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Learning from Salt Lake

From theocratic plazas to oddball vernacular gardens, Salt Lake City offers a unique twist on the American Dream. BY KIM SORVIG



Salt Lake's unexpected landscapes reward the observant visitor: Wild West roots (trappers, *in-set*, at This Is The Place) and nonconformism (Joseph Smith, the first Mormon prophet, as a sphinx at Gilgal Gardens).



JUST ABOVE THE SALT LAKE VALLEY, where Emigration Canyon emerges from the Wasatch Range, lies a park named for America's most famous landscape quote—Mormon leader Brigham Young's "This is the place."

This Is The Place State Park consists of three memorials: a hulking stone and bronze monument to church leaders, its style as subtle as Soviet Realism; a simple tribute to unnamed "hand-cart pioneers," so ardent to reach The Place that they followed Young with their belongings in wheelbarrows; and a tiny white obelisk marking the actual location of Young's famous utterance, lost in beautiful scrub-oak groves. The official monument was relocated a couple hundred yards downhill, an earnest park employee explains, "for landscape reasons."

Landscape reasons underlie much of Salt Lake City, and a great way to enjoy this area is to look below the surface to the landscape's juxtapositions. The three This Is The Place memorials represent power, poverty, and place, each a force at work in this attempt at Western utopia. Both nonconformity and conservatism claim this landscape as their justification. Salt Lake is a marvelous venue for considering the complexities of the American Dream and its shape on the ground.

For those who expect this Mormon city to be too conformist to be interesting, think again. "The subtext in this town is amazing," writes filmmaker Trent Harris, author of *Mondo Utah*, a weirdly wonderful local history. And indeed, the revelatory contrast between Salt Lake's official and unofficial landscapes can illuminate many other American places.

Here is a forbidding landscape settled by people who used its harshness

Mormon irrigation reshaped Utah: It is exemplified at the restored Harrisville Canal, above left, in Ogden and commemorated at Brigham Young Historic Park, above right, near Temple Square. The Pioneer Village living history museum, below, interprets settler life at This Is The Place.

as a shield against outsiders while reshaping it in Eden's image. For The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), the landscape was and is an active presence, both symbolically and in its ability to cultivate the character of the cultivators—"a good place to make Saints," as Young said. The Edenic landscape—The Place—is fundamental to the Mormon mission in life.

For the rest of us, who habitually or occasionally lose sight of landscape's primal importance and see it as decorative backdrop, Salt Lake's subtexts can reconnect us to deeper levels of landscape practice. From the Mormons' arrival in 1847 to the 2002 Olympics, the landscape has been pivotal in the fortunes and even the existence of Salt Lake City.

To the west of This Is The Place, beyond the gridded city below the mountains, the horizon gleams dully and disappears where the world's second saltiest water body meets dusty desert. On this border, ASLA conventioners who open their eyes will discover an unknown landscape where nature and culture relate in quintessentially American ways.

GEOLOGY AND FAITH To the Mormons, the valley of the Great Salt Lake was a second Holy Land. To understand this and its significance to modern landscapes, it is important to know a little about the place itself and a little about Mormon land use.

Great Salt Lake lies on the eastern edge of the Great Basin, that quarter-million-square-mile region between the Sierra Nevadas and the Rockies that has no drainage to any sea. Here the earth's crust, stretched thin by tectonic movement, bowed upward like a pie crust puffed by steam, cracking the region with faults along which mountains rose and valleys



dropped. Water flows into the basin but escapes only by evaporation to the heavens, leaving behind earthly sediments and relic lakes much saltier than tears. The Great Basin is an introverted place, where visible rock formations are iceberg tips of ancient mountain ranges buried two and three miles deep in their own eroded debris. It is a place, writes geographer Richard Francaviglia, where “faith and landscape conspire to resurrect old myths and create new ones.”

This landscape played directly into Mormon beliefs. Joseph Smith’s revelation that Christ had walked the Americas, ministering to Indians who were Israel’s “lost tribes,” set the Latter-Day Saints on a quest for a new Holy Land. In this, they echoed the Puritans and others before them. Nor were they the only ones to see similarities between Salt Lake and Palestine: The 1896 map, below, sponsored by a railway company intent on attracting settlers, graphically compared the Salt Lake and Dead Sea valleys.



