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Retooling Planners

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As cities across America are coming to recognize the undesirable qualities of the last several generations of development, they are beginning to reexamine their land-development codes and consider other options. As reported in the *Places* article on New Urbanism's Smart-Code (Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 74-77), one such alternative is form-based coding. This approach shifts the focus of local-government oversight from the conventional hyper-control of uses to a more limited (and rational) emphasis on the form of the built environment: the streets, the public spaces formed by the disposition of buildings, and the form of the buildings themselves.

Lost in the recent discussion of this issue, however, is the challenge that such a shift poses for the planning profession. In particular, it exposes how little skill and knowledge planners today have with crucial tools of graphic representation.

The Promise of Form-Based Coding

There are important differences between conventional zoning practice and form-based practice. In effect, conventional zoning assigns regulations to individual parcels as placeholders. But these are seldom tied to a specific vision of how a community wants to look. Conversely, the regulations in form-based codes are keyed to various street and building types. In this format, the focus shifts from the regulation of activities on private property by location, to encouraging property owners to build in ways that further a community's sense of itself, particularly in terms of the design of the public realm.

To communicate such a framework, form-based codes typically utilize drawings, diagrams and photographs. Their advocates claim that the public, public officials, and designers find it easier to understand these than the lists, charts and formulas that dominate standard zoning practice. They further argue that people will more likely support what they can more easily understand.

In practice, the basis of form-based zoning is the same as that for more conventional types; a comprehensive master plan, spelling out how a city wants to develop, underlines both. But the form-based alternative seeks to develop a more meaningful implementation of the three-dimensional vision implied in the master plan. In particular, a form-based code is generally built on a regulating plan, which in turn relates to more specific building envelope standards, street sections, architectural standards, and definitions.

Of these components, the regulating plan is a drawing that specifies, in detail, what is only loosely defined in the city's master plan. The function and location of streets

and their relationship with buildings and open spaces are clearly defined on the regulating plan. Building heights, the siting of buildings on a lot, and uses are then further defined by means of building envelope standards. Typical street sections specify the cartway widths, curb radii, sidewalk and tree planting area dimensions, on-street parking configurations, and other amenities. Architectural standards regulate the important public elements of the facade. Finally, certain terms not readily understood by the public, or meant to be used in a specific way, are clarified in a definition section.

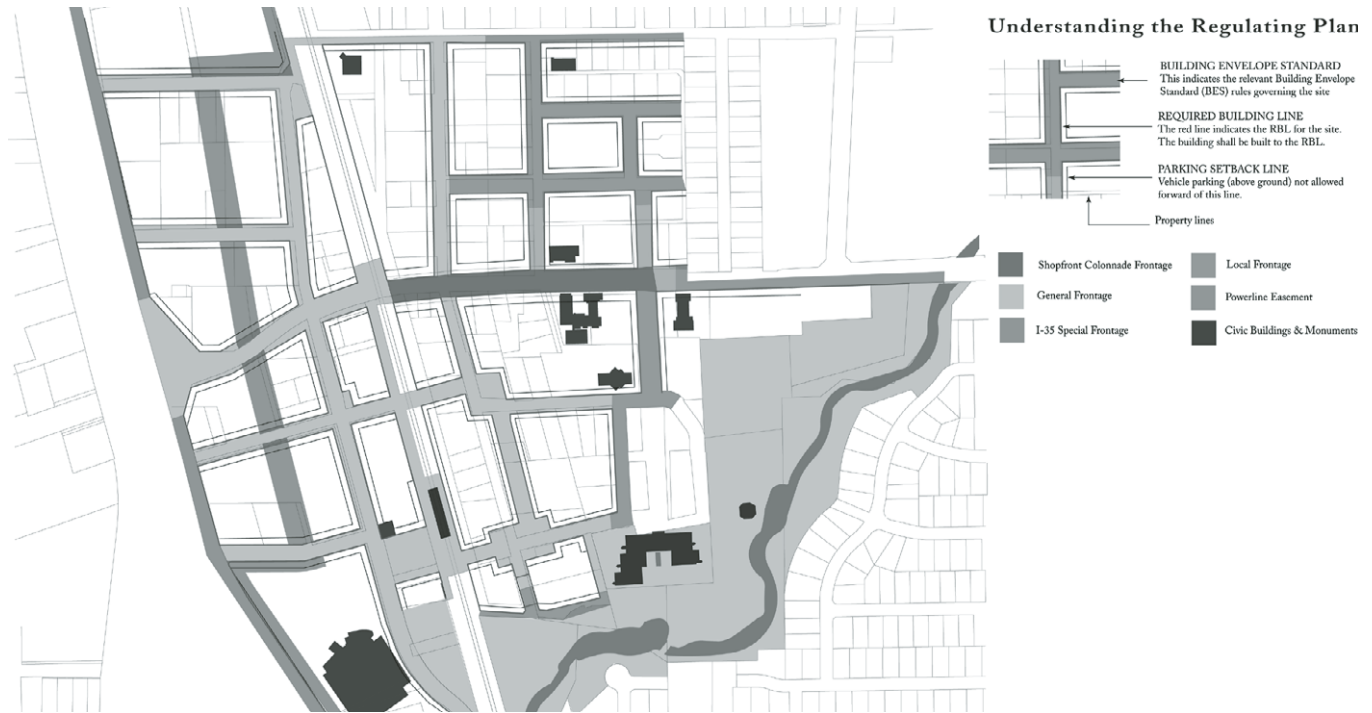
In addition to revamping assumptions about what a zoning code is intended to regulate, the production and administration of such an alternative regulatory structure requires an interdisciplinary sensitivity to urban design, architecture, landscape design, traffic engineering, and even market demand. Crafting the regulating plan and associated building envelope standards also requires knowledge and experience in drawing — typically using computer-aided design software. Finally, specifying building envelope and architectural standards require an understanding of architecture, landscape architecture, and building construction. Generally, planners do not have these skill sets, and are required to rely on design consultants when it comes to preparing form-based codes.

