

# WHAT SIZE OF CITY, AND WHAT SORT OF CITY, COULD (OR SHOULD) THE CITY OF ZION BE?

Russell Arben Fox

## Mormon Agrarian Longing

At a session of general conference in 1949, Elder John A. Widtsoe shared an interesting message with the assembled Saints—a message that contained, so far as I have been able to discover, the strongest agrarian sentiment ever formally expressed by a major Church leader in the whole history of the LDS Church:

We Latter-day Saints are a land-loving people. We believe in the land. We are a land-using people. Most of us are farmers, directly or indirectly. Some few years ago—not many years ago—in a census then taken, approximately sixty-five percent, at least, of our people were engaged in agriculture, in tilling the soil, or in making use of the things that grow upon the mountains, in the valleys and on the deserts. That has given us strength. I hope that we as a people will not depart from that tradition. Those who own the land and use it in the end will determine the future of mankind. It will not come from those who work in the factories or who live in crowded cities; from those whose feet are planted upon the land will come the great determining factors in shaping human destiny. It has been so in the past. It will be so in the future. We Latter-day Saints must ever remember the sanctity and the holiness of the land given us by the Father. There is safety in the land. . . .

I am afraid a good many of us will be tempted to say, “I’ll join the industrial procession. I will forget the land.” This industrial era is welcomed.

There's no question about that; but as it arises, we must keep our minds steadily upon the old established tradition that we are a land-loving and land-using people. We must remember that industry itself thrives best in the midst of an agricultural community. Witness the social troubles of today in our own land. Analyze them, and you soon discover that if we had built, as the Saints a century ago wanted us to build, we would have escaped many of the troubles, chiefly by giving heed to the call of the land.

When Joseph Smith laid out his ideal city many years ago, he planned it so that while the farms would all be around the city, every homestead would have a kitchen garden in the rear of the house and a flower garden in front. There was tremendous wisdom in that. Men, no matter what their work may be, or what their daily callings may require of them, if steadily and vigorously they touch the soil, be it ever so lightly or ever so small an acreage, perhaps a back yard, will receive from that contact spiritual strength. There is something in the soil and mother earth that gives strength to all who make things grow on the land.<sup>1</sup>

Now, given the thoroughly urbanized environments that the large majority of American Mormons live in today,<sup>2</sup> the temptation is to take

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1. John A. Widtsoe, "Preserve Our Heritage," Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 1, 1949 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 62.

2. This is a statement that is easily assumed, and almost certainly correct, but rather difficult to demonstrate due to the lack of data that specifically correlates the announced religious affiliation of those surveyed with the degree of urbanization of their place of residence. Gordon and Gary Shepherd were confident enough to write, "Mormonism today is increasingly becoming an urban religion, with the majority of its members no longer rooted to the soil," but then note later that "there has been surprisingly little scholarly work on the subject of urban Mormonism" (Shepherd and Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Early Mormonism and the Modern LDS Church*, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016], 55, 330n57). One shorthand way of looking at the data is to consider the urbanization of Utah, the epicenter of Mormonism. In a state where over 60 percent of the population identifies as Mormon, less than 10 percent of the population live in what the US Census defines as "rural" areas. This suggests, even if we greatly oversample

this seventy-year-old message, a message that presents a close association with agricultural labor as normative for Latter-day Saints, quietly chuckle at how General Authorities say the darndest things, and set it aside. There are at least two good interpretive reasons to do so. First, it is very easy to read Widtsoe's language as reflecting a thoroughly institutionalized kind of rural sentimentality rather than any actual prophetic counsel. While the romance of the pioneer farm and life in the countryside has never been a dominant theme in the messages handed down by the LDS gerontocracy (note that Widtsoe was seventy-seven years old when he gave that sermon), it was a constant throughout the twentieth century nonetheless.<sup>3</sup> The dynamics of our authoritarian church make it inevitable that the rhetorical norms expressed by one generation of leaders are taken to heart by the next, thus keeping strong an idealization of the rural pioneer experience—even though as early as 1910, forty

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for Mormonism in Utah's rural areas (say, by doubling our numbers), that in the heart of American Mormonism, less than a quarter of all Mormons live anywhere besides cities. See US Census Bureau, 2010 Census of Population and Housing, *Population and Housing Unit Counts*, CPH-2-46, Utah, July 2012, <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/cph-2-46.pdf>. It would be reasonable to suspect that similar urban-rural distributions of self-identified Mormons extend across the United States, and probably other countries as well.