Both are fault-ridden, arid basins without outlet, containing salt seas. But the map goes further, equating the Sea of Galilee with Utah Lake, each linked to the larger saltwater body by its own Jordan River. (Salt Lake City’s west side is occasionally referred to as TransJordan!) Salt Lake City, then, is Jerusalem, while Provo becomes Nazareth and Ogden plays Bethlehem’s part.

Besides its religious connotations, Great Salt Lake has direct ecological effects on the land the Mormons settled. Wherever water is concerned, the lake’s influence is very evident, and in these parts, water controls where soil is fertile enough for settlement. This in turn sets the scene for human conflicts over territory.

Within days of arrival, the first Mormons were diverting what they named City Creek for potatoes, corn, and beans. Although estuaries where freshwater streams entered Salt Lake were fertile, the majority of the Salt Lake Valley was too arid to produce crops without irrigation. Historian Donald Worster points out that Mormons were the first commercially successful irrigators in the



SALT LAKE MISCONCEPTIONS

If you think Salt Lake City is as dry as its namesake is salty, that was once true. Mormon blue laws did prohibit not only alcoholic but caffeinated beverages. Take notice of the Starbucks and the pub at the airport and be reassured.

The Hotel Monaco, where I stayed while researching this article, shows how Salt Lake’s temperance-town reputation of a decade or two ago has changed. I arrived in time for the “manager’s reception,” a nightly wine tasting in the lobby. Three coffee shops and a liquor store are within a quick walk. Although the minifridge is alcohol free, there is an in-room coffeemaker, and the hotel restaurant serves liquor by the glass. If worst comes to it, the membership required to get a drink at “private club” restaurants is less than a usual cover charge (and sometimes waived if you’re just passing through).

Another misperception, that Mormonism is a cult totally unrelated to American norms, is so widespread that the church now avoids using any name but the full “Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,” often with “Jesus Christ” in extra-large letters. The synonyms “Mormon” and “LDS” persist by virtue of being so much shorter.

Founded just before the Civil War, the religion was in part a reaction against that era’s commercialization. For their anticapitalistic ideas, Mormons were persecuted, as well as for polygamy, which the church no longer sanctions. Their very American response was to seek a new and separate landscape for themselves. Today LDS is not much different from other fundamentalist Christian groups—literal minded about scriptures (both the Bible and the Book of Mormon); believing in miraculous intervention in daily life; patriotic, bordering on love-it-or-leave; and a major force against feminism and gay marriage. Devout Mormonism is distinguished primarily by a remarkably cohesive welfare system and extremely active overseas missions.

A related misconception is that no one dare venture into Salt Lake City for fear of Mormon proselytizing. Mormon belief runs deep, but despite some odd official church habits like posthumously baptizing people of other faiths, day-to-day Mormons are genuinely considerate of nonbelievers. Sure, when you visit the tabernacle and Temple Square, official greeters descend, but they are easily spotted in their black suits (or calf-length black dresses) and easy to excuse yourself from. The Book of Mormon is unlikely to appear at your hotel bedside: I got the usual Gideon’s plus “Teachings of the Buddha” and a travelers’ yoga guide called “Om Away from Home.”



United States, following “the faith of desert conquest,” with environmental consequences that “sent nature reeling before them.” Controlling water sources also sent the native Shoshone and Ute reeling. They had considered the valley a shared territory and acquiesced to Mormon settlement there. But to irrigate, and to keep out non-Mormon settlers, Young aggressively colonized the stream valleys that were the Indians’ home grounds. The result, as elsewhere, was a shameful destruction of indigenous cultures.

