
FORM-BASED CODING

By Geoffrey Ferrell and Mary Madden

The Problem:

We no longer build good places.

What happened to the great cities, towns and neighborhoods we built throughout our nation's history? What happened to shopfront windows lined up along pleasant sidewalks? Why aren't we building greens and squares special enough that we place monuments in them? Real streets that are truly public (and not managed by the mall operator or a homeowners' association)? Why don't we build them today?

The answer lies in our planning and zoning system. The very ordinances that were devised to *protect* us from bad development actually *prevent* us from building good neighborhoods, towns and cities.

Our system for "planning" in the United States today is producing bad development. It wastes our environment and energy as we go about our daily lives. It is the result of a planning model, Euclidean Zoning, which segregates housing, recreation, workplace and government into distinct zones of land use. The idea of separating "dirty" uses from residential areas was an understandable reaction to the 19th century Industrial Revolution.

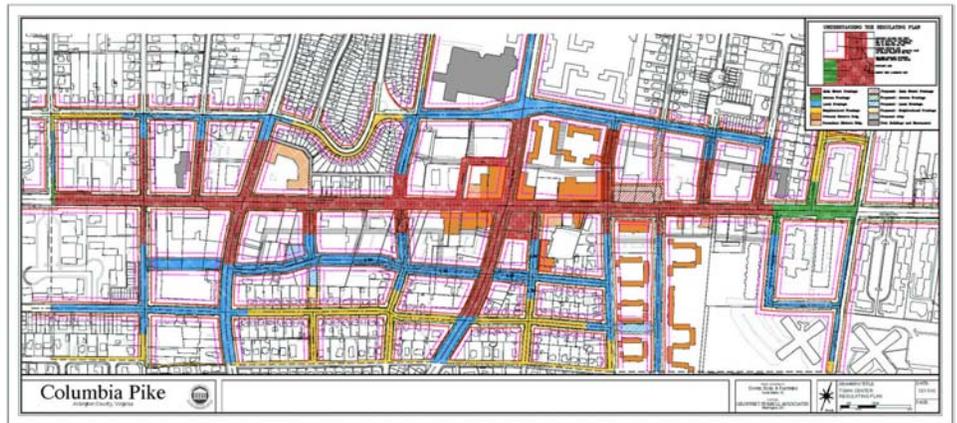
Today, however, such simplistic separation of our more prevalent clean office, commercial, retail, light industrial and residential uses is nonsensical. This segregation of our daily lives is unsociable, outdated and technically unsustainable—it is a practical failure. It results in ever increasing traffic and congestion and threatens the very air we breathe.

The current system for "planning" is fundamentally about keeping things apart. But healthy neighborhoods, towns and cities work to the degree that they properly integrate the different aspects of daily life.

The Solution:

Form-Based Coding

The current zoning regulations are difficult for citizens to comprehend. Controls for future development such as FAR (floor area ratio), density, and hyper-specific land-use restrictions are abstract regulatory methods. They are only accidentally related to building form and rarely understood by anyone except



land-use professionals. We can see the results in the nation's late 20th century development patterns—congested streets and roadways lined with strip malls, drive-throughs, isolated subdivisions, and office towers in the middle of parking lots—all built to the zoning requirements. People oppose new development because of this experience.

With a clear form-based code, owner and neighbor can easily foresee the possibilities for future development. Form-based codes are designed with a physical "place" in mind, whether it is big city or small town, a main street or a neighborhood.

Form-based codes set careful and clear controls on building form, with broad parameters on building use, to shape clear public space (good streets, neighborhoods and parks).

The base principle of form-based coding is that *design is more important than use*. With proper urban form, a greater integration of building uses is natural and comfortable. This is a principle not a dogma, however. There are exceptions to the rule. There have always been "noxious uses" (whether biologically or socially so) that must be kept separate from our neighborhoods. Also, by its nature, retail activity gains synergy from adjacent retail use, and therefore profits from adjacency. Form-based coding recognizes and addresses these conditions.

Simple and clear graphic prescriptions and parameters for *height, siting and building elements* address the basic necessities for forming good streets. Most allow variation within parameters (building height may vary, for instance); however, some are straightforward prescriptions (such as the *build-to line* for main street buildings).

Where conventional zoning controls land use to an extreme level of specificity, form-based

coding fosters and protects a healthy balance, while allowing small-scale market economics to function, by establishing broad parameters for *uses*. (For short-term implementation purposes, it is perfectly appropriate to target a specific mix of uses.)

By keying the form-based code to the street frontage, it provides a different kind of "zoning"—one relative to the logic of the street.

A clear master plan for a location, implemented through the regulatory instrument of form-based coding, allows smaller landholders the advantages of participating in a larger project (synergy and predictability). Most importantly, particularly in redevelopment or revitalization areas with multiple parcels and property owners, this should be the *community's* master plan.

Traditional urbanism/smart growth is also intended to increase the quality of the green environment in the city—as opposed to its simple quantitative enlargement. Form-based coding addresses the design of the green environment as well as the built environment with standards for park, green and street tree plantings. Parks, private yards and courtyards, boulevards, avenues, park blocks, as well as tree-lined main and neighborhood streets are provided within healthy towns and cities. Such reconstruction of our cities and towns helps arrest the suburban sprawl that most threatens our countryside ecology.

Planning for the 21st Century

Great *neighborhoods, towns, and cities* do not happen by accident. They should be orchestrated with a physical vision as places that will be enlivened by commercial and civic activities, and in turn, supported by the local residents.

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