3. It is worth noting—though it is probably not surprising—that the twenty years since the beginnings of the twenty-first century have seen very few general conference addresses that adopt this older attitude toward farming, agriculture, and the land, and none, so far as I can tell, involve the sort of exhortation that often accompanied it in the past. “The Lord’s Way,” given by Elder Stanley G. Ellis in April 2013, in which he reminisces about his boyhood on a farm as part an entirely separate sermon regarding the importance of focusing on the basics of the gospel, is a good example (available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/04/the-lords-way?lang=eng>). According to Gordon and Gary Shepherd, this shift began even earlier; by their count, the final decades of the twentieth century saw only one-sixth as many references to farming in general conference addresses as had been the case in previous decades (Shepherd and Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed*, 281).

years before Widtsoe's sermon, rural life had already become a minority experience among Utah's Mormon population.<sup>4</sup> But no matter; the idealization continued to roll forward. Consider, for example, the way Presidents Joseph F. Smith and Spencer W. Kimball talked about the profound value of maintaining regular contact with the natural world,<sup>5</sup> or the way multiple General Authorities have invoked the lessons of farm work and rural villages while talking about the Sabbath day, or teaching children discipline, or receiving the Lord's blessings.<sup>6</sup> The urban and suburban American Mormons of today know this language and have made their peace with it in one fashion or another. The lessons encoded in this language don't necessarily lose their significance just because nearly everyone who hears them separates them from their context entirely.

Second, one could also consider Widtsoe's claims as reflecting of a kind of classical republican belief, one shaped by populist challenges and conservative reactions to the growth of American cities, American industry, and the American state throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Such radical—or reactionary, or both—responses to industrialization and centralization in the United States during the decades of the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and World War II, were

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4. See Ethan R. Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 82.

5. Joseph Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 265–66; Spencer W. Kimball, “Fundamental Principles to Ponder and Live,” Oct. 1978, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1978/10/fundamental-principles-to-ponder-and-live?lang=eng>.

6. See, for example, J. Richard Clarke, “The Value of Work,” Apr. 1982, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1982/04/the-value-of-work?lang=eng>; and John H. Groberg, “The Power of Keeping the Sabbath Day Holy,” Oct. 1984, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1984/10/the-power-of-keeping-the-sabbath-day-holy?lang=eng>.

of little political influence in Utah, but they were present nonetheless.<sup>7</sup> John Henry Smith articulated this perspective in a general conference address nearly forty years before Widtsoe did, arguing (much like the Populist William Jennings Bryan, or the Southern Agrarian Donald Davidson, or, for that matter, Thomas Jefferson) that “people who crowd into cities and live in rented homes, who are, in great measure, the slaves of their fellow-men, cannot be fully patriotic . . . [whereas the man] who lays his foundation upon the basis of the soil . . . soon finds himself among the independent ones of the world.”<sup>8</sup> This is, perhaps, powerful counsel—but it is also counsel that the LDS Church never formally attempted to see institutionalized after the end of the united order experiments during the presidency of Brigham Young. As Ethan R. Yorgason put it: “This perspective . . . had little ultimate impact. Most church leaders recognized the necessary limits of . . . regional agricultural development and realized yeoman independence was no longer a viable option.”<sup>9</sup> The fact that Widtsoe, as Matthew Bowman has persuasively argued, was himself a participant in bringing Progressive values of economic growth and rationalization into the culture of the LDS Church makes it doubly easy to, again, see this kind of message as a dated aberration and not anything that should be accepted as conveying divine truths.<sup>10</sup>

But whatever the value of these two interpretive strategies—treating Widtsoe’s agrarian paean as either a dated romantic reflex or an

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7. See John S. McCormick and John R. Sillito, *A History of Utah Radicalism: Startling, Socialistic, and Decidedly Revolutionary* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011).

