



Salt Lake reveals its street smarts ; Mayor and Mormon Church look for common ground to lift downtown; [FIRST Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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When the church brought in national mall developer Taubman Centers and announced plans for a \$1 billion redevelopment, [Rocky Anderson] complained that another tired, enclosed mall design was in the works. He blasted a proposed skywalk connecting shopping on either side of Main Street, fearing it would kill street businesses.

Cities including Cincinnati, Dallas, Des Moines, Charlotte and Hartford, Conn., have explored ways to take down skywalks built in the 1960s and 1970s. [Bishop H. David Burton] says retailers insist on a skywalk, and Anderson concedes, "I'll probably lose on this one."

Full Text (966 words)

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SALT LAKE CITY -- For more than 150 years, the fortunes of this arid Western crossroads have been entwined with the Mormon Church like stripes on a barber pole.

Mormon pioneers settled Utah, built this capital city and shaped its culture with their legendary work ethic and teetotaling moral values.

Now the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, never accused of being hip or trendy, and the city government, led by an activist liberal mayor with a contemporary urban vision, are seeking common ground to revitalize downtown.

Salt Lake City aspires to the kind of downtown renaissance that Portland, Ore., San Diego and Denver achieved in recent years. It wants to hold onto the 25 million tourists who pour in each year for conventions, world-class skiing, tours of Utah's five national parks and visits to the Mormon Church's grand temple and tabernacle.

"It has potential within downtown to be the major shopping, entertainment and cultural district for the whole state," says Michael Beyard of the Urban Land Institute in Washington. "Most cities don't have that opportunity."

Today, tourists venture downtown and find giant relics of the retail past: two fortress-like shopping malls, their mostly windowless facades facing each other across Main Street. The church owns them both and admits they're obsolete.

An urban comeback

Few cities are building these urban dinosaurs anymore. "The retailers want to be on the street now," Beyard says. Redeveloping the enclosed malls and their 1.2 million square feet of retail space, much of it now vacant, is seen as crucial to the city's downtown revival.

For years, Mayor Rocky Anderson has pushed ideas that sparked other urban comebacks: mass transit, pedestrian-friendly streets, housing to attract downtown residents who create a 24-hour city.

"I'm an advocate of an authentic downtown streetscape, where it's an interesting place," Anderson says. "People won't come downtown just to have the same experience they can have in their suburban malls."

Making Salt Lake walkable isn't easy with streets 132 feet wide and 10-acre blocks -- equal to nine blocks in Portland. (Founder Brigham Young wanted streets wide enough to turn around ox-driven wagons.)

So the city created midblock crossings, painted them and armed pedestrians with red flags to wave at motorists. Intersections got countdown timers, pedestrian-activated surface lights and overhead flashing lights. Fines on offending motorists were stiffened. Some four-lane streets were calmed by putting parking down the middle.

The Surface Transportation Policy Project, a national coalition promoting smart transportation choices, found last year that Salt Lake City had improved pedestrian safety more than any other metro area in the USA. This month's Outside magazine, in a list of "new American dream towns," rated Salt Lake City No. 1.

Flanked by the scenic Wasatch Mountains, the city has long had a safe, squeaky-clean image. At a time when convention business struggles elsewhere, it's booming here. Light-rail lines have been an instant hit, and a commuter-rail line from traffic-clogged northern suburbs is underway. No U.S. city its size -- 181,000 -- boasts an airport as big. More office space is occupied downtown than ever before.

Anderson sees momentum. The city banned designs for strip malls whose asphalt parking lots discourage walking. Several downtown housing projects have been built. A 117-unit condo complex nearly sold out before groundbreaking.

But the two malls, Crossroads Plaza and ZCMI Center, remain a key hurdle. Built in the 1970s, both were declining by the 1990s, victims of suburban competition. In 2002, Nordstrom, the malls' premier retailer, announced it was leaving for space at Gateway, a new open-air, village-style mall three blocks from Main Street.

Revitalization had been moving in fits and starts. Hosting the 2002 Winter Olympics raised Salt Lake City's profile. The city had begun to attract new downtown housing. But Nordstrom's plans were a blow. City Council slapped zoning restrictions on Gateway designed to block the store's move, but by then church leaders were alarmed.

"We realized if anyone was going to step forward and prevent the urban decay that was becoming rampant there, it was probably going to be us," says Presiding Bishop H. David Burton, who oversees the church's secular affairs.

When the church brought in national mall developer Taubman Centers and announced plans for a \$1 billion redevelopment, Anderson complained that another tired, enclosed mall design was in the works. He blasted a proposed skywalk connecting shopping on either side of Main Street, fearing it would kill street businesses.

Rethinking space

Cities including Cincinnati, Dallas, Des Moines, Charlotte and Hartford, Conn., have explored ways to take down skywalks built in the 1960s and 1970s. Burton says retailers insist on a skywalk, and Anderson concedes, "I'll probably lose on this one."

But the church got the message, Burton says. "We've listened to the mayor's concerns, and we're addressing some of them," he says.

The church hired urban design consultants and reduced the amount of retail space by a third. Burton says the final design will be "environmentally friendly" and integrated with Main Street. At least 600 new housing units will be built as well as underground parking and more office space.

The church will move its business college and establish a Brigham Young University satellite campus nearby. "I suspect introducing a few thousand students will add more to the vitality of Salt Lake City than about anything we do," he says.

The design isn't final, and the public isn't likely to see it until next year. Anderson, who has seen preliminary plans in recent weeks, has toned down his criticism. "Whatever this is going to be, it's going to be extremely unique and at least initially a huge attraction to our downtown," the mayor says.