

# Reviewing Two Street Blocks in Downtown Salt Lake City: Towards Re-envisioning the Circulation Spaces and Passages

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper offers the perspective that architecture should be considered and seen as public art. Accordingly, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary perspective to the study and practice of art and architecture. Along these lines, the paper will discuss a proposal by Urban Art Lab in the SixtyNine-Seventy Competition, which called for the conceptual “re-envisioning” or re-imagining of two street blocks (69 and 70) in downtown Salt Lake City in Utah. Urban Art Lab’s entry for the competition was an urban cluster within two Salt Lake City blocks that consisted of installations, art interventions and new public spaces.

## THE CITY ACTS LIKE A MUSEUM ITSELF

Architecture is not only about buildings, but it is a wider cultural phenomenon that pertains to ideas as well as to discourse and practice and retains a pervasive presence through every part of our daily lives. Indeed, architectural works are also public art and should be seen and considered as such. Therefore, architects and artists should add something valuable and enriching to the culture with every design gesture or detail that they insert into the architectonic outlay of the city. Of course, this artistic representation through architecture translates and transmutes into many meaningful gestures that an architect makes through building designs.

This artistic communication also leads into cultural discourses that inspire new ideas that affect the configuration of cities and the way we live. This synergy between art and architecture in the emergence of certain popular trends such as performance architecture. Examples of this movement are reflected in Pedro Gadanho’s “Back to the Streets: The Rise of Performance Architecture.” Gadanho’s work represents an intellectual perspective called “tactical urbanism,” a “transient community urban action” that was initiated

by architects and artists working collaboratively to re-engage with and re-imagine the city.<sup>1</sup> It traces back to the performing arts movement of the mid-1960s and 1970s, which is based on the idea that the city could act like a museum itself.

It should also be noted that performance architecture is a subset of tactical urbanism, and they both have a long history that traces back to earlier art movements such as the “situationists,” the “fluxus” and the “happenings.” Today, these earlier historical progenitors are reflected in the works of younger contemporaries such as: the Argentinean architect and artist, Tomás Saraceno (*In Orbit*, 2013); the Danish-Icelandic artist, Olafur Eliasson (*The Weather Project*, 2003); and the architects of Raumlabor Berlin (*Kitchen Monument*, 2006 and *City Mattress*, 2008).

Tactical urbanism is a transient and interdisciplinary laboratory for creating new urban experiences, and it is deployed to initiate or encourage the development of aesthetic and sustainable built environments. This urban movement promotes various temporary, low-cost interventions that are targeted at improving urban design. Such urban interventions include art installations, performances, happenings, etc., and they are intended to help promote and effectuate positive changes in urban neighborhoods and communities.

Tactical urbanism is focused on improving the livability of cities, and this functionally starts at the level of the street, the block or the building. These small-scale experimental improvements to the built environment are increasingly seen as ways to stage interventions and investments that are more substantial and permanent. These catalytic actions are often called various names, including guerrilla urbanism, pop-up urbanism, city repair or even do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism.

#### SIXTYNINE-SEVENTY, THE SPACES BETWEEN: AN URBAN IDEAS COMPETITION TO RE-ENVISION CIRCULATION SPACES AND PASSAGES OF TWO BLOCKS IN SALT LAKE CITY

This urban ideas competition was a 2013 design competition that invited design teams from around the world to re-envision the circulation spaces and passages of two blocks (69 and 70) in downtown Salt Lake City. As the SLC Downtown Plan notes: “*The competition aimed to address the downtown as a major destination for culture, civic, and commercial activities, and as a*

*growing residential neighborhood, seeking to develop the synergies across both noted in the Salt Lake City Downtown Plan.*”<sup>2</sup> The competition was organized by the AIA Utah Young Architects Forum and the Downtown Alliance in collaboration with Utah Heritage Foundation. Ultimately, the competition attracted the participation of 200 architects and designers who came from 48 countries across the globe.