8. John Henry Smith, Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), Apr. 3, 1910, 35.

9. Yorgason, *Transformation*, 89.

10. See chap. 6 of Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012).

irrelevant conservative worry—they both miss something: namely, the third paragraph quoted above. For Widtsoe, in this sermon at least, there was a specific root to what he called the Mormon “belief in the land,” and that was the “ideal city” of Joseph Smith. How did that city, and the wide range of speculations and experiments associated with building Zion communities that frequently characterized American Mormonism in the decades that followed, serve as a component of Widtsoe’s inspired defense of the farm? Let’s think about Smith’s “Plat of Zion,” the document where he laid out his outline for an ideal city, and see what connections we can find.

### Mormon City Planning

Smith’s original vision for a city of Zion came about in the summer of 1833, during which time he and other Mormon leaders held meetings to discuss the city “Zion,” which Smith had presented as the central point of the future of the Church. The site for this city was to be the small town of Independence in Jackson County, Missouri. Smith had held in his mind a vision for that city since at least the summer of 1831, when he had first visited Missouri.<sup>11</sup> There is much that can be said about the plat, which Smith and his fellow envisioners developed in two drafts that summer; most relevant to our discussion here is the size they had in mind. Smith stipulated that Zion would have about twenty thousand inhabitants. As Benjamin Park observed, “When that limit was reached, boundaries were to be drawn and yet another large neighboring community built to exactly the same specifications. ‘When this square is

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11. Doctrine and Covenants 57:3, original text dated July 20, 1831, in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelations Books* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 93.

thus laid off,' the June plat explained, 'lay off another in the same way, and so fill up the world in these last days.'<sup>12</sup>

Why the need for a Zion environment to be kept to a particular size? Because one cannot think about Smith's ideal city without thinking about the ideal society it was imagined to be host to. The city of Zion would be the center of a consecrated society, imitating the city Enoch built. As related in Smith's "new translation" of the Bible, it would be a city in which all were "of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness" with "no poor among them" (Moses 7:18–19). Note that the word is "poor," not "poverty." Many Church leaders in the decades to come, deeply invested in the possibility of building the Mormon people into a community that protected and lifted up and treated their own as equals, were outright hostile to the possibility of outside (that is, non-Mormon) investment, even if it would be financially advantageous to some. Better for all to share things in common than for a few to advance.<sup>13</sup>

Achieving that condition of self-sufficiency and rough equality required, in the mind of Joseph Smith as well as in the experience of the numerous aforementioned Church leaders equally committed to the ideal of a Zion community, that the people who lived in Zion all had to be able to maintain a productive connection to arable land. As Widtsoe observed, every resident in this city would have space for at least some agricultural work, though there was no assumption that such

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12. Benjamin E. Park, "To Fill up the World: Joseph Smith as Urban Planner," *Mormon Historical Studies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 14. Park is quoting "Explanation of the Plat of the City of Zion," June 25, 1833, Church History Library.

