

UTAH'S SECRET

By Allen Best **Changing**



Adam Barker

While much of the nation sputters along, Utah continues to reinvent itself in dramatic ways. Perhaps surprisingly, it is among our most urbanized states. Eighty-eight percent of its population lives in towns and cities, many of which were originally

established by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormons. Meanwhile, mass transit and higher density are remaking these places into lively urban cores.

The largest single reinvention is tak-

ing place across from the original Mormon temple in Salt Lake City. There, as part of the 20-acre City Creek development, the business arm of the church is restoring the historic creek. It will flow through City Creek Center, the retail portion of the

with the times is part of it.



Talman

Who knew? High density in the Salt Lake Valley. Inset: Rendering of City Creek Center. The downtown retail center, set to open in 2012, will include a retractable roof and pedestrian sky bridge.



development. The entire project is billed as a “sustainably designed,” mixed use community, with 700 residential units already in place or under construction.

Meanwhile, a light-rail system started in 1999 continues to extend through the urban

corridor paralleling the Wasatch Range. It’s supplemented by a 38-mile commuter rail line that’s also planning an expansion. Just outside the city, the new community of Daybreak is gaining attention for its smart growth principles. And once down-at-the

heels Ogden, where the transcontinental railroad began in 1869, is becoming a destination for hard-core outdoor recreation.

Most interesting is the fact that the state’s urban corridor seems to be embracing what are generally defined as the principles of smart growth. “I moved here from God’s gift to urban planning, Portland, and it is pretty impressive,” says Keith Bartholomew, assistant professor in the University of Utah’s new and rapidly expanding Department of City and Metropolitan Planning. “I think Salt Lake City is on the way to being the next planning mecca in the western United States.”

Why all this now—in staid, conservative Utah? To understand the puzzle, you must peel back history, to July 1847, when the first band of Mormons, fleeing persecution in the Midwest, arrived in what was then Mexican territory. Led by their prophet Brigham Young, the group sought sanctuary in the desert valley bordered by mountains and the vast body of brackish water that we know today as the Great Salt Lake.

Young commanded his flock to divert water from City Creek, beginning the West’s first large-scale irrigation project. Then, unrolling blueprints originally intended for a Missouri settlement, he laid out plans for an orderly and efficient city, with 120-foot-wide streets and 10-acre blocks that would be deep enough for gardens, chickens, and farm animals. It was the first step in fulfilling his vision of Zion, first

Head of the Class

As rapidly as metropolitan areas of the Southwest have grown in recent decades, the planning department at the University of Utah has them all beat. In 2003, when Brenda Case Scheer arrived, there were but 14 students. Now, there are 150 to 160—plus new master's programs (one in conjunction with the business school in real estate development) and a PhD program.

“What drew me here was the exceptional profile of the state—and the understanding that things weren't going to be the same here as on the East Coast and in the Midwest, where I had been before,” says Scheer, the dean of the College of Architecture + Planning. Scheer came to Utah after 12 years at the University of Cincinnati. Her specialty is urban design policy and the physical development of cities. She just completed a new book, *The Evolution of Urban Form: Typology for Planners and Architects* (APA Planners Press; 144 pp., hardcover; APA members \$31.95).

Scheer saw an opening for a new type of planning curriculum, one that would focus on the challenges facing rapidly growing cities. She notes that programs in the East tend to focus on resurrecting dying cities while those on the West Coast are often concerned with multiculturalism. Utah would integrate those concerns with a specifically Southwestern slant, she says.

Since her arrival, the department's faculty has expanded from one to seven, including Arthur C. Nelson, director of the Metropolitan Institute, and Keith Bartholomew, an expert in scenario planning. “We stole them fair and square,” says Nelson, referring to the recruitment of transportation expert Reid Ewing from Rutgers University and Nan Ellin, the new chair of the City and Metropolitan Planning Department, from Arizona State University.

Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker remembers the university's planning department in 1987, when it had a single professor and was hidden away in the geography department. Today, the faculty, along with planning students interning at city hall, provide useful expertise to the entire state, he says.