The products or outcome of the urban ideas competition were not intended to be realized or translated into built projects because the project sites were mostly privately owned. However, there were two project sites of large land holdings that were public—one owned by the Redevelopment Agency of Salt Lake City and the other owned by Salt Lake County. Although initially there was no guarantee that the competition proposals would be realized or actualized, the Planning Department of Salt Lake City later seemed to show interest in utilizing the outcome or products of the competition and in incorporating potential ideas into the new downtown masterplan. Eventually, the SLC Redevelopment Agency used some of the ideas to create the new downtown masterplan.

#### COMPETITION SITE: SALT LAKE CITY DOWNTOWN

Salt Lake City is the capital city of the state of Utah; it is also the county seat and the largest city in the region and had an estimated population of 200,500 in 2017.<sup>3</sup> The downtown area is comprised of 10 smaller districts, each with its own character and identity. Blocks 69 and 70 are parts of the Central Business District, which serves as an important economic and cultural hub for the city and the greater Wasatch Front metropolitan region. A large portion of the competition area and its surroundings are part of a significant national cultural historic area. The competition information package states that “*Salt Lake City boasts a stunning natural setting, cultural amenities, a vibrant retail core, and a thriving and extensive business community. However, it lacks connection between these elements.*”<sup>4</sup>

The organizers of the competition were looking for proposals designed to increase the livability of this district from a former destination to a neighborhood. The Redevelopment Agency of Salt Lake was hopeful that the outcome of the competition proposals would help to support the new Downtown Plan (May 2016), which was a long-term growth and development plan. The Agency sought to implement this Plan “by

*encouraging private sector investment and job creation, upgrading various transportation modes, assisting the cultural core, creating a green loop, improving high-density residential development in various forms and directing proper investment of public funds.”<sup>5</sup>*

The competition was a way of collating ideas that would help the agency to implement a development plan. As described in the competition brochure: *“The vision of the competition was to harness fresh and provocative design ideas and to activate the spaces between the disparate arts, entertainment, and business groups on blocks 69/70, amplifying Salt Lake City’s cultural amenities and acting as a catalyst for design-led growth.”* Furthermore, the brochure notes that: *“The competition in its entirety was about interstitial space. It was not about the design of new buildings, but about the relationships between them and other aforementioned elements.”<sup>6</sup>*

Salt Lake City’s Central Business District is defined by main-street shopping, the tallest buildings in the city, and arts and cultural institutions. The area also has a strong financial and retail district as well as a rich stock of historic buildings. As noted in the competition brochure, Blocks 69/70 are also in “the center of Salt Lake City’s cultural center, which is the designated hub of over 100 major cultural and arts organizations.”<sup>7</sup> This cultural center acts as a central location for various urban activities including performance art, visual art and cinema, as well as shopping, dining and religious venues.

## HISTORY OF BLOCKS 69 AND 70 AND CURRENT LAND USE

Blocks 69/70 stand at the heart of the city and straddle Main Street. These two blocks have a history that dates back to the first pioneer settlers, and they have been utilized for variety of urban purposes. The two blocks may be best known as the home or the first location of the Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Association department store. They also house several theaters, including the Utah and Capitol Theatres, as well as prominent banking institutions and publishing outfits like the Arrow Press and Salt Lake Tribune.

As the commercial district of downtown Salt Lake City grew through the mid- and late-1800s, some blocks were divided into two with new streets or walkways opened up to create the Downtown Mid-Block Walkway

network. The current land use in the designated area is a mix of institutional, office, retail and recreational uses. However, more than a third of all developable land in all downtown districts remains vacant or underutilized.

The two blocks have 12 vacant buildings and six parking garages in addition to many undeveloped parking lots. The primary use of land in the downtown area serves a diversified range of urban purposes. The largest institutional landholders are LDS Church and Salt Lake City in addition to the state and federal governments. Besides these institutional land uses, the downtown area also serves industrial and parking purposes. Of course, as a Salt Lake City publication notes, while functional, these industrial and parking facilities are not very conducive to a pleasant pedestrian experience.<sup>8</sup>

## URBAN ART LAB’S COMPETITION PROPOSAL FOR BLOCKS SIXTY-NINE AND SEVENTY

Urban Art Lab was founded in 2013 by a collaborative group of architects and artists that included Charlott Greub, Jeremy Bringard, Bradison Brinton and Joerg Ruegemer. It was based in Salt Lake City and formed a creative platform for partaking in the SixtyNine-Seveny competition. Urban Art Lab submitted a competition entry that was designed in the form of an urban cluster celebrating the arts, sciences and technology. Anchored on the ideas and principles of tactical urbanism, Urban Art Lab sought to create connections between new public spaces within Blocks 69 and 70 and beyond.