13. Consider the words of George Q. Cannon: "Watch the effect of wealth. . . . Communities get wealthy and they begin to think about their wealth. Where their treasure is there is their heart also. Especially is this the case if they are divided into classes. . . . If we are nearly alike temporally we feel alike. In this has been much of our strength. . . . The increase of wealth, therefore, and the consequent increase of fashions are more to be dreaded than hostile legislation." June 25, 1882, *Journal of Discourses*, 24:46–47.

kitchen gardens would be sufficient to satisfy all the food needs of the community. There would be farms surrounding the perimeter of the city, which presumably were accepted as providing the bulk of the city's food resources, but they would not be built at such a distance that those who worked in the fields would be unable to return to their homes in the heart of the community in the evening. In fact, that was expected; rather than spreading out in search of larger plots of land and distant opportunities, the community was to be a tight-knit and self-sufficient one, with everyone coming together to worship at the temples at the heart of the city, enjoy the company of their fellow citizen-saints, and "live together in love" (D&C 42:45). As B. H. Roberts observed about the plat, "The farmer and his family . . . 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."<sup>14</sup>

The world has seen many experiments with self-sustaining, egalitarian communities—with the united order experiments of the nineteenth-century Church, inspired in so many ways (if not always explicitly guided) by Smith's original plat, being a major part of that story.<sup>15</sup> While these experiments have varied immensely in their social and economic organization, the necessity of thinking hard about scale has been a constant through all of them.<sup>16</sup> In the context of the sufficiency and community that Smith envisioned through his plat, it would seem likely that one must either 1) abandon the kind of rough

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14. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 1:312.

15. See Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992) and, for somewhat broader perspectives, Yaacov Oved, *Two Hundred Years of American Communes* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1993) and Clifford F. Thies, "The Success of American Communes," *Southern Economic Journal* 67, no. 1 (2000): 186–99.

16. The writings of Peter Kropotkin, E. F. Schumacher, Colin Ward, and Wendell Berry all underline this fact, as does the work of many other community- and sustainability-minded thinkers.



equality that rural subsistence economies engender<sup>17</sup> and instead trust in the sort of equality presumably to be achieved after capital-driven financial and commercial growth has made possible transfer payments and welfare of some kind, all of which seems to run against Smith's original ideal, or 2) contemplate serious limits upon size. For a community to spatially expand ever outward in an attempt to claim more and larger resources, much less to grow in population into an unconstrained urban agglomeration, makes the sort of unity, familiarity, and conviviality that Smith's Zion presumed an impossibility. This is not to say that Smith's consecrated and land-connected ideal city had no room whatsoever for individual preference or dissent; in fact, from the years 1831 through 1835, Smith's thinking about the actual socioeconomic and theological mechanics of a Zion community went through significant changes, moving away from the more enclosed, borderline apocalyptic tone of his earliest revelations regarding "The Laws of the Church of Christ" and showing greater awareness of the pluralism present even in the collective desires of the faithful.<sup>18</sup> Had Smith been able and willing to spend more time working on his proposed plat during those years, very likely those changes would have further refined his urban ideas.<sup>19</sup> But despite the evolution in Smith's thinking

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17. There is evidence that small cities with strong regional connections to agricultural resources make possible a more egalitarian economy less subject to the gaps between the rich and the poor, which globalization has made a common feature in the larger cities of the world. See Catherine Tumber, *Small, Gritty, and Green: The Promise of America's Smaller Industrial Cities in a Low-Carbon World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), 136–40.

18. For more on this movement in Smith's thought, see my "'Thou Wilt Remember the Poor': Social Justice and a Radical Reading of 'The Law of the Church of Christ' (D&C 42)," in *Embracing the Law: Reading Doctrine and Covenants 42*, edited by Jeremiah John and Joseph M. Spencer (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2017), 75–78.

19. As Park observed, after the summer of 1833 "Smith never carried these ideas forward, and they remained dormant for the rest of his life." Park, "To Fill up the World," 9.

about family stewardships and bishops' storehouses and the like during these years, the basic aims of his city of Zion did not change: not to produce perfect equality, but to create a loving environment wherein the differences between rich and poor were mitigated, wherein all would share common resources and partake of common religious devotions and common civic pleasures, and by so doing enjoy a degree of solidarity with one another.<sup>20</sup> For a city to grow so large and specialized and diverse such that its inhabitants lose their involvement with their most fundamental shared resource—namely, the arable land they all live upon and draw their food from—would present an obstacle to all that. Or at least, such seems to be a reasonable conclusion if one takes seriously this theoretical elaboration of Smith's early ideas, as such Church leaders as Presidents Wilford Woodruff and Lorenzo Snow both did. First, Woodruff:

We hear that a good many of our young men are leaving this valley . . . to secure for themselves large 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[,] . . . not to spread out all over creation and become so thin and 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 we are missing. . . . [T]here are a great many people who seem to have the idea in earnest, and because there are large tracts of land 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. That is the way to build up Zion.<sup>21</sup>

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20. Fox, "'Thou Wilt Remember the Poor,'" 66; see also A. Don Sorenson, "Being Equal in Earthly and Heavenly Power: The Idea of Stewardship in the United Order," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 1 (1978): 110–11.

21. Cited in Brigham Daniels, "Revitalizing Zion: Nineteenth-Century Mormonism and Today's Urban Sprawl," *Journal of Land, Resources, and Environmental Law* 28, no. 2 (2008): 277–78.

Next, Snow:

Zion cannot be built except on the principles of union required by celestial law. It is high time for us to enter into these things. It is more pleasant and agreeable for the Latter-day Saints to enter into this work and build up Zion, than to build up ourselves and have this great competition which is destroying us. Now let things go on in our midst in our Gentile fashion, and you would see an aristocracy growing amongst us, whose language to the poor would be, “we do not require your company; we are going to have things very fine; we are quite busy now, please call some other time.” You would have classes established here, some very poor and some very rich. Now, the Lord is not going to have anything of that kind. There has to be an equality; and we have to observe these principles that are designed to give everyone the privilege of gathering around him the comforts and conveniences of life. The Lord, in his economy of spiritual things, has fixed that every man, according to his perseverance and faithfulness, will receive exaltation and glory in the eternal worlds—a fullness of the Priesthood, and a fullness of the glory of God. This is the economy of God’s system by which men and women can be exalted spiritually. The same with regard to temporal affairs.<sup>22</sup>

To the extent that Park is correct that Smith did not envision the city of Zion as existing primarily to “aggregate economic endeavors” but rather to “weld a community of people together,” then it would appear that the land-centric thinking of later prophetic proponents of Smith’s vision of consecration and unity held to the core of Smith’s idea of an urban space fully entwined with rural, agricultural practices.<sup>23</sup> The experiments in consecration that Brigham Young pushed in the 1870s were, as Leonard Arrington observed, “most adapted to small rural villages, where the social and economic life of the community already were closely entwined and limited in scale.”<sup>24</sup> In the more commercial urban centers of late nineteenth-century Utah, the track

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22. Lorenzo Snow, Apr. 21, 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 19:349.

23. Park, “To Fill up the World,” 19.

24. Arrington, Fox, and May, *Building the City of God*, 205.

record of such experiments was particularly poor (though all the united order experiments eventually collapsed or were transformed into distinct economic enterprises in time). The whole of Salt Lake County through the 1870s and 1880s showed only four orders incorporated; while variations in the form were attempted through Deseret, the communal vision of a land-based consecration such as Smith implied in his “ideal city” was seen as “patently unworkable” in larger towns and cities, primarily because therein “more complex patterns of social and economic life were established, involving gentiles and miscreant Mormons in a structure that did not permit the clustering of the faithful.”<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, but also presumably inevitably, given the age-old appeal of the independence, the opportunity, and the anonymity that cities and urban economies promise,<sup>26</sup> by the turn of the century Matthias Cowley could observe that “we are Latter-day Saints religiously, but Gentiles financially.”<sup>27</sup> Among the reasons for this, one that Yorgason

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25. Arrington, Fox, and May, 153, 220–21.