Designers Are Eating Planners' Lunch

Engineers have often been known to chide planners for being overly democratic — constantly searching for the politically elusive win-win solution. They argue that such a democratic process runs the risk of less than desirable outcomes that in the long term affect the planner's credibility. Now, with the advent of form-based coding, the technical grasp that architectural designers have over the visualization process presents a new challenge to the credibility of planners.

With engineers maintaining a stronghold on technical details and architectural designers offering superior visualization skills, planners risk being relegated to simply managing or facilitating the community-development process. Under such a scenario, not only will planners not get to eat, but they may not even get a seat at the table. Indeed, they may face a future as bus boys, trying to get all the plates, cups, and silverware arranged in the proper places, one piece at a time.

It is important that planners understand how serious this problem is. Crafting and implementing architectural standards and definitions requires an appreciation and a knowledge of the ways that different individual physical



components contribute to the whole urban built form, and for planners with no formal design and construction training the learning curve is steep. By contrast, architects receive formal training in design and construction, and for them the transition from the design of individual buildings to the design of the larger built environment is much smoother.

Particular difficulties often surface for planners when a developer proposes minor changes to the regulating plan of a form-based scheme. No matter how perfect the code is the day it is adopted, amendments are bound to be necessary. However, the regulating plan and building envelope standards are usually generated using computer-aided design software—a tool commonly used in the architectural and engineering profession, but not so readily found on the planner's tool belt.

Although the original plan may be developed by a consultant familiar with such graphic tools, lean city budgets are not likely to support repeated use of consultants for minor changes, such as moving a street five feet on the regulating plan or modifying the building envelope standards. If they plan to remain integral to the process, planners will have to learn to use the tools necessary to carry out such minor amendments in-house.

Retooling

The planning profession has its roots in physical planning, with an emphasis on designing desirable and livable places. However, over the last century planners have neglected the physical aspects of their profession. While the evolution of the planning profession has witnessed a pluralistic incline, planners should not lose sight of their rich heritage in architecture and landscape architecture. Where great leaders such as Ebenezer Howard, John

Nolen, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Daniel Burnham once produced grand development plans, many planners today seem resigned to the largely bureaucratic function of reviewing and processing development applications.

If planners are to continue to make a significant contribution to the communities they serve and take a more active role in the design and construction of urban built form, their education and training will have to provide them with new skills. Professional organizations will have an important role to play in this process. Today the Congress for the New Urbanism and the New Urbanism Division of the American Planning Association would seem to be particularly good sources for the interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge and tools.

Ultimately, however, the nation's schools of architecture and planning must work together to ensure that urban design skills are better developed in the planning curriculum. It seems particularly odd today that a student graduating with a Masters in Planning may be expected to review site plans, but may not be able to illustrate preferable development outcomes.

The good news is that such a retooling of the planning profession should not prove insurmountable. If planners have proven anything, it is that they can be resilient generalists, adding whatever skills may be necessary to get the job done.

Draft regulating plan prepared for Station Area, Farmers Branch, Texas. Image courtesy of Ferrell Madden Associates.