Based on the thesis that Downtown Salt Lake City is a destination and not a neighborhood, Urban Art Lab’s proposal focused on the redesign of the “junk spaces” within the two-block competition area through pop-up planning, with a strong emphasis on community engagement projects. We emphasized the implementation of artistic interventions that contribute to place-making, promotion and programming connectivity within the cultural core of Salt Lake City. In addition, we sought to bring life and a renewed energy to the public realm through additional elements, such as street furniture and signage as well as planting, lighting and enriching the primary routes or major connective corridors with trees.

These artistic and architectural endeavors were consistent with the aspirations of the SLC Downtown Plan. We sought to actualize the city’s aesthetic for a

public realm, which the Downtown Plan rightly and succinctly understood as: “...the roadways, sidewalks, parks, plazas and other open spaces that comprise the arteries and focal points of the downtown. It is the main space where civic interaction occurs and is often defined in contrast to private property. A successful public realm promotes a dynamic social and civic experience and is the result of the interplay between the built form of a city, the engineering and design of infrastructure systems, and functional programming of space.”<sup>9</sup>

The public realm is a vital aspect of the built environment, so it is desirable to create a regulatory framework that allows pop-up planning in a spontaneous way without having to control every single detail through ordinances. It was clear that connectivity or walkability was one of the most important factors that had to be improved in Salt Lake City’s downtown area. So, Urban Art Lab proposed physical connections through Blocks 69 and 70 that offered multiple routing options to a diverse range of activities, services and places, while at the same time encouraging physical activity. The desired trend was to see more people walking, biking or using transit.<sup>10</sup> Walkability builds community, building equal access to all people, cultures and activity. Urban Art Lab suggested publicly-driven interventions including guerrilla installations, art containers, events, installations and activities.

These public interventions were to take over abandoned and underutilized spaces in Blocks 69 and 70 with a view to transforming them into usable public spaces that would help to create an engaging and walkable downtown. Interventions such as spatial occupancies might be expected to have a temporary character, whereas others provide a more permanent urban enrichment and offer a refreshing and democratic contrast to the consumption-driven City Creek Center Shopping Mall project to the north. The proposal also included several elements that overlapped the physical and digital space. Through these elements, new platforms of urban expression were expected to emerge and offer a *mélange* of cultural, communal and educational activities that would be expected to slowly take over the new public center of Salt Lake City.

## PROPOSED DESIGN ACTIONS AND LOCATIONS (FIGURES 1 AND 2)

### **Block 69: Urban Living Room + Urban Market + Zion’s Beer Garden in a Park Covered by a Parasol Roof**

**Urban Living Room (Figure 3).** Proposed locations and activities in Block 69 are a new pocket park, called the Urban Living Room that functions as the city’s lung and that provides flexible, urban recreation space in the center of the downtown area. A farmers market and beer garden are included as part of this new urban park. To support a better microclimate in Block 69, the Urban Living Room is covered by a natural roof of trees in addition to a supplemental man-made roof structure, or the Parasol Roof. This roof provides shade during the hot summer months and is capped with