26. Well expressed by Stephen Schneck, particularly if one imagines his “city” to mean the bustling commercial center of Salt Lake City, and his “village” to mean the greatest (or at least most notorious) United Order success of nineteenth-century Utah, Orderville: “[C]onsider a line between ‘city’ and ‘village.’ The line is drawn well by that apocryphal 15th century peasant who claims that ‘Die Stadluft macht frei!’ (‘the city air makes us free!’). Consider the tension revealed here between the qualities perceived in village life and those anticipated in the city. Village represents a smothering community. An homogeneity of tastes, styles and desires is inscribed on each villager’s soul by an intrusive familiarity that begins in the cradle. The village represents a life lived with intimate, ubiquitous authorities wherein all is public. City, for our peasant, offers the heterogeneity of anonymity and the possibility of private spaces resistant to the intrusive, public scrutiny found in village life. In the peasant’s ideal of the city there is room for private space and authority is formal, not intimate or personal.” Schneck, “City and Village,” in *Urbanization and Values*, edited by George F. McLean and John Kromkowski (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1991), 170–71.

27. Cited in Yorgason, *Transformation*, 117.

addresses stands out: “Within Mormon culture itself [into the late 1800s and early 1900s] . . . the Mormon conception of wealth was shorn of most negative connotations. Instead of wealth being a mixed blessing, easily promoting dangerous social divisions, wealth rightly separated the industrious from the idle.”<sup>28</sup> This is certainly a narrative that makes sense: the lure of the wealth of cities, their opportunity and freedom, all of which depend upon their openness and diversity, was too great a temptation for the Saints, and the ideal of a homely unity, connected to the humble and shared practices of subsistence and grounded in the promise of higher joy than that which material goods can provide, fell by the wayside. But I would add one additional wrinkle to it.

### The Need for an Unplanned, or a Differently Planned, Mormon Zion

The above-mentioned passage from Arrington’s *City of God*, referencing the fact that by the 1870s and 1880s commercial urban hubs in the Territory of Utah had already organically developed patterns that the egalitarian, communal ideals of consecration directly challenged, needs further consideration. Another passage lays out the relevant issues even more clearly:

On the whole the Saints in the north [of Utah] seemed wary of efforts to alter dramatically their accustomed economic and social patterns. The accomplishments of their cooperatives greatly complemented but did not supplant traditional economic forms. Perhaps their caution worked ultimately to their advantage. Where no fast lines could be drawn between those who worked in the Order and those who did not, occasions for intramural conflict over Order affairs were greatly reduced. In the southern Utah village of Kanab factions of Order advocates were strong and unyielding in their desire to make a living reality of the communal form favored by the prophet. Treading roughly

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28. Yorgason, 128.

upon the more reticent, they left a legacy that divided the community for many years thereafter.<sup>29</sup>

What Arrington here describes was not just the discomfort of an urbanized population called by their religious leaders to change their commercial practices; it was also the discomfort of a community of people who, in the midst of the challenges and vicissitudes and transactions of commercial life, had formed social patterns and routines facing a top-down disruption. Disruption even in rural communities resulted in, as Arrington notes, frustration and unhappiness on the part of some; in a complex city, where patterns of life develop organically, a disruption on the scale that Smith's or Young's communal and egalitarian ideal would demand would result in even greater consternation. And when disruption arises in connection with the fulfilment of some clearly stated organizational principle, the possibility of resentment is greater still. Hence, the more successful and transformative examples of "Zion planning," as it we might call it, were those that refused to advocate for the "communal form" in "unyielding" ways.

