

Form-Based Code | A LIVABILITY FACT SHEET

Smart zoning and land use codes are the foundation upon which great communities are built.

The use of zoning regulations began in the early 20th century in response to urban overcrowding and the intrusion of heavy industry into residential and retail areas. Communities chose to address the problem by separating incompatible uses and limiting residential density.¹ Those efforts shaped the form of the built environment in unintended and occasionally unwanted ways.

For instance, because traditional zoning rules often promote low-density development and limited “one-size-fits-all” housing choices, the policies encourage excessive land consumption and automobile dependency.² Such zoning can stand in the way of communities seeking to create vibrant, walkable neighborhoods that give residents the option of walking to a store, park or work.

Some zoning ordinances can even interfere with a person working from home or operating a home-based business.³

By using the physical form rather than the separation of uses as an organizing principle, form-based code offers a powerful alternative to conventional zoning. With form-based code what matters are the relationships between buildings and the street, pedestrians and vehicles, public and private spaces and the size and types of roads and blocks.⁴ Instead of dictating or limiting activities, the code focuses on such elements as parking locations and limits, building frontages and entrances, window standards, streetscaping and building elevations.

Form-based code can be customized to fit a community’s vision, be it to preserve and enhance a neighborhood’s character or dramatically change and improve it. Form-based codes can do both.⁵

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In the Village of Oak Park, Ill., form-based code helped rescue and repurpose older buildings while inspiring new mixed-use construction. The improvements draw investors and residents to the community’s downtown.

Myth-Busting!

■ “Form-based code is too restrictive and disregards the market.”

Both form-based codes and conventional or traditional zoning codes establish controls on development. While form-based codes emphasize standards that shape the neighborhood or community and offer a great deal of flexibility, conventional codes contain vague standards that often fail to benefit the larger public good.

Form-based codes have precise standards and a streamlined and predictable process. This clarity and predictability open development potential within communities by bringing together planning, design, economic development, engineering and public safety professionals. By joining these stakeholders and others, and doing so early in the process, it becomes possible to get input from multiple points of view, assess costs and better understand how public and private partners can implement the vision.⁶

■ “Hybrid or rezoning is better.”

It's not, if design is simply added into conventional zoning. In such a case the focus will likely remain limited to controlling an area's density and uses. However, communities can experience the best of both worlds by using a hybrid system that adopts form-based code for small areas, such as in distinct neighborhoods or corridors, and carefully integrates the use of such form-based code area into the citywide zoning platform.⁷

■ “Developers will resist form-based code.”

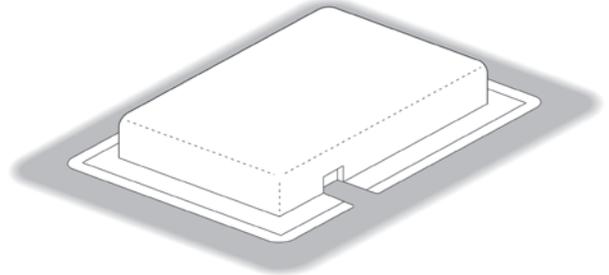
Developer resistance has been a problem in many communities, especially in smaller towns where developers accustomed to building the same product year after year have had trouble adjusting to new codes. However, many developers welcome form-based code because it enables them to build a higher quality, more aesthetic product.

Codes adopted as the result of a proactive public process are far more successful than those produced without engaging the public in defining the community's vision. When code was applied with little public input, developer pushback has been the strongest.⁸

HOW IT WORKS

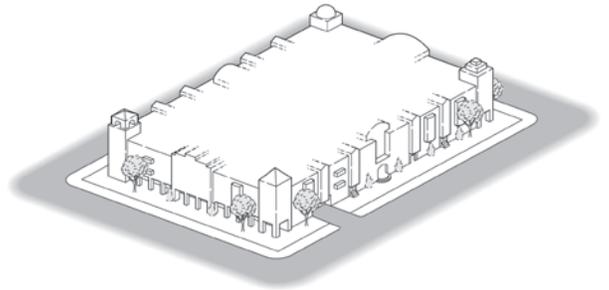
How zoning defines a one-block parcel

Density, use, FAR (floor-area-ratio), setbacks, parking requirements and maximum building height(s) specified.