**6970 Urban Art Lab Proposal**  
**Awarded Urban Design Competition: *The Spaces Between: SLC***

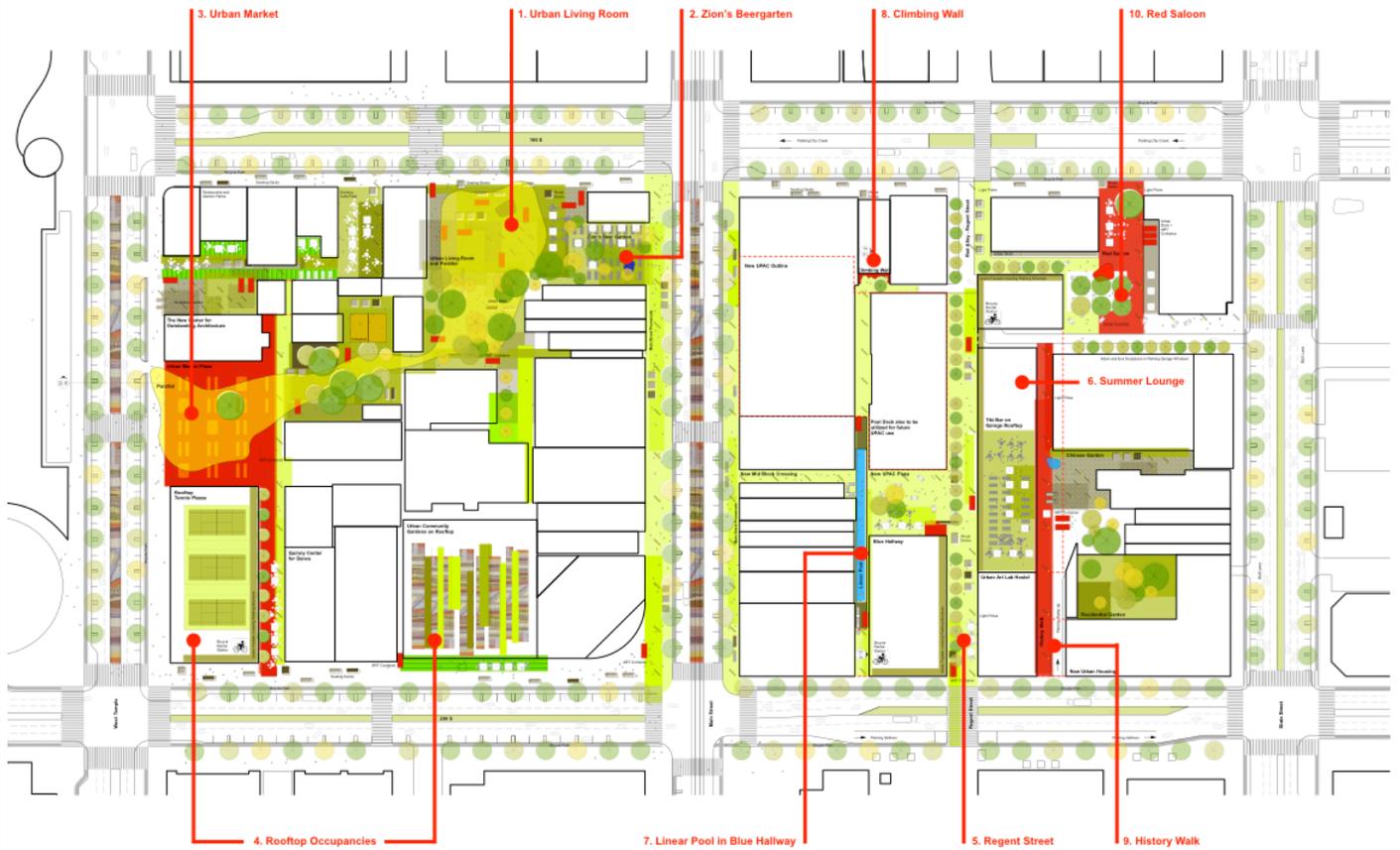


*August 22, 2013 – Urban Art Lab*

**Figure 1**

# 6970 Urban Art Lab Proposal

City Creek Development



Gallivan Center

August 22, 2013 – Urban Art Lab

Figure 2

# RE - CONCEIVE !



Figure 3

an array of photovoltaic cells to generate energy that is used directly by the container installations and the farmers market.

