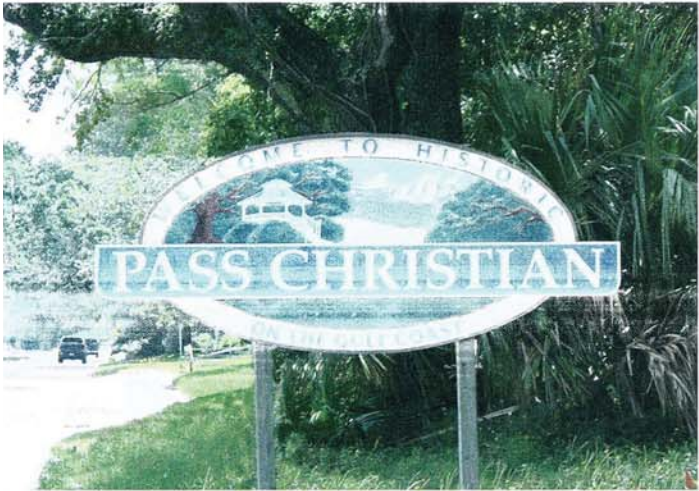


A New Kind of **ZONING**

Communities of all sizes
are adopting form-based codes



By Brad Broberg

Hurricane Katrina nearly blasted Pass Christian, Miss., off the map. The brutal storm leveled three out of every four buildings in the small Gulf Coast community. The historic downtown was hit especially hard. Just a handful of buildings survived.

"It was pretty horrific," said Jeffrey Bounds, city planner.

Four years after the storm, the town is being rebuilt using form-based codes, an alternative approach to conventional zoning codes that fosters a more urban style of development.

Although most of Pass Christian's 4,000 or so residents had never heard of form-based codes, they were familiar with the kind of community the codes are designed to produce.

"When we talked about mixed-use and walkability, people knew what we were talking about — especially the old-timers — because that's how the town functioned as recently as the 1950s," Bounds said.

Pass Christian is one of a growing number of places that are adopting form-based codes. “It looks to me like almost every town or city that is interested in redoing their zoning is at least looking at a form-based approach,” said Sandy Sorlien, director of technical research at the Center for Applied Transect Studies (CATS). “It’s really picking up steam.”

CATS is a nonprofit organization that promotes greater understanding of the transect. The transect, a graduated approach to controlling the intensity of development, is the organizing principle of the SmartCode, a customizable template created by Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. (DPZ) to help communities put form-based codes to work.

Whether places use the SmartCode or some other model, the contrast between form-based codes and conventional codes is the same. Rather than regulating development by focusing primarily on land use, form-based codes focus primarily on physical form, describing in great detail what is desired in the built environment rather than what is prohibited.

Why does that matter? Because it’s a better way to create predictable outcomes. Not just any outcome, though. Form-based codes were conceived to regulate the details — everything from smaller blocks to buildings sitting closer to the street — that are most important to urbanism.

Urbanism represents a return to the way neighborhoods grew before development shifted from towns and cities to auto-oriented suburbs, where conventional codes typically separate various land uses and housing types — single-family, multi-family, retail, office — and maintain low density.

With sprawl, congestion and other ills making the typical suburban model less and less sustainable, more and more places are using form-based codes to recreate the compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods of the past — a style that’s often referred to as new urbanism and which fits hand-in-glove with smart growth.

“Most zoning codes make smart growth illegal to build,” said Dan Parolek, a principal with Opticos Design. “Form-based codes have proven to be the most effective tool in breaking down those barriers and incentivizing the development of ... urban environments.”

DPZ pioneered form-based codes when it designed the town of Seaside, Fla., an early example of new urbanism that was founded in 1979. Today, Seaside is but one example of how form-based codes are being applied across the country.

In the beginning, cities and counties dipped their toes in the water by adopting form-based codes — sometimes at a developer’s behest and sometimes at their own initiative — to regulate specific projects or districts such as

Typical gulf coast architecture will be the foundation of redevelopment design in Pass Christian, Miss.