The Great Basin’s sedimentary deposits created major mining interests (visit the huge open pit Bingham Canyon Copper Mine and its neat company town, Copperton), and Salt Lake City was once the world’s most important smelting center. Basin topography also located the Transcontinental Railroad (take the Golden Spike conference tour). Mining and railroads are major non-Mormon players in regional history. So is outdoor recreation, which the lake strongly influences. Its high-saline water moderates outdoor temperatures (yet occasionally hosts icebergs!). Salt Lake supported huge late-1800s bathhouse resorts and is today used for boating, notwithstanding fireball lightning and storm winds that regularly exceed 100 miles per hour. Evaporation

The native trees and boulders at Seven Canyons Fountains, above, represent the Wasatch, and the pavers stand for Salt Lake’s street grid. Inviting public spaces like All-Abilities Playground, below, are at a premium.

from the lake, rising to and freezing above the Wasatch Range, becomes Utah’s world-famous powder snow, supporting the ski industry and the recent Olympics.

Other evidence of natural history is worth looking for around the city. Today’s lake is a mere shadow of prehistoric Lake Bonneville, which covered half of Utah and was a thousand feet deep.

“Benches” (ancient beach levels) form oddly horizontal terraces around the city. The University of Utah’s “U” on the eastern hills is a good marker for finding the bench that marks Bonneville’s highest level. Lake Bonneville emptied in a catastrophic flood that carved the Snake River through Idaho 14,000 years ago. Since then, Great Salt Lake has been so shallow that minor



changes in evaporation or precipitation shrink or expand the shoreline by thousands of acres, a fact that worried early Mormons and led to a 10-year legal battle over land boundaries in the 1960s. This unusual water body is a dramatic reminder of how tenuous human systems of land tenure really are. (One conference tour includes Bonneville Shoreline Trail; and the best place to see today’s lake, plus natural-history displays, is the State Park on Antelope Island.)

GETTING AROUND

With buses and UTA-TRAX light rail, Salt Lake's transit system is better than that of many Western cities, but thanks to Plat of Zion expansiveness and modern sprawl, distances are long. Downtown and Temple Square blocks are oversized; beyond that area, you may want a car, and out-of-town suggestions definitely require one. For *Spiral Jetty* and many parts of Canyonlands, rent a four-wheel drive.

The street grid numbering system is simple but different—a true Cartesian system. Its numbers represent distance from a central meridi-

an at Temple Square. Thus “500 West Street” is the street five blocks west of the temple (running north–south). The “hundred” represents a block, so 500 West may be referred to as 5th Street West. Don't be startled, either, if someone asks “What south is that?” about an address: They mean how far south of Temple Square. The system emphasizes the symbolic centrality of the temple in Mormon life. Just remember to mentally add “of temple” (300 East of temple), and addresses like 267 South 400 West become easy to find.



COURTESY, SALT LAKE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

LAND AND THE SAINTS

Having found their promised land, the Mormons had carefully prescribed duties to reshape it. The Lord, they believed, intended all deserts to “blossom like the rose” (an often-heard misquotation of Isaiah 35:1). But, as Mormons like to say, “the Lord wasn't getting there very fast, going it alone,” and thus, historian John McCormick says, they justified their transformation and ordering of the land.

In believing themselves called to “improve” the wilderness, the Latter-Day Saints are not much different from most European settlers. However, where others had a plan for the land, the Mormons had a full-fledged design. Among his visionary pronouncements, Smith produced “The Plat of the City of Zion,” on which the original layout of Salt Lake City and other Mormon towns was loosely based. Oddly, the plat is an imaginary place ensconced in the National Register of Historic Places; look for its plaque in Brigham

Young Historic Park, by the local landscape architects Grassli Group, below the State Capitol. Across the street is Landmark Design's resurrection, from culverted death, of City Creek.

The plat ordained a grid of square, ten-acre blocks, each containing eight one-and-a-quarter-acre lots. The grid was to be "right with the compass and right with God," another common Mormon saying that echoes the Baptist notion of "four-square gospel." Houses stood in the middle of each lot, set back from the street, which had irrigation canals (some still in place) along both sides. And what streets! For a city of 2,000 people, Smith decreed avenues 132 feet wide with 20-foot sidewalks—grandiosity that persists in the overbuilt feeling of roads throughout much of Utah. In places, road width has been converted to extensively landscaped medians with public art, like the 500 West Parks, a Landmark Design project behind Salt Lake's converted railroad stations. Excess width is also used to give pedestrians a whole lane to themselves or to insert single, disconcertingly wrong-way lanes into wide one-way streets.