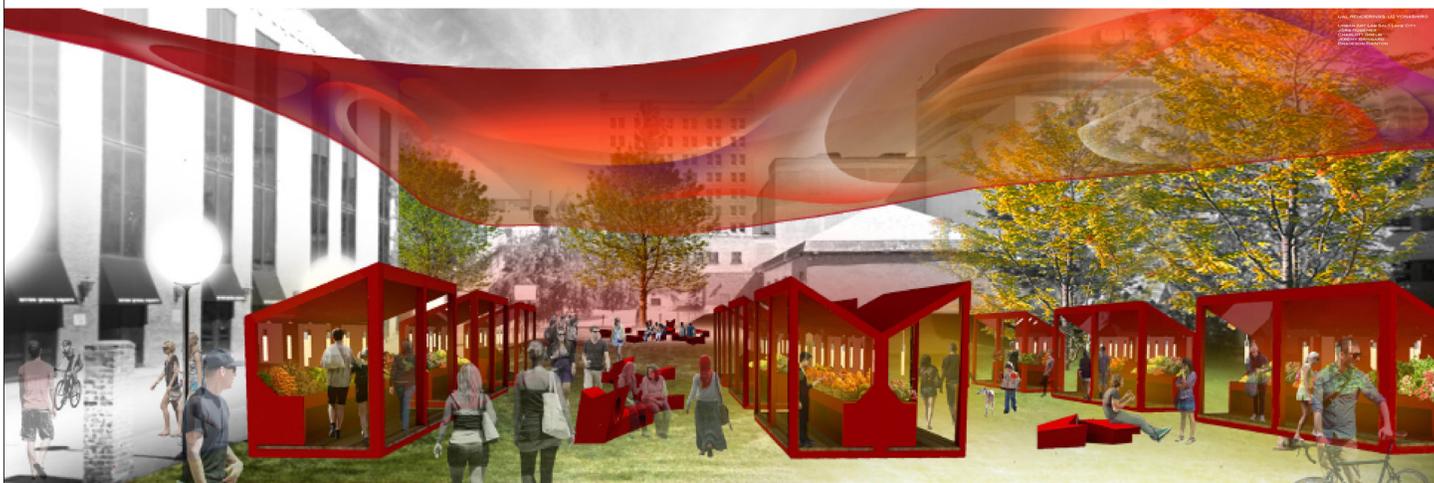
Using a permeable pavement in the form of a greenfield throughout the entire park area contributes positively to a healthier urban microclimate.<sup>11</sup> The performative and artistic flexibility of the proposed park offers an important anchoring function for an expanding repertoire of future interventions or activities. Such interventions would include: publicly-driven guerrilla installations; art containers; multi-media projection; multifunctional street furniture; living walls; urban farming; farmers market; roof-top sports facilities; and community gardens. To be sure, these artistic interventions would help to create a new center that would enhance and enrich Salt Lake City's future social and urban development.

**Urban Market (Figure 4).** The Urban Market becomes downtown's new daily farmers market. This function provides necessary support for downtown dwellers and offers a welcome supplement to the new grocery store that stands just one block away.

**Zion's Beer Garden (Figure 5).** A beer garden at the corner of Main Street and 100 South follows the model of a traditional Munich, Germany open-air tavern, providing a social and interactive space where one's own food can be brought in, to be supplemented by drinks purchased at the beer garden. A small playground takes care of the children, and the adjacency to the city's Urban Living Room provides participation in events that are offered there.

**Urban rooftop occupancy.** As part of the more permanent interventions, the authors propose a variety of urban rooftop interventions. The underutilized

# RE - INSTATE!



THE URBAN MARKET ON WEST TEMPLE - AN URBAN ART LAB PROPOSAL

 [WWW.URBANARTLAB.ORG](http://WWW.URBANARTLAB.ORG) JÖRG RÜGEMER, CHARLOTT GREUB FUNDED BY THE UTAH DIVISION OF ARTS AND MUSEUMS  A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE BY URBAN ART LAB

Figure 4

# RE - ESTABLISH!



ZION'S BEER GARDEN ON MAIN STREET AND 100 SOUTH - AN URBAN ART LAB PROPOSAL

 [WWW.URBANARTLAB.ORG](http://WWW.URBANARTLAB.ORG) JÖRG RÜGEMER, CHARLOTT GREUB FUNDED BY THE UTAH DIVISION OF ARTS AND MUSEUMS  A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE BY URBAN ART LAB

Figure 5

rooftop of the parking garage in Block 70 transforms to regionally popular summer bars; other roofs in Block 69 turn into community gardens, a tennis court and an observation deck. These functions not only add to the attractiveness of downtown Salt Lake City, they also help to minimize the heat island effect during the hot summer months.

