



## MORMONS AS CITY PLANNERS

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*... one key to urban development should  
be plain — it lies in the widening of  
the circle of those capable of participating  
in it, till in the end all men will take  
part in the conversation.*

—Lewis Mumford

The contributions of individual Mormons and the Church as a body to irrigation and farm village life, and the agricultural orientation of the Church's welfare program, have built an image of Mormons as a rural people. Actually, not only are Mormons probably urbanizing faster than the average because of their high level of education, but historically Mormonism has made significant contributions to urban planning, development, and life styles. In fact, as one non-Mormon writer has put it:

The year 1830 saw the birth of a new religion, one among the dozens spawned in the backwaters left by the advancing waves of the frontier. This Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — or the Mormons, as they soon were called — became the most successful city builders of all the religious and utopian societies.<sup>1</sup>

It is the purpose of this article to show the Church's contributions to city planning in the past as a possible guide and spur to modern Latter-day Saints in their efforts to respond to urbanization both now and in the future. The

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<sup>1</sup>John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 466.

time has come to establish a better balance between our institutional preoccupation with agricultural and rural life styles and an increased commitment to the betterment of urban life.

### PAST CONTRIBUTIONS

Most past contributions of the Church derive from a letter sent by Joseph Smith to the Saints in Missouri on June 25, 1833. This letter, which has come to be called "The Plat of the City of Zion," contained a wealth of instructions on city planning, including the following:

The whole plat is supposed to contain from fifteen to twenty thousand people; you will therefore see that it will require twenty-four buildings to supply them with houses of worship, schools, etc. . . . South of the plat where the line is drawn, /land/ is to be laid off for barns, stables, etc., so that no barns or stables will be in the city among the houses; the ground to be occupied by these must be laid off according to wisdom. . . . When this square is laid off and supplied, lay off another in the same way, and so fill up the world in these last days; and let every man live in the city for this is the city of Zion. All the streets are of one width, being eight perches [i.e., eight rods or 132 feet] wide. . . . No one lot in the city is to contain more than one house, and that be built twenty-five feet back from the street, leaving a small yard in front, to be planted in a grove, according to the taste of the builder; the rest of the lot for gardens; all the houses are to be built of brick and stone. . . .<sup>2</sup>

This plan, which was never given the formal status of a revelation, became the "master plat" for most of the Mormon towns founded during the nineteenth century. These towns ranged from Kirtland, Ohio, to San Bernardino, California, and from Canada to Mexico. Some of their distinguishing features were:

1. Provision for farmers and ranchers to live in town instead of on isolated homesteads, as in most other parts of the country. (There are, obviously, many opportunities for cooperation in this arrangement.)
2. Preservation of a greenbelt in agricultural use around the mile-square towns to limit their ultimate population.
3. Exclusion of barns, stables, animal pens, and heavy industrial operations from certain parts of town.
4. Community control of land disposition and water rights to curtail speculation and unfair exploitation.
5. Reservation of strategic blocks for public buildings and grounds, e.g., churches, schools, and parks.
6. Front and side yard setbacks for dwellings and the encouragement of horticultural embellishments.
7. Gridiron street pattern with uniformly wide streets.
8. Division of the town into ecclesiastical wards which tended to define or create social neighborhoods.

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<sup>2</sup>B. H. Roberts (ed.), *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — Period I, Vol. I* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1946), pp. 357–59.

Though these principles were not lavishly followed in every town founded by Mormons, enough of them were used to make Mormon towns seem unusual to visitors. The gridiron pattern was certainly not unique, but the wide streets were somewhat remarkable. Actually, it was not so much their physical layout that made the "cities of Zion" different, but their land disposition policies, land use regulations, and peculiar social and economic institutions. Some of Joseph Smith's city planning ideas foreshadowed typical provisions in modern zoning ordinances, e.g., segregation of uses and building setback requirements. Other features anticipated the British "garden cities" or "new towns" by as much as sixty-five years.

This similarity between Joseph Smith's "cities of Zion" and the "garden cities" of Ebenezer Howard (1898) is worthy of comment. The rationale for the "garden cities" was the relocation of families living in crowded, unsanitary conditions in London and other "bloated" cities. It was believed there was an optimum size beyond which cities should not grow, if proper sociality was to be maintained. This is very close to Joseph Smith's limit of fifteen to twenty thousand. How was "urban sprawl" to be contained? The "garden cities" were to establish a "greenbelt composed of woods and fields all around each new town." The "cities of Zion" were to be reproduced whenever the original mile-square plats became fully built up. Probably because of persecution the greenbelt was not maintained at Nauvoo. Neither has it been maintained around certain other Mormon towns of the Far West.