More and more places are using form-based codes to recreate the compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods of the past.

downtown. They often left conventional codes in place and offered form-based codes as options.

Now, more and more places are jumping in with both feet, replacing conventional codes with form-based codes and applying them universally. Examples range from small towns such as Pass Christian to big cities such as Denver to entire regions such as the Lake Tahoe Basin.

“Form-based coding’s time has come,” said Scott Polikov of Gateway Planning Group. Among the projects he’s worked on utilizing the SmartCode is a transit-oriented development initiated by the city of Leander, Texas.

The project covers 2,000 acres of undeveloped land plus downtown Leander. Although the start of construction awaits completion of a rail line from Austin, the form-based code will produce a “full-blown urban village” on the undeveloped property, Polikov said.

With seven different landowners owning pieces of the site, it would have been difficult for the city to achieve a unified vision for the property using a conventional code because it wouldn’t have spelled out the details needed to create a compact, walkable, mixed-use development.

Picture below: After completion of a rail line from Austin, Leander, Texas, will begin construction on a full-blown urban village using form-based codes to guide its design.



©Courtesy of Gateway Planning Group, Inc.

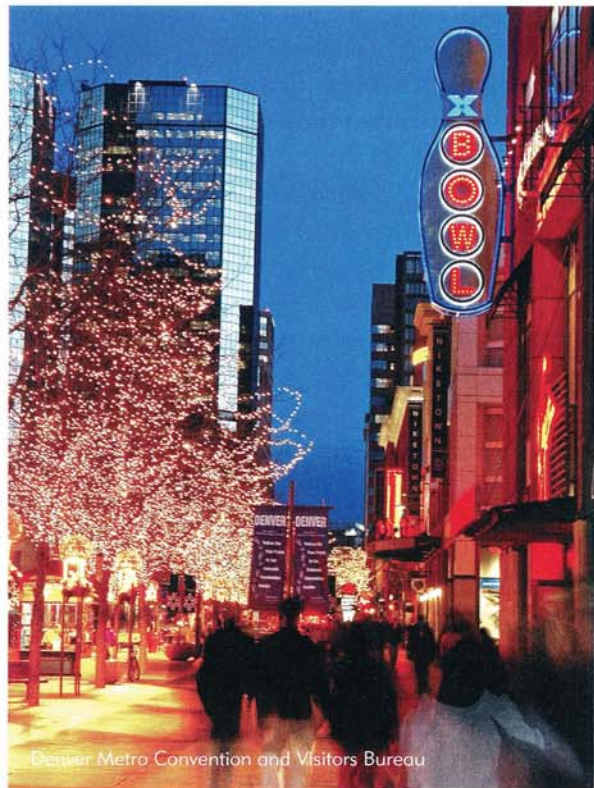
By utilizing a form-based code, the city was able to act as a “de facto master developer,” Polikov said.

Pass Christian was already rewriting its zoning code when Katrina hit, but didn’t decide to develop a form-based code until after officials attended the Mississippi Renewal Forum, where a team from the Congress for New Urbanism introduced the concept to 11 coastal cities facing major rebuilding challenges following the storm.

“The forum planted a seed,” Bounds recalled. “The planning commission said ‘let’s throw what we started away, start with a clean sheet of paper and do something a little bolder.’ There was no better time coming down the road.”

The existing conventional code had paved the way for “classic suburban sprawl gone wild,” Bounds said. The appeal of a form-based code was its potential to help Pass Christian recapture its original small-town character. “That idea had a lot of resonance with people,” he said.

Pass Christian’s form-based code, which is based on the SmartCode, took effect last year. One of the advantages of a form-based code versus a conventional code is flexibility. In the historic downtown, for example, the code



Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau



Photo by: Randy Brown



Cherry Creek bike path and Lodo grille and dining in Denver, Colo.

All photos: Courtesy of Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau



Photo by: Steve Crecalius

requires buildings on two key streets to be built with retail facades. While the intent is that the buildings be used as retail, the code also allows them to be used as dwellings or offices if retail demand is slow to develop.