### **Recurring Design Action in Blocks 69/70**

**Art and events containers.** A flexible artscape of recognizable red shipping containers are distributed throughout Blocks 69 and 70, creating a sub-culture as well as professional projects, exhibitions and exceptional art events. These containers provide endless opportunities and venues for various entities and service providers to express their work or projects and to showcase their service offerings. Such entities would include local artists, universities, companies, schools, the city government and individuals.

**Multifunctional urban modular street furniture (UMSF).** UMSF are provided throughout the entire competition site to initiate outdoor activities, recreation, social equity and social interaction. These are multifunctional flexible elements made of coated EPS for outdoor use in designated public spaces within and beyond Blocks 69 and 70. These modules can be arranged and rearranged as decorative blocks for a variety of social needs that include sitting, playing and sleeping or reading. The special geometry and low weight allow for endless possibilities and formations. UMSF can be arranged as furniture—for example, a bar or stage—and can be transformed into a comfortable interior room by simple means of scaffolding.

**Smartphone as an interactive public interface.** Today's accessible, popular smartphone technology allows for a setup of a variety of interactive events and participatory projects. A special filter allows the public to display individual images on media screens that illuminate the buildings' underused firewalls. A Salt Lake City app is being used by urban dwellers and visitors to navigate the newest events, exhibitions and more by receiving updates and background information on these activities. Another app named Commons' is created to encourage Salt Lakers to "compete to do good" and by doing so helping to improve the city. Salt Lakers are challenged to identify problems in urban spaces and suggest ways to improve them. The users of this app can also vote for each other's ideas to identify the most popular proposals.

**Green Loop: Grey goes green.** The Green Loop is a linear park network that integrates social spaces with green infrastructure, utilizing parts of downtown Salt Lake City's wide public streets. Festival streets or Grand boulevard streetscapes will have a renewed role as places for both people and vehicles. The Green Loop introduces new urban landscapes like living walls in reference to Patrick Blanc, a French botanist known as the founding father of the vertical garden. His green walls are transformative art pieces and create shades of green on what was hitherto merely dull concrete.

**Bicycle stations.** Strategically positioned bicycle rental hubs provide for necessary, instant and sustainable individual transportation. These stations

# RE – MEDIATE !



THE RED SALOON ON 100 SOUTH AND STATE STREET - AN URBAN ART LAB PROPOSAL



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A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE BY URBAN ART LAB

Figure 6

are also equipped with pumps and tools to allow for quick fixes of both private and rental bikes. These stations become part of a larger bicycle rental program within Salt Lake City.

**Block 70: Regent Street and the Red Saloon, Blue Hallway and History Walk (Figure 6).** The Midway Block Alley Regent Street and the Red Saloon on Block 70 will become the new physical manifestation for the Arts, Architecture and Design. A new art district with exhibition spaces that support “Storefront Studios” would be offered to artists, designers and small firms of the creative industries. These spaces would be affordable and centrally located to enable occupants to create, produce and communicate. Simultaneously, there would be some necessary support spaces (such as small coffee places, restaurants, bars and art galleries) to make the area a successful business incubator for small startup firms in the fields of Art, Design and Architecture.

**Summer lounge and rooftop occupancies.** These are seasonal urban recreation or sports facilities (that may come with sport bars) that may be located on rooftop locations.

