Form-Based Zoning

THE PRINCIPAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FORM-BASED AND TRADITIONAL ZONING

Prescriptive, Contextual Standards. Traditional zoning *proscribes* minimum setbacks, permitting building placement anywhere within the allowable zone. Form-based zoning *prescribes* build-to lines, specifically defining desired development patterns. Based on ideal urban forms or contextual cues, form-based zoning ensures that new development will be appropriate to community vision or existing character.

Encouraging Mixed Use. By rigidly focusing on land use, traditional zoning makes mixed-use development difficult, if not impossible. Form-based zoning de-emphasizes land-use regulation, allowing the market to determine the use. For example, form-based regulation would prescribe large windows and entrances oriented toward the street to promote ground-floor retail. Form-based zoning encourages a healthy mix of retail and residential uses, and aims to curb sprawl and reduce car dependence by removing elements of the zoning code that encourage exclusionary housing practices and density restrictions.

Adapting to the Market. By prescribing use, traditional zoning attempts to predict demand. Uses that are no longer threats to public health are still segregated (e.g., office and light industrial from residential uses). Residential zoning regulations adopted when household size was on the rise cannot adapt to modern needs of empty nesters and young, childless professionals without extensive revision. Form-based zoning restores use determination to the market, allowing the use to automatically adapt to demographic and market shifts. Some designers of form-based codes find that, in the early stages of adoption, prescribing a mix of uses may be necessary to wean developers from the ingrained practice of segregating uses. Freeing the real estate market to respond to changes in demand has been shown to increase property values. Regionally, improving the quality of life through form-based zoning may lead to a competitive advantage in attracting a talented labor force.
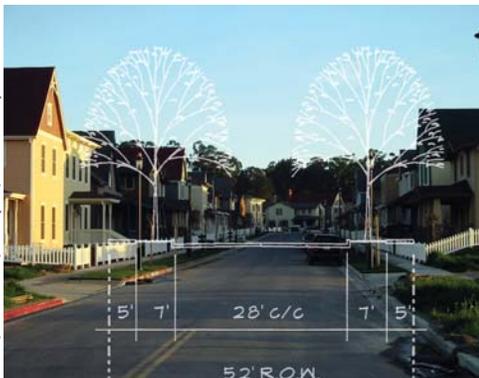
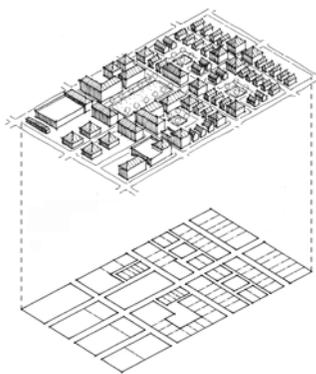## PAS QuickNotes

APA American Planning Association

COMPONENTS OF THE FORM-BASED APPROACH

The Regulating Plan. The regulating plan illustrates where form-based codes apply and guides developers to implement them properly. It classifies sites according to street, block, and district characteristics and includes easy-to-follow illustrations of build-to lines, projected building footprints, location of public spaces, and allowable building types specific for each site. Developers and planners view the site as part of a larger, unified design. Unlike traditional zoning maps, which provide little information about vacant land, regulating plans provide a vision of future development.

Overlay: The Bixby Company; Photo: Stephen Lawton

Matt Taecker

Cross sections help define the desired character of the street. The regulating plan (right) illustrates a three-dimensional vision, more detailed than a simple lot-based zoning map.

Building Envelope Standards. Building envelope standards ensure that development fits the desired character of the zone, regulating building height, placement, and orientation. The standards prescribe the ideal. For example, height parameters define the minimum height needed to define the street edge and a maximum height allowable to fit the context. In addition, the standards prescribe the ideal number of stories to prevent developers from minimizing floor-to-ceiling heights to fit more floors within the height parameters.

Architectural Standards. Architectural standards are used to achieve a community's aesthetic vision. They are highly subjective and are best determined through public participation techniques (e.g., design charrettes). In designated historic districts, architectural standards can be

highly regulatory, governing building scale, architectural features, building materials (e.g., siding for housing) and even construction techniques. They are *not a requirement* in form-based codes.

Street Standards. Street standards share the same objective as architectural standards, but instead apply to hardscape and landscape materials, including tree species and paving type. They are key to developing a coherent streetscape and a connection to public space. Although street standards vary in specificity, they are more prescriptive than architectural standards and are an essential component of form-based codes.
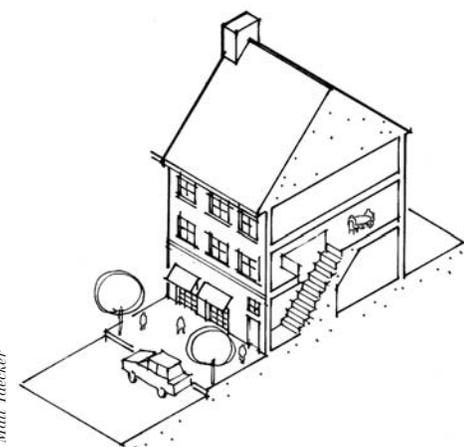
APPLICATION OF FORM-BASED ZONING

Form-Based Coding. This technique provides detailed prescriptions of physical form in a well-illustrated, clear plan. The clarity and prescriptive nature of the plan allows developers to avoid the long, unpredictable review processes common to traditional zoning. Form-based coding often is implemented through a "parallel" approach where new codes are applied as an option to existing codes. Incentives for using the form-based option, including expedited permitting processes and tax breaks, can enhance its appeal to developers and lead to implementation. Developers and architects praise the clarity of a form-based code and the more predictable, streamlined review process. Also, citizens value the opportunity to shape their communities through public design charrettes. Still, adoption and implementation of form-based codes requires considerable political will to overcome skepticism among politicians and creditors.

Matt Taecker

The live-work unit is a popular housing alternative for home-based entrepreneurs.

RTKL Associates, Inc.

The diversity of paving and plantings create a vibrant pedestrian experience.

Form District Zoning. This technique defines districts according to distinguishable development patterns or desired formal characteristics, such as building form and orientation, street grid, and streetscape. This approach can apply to an entire region or specific districts within a city or region with common characteristics (e.g., architectural style or proximity to transit stations). Current applications of form district zoning use a two-tiered approach to incorporate existing zoning regulation. The form districts regulate physical form and design while existing zoning districts regulate use.

Form district zoning respects and adheres to the diversity of existing patterns while providing developers a more flexible and predictable development process. Developers praise its ability to promote context-sensitive design while not being overly restrictive. The two-tiered approach is a politically feasible way to rezone an entire region. As form district zoning becomes more established, it may merge with elements of use-based zoning, creating a hybrid option. *Franz Heitzer* ■

Examples of Form-Based Codes

Arlington, Virginia, Columbia Pike Special Revitalization District From-Based Code, www.co.arlington.va.us/forums/columbia/current

Austin, Texas, Traditional Neighborhood District Ordinance, www.ci.austin.tx.us/development/ldc1.htm

Columbus, Ohio, Traditional Neighborhood Development Article, www.columbusinfobase.org/eleclib/elechome.htm

Gainsville, Florida, Land Development Code, Traditional City Neighborhood Development, comdev.cityofgainesville.org