Both "garden cities" and "cities of Zion" sought to control land speculation and to segregate incompatible land uses. Considerable attention was paid to public health, safety, and welfare. Both plans placed a subtle but real emphasis upon neighborhoods and the concept of neighboring. Letchworth (1903), the first British garden city, was laid out with a curvilinear street pattern and physically discrete neighborhoods. There seems to have been an implicit assumption that proximity would create neighboring. Nauvoo (1839) and subsequent Mormon towns have what might be called "ward neighborhoods." Each Mormon ward provides a secondary social group, an extended family. Regardless of geographical spread, ward members feel close to each other. As a result Mormons are less likely to experience the frustration and anomie with which many migrants to big cities are faced.

The towns established in the Far West reflect the genius of Joseph Smith and the strong organizational talents of Brigham Young. Eugene Hollon summarizes the city building of the early Mormons:

Not all of the early settlements established by the Mormons became permanent. . . . That so many of the settlements did survive is a tribute to the wise planning of church officials, especially Brigham Young. At the time of his death in 1877, thirty years after the founding of Salt Lake City, there were more than 360 Mormon towns in the desert. The magnitude of this accomplishment can best be understood by comparing it with Spanish activities. By 1574 these most successful of all European colonists had planted approximately 200 towns in North and South America. Eighty years after Columbus' initial voyage the Spanish population in the New World approximated 160,000

to 200,000 persons, only a few thousand more than the Mormons claimed after a mere three decades. Furthermore, Spanish colonists probably had no more problems to surmount than did the Mormons, thousands of whom pushed their belongings in handcarts from the Mississippi Valley to their desert home in Utah.<sup>3</sup>

### CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS

It is not surprising that as the Church withdrew from the concept of building a physical kingdom of God on earth to become primarily ecclesiastical, it withdrew too from city-building and economic development activities. The nearest the Church comes to actual community-building activities today is in relation to its larger educational campuses and health and welfare installations. Laie, Hawaii, is probably the best current example of a town expanding as a direct result of heavy Church investments. Some stakes have entered the nursing home business in a modest way. The Salt Lake Stake Retirement Center and Provo's Eldred Manor have been favorably featured in recent articles in the *Church News*. What is more surprising is that as individuals a people who once pioneered in urban planning and city building are now so little involved. Individual Mormons have, of course, made significant contributions as elected officials, professional urbanists (i.e., city planners and city managers), city clerks and finance directors, city engineers, and public utility superintendents, building inspectors, police and fire officials, recreation directors, librarians, and school officials. Others have served as unpaid members of special boards and commissions — such as planning and zoning boards, housing authorities, sanitary districts, and school boards. Many Mormons are prominent in the general contracting and real estate businesses.

However, there are only about fifty professional city planners with Mormon background; this in a wide-open field in which there are said to be 600–700 unfilled jobs, and one which should have intrinsic appeal for land-use and social-relations-minded Mormons. One explanation may be the well-nigh unqualified aversion of many Mormons to federal aid programs having to do with urban life. It is interesting to contrast the attitude of Mormons toward such rural-oriented federal aid programs as reclamation to urban-oriented ones such as urban renewal. It is no more logical and fair for Utahns to decry the federal urban renewal program because there are few slums in Utah than it would be for Bostonians to decry the federal reclamation program because there is no need for it in Boston. Even the argument that the funds advanced for reclamation works will be repaid in due time from water and power charges loses force when it is recognized that well-conceived and well-managed urban renewal projects can also repay investment in increased tax revenues and decreased urban service costs. Another indication of the same paradox is that so many Utahns reject many aspects of federal aid to education (which, as a poor state, they desperately need) while welcoming with open arms a bevy

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<sup>3</sup>W. Eugene Hollon, *The Great American Desert: Then and Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 106–107.

of defense installations and defense-related industries which are, if anything, more heavily subsidized by the federal government than, say, urban renewal or anti-poverty programs. It would be interesting to know whether the same attitude continues among Utahns as they emigrate to more heavily urbanized areas.

Another possible roadblock to the effective participation of Mormons in urban betterment activities is the antipathy of some of them (a minority, surely) to police power regulations. While no responsible person would criticize traffic regulations in general, Church members have been known to decry regulations aimed at the control of land, air, and water pollution. It is ironic that it is often those who complain most about police power regulations who have made them necessary by their utter disregard of their neighbors' and future generations' rights.