**Linear public pool and climbing wall in the Blue Hallway (Figures 7 and 8).** A proposed section of Block 70, called the Blue Hallway, holds a public pool and climbing wall that offer social interaction, relaxation and stress relief in the heart of downtown. No other public sports facilities currently exist in this district. The adjacent wooden decks of the pool provide opportunities for aerobics and low-impact exercises. These decks also function as exterior space and are directly adjacent to the Utah Performing Arts Center (UPAC). During the winter, the pool is

# RE - CLAIM!



*THE LINEAR POOL* BETWEEN REGENT AND MAIN STREET - AN URBAN ART LAB PROPOSAL



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A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE BY URBAN ART LAB

Figure 7

# RE - ENVISION!



*THE CLIMBING WALL IN THE BLUE HALLWAY* - AN URBAN ART LAB PROPOSAL



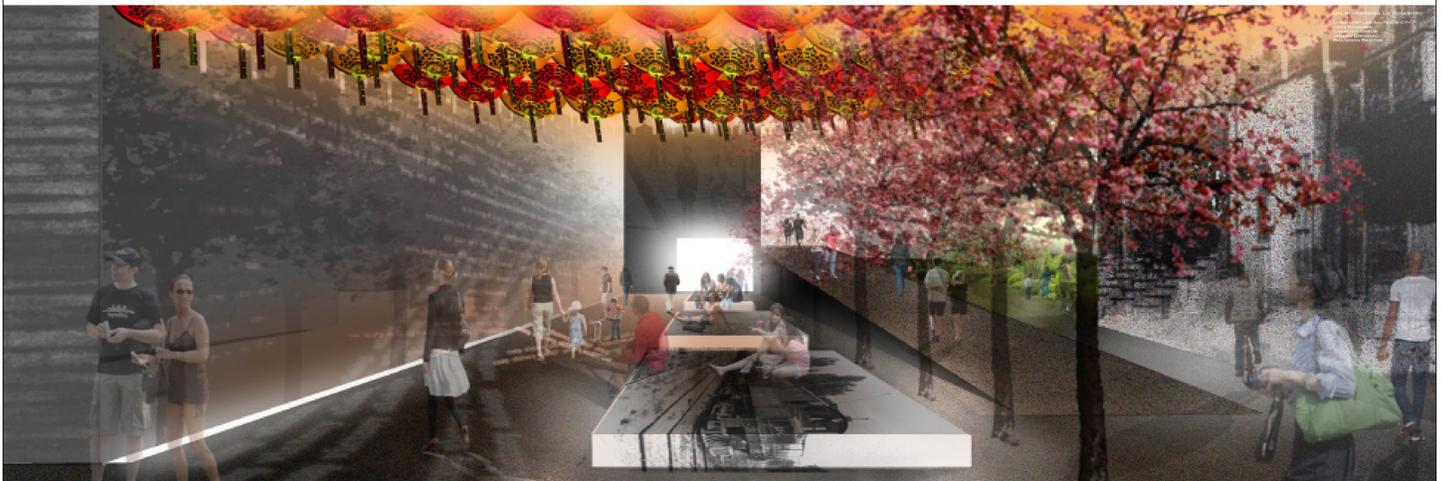
WWW.URBANARTLAB.ORG JÖRG RÜGEMER, CHARLOTT GREUB FUNDED BY THE UTAH DIVISION OF ARTS AND MUSEUMS



A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE BY URBAN ART LAB

Figure 8

# RE - PAIR!



HISTORY WALK ON PLUM ALLEY STREET - AN URBAN ART LAB PROPOSAL



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A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE BY URBAN ART LAB

Figure 9

transformed into a linear ice rink, spanning the new urban plaza between the Blue Hallway and Regent Street. The climbing wall is located at the end of the Blue Hallway and is visible from the decks of the pool. In the United States, sport climbing is the most rapidly growing type of climbing and involves high-intensity, difficult climbing on relatively short routes<sup>12</sup>. The Blue Hallway is accompanied by interactive media projections that could be adjusted for the flexible use of the overall space.

**History Walk (Figure 9).** The History Walk is a reclamation of the former Chinatown district. Its purpose is to incentivize preservation and reuse of character-contribution buildings that will help to establish a history-conscious trail that would narrate the story of the city while physically linking historical and cultural landmarks throughout the downtown. The proposal for Plum Alley, currently used as a parking lot, was to become an area occupied by an Asian Market in concert with a Chinese restaurant and cultural institutions. The History Walk lets visitors and urban dwellers experience the chronicle of the place, while simultaneously offering the visitors places to rest and relax, such as a small Chinese Garden.