Mormons were not encouraged to homestead separately but to create towns. This reflects the fact that LDS, conservative and wealthy though it is today, originally practiced socialist utopianism, collectively owning land and redistributing it in stewardship to individuals. Smith's vision also required single-use land zoning, clustering "artisans and mechanics" outside the town.

Like Mormonism itself, Salt Lake City took well-worn American ideals to new lengths. Salt Lake was the City on a Hill, the Zion of the New World. The crowded, mixed-use cities of old Europe and the East

Coast were sinful: "Zion cannot be gathered in the midst of Babylon," said Young. Thus, geographic isolation drew the Mormons to wild country, but they saw no contradiction in forcefully imposing moral order on the land. One writer compares Salt Lake's street grid to a corset that "keeps the city upright, prim, and attentive to duty."

It would be unfair to characterize the Mormon landscape as entirely rigid or utilitarian. Young exhorted his flock to "make beautiful everything around you, build cities, adorn your habitations, make gardens, and render the earth so pleasant that angels may delight to come and visit." Mormon lands are cheerful with color, well planted with trees (lombardy poplars are locally called "Mormon trees"). Temple Square, where you'll find the famous Mormon Tabernacle (hear the choir Thursday evenings or Sunday mornings) and the temple (closed except to church members), is a horticultural showpiece, glorious with tulips every spring. Another, lesser-known, garden worth visiting is the exuberant, Egyptian-pillared Garden Park Ward at Princeton and 1100 East, incorporating a main irrigation canal.

Two good overviews of Salt Lake's layout are from Ensign Peak and Seven Canyons Fountain. A high point north of town, Ensign Peak was the vantage point from which Young laid out his new Jerusalem. (Grassli Group's two Ensign Peak parks, one contemplative, one nature oriented, reflect Mormon and non-Mormon views.) From the top of the peak (a steep but pleasant climb through sumacs, oaks, and wildflowers), you can clearly see Temple Square and the original grid. By contrast, directly below, behind the state capitol, is a recent neighborhood with winding streets. Farther away,



An aerial view of Temple Square, above, shows the Tabernacle dome to the left, the Convention Center behind, and the controversial closed block of Main Street in the foreground. Below, another view of City Creek Park.



AP PHOTO/STEVE C. WILSON, ABOVE; COURTESY LANDMARK DESIGN, INC., SALT LAKE CITY, BOTTOM



you can make out the railroad in Jordan Valley, where non-Mormon development began its less-orderly growth, and Interstate 15, which disrupts whatever order preceded it, as freeways do.

Seven Canyons Fountain, designed by Stephen Goldsmith (a local artist and the city's former planning director), provides an overview by miniaturization. The seven major canyons of the Wasatch Mountains are represented by large boulders (their geology matched to their respective canyons), water channels, and plantings. A grid of pavers represents the city, and a large pool symbolizes Great Salt Lake. By accident or design, the pool's drain vortex is located exactly to represent Robert Smithson's mysterious and presumptuous *Spiral Jetty*, sited off Promontory Point on the real lake's northern shore.

NONCONFORMIST LANDSCAPES A microcosm of America, Salt Lake City's landscape developed in opposition to prevailing conformity. As part of the much-romanticized land where "going West" meant freedom to set your own rules, Utah has been a haven for many outcasts, self-styled and actual. The Mormons arrived as radicals, ostracized by society, and became their own mainstream, with a distinct counterculture. Labor protesters, 1960s dropouts, environmentalists, and survivalists add to the mix. Many interesting Salt Lake landscapes have nonconformist roots.