“By controlling the appearance, we believe the [intended] use ultimately will follow the appearance as long as we get the appearance right,” Bounds said.

Time will tell whether Pass Christian’s form-based code produces the desired results, but the proof already is coming out of the ground in New Town, a new urban community of 5,700 homes being built from scratch on 755 acres in St. Charles, Mo.

“Our intent is to replicate a small town in the Midwest,” said Tim Busse, town architect.

The developer, Whittaker Homes, wasn’t looking to utilize a form-based code when it conceived the project, Busse said, but the firm that planned the town, DPZ, knew the SmartCode was the right tool.

One of the first steps involved in creating a form-based code is to document the characteristics needed to produce the intended outcome. The New Town project team studied St. Charles and other communities in the region with vibrant urban fabrics, cataloging street widths, setback distances, building facades and other urban characteristics — the DNA of compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods — at a block by block level.

The form-based code — embedded in the master plan and adopted by the city of St. Charles as the mandatory standard for all new urban development in the city — enabled Whittaker Homes to reproduce that DNA in a way conventional codes typically do not. “You could piecemeal it [with conventional codes], and end up with a form-based code, so why not begin with one,” Busse said.

The transect has become the most common organizing principle — or basis for differentiating between zones



Stan Obert for Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau



Steve Crecelius for Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau

Form-based codes contribute to a quality of life that many people desire such as walkable communities, schools located near homes, neighborhood grocery stores, restaurants, etc. It's an easy lifestyle to sell.

River Ranch is a new urban community in Lafayette, La. River Ranch was designed with a form-based model but entitled under a conventional code. As a result, 119 variances were required to provide the details necessary for compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods.

“We needed 18 different street types alone — and half of them were not allowed [in the conventional code],” said architect Steve Oubre, who prepared the master plan for the 324-acre project. Other variances included decreasing the minimum setback to 0 to 15 feet (it was 20 feet), reducing minimum density to one unit per 3,500 square feet (it was one unit per 5,000 square feet) and placing parking at the rear instead of the front of buildings.

Since that time, the city of Lafayette has amended its zoning code to include a form-based option. The REALTOR® Association of Acadiana is now pushing for form-based codes to be included in more zoning codes throughout the six-parish region.

“REALTORS® recognize that having a community where people want to live and work is important to their business,” said Mary Jane Bauer, the association’s CEO. “Form-based codes contribute to a quality of life that many people desire such as walkable communities, schools located near homes, neighborhood grocery stores, restaurants, etc. It’s an easy lifestyle to sell.”

That message is trickling up.