Scheer has won support from within the university for this expansion—and also more broadly in the community. She and others in the department have been engaged with Envision Utah, the small but effective planning group that is known for its work throughout the state.

Most undergraduates in the planning department come from within the state, although some graduate students have been arriving from elsewhere, says Scheer. For the moment, the department will continue to emphasize the problems of growing communities. How long will that formula last? Scheer says she isn't sure. The rapid growth could peter out, of course. “Maybe we will be obsolete 25 years from now,” she says.

But so far, it's working out well.

Dean Brenda Scheer and student Min Kyung Jeong.



in Salt Lake City and then in settlements across the region, making him arguably the most prolific town founder in American history.

Writer Wallace Stegner, himself a product of Salt Lake City, once described Utah in its early years as an absolute dictatorship, but it was a dictatorship of the willing. When Young and the other high priests commanded their followers to journey through scorching deserts and deep canyons to establish distant colonies, they did so, sometimes repeatedly. Convinced of the imminent arrival of the Messiah, they were on a mission to create a place suitable for the second coming. This new society was determinedly communitarian, its members bound by a common cause and religion.

The early Mormon settlements were distinguished by their compact layouts. Following Young's dictate, the farmers lived in town, venturing out to their fields by day. “Compact organization gives them many advantages of a social and civic character,” intoned a church elder in 1882, in denying farmers permission to live on their land. Even today, the Utah landscape includes far fewer exurban ranchettes than most of the rural West.

Another distinguishing feature was the settlers' hatred of federal intervention. Disputes with government officials intensified when the provisional state of Deseret was established in 1849. Young and the other priests saw this as a direct threat to their authority. Tensions subsided somewhat in 1890 with the abandonment of polygamy and the arrival of statehood. But lingering distrust can be seen to this day, when local officials insist on building roads through sensitive and scenic lands in defiance of federal managers.

Even now, Utah remains intrinsically conservative, both socially and politically. Perhaps no other state is as protective of the right to bear arms, and the state's Republican party refused to slate arch-conservative U.S. Sen. Robert Bennett for a second term after he voted for the bank bailout.

Sprawl takes over

Still, there have been changes. The state's communitarian spirit has frayed over time, and so has its famed self-sufficiency. After World War II, Salt Lake City, like the rest of the country, got car fever, and the metropolitan area began to sprawl into a chaotic urban mosaic, contained only by the



Kennecott Land



Alan Best

The northern portion of the Wasatch Front is served by the FrontRunner commuter rail line. Above: Rendering of the South Jordan Health Center. The 208,000-square-foot facility is part of a planned University of Utah Health Care medical campus. The site is next to a future light-rail station.

region's unique geographic barriers.

Because of those barriers, 80 percent of the state's 2.8 million people live in the narrow corridor called the Wasatch Front. It is 100 miles long but no more than 20 miles wide in the Salt Lake Valley, its midpoint. To the east is the Wasatch Range, source of the area's crucial water supply. To the west, the Oquirrh Mountain Range, the Great Salt Lake, and the forbidding desert discourage sprawl, as does federal land ownership. Some 57.4 percent of Utah is federal land; only Nevada and Alaska have more.

In fact, Utah has been growing rapidly for decades, 24 percent in just the last decade, behind only Nevada and Arizona. But unlike many other states, it is mostly growing from within. The Mormons have traditionally encouraged early marriage—and large families—and church influence shows up in all sorts of rankings: the nation's lowest out-of-marriage birth rate, 19.7 percent (national average 39.7 percent); largest household size, 3.14 (average 2.61); and percentage of minors per 100 working-age people: 52.2 (average 38.6). "We're on a permanent youth movement in the state," says Pamela Perlich, a senior research economist with

the University of Utah's Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

By the mid-1990s, the state's business and political leaders had begun to understand that, unless changes were made, this population growth would ultimately choke economic growth. Water supply was, and remains, a major concern. "Water is a key limiting factor on the Wasatch Front," says Greg Montgomery, AICP, planning manager of Ogden, 35 miles north of Salt Lake City.