Of the public places that developed specifically as "non-M" expressions (not necessarily anti-Mormon, just not LDS controlled), the Salt Lake City & County Building is probably the most accessible. It stands in Washington Square, one of four public squares set aside when the original city was laid out, and marks the southern boundary of the downtown. The southern part of old Salt Lake City was developed by non-Mormons,

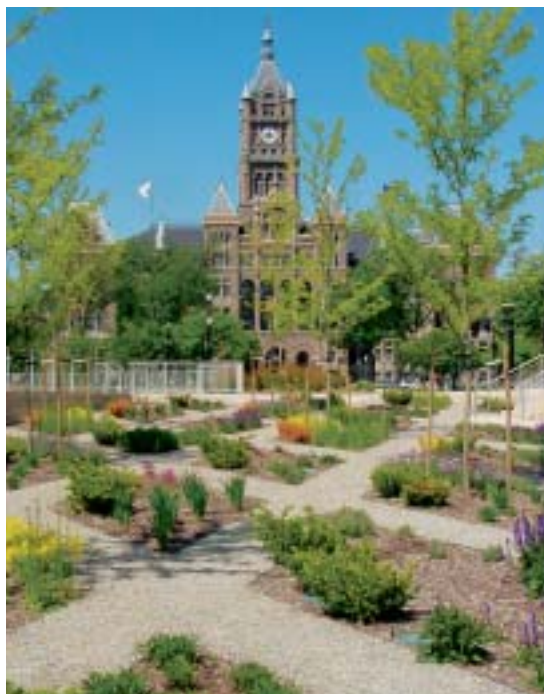
The library roof gardens, above left, provide views of the Wasatch Mountains. The new library and its commons, above right, are dramatic, deliberately disorienting, and—once temperatures rise—desolate. Across the Library Common is the City & County Building, below.

many of them mining magnates from Park City or other rich strikes. (Mormons discouraged mining because its boom-and-bust cycles disrupted social stability; the U.S. Army, sent in 1862 to keep an eye on then-suspect Mormons, encouraged soldiers to prospect, hoping to undermine, literally, Mormon power.)

The City & County Building is designed and sited as a political statement. On axis (along the aptly named State Street) stands the Capitol, where Grassli Group is renovating the grounds to their original Olmstedian style. Temple Square, one block to the west, is notably off axis. Contrasting with the temple's Gothic skywardness, the City & County is massive, rooted, and Romanesque. Where the temple sports a golden angel, the City & County is richly carved with very human figures. In keeping with this focus, Washington Square is the annual site of a Living Traditions festival that celebrates folk and ethnic Utah.

At City & County in 1914, mining tycoons staged the trial of labor organizer and songwriter Joe Hill, framed for murder and executed at the prison in what is now Sugarhouse Park, about 2½ miles southeast. Nonconformist public speech, like Hill's, often leads to contests over public landscapes. Liberty Park, site of Seven Canyons Fountain as well as Landmark Design's stylish All-Abilities Playground, has a long history of soapbox public oratory, but recently police broke up rallies here. Even more controversial is the recent

LDS purchase, from the city, of a block of Main Street that separated Temple Square from church office buildings. Although the resulting Main Street Plaza is open to the public, the church gained private-owner rights to prohibit assembly and protest. The fact that Mormons play religious messages and hand out tracts but



public response is banned has been a divisive issue between LDS and the rest of Salt Lake.

Directly across from the City & County is the new city library. The building, by Moshe Safdie, provides a beautifully transparent interior, in which readers, library stacks, and even gift stores float suspended in views to the mountains. Library attendance has increased immensely since the new facility opened. Many locals, however, find the exterior grim, a box of unrelieved rectangular windows. A remarkable tilted arc, topped with steps, leads from the grounds to the roof, a dramatically nonconformist touch (the topmost tread is engraved, with architectural pomposity, “The End; The Beginning”). Unfortunately, the rooftop plantings are too politely decorative to compete either with the views of the Wasatch or with Salt Lake’s grandest roof garden (on the LDS Conference Center). The grounds, called Library Common, are by Civitas, from Denver. While fitting the hard-edged austerity of the exterior, Civitas’s large courtyard paved in Jerusalem limestone heats up quickly, and by as early as April is already deserted. A knife-edge stone wall is already spalling from winter frosts. Departing this far from regional norms in search of originality often reveals that accepted design approaches are not mere conformity but embody an evolution of what works locally. From both Safdie and Civitas, I would have expected somewhat fuller integration.

