

Creating a Form-Based Code in Grand Rapids

by Suzanne M. Schulz

A 40-year old master plan and an antiquated zoning ordinance can equate to development that is not serving the best interests of a community. Those would, of course, be the first items on a city planner's list—but when developers and regular citizens start to charge City Hall...well, Houston you've got a problem. Now, couple the crisis with rising fuel prices, talk of "carbon footprints," changing demographics, and the desire to be relevant in the New Economy, and simple amendments to plans and regulations don't seem to be enough. A complete make-over is needed. The city of Grand Rapids just did that with an overhaul of its master plan and zoning ordinance.

New Master Plan

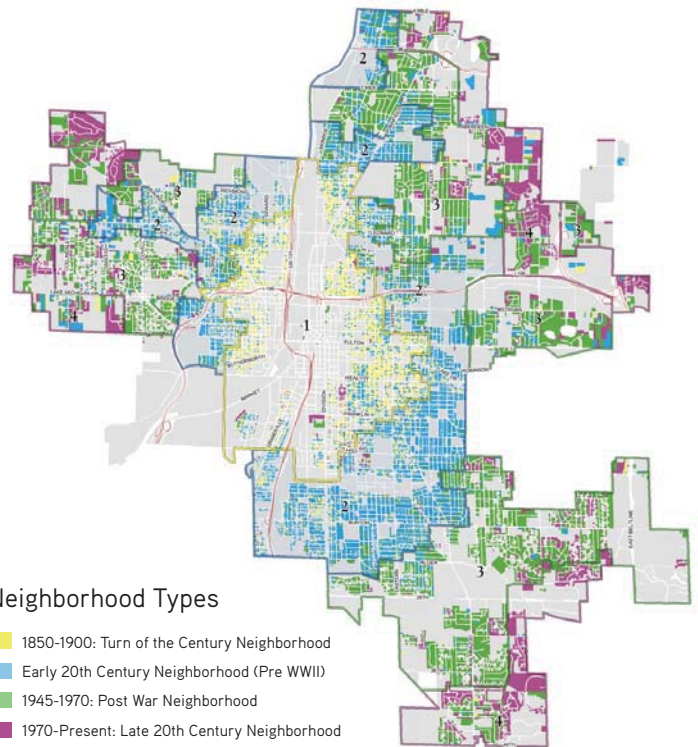
By the year 2000, Grand Rapids' master plan had been amended more than 40 times. The city's Residential Area Priority Team had identified that inconsistent land use decisions were chipping away at neighborhood cohesiveness. The Right Place Program (an economic development advocacy group) and the Frey Foundation noted that economic development opportunities were being lost or not fulfilling their full potential. The need for a new plan was identified.

After an 18-month process and nearly 250 community meetings, the city commission adopted a new Smart Growth-based comprehensive master plan. This plan created a new vision for the city that focused on building great neighborhoods, vital business districts, a strong economy, balanced transportation, a city that enriches our lives, a city in balance with nature to achieve these visions through partnerships.

One key finding of the master plan process was the concept that residents and business owners appreciated the "character" of their neighborhood. The challenge was to quantify this character in a meaningful way that would not prove to be over-burdensome to the city's administrative staff and yet provide the basis for a form-based ordinance.

Smart Growth Vision

Grand Rapids used Smart Growth principles as the foundation on which to build its community vision and corresponding land use regulations. Extensive public engagement methods were used throughout the master plan and zoning re-writes to solicit input from the community, test ideas and resolve issues. In every interaction, the tenets of Smart Growth were reinforced. Citizens expressed a strong desire to create a compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented community with a broad range of housing and transportation choices and a strong sense of place.



Neighborhood Types

- 1850-1900: Turn of the Century Neighborhood
- Early 20th Century Neighborhood (Pre WWII)
- 1945-1970: Post War Neighborhood
- 1970-Present: Late 20th Century Neighborhood

A development era map was created using the city's GIS; year of construction information was derived from assessor's data.

Defining "Form"

A Neighborhood Pattern Workbook was created to engage citizens in a discussion about their neighborhood's character. The workbook described four neighborhood types. Eventually, these districts were refined to comprise three neighborhood classifications in the zoning ordinance. The findings of the workbook provided planners with a clear definition of the classifications and the metrics needed to define the "form" of each area. While the ordinance was being written, an interim zone district, known as the Planned Redevelopment District (PRD), was utilized to test regulatory concepts and demonstrate how plan goals would be realized; almost immediately impacting the built environment after the master planning process.