In addition, temperature inversions were becoming commonplace in the mountain bowl that creates the Salt Lake Valley, trapping the stew of traffic exhaust and other pollutants. For 10 to 15 days each winter, respiratory therapists were doing a land-office business. They still are. Utah has made strides—but it has a ways to go.

Values ladder

The public-private partnership known as Envision Utah was established in 1997 to deal with these issues and a host of others. Its organizers pointedly solicited the participation of suburban mayors and church leaders of every stripe, not just Mormon.

The group's founding board chairman, Robert J. Grow, was a former land-use attorney and steel company executive who was eager to apply to community planning the "value-ladder" approach he had learned in the business world. "What are the three things you value most about Salt Lake City?" he and other pollsters asked people. "What are the three things you value least?" Not surprisingly, traffic congestion was high on the list of negatives.

"When you think about how to build the future, you have to deal with what people really want, and you have to translate planner-speak into talking about the things that people care about deeply," said Grow in a recent interview. "When you do that, people change how they think about the future." Grow has since made a new career out of his values-based work, doing similar research from Orlando to Phoenix.

Envision Utah, which won a national award from APA in 2002, has held hundreds of workshops across the state and has been instrumental in winning support for smart growth plans. Some 73 percent of Utahans declared in a 2005 poll that they value walkable communities built around village centers and schools. The group's message has taken root, says community relations manager Kevin Fayles. "More and more business people are making the connection that quality of life is important to attract new businesses here, to keep the best and brightest here."

There's more ahead. Envision Utah's ambitious target is to squeeze a third of all new homes in the state onto just three percent of developable land. The result could be a reduction of daily vehicle miles traveled from the current 96 million miles to 76 million. By linking new centers with a first-class transportation system, says executive director Alan Matheson, Jr. (nephew of a former Utah governor and cousin to a current U.S. representative), "we will improve air quality, save billions of dollars, reduce traffic congestion, use less water, and create vibrant communities and gathering places."

Where planning thrives

The center of all this forward thinking is Salt Lake City. It's not the first place that comes to mind when people think about nightlife. Indeed, when Denver Nuggets basketball players were asked several years ago to name the least favorite city they

played in, they all said Salt Lake City. And they weren't just talking about drubbings by the Utah Jazz. Outside of the Gateway Mall, built for the 2002 Winter Olympics, the city closed up early.

But things are looking up. Even in the midst of a recession, there are far fewer empty storefronts than there were four years ago. Already, well in advance of the completion of City Creek and other major projects, there is a decided buzz downtown even after quitting time. The streets are filled with bicyclists and pedestrians. Residents and tourists are crowding into downtown's restaurants, bars, and theaters. Maybe it's time to poll those Nuggets again.

All this gladdens the heart of the man who has been Salt Lake City's mayor since 2008. Ralph Becker, FAICP, is a former planning consultant who spent six years as a state legislator before running for mayor on a platform that stressed environmentally sound growth and social justice.

"It feels like we are moving ahead by leaps and bounds in the planning arena," says Becker. He points with pride to the city's comprehensive sustainability ordinance, the first in the nation to eliminate existing regulations that serve as barriers to what he prefers to call self-sufficiency.

The new ordinance covers everything from building orientation to recycling. Pruned from the old regulations are laws like the one governing the height of vegetables planted in front yards. Becker credits the rapid changes in the city to an "incredible environmental ethic—a commitment to preservation, to protecting our environment, and to a healthy lifestyle"—that he sees among Salt Lake residents.

He also credits Salt Lake City with fostering changes that are now spreading along the Wasatch Front. Most notable is the transit system. By 2015, the Utah Transit Authority expects to have 44 miles of light-rail lines in operation in the Salt Lake Valley. In addition, 90 miles of commuter rail—the FrontLines system—will stitch together nearly the full length of the Wasatch Front. Bus rapid transit is also expected to expand, and streetcars may find a home on the wide streets of Salt Lake City.

Becker notes that the valley's geographical constraints actually serve to encourage mass transit. "It is perfectly suited for rail," he says, and that in turn will help to attract high ridership.

