

Communities By Design, a
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organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



Form-Based Codes:

*A Look at the Evolving and Diverse Use of
Cutting Edge Zoning Tools*

2007-08 SEASON: FORUM #5
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2008
HISTORIC LOBBY OF THE FOX THEATRE
2215 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On February 6, 2008, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities by Design” held the fifth presentation of the 2007-2008 Forum season. The Forum featured a presentation by Daniel Parolek, Founding Principal of Opticos Design and Co-Author of *Form-Based Codes: A Guide for Planners, Urban Designers, Municipalities, and Developers*. His presentation addressed “Form-Based Codes: A Look at the Evolving and Diverse Use of Cutting Edge Zoning Tools.”

Mr. Parolek began his presentation by sharing why he is so passionate about form-based codes and why he has been motivated to write about the subject. A long-time resident of pedestrian-friendly cities, Mr. Parolek has learned the value of pedestrian-friendly places first hand and believes form-based codes can set forth a vision that addresses neighborhood walkability along with other components of community form. Additionally, Mr. Parolek sees form-based codes as powerful regulatory tools that can predictably guide future development. He also acknowledges the role form-based codes and smart growth can have in meeting broader environmental goals such as reducing carbon emissions, supporting sustainable development, and addressing global warming. Mr. Parolek shared a quotation from Reid Ewing, author of the *Growing Cooler* report: “Making reasonable assumptions about growth rates, the market share of compact development, and the relationship between CO2 reduction and VMT reduction, smart growth could, by itself, reduce total transportation-related CO2 emissions from current trends by 7 to 10 percent as of 2050.”

Mr. Parolek then described in more detail how form-based codes are defined and composed. First applied in the 1920’s and 1930’s, form-based codes are a regulatory

tool to achieve a specific urban form through controls over physical form, with a lesser focus on land use, through city or county regulations (as defined by formbasedcodes.org). Creating a form-based code is a three part process of first documenting the existing framework plan, then visioning to create illustrative plans, imagery, regulating plans and regulations, and finally, assembling and formatting the final form-based code.

“Form needs to be emphasized over land use, but land use still needs to be there.”
-Daniel Parolek

This process results in a form-based code that has three main components:

- 1) A regulating plan that replaces zoning maps;
- 2) Building form standards such as setbacks, appropriate heights, and massing; and
- 3) Public space standards including streets, parks, and open spaces.

Other optional components include architectural standards, building type standards, green building/planning standards, landscape standards, signage standards, and storm water management standards.

“In addition to creating great places, one of the other reasons we really like form-based codes is that they are very usable. Usability is a big issue, both from a graphic standpoint and an administrative standpoint.”
-Daniel Parolek

Mr. Parolek outlined some advantages of form-based codes over conventional planning. In Grass Valley, CA, two pages of form-based codes outlined 90% of the regulations for building placement, building form, general land use type, parking, heights, encroachments, frontage types, etc.; five to ten pages of land uses were distilled into a one page land use table plus

one illustrative drawing. In addition to being more succinct than conventional guidelines for both planners and developers, Mr. Parolek argued that form-based codes are more usable from an administrative standpoint, provide better predictability in development build-out, and have diverse applications ranging from large to small scale projects.

At the macro scale, the code determines neighborhood structure, districts, and structures. Mr. Parolek used the Miami 21 code to demonstrate how regulating form at the macro scale can improve transitions between high-rise structures at major transit nodes and relatively low density residential areas. At the micro scale, the code defines



The Miami 21 citywide form-based code guides development for transition areas between high rise structures at transit nodes and relatively low density residential areas. (Source: DPZ)

how the buildings are articulated and stepped down to spatially relate to each other and the surrounding open spaces in such a way that produces a cohesive city fabric. Mr. Parolek also drew from his work in California for the cities of Livermore, Benicia, Hercules, Grass Valley, and Ventura to discuss other applications of form-based codes.

Mr. Parolek went on to show that form-based codes are adaptable and can fit within the framework of conventional planning guidelines.

Instead of overhauling the existing planning documents in Grass Valley, CA he created form-based coding for infill areas. The resulting document contained chapters added to the existing planning guidelines that articulated authority over the existing chapters to ensure the guidelines set forth in the new form-based code sections took effect. Mr. Parolek believes that to be successful, hybrid codes need to recode entire zones to be form-based, with full form-based code regulations for each of the zones.

Lastly, Mr. Parolek discussed the future of form-based codes in California and predicted that the codes will continue to catch on both at the regional and city administrative level. In addition to the case studies Mr. Parolek shared, he described the Lake Tahoe Regional Plan, and the City of West Sacramento and the City of Coachella's General Plans, to show how form-based codes are applicable at a regional scale and can be integrated into general plans. He also reiterated the need for form-based codes to be regulatory to provide development predictability for municipalities and developers alike.

As a scalable and adaptable regulatory tool, Mr. Parolek sees great potential for form-based codes to integrate well with existing General Plans and provide better and more concise planning documents that can help implement and achieve broad social, environmental, and economic goals.