Salt Lake City has some wonderful vernacular gardens—nonconformist, do-it-yourself, individualist. The best known is Gilgal Gardens, at 749 East 500 South. Created by LDS bishop and masonry contractor Thomas Child Jr. between 1945 and his death in 1963, this unique sculpture garden is a must-see. Its most-cited feature is a rough-sculpted Egyptian sphinx bearing a realistic face of Joseph Smith. The garden has an angelic guardian whose head is a block of uncut stone, along with a self-portrait of Child, his trousers built of brick. Seemingly random stone objects—grasshopper, broken pitcher, wheel—make more sense if you recognize them as items from the last chapter of Ecclesiastes. Every landscape architect can relate to one Child quote: “If you want to be brought down to earth in your thinking and studying, try to make your thoughts express themselves with your hands.” The garden



Gilgal Gardens is the idiosyncratic meditation-in-masonry of Thomas Child Jr. (self-portrait in brick trousers, above). Below, the Swiss entry in Salt Lake’s International Peace Gardens.



gravestone with its name). The Asian gardens are rather authentic, but just to make sure, in two places, the Chinese entry is labeled “Chinese Garden” in three-inch, nail-on letters. Juxtaposing gardens without boundaries was, presumably, symbolic of a world without borders but gives some startling results. The Danish reproduction of Copenhagen’s Little Mermaid, forlorn in a blue-painted puddle, stares at a minimegalith representing Wales. The Swiss contributed a 40-foot-tall Matterhorn, and the Brits offer a

was private until the Friends of Gilgal Garden, with help from the Trust for Public Land, dedicated it as a city park in October 2000. A good brochure makes the garden intellectually accessible.

Taking time to tour Salt Lake’s neighborhoods reveals other vernacular treats. “Ninth and Ninth” (where 900 East and 900 South intersect) is a well-preserved neighborhood being rejuvenated without too

much gentrification; it includes some marvelously retro commercial buildings, great coffee shops, and independent bookstores. Across town, near the intersection of Navajo and 200 West, a machinist’s garden retools a huge casting as a planter (private, but visible from the sidewalks).

The Jordan River was historically a dividing line between Mormon and non-Mormon neighborhoods. Today, it forms the city-spanning Jordan River State Parkway, great for walking or biking. West of the river, the Plat of Zion grid fades into rectangular lots, then meandering suburbs. This area was (and is) home to many ethnic immigrants and has many nonconformist treasures to discover. Since the ASLA convention coincides with Halloween, check out 800 South at Redwood Road to see if the owner has an All Saints’ Eve display that matches his Easter lawn extravaganza.

Farther south, near 900 West on the Jordan River Parkway, a different kind of vernacular landscape is well worth the trip: the International Peace Gardens. Beginning in 1939, the Salt Lake Council of Women convinced 24 different groups such as Sons of Norway to create gardens representing their homelands. These vary from sophisticated to minimalist to among-the-missing (Brazil is represented simply by what appears to be a

HIGHLIGHTS AND SIDE TRIPS

My personal pick of interesting places in and near Salt Lake City:

1. International Peace Gardens
2. Gilgal Gardens
3. Brigham Young and City Creek Parks, with City Creek Canyon (walking getaway at city's edge)
4. Church Museum of Art and History
5. LDS Conference Center rooftop garden
6. Trolley Square (south neon arch; Rube Goldberg quarter machines inside) Visit www.visit-southernutah.com or www.grand-circle.org.



7. Antelope Island and its visitor center
8. Sam Weller Books, 254 S. Main, 800-333-7269—a good selection of new and used books about Utah
9. Red Butte Gardens

10. This Is The Place State Park In addition to conference tours, here are some suggestions farther afield:
 - ◆ If you've never been, try to see some of the Utah canyons: Zion, Bryce, Kodachrome, Escalante,