The Church makes perhaps its chief contribution to solving the problems of urban man through its very organization:

In his important book on city planning, *The Good City*, Lawrence Haworth sets forth some very interesting proposals for recapturing the sense of shared values in our modern cities. Most of these proposals, however, boil down to a recommendation that we implement the neighborhood unit concept. Haworth is undecided about the appropriate size or shape of these neighborhood units, but the geometrics aren't as important as the need for a neighborhood social nexus. Schools, parks, churches, stores, cafes, and even laundromats all help in their own way to supply social contact centers.

Some time ago I contended, in an article for the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*,<sup>4</sup> that Mormon wards (especially where the full program of the Church can be carried on) serve admirably as neighborhood centers — at least for the members of the Church. It is interesting to note the similarity between Mormon wards and the wide-ranging program carried on by the Pioneer Health Centre (founded in London, England, in 1926) which Haworth points to as a novel solution to the need for more personal interaction. A family club, the Pioneer Health Centre sponsored recreational activities, arts and crafts, a library, a nursery, a cafeteria, and even a farm. The sense of mutual helpfulness which the members enjoyed could hardly have matched that which Mormons feel as members of the extended family — the ward. At any rate it is interesting to note that a philosopher would recommend an arrangement similar to that which Mormons already have in order to bring meaning and warmth back into city life.

Other churches are moving in the same direction — as are labor unions, large corporations and certain other socio-economic institutions. The need for a primary social group, larger than the family but small enough to maintain a unity of purpose and appeal to all ages, seems much in evidence. It is only the unchurched, who at the same time have no legitimate vocational or avocational ties to give meaning and recognition to their efforts (if, indeed, they make any) who are truly "lost in the shuffle." They are our biggest prob-

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<sup>4</sup>Charles L. Sellers, "Early Mormon Community Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1 (February 1962), 25.

lem — the disoriented and unwanted castoffs which an affluent, technologically advanced society cannot assimilate without tremendous cost in money, time, and heart. Mormons need to ponder their responsibility to use such resources to help provide these castoffs with opportunities for successful urban living that have come almost as automatic blessings to themselves.

### POSSIBLE FUTURE CONTRIBUTIONS

In addition to the many and varied contributions which individual Mormons can make to the betterment of urban life, there are many worthwhile endeavors which will require concerted group effort. One very important (though rather general) one is the need to promote clean progressive local government. But good government is rarely inexpensive government. Public health, safety, and welfare facilities and services are priceless but not costless. One possible way to cut down the cost, however, and to make them more efficient at the same time would be the merging of adjoining municipalities and special districts, at least in functional consolidations of selected urban services. On the county level it might be beneficial if more thought were given to the feasibility of county consolidations. (Utah's Daggett County is hardly a viable unit.) Utah has a head start on most other states in this regard because a thorough study was made by Dr. George Hansen of the Brigham Young University (1930). Mormons should promote rational municipal and county government structures. They should also support sound proposals to reform the property tax system so as to stop penalizing improvements to property while encouraging poor maintenance. The federal government's revenue sources are much more lucrative than are those of the states, yet most of the socioeconomic problems which have finally pricked the conscience of the American people must be attacked at the local level. This is the circumstance which has brought forth the principle of "creative federalism." The federal government offers loans and grants to state and local governments to supplement the resources which they glean on their own. Many of the grants are offered on a matching basis — in much the same way the Church offers to pay, say, seventy percent of the cost of a chapel if the local people put up the other thirty percent. There are hundreds of federal aid programs offered by various departments and independent agencies of the government to states, counties, municipalities, other governmental entities, private institutions, and individuals which have a bearing on urban betterment.

Going beyond these general considerations, there would seem to be five types of activities which the Church or its local units could undertake. These are (1) the creation of new towns; (2) the provision of housing for low or moderate income families; (3) the rehabilitation of old houses and demolition of others; (4) the provision of outdoor recreation facilities near chapels; and (5) participation in social and vocational rehabilitation programs.

The concept of new towns should not seem foreign to Mormons familiar with Church history. If it could found as many as 360 in pioneer days, why not one or two today? It is recognized that the Church does not have an excess of idle cash to lavish on secular construction projects. But if it could

serve as entrepreneur for such efforts, attracting money thereby from non-Church sources, it would do a great service to the nation and would attract much favorable publicity. We undoubtedly have the planning and managerial talent necessary. Should we not be practicing for the building of the new Jerusalem? Those who study our nation's population dynamics suggest that new towns are one way to accommodate our burgeoning population, that they are a logical alternative to unbridled expansion of existing cities.