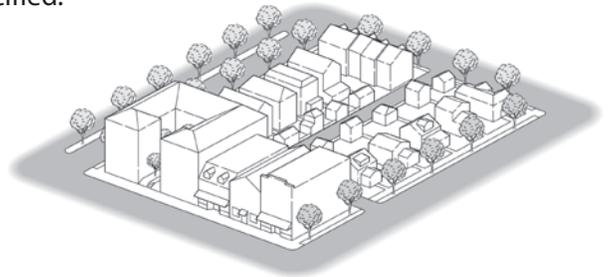
How design guidelines define a one-block parcel

Density, use, FAR (floor-area-ratio), setbacks, parking requirements, maximum building height(s), frequency of openings and surface articulation specified.



How form-based codes define a one-block parcel

Streets and building types (or mix of types), build-to lines, number of floors and percentage of built site frontage specified.



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1. Michigan Association of Planning . (January 2007) “Form-Based Codes.” *Smart Growth Tactics*. Issue No. 28. http://www.mml.org/pdf/map_article_issue28.pdf
2. Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. (2013) *Form-Based Codes: A Step-by-Step Guide for Communities*. http://formbasedcodes.org/files/CMAP_FBCI_GuideforCommunities.pdf
3. EPA, “Examples of Codes That Support Smart Growth Development.” Retrieved March 21, 2014, <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/codeexamples.htm>
4. Form-Based Codes Institute. Retrieved March 17, 2014, <http://www.formbasedcodes.org/what-are-form-based-codes>
5. Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. (2013) *Form-Based Codes: A Step-by-Step Guide for Communities*
6. Rangwala, K. (April-May 2013) “Assessing Criticisms of Form-Based Codes.” *Better! Cities & Towns*. <http://bettercities.net/article/assessing-criticisms-form-based-codes-19967>
7. Ibid
8. *New Urban News* (April 2010) “Survey: Combine New Code with Activities and investment.” http://www.formbasedcodes.org/files/Survey_Combinewithinvestment.pdf

How To Get It Right

A BEFORE AND AFTER PHOTO VISION OF CHINCOTEAGUE ISLAND, VIRGINIA



BEFORE: Buildings set back from the street, inadequate walking and bicycling safety, poorly-defined parking and minimal appeal.



AFTER: Buildings close to the street, good walking and bicycling safety, well-defined parking and very strong destination appeal.

■ Embrace a public process and build support

Develop an education and awareness campaign prior to implementation, and reach out to developers, community members, elected officials and municipal staff. Government leaders may need to see public support before acting. Developers may need to see political support and funding first.

To build support community advocates can share this fact sheet and meet with decision makers, news outlets, experts and others to discuss the benefits of form-based codes. To build public acceptance and understanding, agency staff should host community-wide or neighborhood visioning or design workshops and provide regular updates.

■ Provide municipal funding first

Developers may want to wait for someone else to test the first project with the new code. According to a survey of 35 communities, cities that invested their own funds found that developers followed, but those that put the responsibility solely on developers didn't do as well. A community has to show support politically and financially. Those that do typically get a good return.

■ Make the code mandatory

Mandatory codes provide more predictability to the urban form and help direct development to the code area. If a community has done the right amount of due diligence, held public brainstorming and design sessions and worked toward public buy-in of a common vision, the legal issues should be minimized and the public will already know what to expect.

■ Demonstrate existing successes

Help educate developers to get them comfortable with the new code and goals. Provide existing examples of similar, successful designs.