**Multi-media art projection.** It was proposed that digital projections on underused firewalls be utilized to illuminate streets and alleys and to transform the downtown landscape into an inviting and stimulating atmosphere for people to gather and enjoy the city. This will help to support and encourage science, technology and culture, especially among the young and under-privileged. The projections would create an accessible, affordable and educational public art experience. For example: prominent artists like Louie Psihoyos and Travis Threlkel could be invited to project digital images of endangered species onto downtown high-rise buildings. Such

artistic events would be intended to draw attention to the plight of such endangered species while helping to launch activities like March for Species Racing Extinction. Through pairing with smartphone interfaces, these events would provide a forum for the public and emerging multi-media artists to experiment and interact. These artistic events would help to generate a dialogue about emerging art forms within and beyond the community while simultaneously serving to challenge, re-imagine and enrich the life of the city.

## CONCLUSION

Three years after the competition in 2016, some of the ideas offered in the proposal of the Urban Art Lab became an important element in the new SLC Downtown Plan. On a professional note, it was most gratifying that out of the five key moves that were embraced in the SLC Development, three of the key moves were extracted from the ideas proposed by the Urban Art Lab. The three key moves that were inspired by and extracted from ideas from the Urban Art Lab are outlined below.

The first incorporated key move pertains to the idea of strengthening the cultural core through art interventions, etc. The May 2016 Downtown Plan seeks to give support to: “*existing cultural venues and organizations ... [and to] explore opportunities to develop the spaces in-between such as parking lots, mid-block walkways and vacant properties between established activity centers throughout the cultural core.*” Furthermore, the Plan encourages “infill development” and seeks a modification of the “*zoning regulations to remove barriers so that development that helps implement the Downtown Plan is easier to realize.*”<sup>13</sup>

Additional examples of in-between or infill development art interventions would include promoting pop-up planning, street furniture, plantings and public art in addition to other elements such as arts events and art containers. This key move is intended to support the city’s cultural landscape by re-imagining cultural venues through art interventions that strengthen Salt Lake City’s cultural assets and bringing life and richness to the public realm.

The second incorporated key move pertains to the idea of creating a recreational and ecological environment in the form of a linear park or Green Loop. The May

2016 Downtown Plan seeks to give support to the development of a “*new linear park system that provides space for recreation and ecological services.*”<sup>14</sup>

Consistent with the ideas proposed by Urban Art Lab, the Downtown Plan seeks to: “*develop a tree planting program for the downtown that has urban qualities ... maintain an expanded urban forest in the downtown area ... [and to provide a] significant tree canopy that can effectively shade the public realm and reduce urban heat island effect.*” Furthermore, the Plan seeks to “*incentivize use of vegetation to minimize building cooling requirements, reduce urban heat island effects, manage storm water runoff, and promote air quality awareness and education.*”<sup>15</sup>

The third incorporated key move pertains to the idea of “*Sports Expansion and Retention,*” which seeks to promote the expansion of sports recreational facilities in outdoor areas or on rooftops. The Development Plan notes that: “*sports and entertainment are an important component of the 24-hour city*” and that a proposed section of Block 70 would accommodate a public pool and climbing wall in the downtown area.<sup>16</sup>

This paper has presented the perspective that architecture should be considered and seen as public art. It adopts an interdisciplinary perspective to the study and practice of art and architecture. A proposal by Urban Art Lab in the SixtyNine-Seventy Competition was discussed. The proposal called for the conceptual “re-envisioning” or re-imagining of two street blocks (69 and 70) in downtown Salt Lake City in Utah. Urban Art Lab proposed ideas for an urban cluster within two Salt Lake City blocks that consisted of installations, art interventions and new public spaces.

Indeed, the elements of connectivity and walkability were the most important variables that were in need of creative and artistic improvements in the Salt Lake City downtown area. Urban Art Lab proposed physical connections through Blocks 69 and 70 that offered multiple routing options to encourage physical movements and pedestrian mobility for a diverse range of activities, resources, services and places. Urban Art Lab sought to deploy artistic interventions with Blocks 69 and 70 in creative ways that would have more people walking, biking or using transit. Walkability builds community while giving equal access to all people, cultures and activity.

## ENDNOTES

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