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# Good Design at Any Scale

*More options emerge to put form-based codes within reach*

By [Deborah Myerson](#)

A walkable, bike-friendly neighborhood with a harmonious blend of single-family homes, duplexes, and small-scale multifamily apartments. A lively mixed-use corridor with attractive retail storefronts facing trees, landscaping, and benches to create an appealing streetscape.

These are just some of the outcomes that advocates of form-based codes have sought to promote as a counterpoint to conventional zoning over the last four decades. Zoning ultimately controls where we live, how we move around, and whom we interact with.

Traditional zoning, also known as [Euclidean zoning](#), was established by U.S. cities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to separate land uses, address public health considerations, and protect property values. The practice of zoning also has a notorious legacy of being employed to enforce [racial segregation and discrimination](#). ([A good reading list for those who wish to dive deeper into zoning.](#))

A relative newcomer to land-use controls, for the past 35 years form-based codes have prescribed the physical design of the buildings and blocks, focusing on the public realm and embedding distinctive community character in visual form rather than regulating the type of land use. Carefully developed and applied, form-based codes are design regulations that prescribe a desired form, placement, size, and bulk of buildings as they relate to each other within a block or neighborhood. Form-based codes may substitute for all or part of the zoning ordinance of a city or town.

## An Antidote to Sprawl

Rooted in [New Urbanism](#), form-based codes have been sought after as a design tool to create place-specific infill and mixed-use neighborhoods that reflect local architectural styles, particularly as an antidote to urban sprawl and homogeneous, car-dependent, suburban-style development. [The Codes Study](#) is a collaborative effort that has tracked more than 650 codes around the country that meet criteria established by the [Form-Based Codes Institute \(FBCI\)](#). While implementation is often designated for particular neighborhoods, downtowns, or mixed-income areas, entire [cities](#) or even [regions](#) have also adopted form-based codes.

The [Columbia Pike corridor](#) in Arlington, Virginia, has applied form-based codes for some time, creating a walkable community anchored by restaurants, businesses and attractive public spaces, while preserving housing options for residents with a mix of incomes. The Form Based Code allows for more density, financial incentives, and a faster, more streamlined approval process.

An in-depth approach to adopting a form-based code, while thorough, can also be quite time- and resource-intensive. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's [Form-Based Codes: A Step-by-Step Guide for Communities](#) publication provides extensive guidance to municipalities to help them hire specialized consultants who can lead the effort to create a form-based code, as well as support for local administration of a newly adopted code.

## Creating More Inclusive and Equitable Communities

Form-based codes more readily accommodate a mix of housing types than density-based codes that tend to segregate housing types. Many communities are recognizing a need for “missing middle” housing — a term used to refer to a range of multi-unit or clustered housing types that are compatible in scale with detached single-family homes—that can help meet the growing demand increased affordability in high-resource neighborhoods. The mixed-use neighborhoods and missing middle housing supported by form-based codes can also help overcome [historic racial inequities](#) in zoning and land use, develop and preserve affordable housing, and prevent displacement. A strong design focus with community engagement and visioning can also create incentives to help leverage preferred development types. [Bradenton, Florida](#) is using form-based codes to expedite approval and reduce review fees as a reward for projects that include affordable or workforce housing.

An especially promising combination [aligns form-based codes with by-right review](#). A zoning code is considered “by-right” if projects that comply with local zoning standards receive approval without a discretionary review process. Form-based codes that successfully project a well-defined community vision, implemented with prescriptive regulations, can serve to inspire sufficient community confidence to allow by-right review. One of the many advantages of a by-right review process: it lowers the risk of development by streamlining the review period, making projects more viable, helping more housing to be built, and thus lowering the cost of that housing.

## Growing Nimble

Yet, over time, the approach to form-based codes has necessarily become more nimble. Hybrid models or overlay options have become viable considerations to overcome concerns about the cost of potentially bringing in a team of specialized consultants and undertaking extensive community planning efforts.

Launched in 2016, the Congress for New Urbanism initiated the [Project for Code Reform](#) (PCR) to make form-based codes more accessible to communities that may lack staff or political capacity for a more in-depth approach to accomplish zoning reform. Under a partnership with the State of Michigan, the PCR provided an opportunity to create simpler tools scaled to the capacity of the local government.

In September 2018, the Congress for New Urbanism published “[The Users’ Guide to Code Reform](#)” – the product of a two-year effort working with Michigan communities to develop tools that municipalities can use to reform their zoning, encourage better quality development, and implement standards to promote healthy downtowns and vibrant neighborhoods. The product is a valuable tool for local government staff and elected officials throughout the U.S., as well as planning consultants who work for municipalities.

Form-based codes offer valuable features such as design-focused, community-driven standards that can bridge the shortcomings of conventional zoning. The wide array of choices that have emerged for code reform put form-based codes within reach for localities of all sizes and capacities.

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