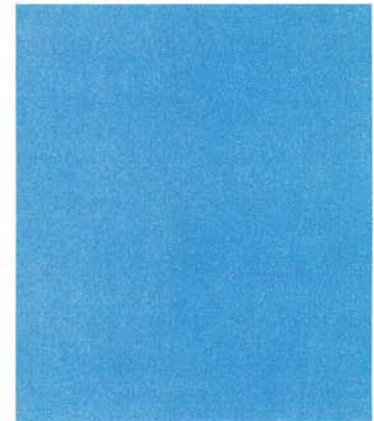
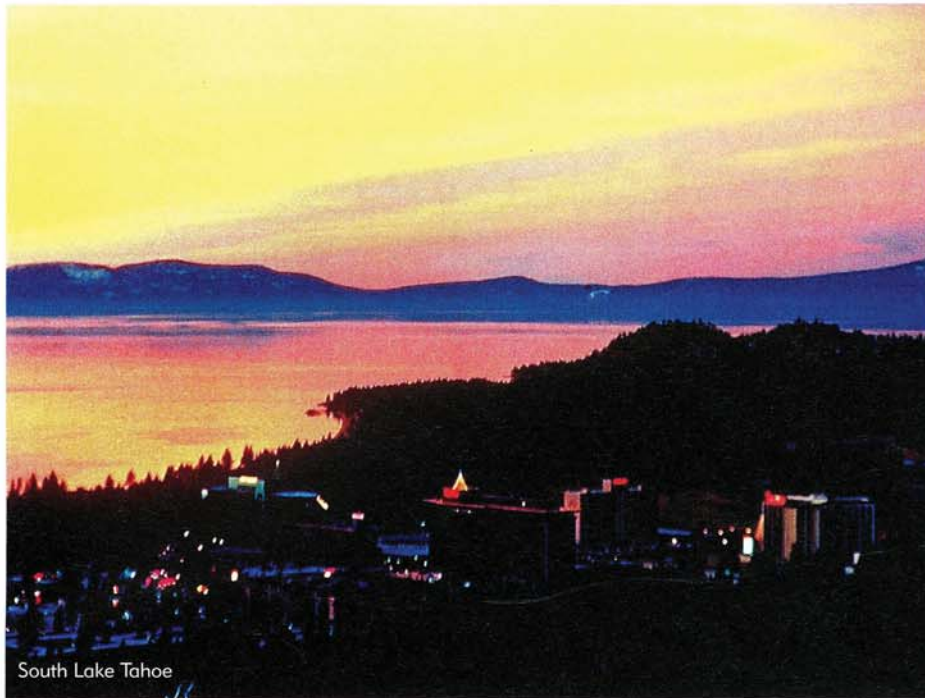
“As more high-quality projects regulated by form-based codes come out of the ground ... cities, towns and counties of all sizes across the country are becoming interested in using form-based codes,” Parolek said. “Practitioners have shown that FBCs are not just for small sites, but can also be effective at citywide, county and regional scales.”

— of form-based codes. “I’ve heard it called a feathering of the intensity of uses,” Busse said.

The transect mirrors the natural world by creating a sequence of habitats — or in human terms built environments — that achieve urbanism through a series of gradual transitions from very rural at the edge to very urban at the center.

The SmartCode identifies six rural-to-urban transect zones. Within each zone, the SmartCode applies form-based regulations to ensure the built environment is appropriate to the location. Exactly how that looks varies from place to place depending on the vision of stakeholders — the developer, community, local government — and the geography involved. New Town, for example, contains no natural (T-1) or rural (T-2) zones, just sub-urban (T-3), general urban (T-4), urban center (T-5) and urban core (T-6).

One way to understand what a form-based code brings to the table is to consider what it takes to develop compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhood without one.



By supporting compact, walkable, mixed-use development, a form-based code is expected to limit auto use, thereby reducing emissions and improving air quality.

The city of Denver and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) are banking on that as they prepare to replace their existing zoning codes with form-based codes.

“We have a [conventional] code that’s really broken,” said Peter Park, manager of community planning and development in Denver. “It doesn’t support a lot of the policies in our adopted plans for sustainability, transportation and land use.”

Denver’s form-based code is expected to go to the city council early next year. In areas where the city wants to maintain stability, such as historic residential neighborhoods with bungalows on small lots, the code will ensure future development jibes with existing characteristics. In areas targeted for change, such as near new rail stations, the code will pave the way for transit-oriented development featuring a mix of uses and housing types within walking distance of the stations.

“The point is to have a vision of what kind of place we want and then have the regulations to support that,” Park said.

A desire to ensure the built environment complements the surrounding landscape is one of the reasons the TRPA, which spans four counties straddling the California/Nevada border, is starting a two-year process to develop a form-based code.

Vast stretches of the region are wilderness, but it includes the city of South Lake Tahoe and a number of small towns, where a legacy of “strip commercial” development is out of sync with the natural setting, said John Hitchcock, TRPA’s principal planner.

Environmental issues are also a driving force. By supporting compact, walkable, mixed-use development, a form-based code is expected to limit auto use, thereby reducing emissions and improving air quality.

In addition, compact development will leave more room for natural and/or man-made detention basins to filter sediments before they make their way into Lake Tahoe and degrade its prized clarity, Hitchcock said. ●

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