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Project Renews Downtown, and Debate

By [KIRK JOHNSON](#)

SALT LAKE CITY — For many devout Mormons, Utah's capital city is important mainly as a setting for the jewel that really matters: Temple Square at the city's center. Brigham Young, the pioneer leader of the [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#), laid out the urban grid with street numbers starting at the temple. The secular world was thus defined by the sacred core.

But now a hugely ambitious, \$1 billion church-financed redevelopment project near the temple, called [City Creek Center](#), and a wave of recent church property purchases in the vicinity are prompting a new debate inside the church community and out over where the line between culture and economics should be drawn.

Some residents say the church, by opening its checkbook in a recession, rescued the city when times got tough. The 1,800 construction jobs at City Creek alone have provided a big local economic cushion. Completion of the project — 20 acres of retail shops and residential towers — is scheduled for 2012.

"City Creek has been a literal and figurative godsend," said Bradley D. Baird, the business development manager at the Economic Development Corporation of Utah, a private nonprofit group that has no direct involvement with the project.

Other people say that if the new heart of downtown has a strong church flavor, Salt Lake, which has become more diverse in recent years — could veer back toward its roots, for better or worse. About half of city residents are Mormon, according to many [estimates](#), and if many, or most, of the roughly 700 apartment units at City Creek were occupied by Mormon families, the city could have a dramatic new feel.

"Our downtown has become a ghost town in my life — nobody lives there," said Dan Egan, 55, a lawyer and church member who works near the site but lives in the suburbs. "Having several thousand people live down here will have a big impact, and having many of them L.D.S. would be a very interesting thing to see."

Church leaders say they have no religious goals in mind for City Creek, or for their other recent acquisitions. Over just the last month, the church has bought three more properties, including a [13-acre parcel](#) a few blocks south of City Creek. A spokesman said the purchases were

investments.

“There will be no evidence of the church within those blocks,” said H. David Burton, a former corporate executive who oversees the church’s business interests as the presiding bishop. Mr. Burton said the civic spaces inside City Creek would be private property, but “with all the attributes of a public venue.”

Alcohol, for example — always a cultural flashpoint because of the [church’s teachings](#) to avoid it — will probably be allowed in City Creek, Mr. Burton said, under special contracts that will allow a restaurant wanting a liquor license to buy the underlying property. That would keep the church from being in the liquor business or from benefiting from liquor sales while still allowing sale and consumption on the premises.

As for who might want to move in, Mr. Burton said he thought proximity to the temple would make the apartments attractive to church families, but only time will tell. About 40 percent of the available condominium units have been reserved by deposit, but a church spokesman said the buyers’ religious affiliations were unknown.

“If I were making a guess — and I don’t have any empirical data — it might be more attractive to L.D.S. than to others,” Mr. Burton said.

One former Salt Lake City planning official, [Stephen A. Goldsmith](#), who is not a Mormon, said he was thrilled by the thought of people moving back downtown, but feared that the church’s economic concentration would lead to a “Vaticanization” of the area.

“The concern is about having just one owner own so much of the heart of the capital city,” said Mr. Goldsmith, who was director of city planning from 2000 to 2002 and is now an associate professor of architecture and planning at the [University of Utah](#).

Already, Professor Goldsmith said, a buffer zone of about 100 acres of church-owned properties, assembled gradually over the past few decades, rings the inner core. He said the “we/they” divide between Mormons and non-Mormons could widen if even more public space became private or was linked to one group’s cultural values.

Church leaders said the desire to head off economic decline in downtown was their prime directive at City Creek.

“Along with economic malaise comes an element that we were concerned about in proximity to the temple,” said Mr. Burton, the presiding bishop. That the temple area might one day start to feel dangerous was simply intolerable, he said. “With decay, sometimes comes crime,” he said.

Although lots of urban churches worry about those issues, the ones that can write a \$1 billion check are rare.

“It’s certainly one of the largest, if not the largest project in the United States funded by a single entity, and the fact that the entity is a church makes it doubly unusual,” said Patrick L.

Anderson, the chief executive and founder of the [Anderson Economic Group](#), a Michigan-based real-estate consulting company.

Mr. Anderson, who said his firm had no economic involvement in City Creek, said such megascale urban redevelopment mostly went out of fashion after the 1970s and '80s. That makes Salt Lake even more singular, he said.

Church officials said, however, that some of what they were doing was a throwback — to the 1930s. In [the Great Depression](#), the church established a food and clothing distribution system for destitute members and bought land all over the state, establishing a precedent for wading in during hard times.

Now, some of those 1930s economic stimulus lands could come back into play. The Salt Lake City Council is considering another huge development project called the [Northwest Quadrant](#) near the airport, where the church owns a swath of land used long ago as a Depression-era church farm.

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