Ordinance Format

Zone districts are not done as overlay districts, but rather the neighborhood character designation (created using the Pattern Workbook) is the zone district. All ordinance requirements are based on this premise. For example, there are two residential categories in the new ordinance, Low-Density Residential (LDR) and Mixed-Density Residential (MDR), but there are six residential zone districts classified as Traditional Neighborhood (LDR/MDR), Mid-20th Century Neighborhood (LDR/MDR) and Modern Neighborhood (LDR/MDR). Building placement, lot sizes, entry locations, porch depth, façade transparency, accessory structures and other requirements are suited to fit the neighborhood classification. Commercial district designations are managed in the same way.

Neighborhood types were evaluated based on patterns in land use, street type, block size, parking location, materials, windows, entry orientation, lot width, building setbacks and height. This evaluation set the metrics for the ordinance's neighborhood classifications.



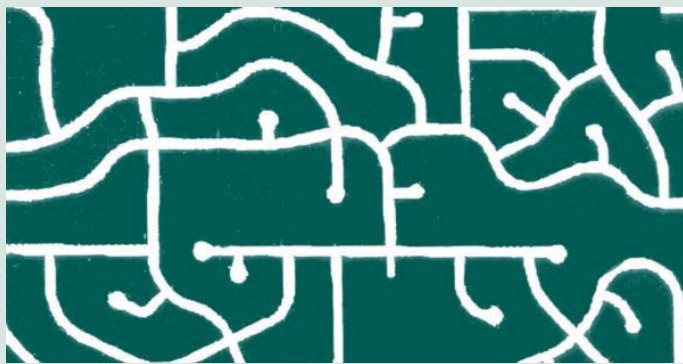
Turn of the century land use



Turn of the century street pattern



Late 20th century land use



Late 20th century street pattern

All development types are allowed in some way. For example, large lot development is permitted in the Modern Neighborhood with restrictions. The citizens of Grand Rapids stated that they "liked where they live"—and in some cases that means people like living near the infamous 28th Street corridor. The ordinance, however, is structured in a way that will allow more recent, unsustainable types of development to transition into a more compact development pattern that will meet the community's goals.

In truth, the zoning ordinance is a hybrid code that pulls elements of form-based, performance-based and Euclidian regulations. The mixed-use neighborhood types require a heavy emphasis on performance-based measures to prevent potential detrimental impacts. Traditional regulations that are more Euclidian in nature are needed depending upon the circumstance.

Ordinance language tries to strike a balance between what is reasonable and implementable for a 44 square-mile community that is 97 percent built-out and a limited staff of six planners. Flexibility is built in with the use of administrative departures which are situational but tied to defined standards. All development reviews that satisfy the code are approved administratively. A project only goes to the Planning Commission if a zone change or special land use is required.



Buildings in the Traditional Neighborhood classification are required to be placed at the sidewalk with recessed door entries, hidden parking, and 60-percent window transparency.

Information is conveyed in table format wherever possible, which provides the opportunity to combine multiple districts under one article. The table layout also allows one to see the transition in densities and building form between the neighborhood classifications.

The city of Grand Rapids Zoning Ordinance requires:

A healthy community. Sidewalks, pedestrian connections and bicycle parking are required for every commercial development.

A green community. Credit is given for full on-site stormwater retention and the ability to meet LEED requirements. Just enough greenspace is required as part of the overall percentage of a development project to encourage green roofs, urban open spaces and landscape planters.

An accessible community. Building designs in the Traditional Neighborhood classification provide an improved environment for persons with disabilities by including recessed door entries and predictable building placement.

A safe community. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) standards to improve building transparency, lighting, and access are used to create a safe environment.

An equal community. Residential neighborhoods that have the least capacity to contest potentially deleterious uses are now on equal footing with more able and affluent neighborhoods because similar uses are allowed in all residential zone districts.

A transit-friendly community. Higher density residential uses and mixed-uses are encouraged along major transportation corridors to support businesses and transit ridership.

An affordable community. Accessory dwelling units, higher housing densities and varying forms of housing types are permitted in all residential zone districts.

A collaborative process. Developers are required to meet with neighborhood groups to plan large-scale redevelopment projects and to seek neighborhood input prior to any public hearing on a project.