Density is also expected to increase, in

the form of transit-oriented development. Becker and other local officials expect that 75 percent of the Wasatch Front population will soon live within five miles of a major transit stop. They hope to see 90 percent within one mile of a stop by 2030. State legislators last winter gave the state transit authority permission to become a limited liability developer of five high-density TOD projects adjacent to transit stops.

All this activity makes it more likely that the 24/7 downtown that Salt Lake City's leaders see as their common goal will eventually take shape—although it might take another decade—and that its single largest driver will be the City Creek development. National urban observer Joel Kotkin, author of *The Next Hundred Million*, pointed out recently that Salt Lake City's redevelopment is driven by an unconventional dynamic: a church seeking to protect its "sacred place" from urban decay. That's a far cry from the usual planning goal of attracting empty nesters or well-heeled singles, he said, although it's doing that, too.

Density in the desert

Meanwhile, there are signs of life elsewhere along the Wasatch Front, notably in a new urbanist-type development called Daybreak on the west bench, or valley terrace, of the Salt Lake Valley. The project, located within the city of West Jordan, sits on 4,200 of the 94,000 acres owned by Rio Tinto, operator of the giant Bingham Canyon copper mine in the adjacent Oquirrh Range. The project, planned by Kennecott Land, a subsidiary of the mine owner, is based on the smart growth principles of walkable neighborhoods, compact development, and accessibility of mass transit.

"Daybreak is the first large-scale development of its kind" in Utah," says Arthur C. Nelson, FAICP, who now directs the Center for Metropolitan Research at the University of Utah, "and it has been an eye-opener." It has shown people "that you can have relatively high density with a nice environment in a suburban setting," he says.

Had this development not come along, say company officials, the land probably would have been subdivided into two- to five-acre exurban lots. Instead, density at Daybreak shakes out to five units per acre, if you include open space, roads, and commercial development. But shorn of the infrastructure, development is 10,000 people per square mile—denser even



From railroad workers to ski bums in one generation: Ogden decided it could revive its faltering economy by developing

than Portland, Oregon, says Nelson.

Six years after groundbreaking five years ago, the project has completed just 2,800 of the planned 20,000 units. Company officials admit disappointment at the pace but point out that the project ranks as the nation's sixth best-selling development this year. The housing ranges from \$130,000 condos to \$1 million-plus houses arrayed around pocket parks and other open spaces. It is served by three schools and a shopping complex, all connected by sidewalks.

Don Whyte, president of Kennecott Land, cites a University of Utah study that found that 80 percent of Daybreak residents routinely stroll around their neighborhoods, compared with just 17 percent of the residents of a neighboring development who do so. "I see whole families out for a walk in the evening," he says.

A light-rail line now being completed will have two stops when operations begin next year, connecting Daybreak to downtown Salt Lake City. But planners expect that many residents will work and shop within the community. The project currently includes 745,000 square feet of retail, office, and light industrial space, although plans call for up to 14 million square feet.

Traveling around

Directly across the valley from Daybreak is the Wasatch Range, dominated by Mt. Olympus and riven by canyons. The runoff from the mountains is the source of the water that sustains the valley's 1.2 million peo-



Alan Best

its recreational potential. Venues for skiing, rock climbing, and mountain biking are minutes away.

ple. The mountains—mostly federal land, but intermixed with privately owned and city-owned land—also provide unbounded recreation: exemplary rock climbing, hiking trails into designated wilderness, and some of the nation's best skiing. Most remarkable is their proximity to the city.

Alta and Snowbird, perhaps the continent's premier powder skiing sites, are less than a 30-minute drive from the Salt Lake airport—provided that an avalanche hasn't closed Little Cottonwood Canyon.

In summer, the busiest time, parking has become an overwhelming problem. According to planning director Gabriel Epperson, AICP, Envision Utah has recommended that paid parking permits be instituted as a stop-gap solution, although the group notes that the real answer is transit. One proposal calls for a rail line through Little Cottonwood Canyon following the path of the railroad that once served the mines. In other canyons, where up to 20 percent of land is privately owned, there is support for regulating development by transferring development rights, Epperson says.