Capitol Reef, and others. Zion, besides beauty, offers a case study in landscape-driven sustainability. Cedar City, 240 miles south of Salt Lake City on Interstate 15, is a jumping-off point. Wander U.S. 89 to see the rural Mormon landscape. ◆ Robert Smithson's earthwork, *Spiral Jetty*, is reemerging from the drought-lowered lake. Be sure to get directions from www.nps.gov/gosp/tour/jetty_directions.htm. Stop at Golden Spike and Thiokol Rocket Gardens on the way home. ◆ Mountain resorts: If you like Old West meets New Urbanism run amok, try Park City. Otherwise, visit Sundance (www.sundancersort.com).

metal arch reading “England” over a bust of—who else?—Maggie Thatcher. Bring your sense of amazement and meditate on proof positive that professional landscape architects do serve a useful function. Now a city park, the garden keeps eight-to-four hours that no one seems to observe.

SUSTAINING “THE PLACE” Utah's great national park landscapes reflect the American conservation ethic, although their extensiveness raises the ire of a vocal property-rights faction. Some of the most-visited places in Utah, whether Zion National Park or Robert Redford's Sundance resort, are success stories of sustainability specifically focused on landscape issues.

In Salt Lake City itself, the sustainability story is more mixed. The pioneering *Resource Guide to Sustainable Landscapes* was produced in Salt Lake by Wes Groesbeck and Jan Striefel, FASLA (now ASLA chapter trustee). Yet neither the landscape industry nor the public in Salt Lake seems to push sustainability as vigorously as many other places do.

Some of Salt Lake's artistic landscapes: Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, top, a home garden of recycled machinery, below left, and Thanksgiving Point's children's garden, below right.

Water conservation, increasingly critical with widespread drought, is listed as a specialty by only one of 18 landscape architecture firms in Salt Lake's phone book (Racker & Associates, designers of the formally conventional Delta Center plaza). Only five of nearly 200 landscape contractors tout Xeriscape or other ecological approaches. In recent Utah ASLA chapter newsletters, only a couple of suppliers and one student mention sustainability. Nonetheless, at Utah State in Logan, students of the state's only landscape degree program run sustainablelandscapes.org, whose fifth annual conference this April was the largest student-run symposium in the state. Utah State also operates a Botanical Center, where Utah House demonstrates green building concepts, indoors and out.

Utah Nature Conservancy, which will host one conference tour at its 3,500 acre Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve, sees eight environmental issues as critical for the region. Five are areas where landscape architects can be part of the solution or part of the problem: Habitat loss, invasive species, water concerns, road and off-road issues, and alteration



of natural fire regimes are all increasingly worrisome, here as in most of the West. In every case, conventional development practices share some of the responsibility, and sustainable landscapes could mitigate some of the problems.

Says Striefel, “Sustainability isn’t something we beat the drum about on behalf of the Utah ASLA as a whole.” Individual members belong to water forums and green councils, and chapter president Sharen Hauri, ASLA, is very involved in educational community gardens in the city. A number of solid projects are aimed at resource efficiency. Several are by Striefel’s Landmark Designs, underscoring how individual commitment to an ideal can have slow but widespread influence.

Two of Striefel’s projects publicly demonstrate native plantings in very different settings. The Interstate 215 corridor has nine miles of never-irrigated landscape that, says Striefel, people still point to as an example of what you can do without sprinklers. The same approach replaced a steep, useless lawn in Memory Grove, the city’s place to accumulate war memorials since 1919. The native plantings help unify the one-of-each monuments (the Roman temple, the obelisk with eagle, the Liberty Bell replica, and the true-to-your-school planter-as-memorial).

Landscape architects are in a tough spot where rapid development and sustainability conflict. For example, the gorgeous high-end residential detailing at Stone Gate Communities near Provo designed by Winston Associates from Boulder, Colorado, cannot make up for the fact that this is another gated community gobbling up land that is simultaneously arid by nature and fertile through hard labor. Few landscape architects anywhere can cast stones about this dilemma but need to advocate sus-



The terrace gardens at Red Butte Garden and State Arboretum, above. Below is the green roof of the LDS Convention Center.

tainable options whenever possible.

