

Back to the Future

A Beginner's Guide to Form-based Codes

DO YOU LIKE THE WAY YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD — AND CITY — IS CHANGING? 'Zoning', an approach to the use of land and buildings invented in the 1920s, underlies many of the problems we face today, including the frequent clashes between neighborhoods and commercial developments. Scores of US cities have decided to put the quality of their neighborhood first, and the 'use' to which buildings are put, second. It's back to the way things always used to be before zoning came along. Nowadays it's called 'Form'-Based Codes. Become an instant expert with this user-friendly Q&A....

What...?

First things first: What goals should we set (before we start changing our land use codes)?

- ❑ Deliver livable, healthy, sustainable neighborhoods.
- ❑ Engage citizens in the planning process.
- ❑ Reduce infrastructure costs per capita.
- ❑ Develop codes that are comprehensible to everyone (not just technocrats).
- ❑ Encourage responsible infill as well as suburban development.
- ❑ Facilitate walkable neighborhoods and improve transit options.
- ❑ Harmonize private building decisions with the re-creation of an attractive 'public realm'.
- ❑ Coordinate planning and administration effectively and efficiently.
- ❑ Recognize demographic, societal, economic and environmental realities.

What does 'form-based' mean?

It refers to the 'form' or appearance of buildings, and the way they relate to the 'public realm' - the street, the streetscape, parking arrangements, and the neighborhood around them.

What are 'codes' for?

Form-based codes regulate the placement of buildings in relation to their environment; whereas 'Zoning' concentrates on separating the uses to which buildings are put.

Why...?

Why do some cities prefer 'form'-based codes to 'zoning' codes?

- ❑ They state what you want instead of what you don't want, and help achieve a more predictable result by controlling the elements most important for creating a high-quality environment.
- ❑ They encourage public participation, allowing citizens to see what will happen and where.
- ❑ They encourage property owners to do good things (by using pictures), instead of telling them what they can't do (using mathematical formulae).
- ❑ They are easier to understand and use than conventional zoning documents because they are shorter, more concise, and organized for visual access and readability.
- ❑ They eliminate the need for design guidelines (which are difficult to apply consistently, offer too much

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room for subjective interpretation, and are difficult to enforce).

- ❑ They seek to harmonize private building decisions with the public realm and the neighborhood.
- ❑ They work well in established communities to define and codify a neighborhood's "DNA." Similar building types are easily replicated, promoting infill compatible with surrounding structures.
- ❑ They encourage mixed uses, primarily in commercial/retail areas, in the manner of traditional neighborhoods.
- ❑ They regulate development at the individual building or lot level, which encourages independent development by multiple property owners (*less need for mega-projects*).
- ❑ They require less oversight by review bodies, which fosters a less politicized planning process that can deliver huge savings in time and money, and which reduces risk and stress for everyone.
- ❑ They are more effectively enforced than design guidelines because their purpose is to shape a high quality public realm – a presumed public good that promotes healthy, civic interaction. Compliance is enforced not on the basis of aesthetics but because failure to comply diminishes the public good being sought.

Who...?

Who benefits from form-based codes? Everyone!

- ❑ **Neighborhoods:** More input; nicer commercial streets; more livable communities; less uncertainty.
- ❑ **Children:** More walkable neighborhoods.

- ❑ **Developers:** More predictability; quicker; more flexibility in use of buildings; more efficient use of land.
- ❑ **Public Officials:** Simpler codes; far fewer 'variances/special exceptions'; less paperwork, more productivity.
- ❑ **City:** Lower infrastructure costs; more sales/property taxes; more efficient use of tax-dollars.
- ❑ **Architects:** More design flexibility.

Who makes it happen?

- ❑ The City, working with whichever organization(s) the Mayor and Council consider appropriate. Planners should be involved. Administrators should be involved. Citizens and developers should be involved.
- ❑ An outside company with experience in introducing form-based codes should definitely be involved.

Who should be in charge of administering the new codes when they're in place?

- ❑ That's for the City to decide.
- ❑ INCOG currently administers Tulsa's codes, as it does for many other municipalities. (*Some, like Broken Arrow and Owasso, manage their own.*)
- ❑ Tulsa's Urban Development Dept. facilitates and develops neighborhood plans with residents.
- ❑ Some think the City should be master of its own destiny. What do you think?

Who else uses form-based codes?

To name but a few: Albuquerque, NM; Alexandria, VA.; Arlington, Va.; Baltimore County; Baton Rouge, LA; Bluffton, SC; Boston, MA.; Chicago, IL; Columbus, OH; Duluth, MN; Farmers Branch, TX; Fort Wright, KY; Grand Rapids, MI; Gulfport, MS; Hercules, CA; Ketchum, ID; Jackson, MA; Lake Worth, FL; Louisville, Jefferson County, KY; Massachusetts (State Law Chapter 40R, passed by legislature July, 2004); Miami, FL;

Nashville, TN; New Jersey; Peoria, IL; Rio Rancho, NM; San Diego, CA; San Francisco, CA; Slidell, LA; Sonoma, CA; South Knoxville, TN; Syracuse, NY; Tacoma, WA; Towson, MD; Ukiah, CA; Ventura County, CA; Vienna, VA....

Who's going to foot the bill?

- ❑ Development of the Comprehensive Plan is to be funded by the City and County (\$0.5m. each, we hear).
- ❑ The Comprehensive Plan should evaluate land use ordinances and form-based codes at a strategic level.
- ❑ The new codes will lead to infrastructure cost-savings and more sales tax income – which both benefit tax-payers.
- ❑ Some Tulsa neighborhoods have already produced their own Comprehensive Plan updates (*Brookside, the Pearl, Brady Heights*) facilitated by the City's Urban Development team.

Where...?

Where do form-based codes work best?

Everywhere: the codes address the whole range of environments, from rural and suburban to historic neighborhoods, to the inner-city and Downtown.

Where can I read some examples of form-based codes?

- ❑ www.formbasedcodes.org
Check the 'Resources' page. Several cities' codes can be downloaded.
- ❑ www.dpz.com.
Click on 'Smartcode'. It's 229 pages, 50MB – and a lot more readable than the Zoning code.

How...?

How should Tulsa approach form-based codes?

- ❑ Alongside the City's update to its 'Comprehensive Plan'.

- ❑ As an integral part of the City's economic development strategy.
- ❑ Alongside the Mayor's new, 'Working In Neighborhoods' (WIN) initiative.
- ❑ Alongside an evaluation of Tulsa's planning and administrative structure.
- ❑ Informed by an evaluation of 'lessons learned' by benchmark cities which have introduced form-based codes.

How do we manage the transition from zoning to form-based codes?

- ❑ An area at a time (a district, a neighborhood, as 'pilots') or all at once.
- ❑ An overnight transition, or running both 'in parallel' for a brief period.
- ❑ Evaluate the lessons from benchmark cities. Be guided by experienced consultants. Then decide.

How do we know form-based codes will work any better than zoning?

There is now a sufficient body of evidence from many cities showing that they do work.

There is plenty of evidence that 'Zoning' works against the interests of every city, large and small.

When...?

When can the City start moving on this?

In late 2006 (we hear) the City will appoint a planning consultancy to work on an update of the 'Comprehensive Plan'.

How about employing a consultancy with experience of form-based codes?

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favorite Tulsa topic on our *Public Forum* and sign up for our on-line newsletter. Get involved, now.