North of Salt Lake City, the old railroad town of Ogden has also been gussying itself up—but with an entirely different approach. Once rife with canneries, slaughterhouses, and, somewhat incongruously, tourists and bankers, Ogden declined slowly after World War II and then skidded dramatically. A decade ago, the downtown core was deteriorating to the point that an

800,000-square-foot shopping mall built in the 1970s was on the verge of becoming a call center.

After studying the city's assets, local officials decided to take a brand-new approach to improving its century-old downtown: It would sell Ogden on the basis of its recreational amenities. The Snowbasin ski area, site of several events in the 2002 Winter Olympics, is just 25 minutes away. The area has superb rock climbing walls, looping mountain bike trails, and kayaking in the Weber River.

The first step was to start filling those downtown buildings. The federal Internal Revenue Service, a major presence locally, had decamped to suburban offices years before. Citing federal statutes that instructed agencies to occupy historic buildings whenever possible, city officials demanded that the IRS return to the downtown. The agency resisted but finally acquiesced.

Next came the outdoor companies: Ski equipment manufacturers Solomon and Atomic, along with Quality Bikes, now occupy an old cannery, drawn both by the cheaper real estate and the proximity of outdoor recreation. "We were just trying to get that branding, and it all started with the natural assets of the river and the mountains," says Mayor Matthew Godfrey.

Nearby, work continues on the restoration of the Ogden River. The river had been channelized, its riparian area filled in, and houses built to the water's edge. In other sections, it had been used as a dump by foundries and other industries. "It was a mess. We had two salvage yards in our downtown. Two!" exclaims Godfrey. Now, partly through federal stimulus funding, the river is being transformed into an amenity in this new, recreation-based economy.

St. George, near Zion National Park in Utah's southwest corner, faces many familiar problems, including high summer ozone levels. Its metropolitan region is projected to have 300,000 people by 2030, more than double today's 137,000. Many local residents are retirees from the Salt Lake area, 300 miles away. They're drawn by the city's pleasant climate. "I have lived here 25 years and never shoveled snow," says Kenneth Sizemore, executive director of the Five County Association of Governments.

Sizemore identifies the area's chronic water shortage as a significant limit to growth. One solution, proposed by the Washington County Water Conservancy

District, is to import water from Lake Powell, 100 miles away. The cost of this huge project has been estimated at more than \$1 billion. Federal analysis of the proposal is currently under way.

In theory, Utah planners seeking to accommodate urban growth can still count on 350,000 acre-feet of water from the Colorado River and its tributaries. But a skeptical Robert Adler, a water expert at the University of Utah, suggests that a more promising—and more sustainable—way to accommodate growth is to encourage efficiency. He notes that the agricultural sector is the state's major water user and that more efficient irrigation practices—coupled with conservation—could make a tremendous difference. Utah today ranks just behind Nevada in per capita water use.

Living with contradictions

So that's Utah, a place with more than its share of contradictions. Few people live in its mountains and desert valleys, yet it's one of the fastest growing states. It's defined by bodies of water, Lake Powell and the Great Salt Lake, but it suffers from a severe water scarcity. It's known for its conservative impulses, yet it has liberal enclaves and a surprising acceptance of planning principles.

Brenda Case Scheer, dean of the University of Utah's College of Architecture + Planning, insists that the state's reputation deserves recalculation. "You always get the impression from the outside that the West is driven by a bunch of people who don't know what they're doing and have no regard for controls," she says. "What is the case here in Utah is very different from that perspective."

"A lot of this change has come on in the last 10 years, and it's come on like gangbusters, because people have decided it's in their best interest," she adds, speaking of accepting town centers, preserving open space, and greater control of development.

Most of all, Utah remains among the most interesting of the states for its founding story. Religion has played a role all over the country but nowhere else so profoundly. You don't have to be Mormon to live in Utah, but neither can you understand the state without understanding its first leader and town builder, Brigham Young.

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