A community with an identity. Neighborhood classifications describe three different neighborhood character types within the city. These neighborhood classifications provide the basis for all residential and mixed-use commercial zone districts in the city to create a strong sense of place.

Key Ordinance Recommendations

Grand Rapids' new zoning ordinance became effective on November 5, 2007. The tenets of Smart Growth, LEED-ND criteria, Transect and Transit-Oriented Design (TOD) concepts, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) standards and the community's master plan vision served as the basis for this code.

In short, the ordinance does the following:

- Allows mixed-use development by right in all of the city's commercial districts;
- Permits high density development in appropriate residential and mixed-use areas;
- Treats all neighborhoods of varying incomes and racial compositions equally;
- Provides for accessory dwelling units, row houses, town houses, and high-rises;
- Requires pedestrian- and transit-oriented development, including sidewalks and bicycle parking;
- Reduces all traditional parking requirements;
- Insists on neighborhood input for large redevelopment projects through the creation of an area-specific planning process; and
- Permits development by right where all zoning requirements are satisfied.


A Viable Future

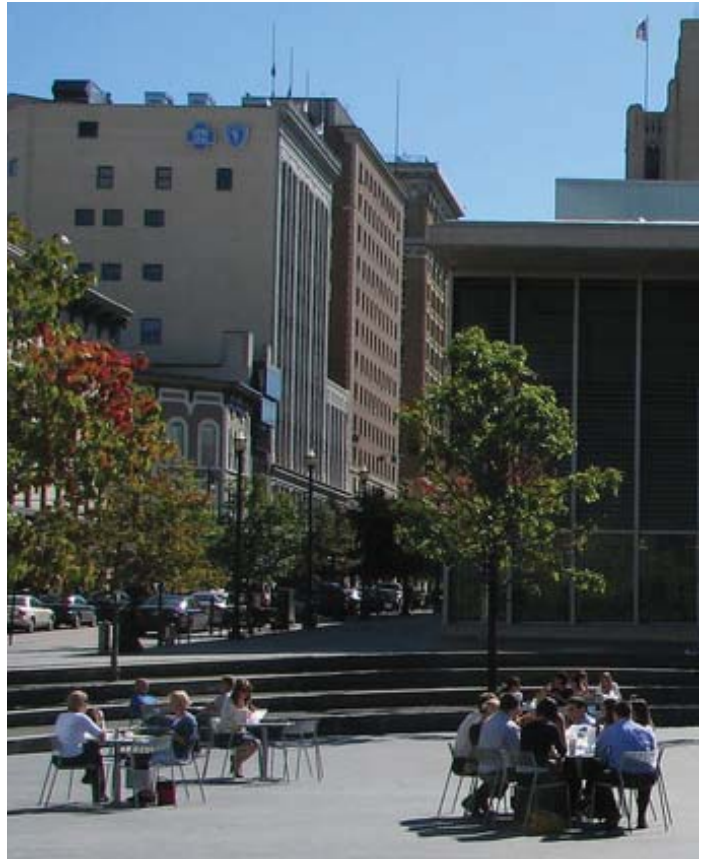
New development projects are now constructed with greater window transparency, less parking, higher quality materials, green elements and pedestrian-oriented building placement. The most visible change in the built environment has been the impact on new construction in locations that are considered to be in the "Traditional Neighborhood" (pre-WWII). Previously identified as community renewal areas in the city's 1969 zoning ordinance, these areas were impacted by "garage" houses on infill lots and large parking lots in front of commercial buildings. Buildings are now required to frame the street and parking lots are required to be hidden or screened by one of five landscape screening methods. This arrangement of buildings and parking areas will create a more pedestrian and transit-oriented city.



New residential structures must fit the character of the existing neighborhood, including building materials and placement. This infill development is located at the edge of downtown with a density of 20 units/acre.

Grand Rapids' future economic, environmental and social sustainability is tied to the city's physical development patterns. Mixed-use development will reduce automobile trips and miles traveled, improve air quality and create a vibrant community. The reassignment of uses in residential zone districts now distributes alternative forms of housing equally; economically challenged neighborhoods no longer bear the sole responsibility of providing group housing arrangements. The ordinance provides for transit-oriented development and a range of housing types that will create the competitive living environments which will attract a contributing work force.

The city's new plan and ordinance are now serving the best interests of the community, and the reward in economic redevelopment has been impressive. Permit numbers are up, blighted properties are being redeveloped, and our neighborhoods are becoming vibrant, cohesive places. 



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