Red Butte Garden and State Arboretum, a 100-acre botanical garden on the University of Utah campus on Salt Lake City’s east side, offers extensive courses on Utah native plants and waterwise/wildlife/high-altitude landscaping. Red Butte’s terrace gardens, by EDAW’s Herb Schall, out of Fort Collins, Colorado, demonstrates low-volume water features with major impact. The Red Butte

children’s garden (also EDAW) features an amazing giant topiary rattlesnake, which is still growing.

At another children’s garden, part of the major horticultural display called Thanksgiving Point near Lehi (south of Salt Lake City), Grassli

Group took a novel approach to environmental education. A sculptural Noah’s Ark makes an entry fountain, and from it, animal tracks in concrete walkways lead children (and curious designers) to simulated habitat for each creature. Thanksgiving Point is enormous, with mazes, motion-sensitive fountains, a 40-foot waterfall, and endless theme gardens.

NATURE ON HIGH Of Salt Lake’s many landscapes, professional and vernacular, large and small, the one that sums up this unusual city’s strange blend of the visionary and conventional—outdoors oriented but not entirely environmental—is the LDS Convention Center roof garden. The building and landscape combine the symbolism, monumental power, and wealth of the Mormon Church with a serious attempt to be good neighbors and to bring nature (primarily as a spiritual symbol) into the city.

LDS worldwide membership gathers twice a year, bringing thousands to hear the current prophet (LDS head). To accommodate them, the convention center’s auditorium seats 21,000 people un-



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der a single-span roof, supported by a special 621-ton steel truss 152 feet long. (The truss was imported from Belgium, quite unsustainably, along with tons of stone, which was sent from Utah quarries to be sliced in Idaho and then sent back to Utah.) Covering 10 acres, the structure seemed likely to dwarf adjacent Temple Square, block views from residences, and violate city height restrictions.

As the project's main landscape architect, Laurie Olin, FASLA, of Olin Partnership in Philadelphia, struggled with the sheer size of the facility—would it look like a sports arena and diminish the symbolic importance of the tabernacle and temple? Olin says that he told the project architect, Bob Frasca, “You can't think of this as a building”—a funny thing to say to an architect, as Olin admits. Together, they elaborated the idea of a rooftop park.

Unlike most roof gardens, this one had so much structural support (the center meets intense seismic codes) that adding a few tons of soil and water was all part of the engineering. As a result, the center has three to four feet of soil supporting alpine trees, a huge meadow, and a pool of water that cascades dramatically off the edge of the roof, exactly on axis between the tabernacle and the temple.

Olin worked closely with two local landscape architects: Peter Lassig, native species expert, and Kent Brough, ASLA, of the LDS Temple Construction Department. Brough explains that in 1853 Young prophesied such a church building, saying “the time will come when we shall build, on the top, groves and fish ponds.” Believers emphasize that no one told Olin or Frasca of this until after they had fulfilled the prophecy.

Whether you believe in latter-day miracles or not, the construction of this building in just 32 months is impressive, and its roof garden is a unique highlight of the Salt Lake experience. This naturalistic garden, carefully crafted atop a bigger-is-better religious building, where water flows from on high to represent the Holy Spirit, is one of Salt Lake's many wonderfully ambiguous microcosms of the American landscape.

Bring your curiosity and enjoy the place they say is The Place. *LARRY*

A resident of Santa Fe, University of New Mexico professor and consultant Kim Sorvig won the 2002 Bradford Williams Medal for landscape writing.



2003 ASLA AWARD WINNER

The plan, above, and the northeast corner, below, of the LDS Convention Center (the Mormon Temple is at the left of the photo). The ambitious scale and native plantings of the roof garden use nature as a religious symbol.

Resources

- *Believing in Place: A Spiritual Geography of the Great Basin*, by Richard Francaviglia; University of Nevada Press, 2003.
- *The Gathering Place: An Illustrated History of Salt Lake City*, by John S. McCormick; Signature Books, 2000.
- *Geology of the Great Basin*, by Bill Fiero; University of Nevada Press, 1986.
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- *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, by Donald Worster; Oxford Press, 1992.
- *Salt Lake City Underfoot*, by Mark Angus; Signature Books, 1993; this book includes walking and biking tours as well as extensive notes on architecture—but almost none on landscapes; it is out of print but available.



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