constructed in 1876 on the block southeast of the temple block. It became the first department store in the western United States, pioneering the concept of individual departments specializing in specific products. Its growth was dramatic, with a three story wing added in 1880. By that date 146 cooperating stores were operating in the Mormon settlements of the West. The Salt Lake City ZCMI was razed and expanded into a central city mall in the 1970s, keeping only the cast iron front of the 1876 store as a reminder of its pioneer origin under Young's direction.

The ZCMI building was followed by other Mormon business ventures, the most notable being the Hotel Utah completed directly east of Temple Square in 1911. Ten stories high with 500 rooms, it was a showpiece that reinforced both the centrality of the temple and protected it from clashing architectural or commercial interests. Hotel Utah was also important because it was financed by a stock company in which non-Mormons, the church and Mormon members participated. Its completion marked the beginning of greater cooperation between the Church and non-Mormon businesses.

The continued growth of Salt Lake City and the Mormon settlements in the 20th century was accompanied by related changes in the city. Church ownership of land in the city centre and Mormon influence in the political arena led to construction of government buildings away from the temple. The City and County building was constructed nearly a mile south, and the State Capital was ultimately completed an equal distance to the north in the foothills. Discovery of important deposits of mineral resources (gold, silver, copper) led to an economic boom which financed the construction of large homes on South and North Temple streets which further protected the temple block from increased commercial development. Large commercial buildings however, were constructed in the area from First to Fourth South, with the Walker Bank's sixteen stories (1912) making it the tallest building between the west coast and the Missouri River (McCormick, 1982, 8).

The building boom of the first decades of the 20th century quickly surrounded Temple Square with a variety of urban activities. The block immediately east was dominated by the massive Hotel Utah building. Beyond the Hotel Utah was Brigham Young's old home, the Beehive House. Its beehive shaped cupola remains a subtle reference to Mormon influence in the City, as the beehive is an important symbol to Mormons which signifies industry and thrift. The beehive symbol is repeated in a crowning monument on the Hotel Utah and in numerous architectural decorations throughout the city. East of the beehive house is the Lion House, a large home initially used by some of Brigham Young's families and an adjacent house used for administrative purposes of the church. Outgrown by the 20th century, they were replaced by a new church administration building which was completed in 1917 on the block. The rectangular building is built of the same granite as the temple, but in classical

style. Measuring 102 by 165 feet, it is notable for the twenty four Greek Ionic columns that surround its exterior. This five story building housed the church leaders and the principle activities of church administration until the construction of true skyscrapers in the 1970s in downtown Salt Lake City. The three small structures from Brigham Young's era, however, remain as reminders of the role of Young and the Mormon Church in creating Salt Lake City.

6. The Modern Period

Throughout the 20th century, downtown Salt Lake City has faced the tension inherent between the goal of the Mormon church leadership to maintain the Salt Lake Temple Square as a sanctuary against the encroachment of the materialistic commercialism of America evident in the businesses surrounding it, and the forces affecting the central business districts of most large American cities. This tension became critical in the 1960s and 70s as urban renewal efforts in the United States peaked in programs to revitalize downtowns threatened by suburbia's ubiquitous malls. Like other cities, Salt Lake experienced the destruction of landmark structures from the late 19th and early 20th century and their replacement by utilitarian high-rise buildings. In spite of this, the downtown area suffered decay and became characterized by obsolete, abandoned, or derelict structures housing activities antithetical to the sacred nature of the core of downtown Salt Lake City.

Since the Mormon population has always been a majority in Salt Lake City, the Mormon church first attempted to influence urban renewal of Salt Lake City indirectly. Mormon businessmen and political leaders were approached about efforts to slow the decay of Salt Lake City's downtown. Continued competition from suburban malls, however triggered the same cycle that affected other American communities. Businesses left for suburbia, other poorly capitalized businesses attempted to establish themselves, and their failure was followed by the development of unacceptable (to Mormons) activities such as shabby rooming houses, massage parlors, or vacant structures. Unlike deteriorating areas in other American cities, however, there was no proliferation of liquor stores since the State Liquor Agency owns all stores selling anything but beer. Failing to halt the urban blight, the Mormon Church responded by vigorously purchasing land in the 1960s and 70s for renewing the downtown area. The most visible aspects of this activity are in the blocks immediately surrounding Temple Square.