The reality that Smith's and others' approach to orchestrating the construction of an ideal, loving, self-sufficient, equal city often took such unyielding disruption for granted is noted by Park:

The first point is how divorced the plans were from the geographic reality of Jackson County, Missouri. The city plans seem to imagine a vacant lot ready to be filled—and not just a small lot, either, but a lot that would fill twenty thousand people. This was Zion the ideal, a contemporary Eden, barren of people and previously claimed property, anxious to initiate a new civilization originating from a specific and physical location. This was a new beginning and empty drawing board. But the community of Independence was nothing close to an empty drawing board. While it was incomparable to the cities found on the East Coast, the frontier town did still claim a growing settlement . . . , [and Smith's] designs totally disregard[ed] road and city developments

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29. Arrington, Fox, and May, *Building the City of God*, 224.

then in place. Westport Road, [Jackson County]’s major east-west thoroughfare, was ignored and not incorporated into the plan. However, what is more striking is how the plat seeps into Independence town proper, replacing nearly half of what was then a growing community. This problem becomes even more insurmountable in the second plat developed several months later. [And if] the June 1833 plat encroached on town property, the second obliterated it completely.<sup>30</sup>

In a recent book on the history of liberal ideas, Jacob T. Levy uses a comparative framework to look at what he calls “rationalist” and “pluralist” visions of human freedom.<sup>31</sup> His analysis can perhaps be expanded to how we consider other ideas, including religious ones. There is, in Smith’s, Young’s, and others’ top-down, prophetically worked out visions of those city plats and systems by which Zion could be realized, a type of rationalism that, as James Scott has observed in his magisterial study *Seeing Like a State*, invariably involves the dismissal of organically developed patterns of life and the local knowledge that those patterns reflect because the inconsistencies and exceptions that those patterns allow challenge the rational vision which the planners have in mind.<sup>32</sup> While it might seem odd to say it, there is an element of Robert Moses hidden in the thinking which went into Smith’s plat of Zion, and certainly, no one familiar with Young’s biography would deny that there was more than just an element of authoritarianism to how he viewed the State of Deseret.

Does that mean that those Mormons, Jack Mormons, Gentiles, and everyone in-between in Salt Lake City and Ogden who rolled their eyes, dragged their feet, and declared that the idea of restricting, changing, or

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30. Park, “To Fill up the World,” 8–9.

31. Jacob T. Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

32. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

channeling their habits of purchasing, selling, and laboring in the name of building up Zion was a step too far were, in essence, proto-Jane Jacobses, localist fighters for personal freedom and a more authentic sense of community against a “high modernist” project? Probably not, at least not entirely. But to the extent that we are still inspired today by the promise of Zion, and to the extent that we dwell in places and work through economies that are thoroughly globalized and urbanized and suburbanized, then we owe it to ourselves to recognize that the writings that inspire us often have a presumptuous, top-down, authoritarian character.

This is, one might note, an intellectual struggle that has characterized many efforts to articulate alternative economic arrangements of almost any sort. While I do not wish to belabor the (I think mostly silly) arguments over the degree of similarity between united order experiments and socialist economies,<sup>33</sup> the argument over the degree to which socialist ideals must necessarily involve adhering to a top-down program, versus the degree to which socialist principles may be accommodated to the pluralistic characteristics of a genuinely democratic civil society, is something that Mormons thinking about urban (and other types of) planning might learn from. The collapse of the Soviet Union nearly thirty years ago ended almost all apologies ever made by revolutionary thinkers for state-based socialism; the reputation of socialists as addicted to the achievement of community and equality through the coercive power of the state lingers on, however, partly because socialists themselves have not rethought enough of their

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33. For those interested in diving in, Dean L. May, “The Economics of Zion,” *Sunstone* (Aug. 1990): 15–23, and Duane Boyce, “Do Liberal Economic Policies Approximate the Law of Consecration?,” *FARMS Review* 21, no. 1 (2009): 197–213, provide a good starting point, with their diametrically opposed perspectives.



own presumptions. One thinker who has, namely the sociologist Erik Olin Wright, commented on this intellectual struggle as follows:

A vibrant civil society is precisely one with a multitude of heterogeneous associations, networks, and communities, built around different goals, with different kinds of members based on different sorts of solidarities. . . . It is tempting to deal with this . . . by somehow defining civil society as only consisting of benign associations that are consistent with socialist ideals of democratic egalitarianism. . . . I think this is an undesirable response. . . . There is no guarantee that a society within which real power rooted in civil society predominates would be one that always upholds democratic egalitarian ideals. This, however, is not some unique problem for socialism; it is a characteristic of democratic institutions in general. As conservatives often point out, inherent in democracy is the potential for the tyranny of the majority, and yet in practice liberal democracies have been fairly successful at creating institutions that protect both individual rights and the interests of minorities. A socialist democracy rooted in social empowerment through associations in civil society would face similar challenges. . . . My assumption here is not that a socialism of social empowerment will inevitably successfully meet this challenge, but that moving along the pathways of social empowerment will provide a more favorable terrain on which to struggle for these ideals than does either capitalism or statism.<sup>34</sup>

Those who find inspiration in Smith's plat of Zion, and thus wish to keep in mind the principles it encompassed when dealing with the (often fiscally and environmentally unsustainable) growth-centric qualities of urban life around the globe today, must also keep this principle in mind. There is, as in most other conceptions of cooperative, egalitarian, agrarian, socially oriented forms of life, a rationalist temptation here, one that arguably Smith fell victim to in blithely conceiving of the laying down of one small, self-sustaining urban form after another, so

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34. Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010), 145–48.

to “fill up the world in these last days.”<sup>35</sup> It is this rationalist temptation that contributes, however unfairly and indefensibly, to the common accusation of “fascism!” made against those who sincerely seek to make our food systems more sustainable, our cities more walkable, and our communities less subject to the dispersing, disruptive, centrifugal forces of growth.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps such accusations are unavoidable, and perhaps the rationalist, interventionary aspect of Smith’s vision for the city of Zion is unavoidable as well. But if so, those of us who find ourselves moved, however intensely or distantly, by Elder Widtsoe’s agrarian evocations, should therefore struggle with how such inspired reminders could be communicated in contemporary urban environments, which are, like all cities, organic, complex, entwined, and even a little anarchic at their foundations, and thus not easily aligned with a singular—as opposed to a pluralistic—spatial and socioeconomic model. A limited, constrained, land-oriented city of Zion and its relationship to any attempt to imagine a practicable Mormon theory of consecration

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35. One may discern this same kind of temptation at work in some of Smith’s thinking about temple work; while Samuel Brown’s excellent book on this topic is very sympathetic to Smith’s vision of a “heavenly network of belonging,” he does allow that there was an element of “craftiness” to it, an “ontological flattening” wherein Smith conceived of all of us as equal, and almost desperate, participants in the race to become “saviors on Mount Zion” to ourselves and everyone we know or ever might know. See Brown, *In Heaven as it is On Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145, 243–45, 259–60.

36. For a particularly paranoid and fairly hilarious example, consider Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2008). This accusation is not restricted to professional conservative agitators and wing nuts, however; just last summer, the *Wall Street Journal* published a prominent piece on how just about all serious efforts at promoting more communal and egalitarian urban environments were instances of “leftist” coercion. Christopher F. Rufo, “New Left Urbanists’ Want to Remake Your City,” *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 22, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-left-urbanists-want-to-remake-your-city-11566512564>.

could be simply dismissed, of course. But given the ways in which Smith's plat of Zion nonetheless connects with the Mormon struggle for community, perhaps those inspired to continue that struggle must simultaneously attend to the possible imperative of building cities that are at least somewhat constrained and agrarian, but also to the possibility of doing so in ways that do not needlessly disrupt the urban folkways that all of us take as second nature today.

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RUSSELL ARBEN FOX is a professor of political science and director of the History and Politics and Honors programs at Friends University, a small Christian liberal arts college in Wichita, Kansas. He served as the book review editor of *Dialogue* from 2008 to 2016. He has published on Mormon-related topics previously in *Dialogue*, *Journal of Mormon History*, the *Mormon Review*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *SquareTwo*, *Embracing the Law* (Maxwell Institute, 2017), and *Mormonism and American Politics* (Columbia, 2016). His current research focuses on the various issues facing mid-sized cities.