It would seem appropriate for stakes or groups of stakes to organize housing cooperatives to take advantage of certain Federal Housing Administration mortgage insurance programs. The more applicable ones are for rental housing for families of low or moderate income, cooperative housing, multi-family rental housing, rental housing for the elderly, housing for elderly and handicapped, and nursing homes. These programs are an attempt to increase the options open to families or individuals whose special needs are often overlooked. As already noted, there is precedent for the construction and operation of nursing homes by stakes or groups of stakes. This trend constitutes a tacit recognition of the fact that we no longer live in a society where all the old folks can or should live with their children when they cannot afford cottages of their own. Of course, nursing homes serve only the more infirm. Attention should also be given to the possibility of providing efficiency apartments with special features and fixtures for the elderly and the handicapped.

If stakes or groups of stakes can purchase, improve, and operate elaborate welfare farms and indoor welfare projects, it would seem they could marshal necessary financial and managerial resources to build and operate housing cooperatives. A church which pioneered producers' and consumers' cooperatives in the days of its penury can do something to alleviate today's critical housing shortages.

With all the building talent there is in the average Elders' quorum, it should be feasible for such a group to acquire rundown houses, to rehabilitate them, and to resell them at a profit. Elders' quorums might also arrange to demolish obsolete structures (such as barns and other out-buildings) whose owners cannot afford professional wreckers. With jobs for youth becoming scarce, this could provide outlet for the excess energy of teenagers — it might even lead to our own version of the Neighborhood Youth Corps.

The publicity value of a well-designed and nicely landscaped chapel on a major street is enormous. Paved off-street parking lots are also becoming standard practice. However, our church facilities should not be visual assets only, but should become neighborhood centers for as broad a clientele as is willing to use them. Especially where ward boundaries approximate physical neighborhoods should a sustained effort be made to attract non-member neighbors to share in our activities. We could make our indoor recreational facilities available to members of other churches, such as those in ghetto areas. With recreational facilities as limited as they are in most cities, our church's willingness to help close the "recreation gap" would not go unappreciated.

Finally, it is recommended that members of the Church become involved in some of the social and vocational rehabilitation programs developed in re-

cent years to interrupt the cycle of poverty. Instead of focusing on palliatives (as in the classic government welfare situation), these new programs are designed to improve social and vocational skills, enabling trainees to take their proper place in society. It is easy for Mormons to be complacent toward the problems of the urban poor when a tradition of collective care makes governmental paternalism seem unnecessary and unwelcome. But the urban poor are not so fortunate. James M. Gavin and Arthur Hadley describe their predicament in these words:

The crisis in our cities, however, cannot be understood or attacked except as part of the total American pattern; cities cannot be considered apart from the rural life they have replaced. Between 1960 and 1970 an estimated 10,000,000 farmers will have moved to the city. The majority of these migrants — white and black — are the poor, the underprivileged, the undereducated. . . . In the urban ghetto, migrants slowly begin to leave — if they have not already — what we like to think of as "our America." They become among those uncounted by the census [an estimated 5,700,000 males between the ages of 20 and 39 — mostly non-whites]. Denied participation in the American dream, they become "they" and "them." . . . Inside this underculture of the poor — 20,000,000 people, white and black — the goals and aspirations of American society appear as one vast fraud. Each magic program that remains unfunded drives them tighter into their world. . . .<sup>5</sup>

What can be done to bring these "cultural dropouts" into the so-called "mainstream"? Perhaps lessons can be learned from the Bureau of Indian Services. It has recently pioneered many of the acculturation programs which were later adopted by the Office of Economic Opportunity. One of its most interesting programs involves the training of complete family units in the attitudes and skills of urban, technological living. Two employment training centers have been set up where job-training, formal education, and instruction in home economics are given to complete Indian families. The Bureau also has a relocation program which helps Indian families to settle in cities where jobs are available. Church groups and agencies could certainly operate such centers. Our long sympathy with the Indians should help us in broadening our horizons to include other minority groups.

All of the above suggestions could be expedited if city-dwelling Latter-day Saints would consistently think of themselves not as displaced agrarians, but as urbanites by choice. A change in attitude could lead to lasting contributions to urban institutions. The five action programs I have described are not all-inclusive, but they do suggest areas of concentration.

After all, the Good City is important insofar as it contributes to the making of good people. Eradication of slums and the social and economic injustices that breed them represent the top priority to which Mormons and all Americans must dedicate themselves.

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<sup>5</sup>James M. Gavin and Arthur Hadley, "The Crisis of the Cities: The Battle We Can Win," *Saturday Review*, Vol. LI, No. 8 (February 24, 1968), 31-32.