Directly south of Temple Square the Church became partners with other landowners in developing a second major urban mall to augment the ZCMI as a focus of shopping and restaurants in the downtown area. West of the Temple Square the church developed a block devoted to museums and church genealogical activity. Both of these enterprises replaced deteriorating structures with new buildings which do not dwarf the structures on Temple Square, and provide employment and visitor attractions which maintain the vibrancy of the area around Temple Square. To the east of Temple Square on the Hotel Utah block, the church has constructed a 26 story skyscraper sheathed in granite to house the increasing administrative activity of a church that has grown to over 8 million. The block east of the temple has been further landscaped to provide a series of waterfalls and gardens which frame the temple from the east. The old Hotel Utah which had been losing patronage to newer hotels and motels south and west of Temple Square is in process of being remodelled and refurbished into additional office space for use of the Mormon church. To the north of Temple Square the church

has removed derelict structures to create parking space for people visiting the complex of museums, sacred buildings, and church administrative structures which characterize the three central blocks of downtown Salt Lake City.

To the southwest of Temple Square the Mormon church has been active in directly or indirectly encouraging the construction of the Salt Palace Convention Centre. Constructed in the 1960s, the convention centre became home to a professional basketball franchise (first the Utah Stars and then the Utah Jazz), a minor league hockey franchise (the Golden Eagles), and a convention centre that brings additional people to the downtown while replacing derelict structures. The north end of the Salt Palace Convention block is the site of the Symphony Hall, a structure completed in the 1980s to house the Utah Symphony and other cultural activities. The old bus depot and deteriorated hotel on the northwest corner of the block directly south of the temple was remodelled by the Church into a small luxury hotel that opened in 1991. As other buildings have become abandoned and derelict, the church has acquired additional land further from Temple Square in their ongoing attempts to ensure the sanctity of the centre of Salt Lake City.

Church ownership of land directly around Temple Square and its commitment to the continued revitalization of this area is only a fraction of the influence the Mormon church has on planning in Salt Lake City. Although a bare majority of the population of Salt Lake City is Mormon, the political leadership at both the city and state level is overwhelmingly Mormon. While not necessarily directly influenced by the Mormon church, it seems clear that they are indirectly affected by their shared religious beliefs. In the private sector as well, the predominance of Mormon business leaders means that they also share the Mormon leaders' ideas about Salt Lake City as the Mormon Mecca. Through Mormon encouragement and Mormon involvement, Salt Lake City has managed to avoid the decay and dilapidation that characterizes the downtown of so many American cities. Renewal efforts of the 1960s and 70s have created a downtown that is shopper friendly, while destroying many of the older obsolete structures.

The wide streets of Brigham Young's era ensured ease of ingress and egress to downtown, and the landscaping and redesign of Main Street to Fourth South created a core area attractive to shoppers. The two urban malls adjacent to Temple Square compete successfully with those in suburbia and an economic boom in Utah in the last two decades, which has been associated with new construction of office buildings in the old business sector from First to Fourth South between First West and Second East, replaced derelict structures. This has generally been in response to recognition that the church's commitment to the downtown ensures its continued maintenance, and consequent viability for economic activity. The commitment of both city and state officials to Salt Lake's dominant position in Utah indicates that the city will not be allowed to deteriorate.

7. Conclusion

The Mormon role in the planning of Salt Lake City remains the most significant factor affecting the spatial relationships found there. The underlying land division based on the city of Zion Plat of the founder shapes the city's morphology, but the decisions of Mormon leaders and their influence on other decision makers continues to shape its evolution. Church ownership of the core of the city ensures that the Church leaders' vision for a downtown that is compatible with the sanctity of Temple Square

will be maintained. The Church has a masterplan that anticipates that the central corridor east and west of Temple Square will be a focus of church office buildings, museums, and related activities. The Church plans to build more multi-unit housing complexes east and north of that corridor while maintaining the district to the south of Temple Square for commercial use. By maintaining control of religious, public, commercial, and residential space around Temple Square, the church ensures that the inviolability of the temple grounds will be maintained. Through dominating the political and economic system, they have been able to maintain the Salt Lake City downtown as a fitting setting for their sacred places.

The spatial arrangements reflecting the wide streets, large blocks, north-south grid, and focus on Temple Square dating from Brigham Young are obvious influences of the Mormons on the spatial arrangements of Salt Lake City. While the Mormon role in planning the blocks around Temple Square is apparent in Church owned and identified buildings, Mormon symbols such as the beehive and ZCMI are primarily identified by Mormons. The extent of Mormon Church involvement in business, commerce and politics that have no recognizable ties to the Church extends much farther, however, and is generally neither known or recognized by people visiting or studying Salt Lake City.

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