■ Replace the existing zoning code

The form-based code should replace the existing conventional zoning code for all or part of the community, and all development within the area should abide by the form-based code. This approach generally offers the widest range of opportunities for transforming a targeted area of a community while maintaining established character in others. It also offers the advantage of consistency in regulatory vocabulary and procedures throughout the code.

■ Tailor the code to the place or neighborhood

Personalize the code to its specific geography, politics and culture in order to be successful. Take the time to identify each neighborhood's character and vision. Periodically review and update the code.

■ Include regulatory plans and standards

A regulating plan is a master plan or zoning map in which different building forms, public streets and spaces are defined based on clear community intentions about the physical character of a designated area, such as a neighborhood or community. Building form standards define the configuration, design features and functions of buildings that frame the public realm.

Success Stories

■ Redwood City, California: Downtown Precise Plan

Since a new form-based code was adopted in January 2011, there's been more downtown housing development than in the previous five decades combined. All of the development in the two years following the code's enactment was privately constructed. Between 1980 and 2010 most development required assistance from the city's redevelopment agency.

Under the updated Downtown Precise Plan, 421 residential units were under construction by August 2013, 280 more units were approved and 471 more were under review — for a total of 1,172 downtown units. In addition, 300,000 square feet of office space was under way. All projects received planning approvals in six months or less without opposition.

Downtown Redwood City is now more active than it has been in decades, retail vacancies have fallen and an eclectic dining and pub scene has materialized.



As part of the "Downtown Precise Plan" in Redwood City, Calif., El Camino Boulevard is being transformed from commercial to mixed-use zoning.

■ Cincinnati, Ohio: Citywide Code

In 2010 Cincinnati's vice mayor, Roxanne Qualls, introduced a motion to adopt zoning in support of mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development around transit stations.

A report released after a five-day urban design workshop (which was attended by more than 700 public participants) explained why Cincinnati needed the change: "The city has lost 40 percent of its population since 1950, leaving suburban densities in the city's formerly urban neighborhoods. Many residential buildings and lots sit vacant."

The effort grew into citywide form-based code, adopted in May 2013 and achieved with the help of a \$2.4 million federal grant. The plan calls for every Cincinnati neighborhood to be mapped and have regulating plans approved. The code has been applied to business districts and key vacant parcels. The city hopes the new form-based code will spur redevelopment of neighborhoods that have been in decline or stagnating for a long time.

■ Nashville, Tennessee: Community Character

Nashville replaced its conventional zoning with a "Community Character" approach to policy that is based on the look and feel of neighborhoods, centers, corridors and open spaces. The change has resulted in a 75 percent increase in taxable value in the districts where the approach is used, compared to a 28 percent increase in the county over the same time period.

RESOURCES

1. **Form-Based Codes Institute:** <http://formbasedcodes.org/>
2. **Form-Based Codes: A Guide for Planners, Urban Designers, Municipalities and Developers.** Parolek, D, et al. (2008) Wiley & Sons
3. **Smart Code.** (2012) Center for Applied Transect Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2. <http://www.transect.org/codes.html>
4. **The Codes Study: Placemakers.** A website tracking form-based codes throughout the world. Retrieved March 21, 2014, http://www.placemakers.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/CodesStudy_May2013_WEB.htm
5. **Examples of Codes That Support Smart Growth Development.** EPA. Retrieved March 21, 2014, <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/codeexamples.htm>
6. **Community Character Manual** (2012) Metropolitan Nashville-Davidson County Planning Commission. http://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Planning/docs/CCM/2012Certified/0_CCM_adopted%20Oct%2025%202012.pdf



AARP LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

Mail: 601 E Street NW, Washington, DC 20049
Email: livable@aarp.org
Online: aarp.org/livable



WALKABLE AND LIVABLE COMMUNITIES INSTITUTE

Mail: 2023 E. Sims Way #121, Port Townsend, WA 98368
Email: community@walklive.org
Online: walklive.org